



Challenges for the Future of Rugby Football in Schools

NEIL ROLLINGS

First published 2021

© Neil Rollings

Published by PADSIS
6 Main Street, Sedbergh LA10 5BN

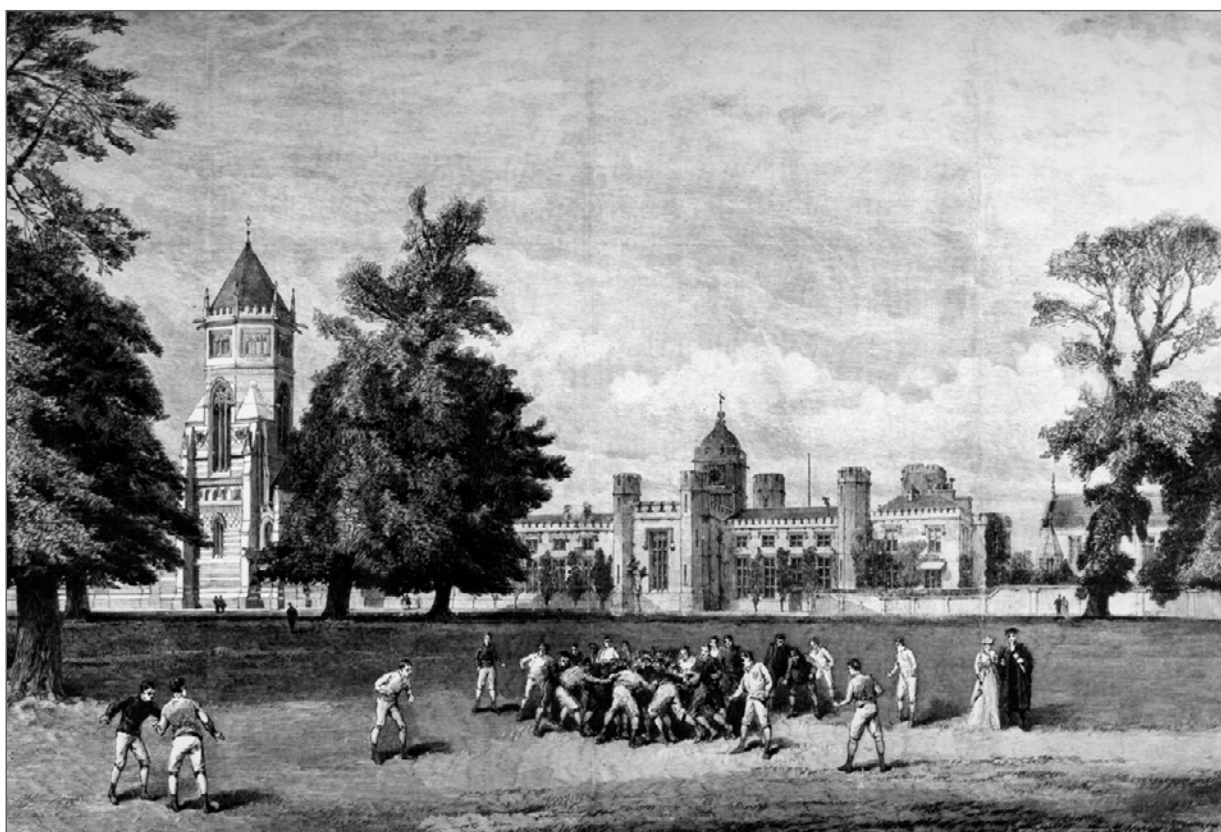
CONTENTS

BACKGROUND	3
THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF SCHOOL RUGBY: THREATS TO THE GAME	4
Context	
Demise of Compulsion	
Player Retention	
Prep School “Ticking Time Bomb”	
Commitment to Senior Teams	
Impact of Professionalism	
Glorification of the Gladatorial	
Staffing	
Adverse Publicity	
The “Covid Season”	
CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE OF THE GAME	8
Communication of Purpose and Benefit	
Culture	
Mitigation of Danger	
Collaboration between Schools	
The Place of Rugby in the Games Programme	
High Performance	
THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP	12
RFU	
Head Teachers	
Directors of Sport	
Heads of Rugby	
WHAT WOULD A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL RUGBY PROGRAMME LOOK LIKE?	14
CONCLUSIONS	15

BACKGROUND

British schools have an 150 year history of making forms of Football compulsory for pupils. Nothing is new in this concept, with only Latin and Greek having the same longevity in the sector. However, the twenty first century has brought changing attitudes, risk aversion and a sense of parental empowerment. The result is that Rugby – currently the preferred football code of over 200 HMC schools, and more than 300 IAPS members – is facing pressure from a number of social and educational trends. Its place as the dominant game of the Autumn term, played by a majority of boys, is under growing threat.

