
RETENTION CHALLENGES FOR RUGBY DEVELOPMENT IN THE USA

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All authors:

Christine Green (corresp), Laurence Chalip, Jon Welty Peachey, David McCann, Wonjun Choi, Matthew Greenberg

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Synopsis:

Retention and transition of rugby players in the U.S. are examined using mixed methods. Former and current players differ in motives, subcultural fit, and the importance of social infrastructure. Females differ from males in motives and the importance of social infrastructure.

Abstract:

Rugby can be played as a child, while in university, and as an adult. Having players begin the sport early and remain for many years has the advantage that it enables development of playing excellence over a period of years, while retaining a stream of revenues from players. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that foster and that inhibit player retention.

Motives (Beggs et al., 2004), sense of community (Chalip et al., 2013), adaptation to transition between programs or levels (Green, 2005), the social infrastructure for the sport (Sport England, 2004), and consequent adaptation to the sport's subculture (Green, 2005) can each affect player choices to remain in a sport or quit it. Gender differences are also common, and are attributed to gender role differences and/or differences in the ways that sports are organized (Appleby & Foster, 2013). The effects of these variables on player retention, including differences between males and females, were tested in this study of American rugby players.

Seven years of membership records for USA Rugby were examined to determine retention levels, especially when players transition from youth to university or club, and from university to club. Current and past players were surveyed (N=3000) to determine the salience of motives, their sense of community in their rugby organization, the importance they attached to social infrastructure, their identification with the sport's subculture, and the barriers they perceive in continued participation. Each measure utilized multiple items, each of which was drawn from existing scales that have been shown to be both

reliable and valid. In order to further explore their answers, a subset of 100 respondents were selected on a random stratified basis (to include males and females; current players and former players) were interviewed by trained interviewers using a semi-structured protocol.

Percentages of players staying, exiting, and transitioning at each level were calculated from the membership records. Survey responses were tested in two ways to determine their relevance. First, means were tested against the scale midpoint (i.e., the point of indifference) to determine whether the variable was important to respondents on average. Then a two-way MANOVA (gender X player or leaver) was conducted. Finally, interviews were coded thematically to unpack differences found from MANOVA.

It was found that players rarely transition from one context to another, as fewer than 5% of players moved from youth to university or club, or from university to club. Motives, sense of community, adaptation to transition, and adaptation to the sport's subculture were all rated highly on average. There was a significant interaction between gender and whether the respondent was a current or former player. Females not currently playing reported the lowest escape motivation, followed by males not playing. Current female members were most highly motivated by the chance to escape the everyday, both mentally and physically. The same pattern held true for the importance of the social infrastructure of the sport with current females reporting the highest levels of importance and non-current females the least. As expected, current players reported the lowest perceptions of barriers, specifically with respect to convenience, off-field activities, and travel. Non-current females reported experiencing the most barriers.

Females reported higher levels of all motivation, and were more highly identified with the sport than were men. Females also reported experiencing more barriers with respect to injury, poor skills, cost and fit with the rugby subculture. Males were more likely than females to experience a lack of support by their significant other. Current players reported higher levels than did non-current players of mastery and social motivation, and were more highly identified as rugby players. Interestingly, current players reported experiencing more issues about a lack of skill than did their non-playing counterparts. For all other barriers, non-players reported more frequent barriers than did current players.

Interviews confirmed the salience of social experiences for current and former players, as camaraderie was a substantial ongoing theme for males and females. Some current and former players bemoaned the poor level of social infrastructure (especially facilities) for rugby in the United States, but that was rarely specified as grounds for leaving the sport. Transition points were a particular challenge for players and former players, in part due to the sport's poor penetration of American communities, and also due to the lack of connections between clubs, university and youth programs, and due to the conflicting demands placed upon them as they incur non-rugby adult responsibilities.

It is concluded that males and females, as well as current players and former players feel positively about their rugby experiences, but that the quality of their experience is compromised by the sport's poor social penetration in the United States. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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