

The impacts of commercialism

John Ireland looks at how professionalism and commercialism impacted the codes of rugby and cricket



Rugby union

The 1991 Rugby World Cup generated \$81 million, despite the game still being amateur. Four years later the decision was taken to accept professionalism and re-assemble rugby union as a commercial business.

In England, a divisional structure was established with the Premiership at the top, abolishing the traditional system of friendly fixtures and stimulating improved standards of play and club aspirations. The Rugby Football Union (RFU) modified the laws of the game to enhance entertainment potential and so play could be enjoyed by spectators with little rugby experience.

Players at the top level became full-time professionals. They became fitter, more skilful and better organised. Some felt the game would become too serious, and narrow the outlook of participants and prevent the eclectic social mix that previously enriched the game.

Professionalisation was not simply a matter of paying players. As commercialism became established, professional business managers were needed at the top level, replacing the voluntary committees that had served the clubs during the amateur era.

This process (referred to as **de-institutionalisation**) was beneficial because it brushed aside parochialism, expanded the potential of teams and allowed corporate business plans. On the other hand, business consortiums often did not have the best interest of their acquisitions in mind and many prominent rugby clubs were forced to disband and reform as amateurs, e.g. Orrell RUFC.

Professionalism removed the need for rugby union players to convert to rugby league in order to be paid. This process, a source of great dispute between the codes for over 100 years, had finally been resolved, but a rich source of talent had suddenly become inaccessible to the league code.

Rugby league

Professionalisation was part of league's evolution of the union code, but in the 1990s commercialism rescued rugby league from oblivion. Sky Sports' Rupert Murdoch purchased British rugby league in 1995 for £87 million. The previously poorly administered, semi-professional code became fully professional.

The game at top level was rebranded as the Super League, but after proposed mergers of some traditional clubs were rejected, the newly formed competition comprised only ten members. Founder clubs like Wakefield Trinity were initially excluded, partly because they refused to partner with local rivals. The game became a summer sport so as to not clash with football.

Not only the culture, but also rules were changed, e.g. scrummaging became uncontested and defences were made to retreat 10 metres. These changes produced a collision game of high intensity and athleticism, and it became an ideal entertainment product for Friday night viewing.

Many longstanding supporters did not take kindly to the new format and withdrew their patronage. However, a new generation of fans who have no recollection of winter rugby league now populate new purpose-built stadiums and appreciate the spectacle made possible by sponsorship and commercial investment.

Cricket

Twenty20 cricket is often played in the evenings under floodlights. When the Indian Premier League is considered, it may become the most popular form of the game.

Limited-over cricket allows spectators to attend after work. Team kits are coloured, and big hitting often produces exciting finishes. Results are guaranteed: if it rains, the Duckworth–Lewis rule (a mathematical formula that adjusts the run targets required to win a rain-affected match) is applied to shorten the match to ensure a winner. It is a manufactured and popular entertainment package. The 2016 Twenty20 World Cup confirmed its global popularity through sponsorship from major companies such as Emirates and Reebok.

The shortened version of cricket has generated capital and refreshed the sport. Tactics and techniques from Twenty20 are now applied in traditional county and 5-day international matches. In consequence, the skills of the original form are arguably compromised.

PEReviewExtras



Download this poster at www.hoddereducation.co.uk/perereviewextras

John Ireland is an experienced A-level PE teacher and textbook author.