The purpose of this paper is to support schools in maintaining a robust Rugby programme. It is necessary to have a clear understanding of the threats to the game in education, and a recognition of the inflection points where risks are greatest. It is hoped that the identification of possible strategies will assist schools in a proactive approach to supporting the game and retaining its place in the sector.



THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF SCHOOL RUGBY: THREATS TO THE GAME

Context

A smaller number of boys play Rugby Football in schools than at any time in recent history. There are fewer school teams, playing fewer matches, than at any previous time this century. This was the case before the interruption for the Covid pandemic. This didn't suddenly happen. There has been incremental pressure on the game building over the last 10-15 years. Some relate to all traditional games in schools: others are Rugby specific. Some are historic; others have emerged within the last year.

Demise of Compulsion

For more than a century, schools exercised compulsion for pupils to learn and play Rugby Football, including an expectation to participate in school matches. This assumption is no longer valid. The RFU does not endorse involuntary experience of the contact game, and there has been a realisation that it would be illegal to enforce this. Non-contact versions have been introduced to provide alternatives. Most schools have a small number of pupils whose parents withdraw the tacitly assumed permission at the outset of their school career; additionally, the age at which the choice to embark on alternative games activities is offered has lowered in recent years. A more common policy now is that Rugby is compulsory, but contact Rugby is not.

Player Retention

Percentage of Boys in each year group playing contact Rugby Football

YEAR GROUP	DAY SCHOOLS	DAY/BOARDING*	BOARDING
7	94	80	
8	82	72	
9	46	64	94
10	38	55	90
11	31	48	73
12	28	35	55
13	27	34	50

* Defined as a school with at least 25% pupils boarding, and at least 25% day

Player retention has been a challenge for the great majority of schools in recent years. There are – rightly – no remaining schools who dispute the right of parents to remove their children from contact Rugby entirely. The introduction of alternative sports activities,

with accompanying choice (typically around the age of 14) always results a reduction in participation. Such decline is lower in those schools which have a strong culture of the game, but the number of pupils persisting with the game until the Sixth Form is smaller than at any time in history. Even the big boarding schools, historically the sector where the largest numbers were retained throughout their school career, have fewer sixth form teams than ever before.

Year 11 presents a particular challenge to player retention. Figures show that, in average sized schools, retaining a stand-alone team in this year group is a challenge. Levels of player retention are on the lower limits

of numbers required to sustain a full season. Positional specificity is greater in Rugby than other team games, as are injury rates. Both impose pressure on squad sizes. The short term expedient of combining the Under 16 age group with Sixth Form, despite being contrary to RFU guidance, is still relatively common, especially in smaller schools. Research shows, however, that this practice accelerates player loss in senior teams. The considerable variety of size and ability within an age range that can be almost four years is compounded by the impact of professionalism (see below). The result is a legitimate concern for the safety of the younger and slighter players in this company, and an understandable drift away from the game.

CASE STUDIES

Co-ed Day School 11–18

- 850 pupils on roll
- C 60 boys/year
- Year 11 (31%) = 18 players
- Year 12/13 (27.5%) = 33 players

Co-ed Boarding School 13–18

- 600 pupils on roll
- C 60 boys/year
- Year 11 (48%) = 29 players
- Year 12/13 (34.5%) = 41 players

Prep School “Ticking Time Bomb”

Changes in the 13+ prep sector have not yet fully impacted on senior schools. Parental anxiety is leading to an ever increasing number of such schools providing alternative sports in years 7 and 8, effectively ending the compulsion to be involved in any type of Rugby activity beyond the end of Year 6. When these pupils reach the traditional schools in Year 9, they will be long retired from the game. Their expectation will be of sporting choice from the start of senior schools.

Commitment to School Teams

The honour of selection for school teams can no longer be assumed. Commitment, of both players and parents, to weekend fixtures has been diluting for some time. The frequency of schools making the Friday call (or text) of shame to cancel games in the following day's block fixture is up by an estimated 25% in the last decade. On some day school circuits, 3rd XV's and Under 16 B teams are almost extinct. This reflects the issues of the game in Years 11/12/13 (above). Games played with fewer than a full complement of players, or with other adjustments, such as uncontested scrums or borrowed players, are more frequent than ever before.

Impact of Professionalism

Players still involved in the game post maturation are probably performing at a higher standard than ever before. Certainly, most are better conditioned and prepared than previous generations. The significant overlap between schools and the elite game, through a profusion of “academies” and performance centres, has produced a population of teenage players who aspire towards the vocational game. They – and their parents – are prepared to make the significant commitment of training, lifestyle and travel to pursue this dream. An unintended consequence has been the polarisation of the game in schools. The contrast between the best athletes and the others is stark, making the game less attractive to the latter. House matches have become unworkable on safety grounds. The exodus of players has not been amongst the marquee performers: it is the boys of average size, ability and commitment who are no longer finding the game as attractive as previously.

Schools have adopted “professionalisation” of the game at different rates, and to varying degrees. A rise in the concept, and value, of sports awards (often entitled “scholarships”) has accelerated the growing range of playing standards, and disrupted school relationships and fixture patterns. Schools with the most developed programmes are now having to travel further, and be more creative, to achieve the right level of competition. Conversely, smaller schools, with lower playing populations, often struggle to find equitable fixtures.

Safety concerns have resulted in better medical support than any other era. An industry of pitchside paramedics has grown up around school Rugby; coaches are now better educated in first aid, concussion and risk aversion. None of this appears to have increased player numbers.

Glorification of the Gladatorial

Professional Rugby is not a good shop window for the school game, nor is its nomenclature always encouraging. Some parents will be enthusiastic for their children to emulate the size, athleticism and appetite for heavy contact that can be witnessed in the Premiership. However, a focus on “big hits”, macho confrontation and a celebration of abnormal size and power of players detracts from the historical claim that it is a game for all shapes and sizes.



Staffing

Reluctance to be involved is not confined to the players and their parents. Many schools have found it increasingly difficult to find an appropriate workforce to maintain their Rugby programme. League table pressures, sector trends and leisure ambitions have made classroom teachers generally more reluctant to commit to coaching sports teams, especially on Saturdays.

Responsibility for safety is a further disincentive. Expectations of coaching quality have also grown. The ‘professionalisation’ of school Rugby has marginalised the gentleman amateur schoolmaster. The willing enthusiast teacher-coach no longer finds the sector to be as tolerant of



his lack of technical knowledge, nor medical limitations. Coaching school Rugby has become a specialised job, resulting in the appointment of a greater number of specialist, or “professional” coaches, many direct from the elite game. Such technical competence, essential in an ever more complex game, is sometimes accompanied by pastoral insensitivity, or lower awareness of the all-round demands of schools and the academic ambitions of pupils. Schools have not always been good at “house-training” sports professionals into the wider success criteria of education.

Adverse Publicity

There has been high profile exposure of the game’s dangers, especially those relating to head injuries. Allison Pollock’s book, “Tackling Rugby”, was a stimulus for calls by some doctors to remove contact from the game in schools. This theme was recently repeated by American neurologist Ann McKee, featured in ‘The Times’, who emphasised the accumulating impact of repeated sub-concussive blows. Rising awareness of concussion danger has gained new momentum from recent publicity surrounding the health legacies of head injuries to high profile professional players. The risk lobby has been extensively mobilised, and has had wide exposure. Laudable work by the RFU to improve concussion awareness for players, coaches and parents and to assess the real level of danger in the age group game has attracted less publicity.



“The growing acceptance is that every little blow contributes to an accumulative toll”

DR ANN MCKEE

The “Covid Season”

The school sports seasons of 2020/21 have been substantially impacted by the Covid pandemic. Rugby has been disrupted more significantly than other games. Hockey, Netball and Association Football have been able to maintain a recognisable presence within schools, throughout the Autumn Term. Rugby has been confined to non-contact versions of the game throughout its principal season. It seems unlikely that much, if any, Sevens will take place. Inter-school competition has been largely eliminated. It is too early to say whether this missed season will have an impact upon the number of pupils resuming the game the following year. Rugby in schools was under pressure pre-pandemic. It will doubtless be another incremental pressure.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE OF THE GAME

Communication of Purpose and Benefit

Whilst the risk lobby has been effectively mobilised, the benefits of the game – widely, though tacitly, understood by the Rugby family – have been articulated less effectively. The belief that the game can be a positive developmental force, and life-enhancing for many participants, has not been well promoted. It can no longer be assumed that a majority of parents will unquestioningly accept the view that the game is a positive experience for their children.

Two initiatives are necessary:

The first is to clarify the purpose of the game in schools. Rugby has enjoyed a place of unquestioned primacy in the programmes of many schools for a long time. “Why we play Rugby” is an overdue consideration. The reasons need to be widely understood throughout the school community, and proactively communicated with parents.

The second is a recognition that participation can bring benefits to players, and that these are not ability-dependant. Some of these are athletic, but not all. Some are common to all team games; others are unique to Rugby Football. The development of desirable personal characteristics is central here. Commitment, courage, selflessness, self-discipline, empathy and teamship are potential outcomes that are indisputably positive. It will be necessary for schools (and the RFU) to be much more proactive in robustly identifying and communicating these benefits. Currently, schools promote the features of their programmes (teams, fixtures, results etc) but are remarkably quiet about the value of participation, and the reasons why this game has such a dominant place in the programme. A successful Rugby programme can bring significant benefits to pupils, staff, parents and schools: it is necessary, however, to be clear what these are, and to articulate them credibly and proactively. Medical professionals opposing the game are articulate and credible; there has been little attempt to identify high profile ambassadors for the game’s benefit

Culture

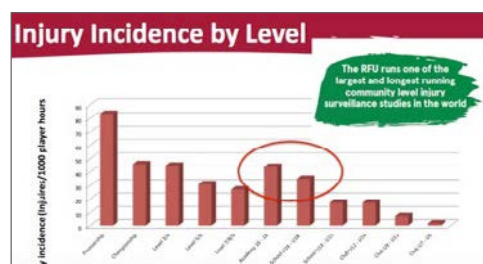
Building a culture of willing participation will be essential to achieve the engagement of a critical mass of pupils once alternative sporting activities are made available. There are two stages of the programme where this is under particular pressure:

The first is the stage at which the choice not to be involved in the game is offered. This age varies between schools. Retention at the first point of choice is a determining factor in assessing the health of the game in any school. The alternative sporting activities that are offered at this stage are also significant. If these are undemanding, loosely supervised and indoor, they can result in pupils taking the easy option. This is compounded when some choices are linked

with attendance at Saturday matches, and others not. Where the culture of the game is weak, this impacts upon the player base. Over the years since the demise of compulsory Rugby, the challenge for schools has been to present the game in a sufficiently attractive way as to engage willing and voluntary participants in sufficient number. The replacement for compulsion is culture. This involves a subtle shift from stick to carrot. In schools where the culture of Rugby is strong, the introduction of choice (whatever the alternatives) becomes irrelevant. The current century is seeing a shift from compulsion to environment in driving participation.

The second inflection point is at Years 11/12.

Maintaining parental confidence is important in the Sixth Form years, where RFU data shows that the danger profile of the game increases significantly. Parents need to be comfortable that the benefits of the game continue to exceed the increasing risk. This can only be achieved through extensive proactive communications.



Mitigation of Danger

Maintaining the game as a majority activity will require parental confidence in its safety. In part, this will require education that the risk profile varies across the age range, and that it is radically different from that of the professional game. Below the age of 13, it is unlikely that Rugby is any more dangerous than any other sport. A broader Rugby offer will be necessary, embracing non-contact forms of the game, and other variants in which contact is diluted. Creative solutions to providing high quality competition might involve weight restricted teams, and festival type match days, where several teams come together for a series of shorter games.

Other mitigations will need to be both established and communicated. These will include improving standards of coaching and refereeing (proven to reduce injury), and head injury awareness training. Medical support will need to be preventative, as well as responsive, with adequate provision for both first aid and rehabilitation.

Collaboration Between Schools

The need to retain players under pressure from choice has created greater awareness of the quality of the experience for players. This has resulted in greater collaboration between schools. Sensitivity to the impact of one-sided games has stimulated initiatives to improve competitiveness, including pre-emptive communication, adjusting teams, amending laws and sharing players. Research shows that the quality of the experience is improved when the result is uncertain, when the game is free-flowing and when there is a positive atmosphere between teams, officials and spectators. The formula for a "great game" is well known. At best, schools are adopting a positive approach to coaching, refereeing and the tone of the environment.

They are communicating carefully before and during the game to maximise the chance of a worthwhile experience for participants. All schools will benefit from improved collaboration, which should start at head teacher level.

The recent introduction, by the RFU, of the half game rule (ensuring at least half the playing time for all members of a match day squad) was made necessary by a legacy of meritocracy that many coaches found difficult to abandon. The tension between the short term expedient of winning a match, and the medium term implications for player retention, should not confuse school coaches.

There have been some positive impacts of the "Covid Season". Schools have been compelled to experiment with other game forms, many of which have proved popular. Also, the removal of the race to judgement in selecting teams, which the fixture programme demands, has led to higher participation in extra curricular Rugby, including Saturdays. There has been wide acceptance that a familiarisation period of a couple of weeks at the start of term provides a more measured introduction to the season, in which players can be more gradually prepared, and the worst of hard pitches avoided. All of these are discoveries with potential longevity, which could improve the school game.

The Place of Rugby in the Games Programme

The Games Programmes of many schools are built on the assumption that Rugby Football will be the majority game of at least the autumn term. It is an activity which is historically straightforward to resource economically. Schools also have considerable capacity to accommodate mass participation in the game. Facilities are widespread, simple to maintain compared with many other sports: equipment is limited and cheap. Staffing ratios compare favourably with other activities. Most schools can comfortably manage more pupils in this game than any of their other principal activities. None of these factors differs if the game is non-contact.

Any changes to the Games Programme that reduce the numbers of pupils involved in Rugby activities will have significant implications for resources, and administration. Any alternative activities are likely to have more specialist facilities, lower capacity and less favourable staffing ratios. The introduction of freer choice at an earlier stage has made programmes much more difficult, and costly, to manage. Attractive, alternative activities will not lure the committed Rugby players, but might impact on the marginal players. It is in the interests of schools to maintain an appropriate, quasi-compulsory Rugby activity for all pupils in the early part of their school career. It is necessary to establish this foundation, and to engage a significant proportion of athletically minded pupils, before the introduction of choice dilutes the player base. If schools believe in the educational value of the game, they need to provide behavioural nudges to encourage pupils to participate – in appropriate forms of the game – long enough to engage them through the quality of the experience.

The School Rugby experience must be democratic and inclusive. It needs to ensure an appropriate, positive environment for all pupils who wish to be involved. Ironically, the future health of the game within education is dependent less upon the early-developing athletes (whose interests have always been well served, and continue to be), but on the engagement of pupils of average ability, or below. The importance of the attitude and delivery of individual teachers and coaches not be underestimated. This is too important a factor to be left to chance, and will require schools to have a much more coherent, child-centred coaching philosophy which is applied across the school. Robust coaching of safe practice must be creatively incorporated within a programme which delivers the game as an exciting opportunity for skill and evasion. An emphasis on providing a good experience for all participants, rather than simply winning the match by as big a margin as possible, will be a focus at most age and ability levels. A cultural shift to promote, and celebrate, skill and evasion ahead of heavy contact and big “hits” would be helpful, along with a limit on full contact training. Emphasising the social side of being involved in the game, will be as important as the physical side. Teenagers thrive on the sense of belonging and shared endeavour that comes from playing with friends.

High Performance

At the higher end of the ability spectrum, schools need to be able to adequately support the players who are most able and athletic. Expectations of the best age group players have risen, as has the profile and currency of academies. Managing the interface with the elite game, as well as the demands placed on the top players, is another challenge to both programme and resources.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

The game has never been in greater need of clear leadership, at the macro and local levels.

RFU

The national governing body of any sport exists to define the desirable state of a game at every level, and to put in place the mechanisms that support this. The most pressing need, at national level, is the promotion of the science surrounding the game's benefits. Alongside this is a greater understanding of the real level of the risks, and how these can be mitigated. Guidance in best practice, and an education service to support this, has never been more important. The PR battle is being lost, in the face of sensationalist reporting in national newspapers, of the unfavourable views of selected doctors. The game would benefit from raising the profile of its value, through the leverage of positive role models and the science of benefit. Schools will look to the Union to provide them with a supporting rationale and justification for the game, along the underlying science of benefit. This will inform their Rugby strategy and counter the anxiety of some parents.

Head Teachers

Heads are ultimately responsible for what occurs in their schools. They are at liberty to choose the impacts they seek for their pupils, and the activities by which those outcomes are pursued. They must lead the understanding of the purpose of the game in their school, and be comfortable both with why they include Rugby Football, and the attendant benefits and risks.

Directors of Sport

The purpose of a Director of Sport is to provide leadership, culture building and quality control. It is also to manage a programme that delivers the school's philosophy for physical activity. Rugby must fit into the overall purpose of sport in a school, and be accountable for delivering identified outcomes.

Of the 206 HMC schools for whom Rugby is a principal game, 67% have a Director of Sport who has a significant personal background in the game. This is down from 79% ten years ago. It indicates the historic dominance of Rugby in the sector, and also indicates a slow broadening of attitudes. This should indicate that most are personally invested in the success of their Rugby programme, and empathic to the challenges faced by the Head of Rugby.

Head of Rugby

The challenges for the leaders of the Rugby programme have changed and intensified significantly in the last two decades. The Master in Charge of the twentieth century had a

relatively straightforward administrative task. Dealing with the match logistics was usually combined with coaching the 1st XV. Success was measured primarily in playing results. The last decades of the century saw an exponential growth in the number of teams operated by all schools, reflecting growing concern for inclusivity and supported by compulsion to participate.

A number of factors have changed to complicate the role, and established new challenges and success criteria. Many previously boys-only schools are now co-educational. This has undoubtedly brought benefits, though the size of the Rugby playing population is not one of them. Overseas pupils – especially Sixth Form entrants – have not always embraced the game. Growing safety concerns and changing pupil demographic have further eroded the previously dominant place of Rugby. The priorities for the Head of Rugby have shifted and pluralised. Getting 15 players to win a match against a local rival is now only one of the ambitions of the incumbent. Building a culture of willing participation, supported by empathetic coaching and appropriate competition, is at least equally important. Finding like-minded opponents of comparable standard is more difficult than ever. Player retention and parental confidence present bigger challenges than winning the line out, and demand a wider skill set – and sector awareness – of the Head of Rugby than at any time previously. These are not abilities that are easily represented on a CV, making such appointments more difficult than simply finding the best coach. A school's Rugby culture is usually a reflection of the character of the game's leader. This makes the person in this position more important than ever.

WHAT WOULD A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL RUGBY PROGRAMME LOOK LIKE ?

AIMS	HOW MIGHT HIS BE ACHIEVED?
<p>Acceptance of Rugby as a majority game in the education sector</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Promotion of game's benefits ■ Overcoming safety concerns ■ Improved, proactive parental communications ■ Improved risk management processes
<p>Quasi-compulsory appropriate experience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Improved quality of experience across the ability range ■ Variety of game forms, including non-contact ■ Appropriate competition widely available ■ Inclusive approach to coaching ■ Emphasis on fun, progress and teamship ■ Limit on full contact training ■ Reassuring medical provision
<p>Engagement of a critical mass of pupils (when choice is introduced)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Culture of belonging and participating ■ Programme quality not ability-dependent ■ High quality of appropriate competition ■ Sensitive and imaginative coaching ■ Relevant game forms ■ Alternative sports offered are rigorous and demanding ■ Promotion of personal development
<p>Retention of teenagers (into Sixth Form – and beyond)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A good, and appropriate, experience for all players ■ High quality coaching and refereeing ■ Athlete-centred coaching programme ■ Strong player-coach relationships ■ Inclusive approach, valuing all players ■ Robust coaching of safe techniques ■ Emphasis on teamship, commitment and fun ■ Appropriate programme of competition ■ Parental engagement, through supporter experience ■ Continued education of benefits, esp non-athletic ■ Reward and recognition of participation ■ Reassuring risk management procedures
<p>High Performance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Appropriate support mechanisms to develop ambitious athletes ■ High quality coaching and competition ■ Reward and recognition ■ Flexibility with outside agencies

CONCLUSIONS

Rugby Football presents more challenges to the schools which embrace it than ever before. These difficulties are not about to disappear. They will require a proactive strategy on behalf of the game, the sector and individual schools to address the issues and build a secure future for the game. September 2021 will be an important watershed, as the game re-starts after Covid interruption, accompanied by renewed publicity of dangers. Schools must be prepared for the challenges of restoring the game to its pre-pandemic place. This will include plans and communications to anticipate objections

In the late nineteenth century some schools chose to embrace the Association code, fearing that the alternative was too dangerous. However, belief that the risks of Rugby are potentially outweighed by the benefits is one of the reasons that has sustained the primacy of the code in the majority of independent schools. These advantages have not disappeared; in many ways they are more relevant now than ever before.

However, what is clear is that the game, and the organisations which adopt it, have to face a number of challenges if it is to remain healthy in the sector. This will require a clear strategy to address the specific issues, and a robust communications programme to support it.



**PADSIS exists to support the leadership
of sport in independent schools.**

**Through advisory, recruitment and training
services, PADSIS enables schools to exceed
their aspirations through physical activity.**

TELEPHONE **015395 60060**

www.padsis.com



6 Main Street, Sedbergh LA10 5BN

TELEPHONE 015395 60060 EMAIL info@padsis.com
www.padsis.com