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David Rose: women, whistles and rugby union

The Leisure Review spoke to David Rose, head of development at the Rugby Football Union for Women (RFUW), about the state of play in his sport, the politics of development and the loneliness of the long-term committed referee.

David Rose's career path includes spells with the RFU as a youth development officer, the International Rugby Board (IRB), Sportscoach UK and the refereeing department back at the RFU. He is also an Aviva Premiership referee and can often be seen on television in this parallel role. In 2008 he joined the RFUW.

Can you give our readers an idea of the scope of your job?

I manage the development department here at the RFUW which consists of a team of five regional managers plus a competitions officer and someone who looks specifically at volunteering, recruiting and training volunteers into various roles. I also work nationally with the RFU [Rugby Football Union] principally the development director [soon to be Steve Grainger, late of the Youth Sport Trust] but also with their senior managers who look across a range of functions, such as at delivering in schools and in universities, at coaching and at refereeing. I work at a national level with them looking to develop policies and strategies to recruit more and more females into those areas. In addition I sit on some of the huge number of RFU committees on behalf of the women's game in terms of its representation at county level, at regional level and also through thinks like the national schools executive. I look at issues around game promotion and participation and in the non-contact versions of the game, like touch and TAG, and the social aspects of rugby, making sure that they include females as part of those developments.

The relationship between the RFU and the RFUW is probably unique in British sport isn't it? They seem to be set up to look like separate organisations but they're not.

At the moment the RFUW still has its own board and is a separate company but integration is ongoing and we'll become fully integrated as one union, probably in the next 12 to 18 months. Some of the integration has taken place already. For example, financially we support the RFU to ensure that we get delivery on the ground in terms of participation objectives and one of our board members sits on the RFU council. So we are integrated already in some senses but in terms of becoming one company, that's a little way off at the moment. That's down to timing more than anything else.

Is there a resistance to that integration within the RFUW?

No, no, no. We see it as positive step forward and it's something that we're fully behind as an organisation. Cricket and soccer have done it successfully and, although we may not use the same model, we will come together as one sport with a dedicated women and girls function.

In the past gender politics has seemed to be a driver within the RFUW with independence from the men's game a discernible objective. Do you think that has impetus has now gone from the organisation?

Times have changed and I think people are now almost waiting for the day when we do integrate. The female game has moved on significantly because of our relationship with the RFU, especially in the development aspects where we are getting things delivered. Always in any situation you will find people who are resistant to change and we must accept that and try to persuade those people that the change is both for their own good and that it won't make much difference to them on the ground. What it does do is give us greater influence and penetration. The [female] game needs the support of the RFU because it is

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too small to survive on its own. But there are a lot more enlightened people who see that it is going to happen and they support it happening.

You don't feel beleaguered, then, being a man in a woman's world?

No. One of the big challenges is keeping the momentum going and keeping women's rugby at the forefront of the planning process. Inevitably when you have such a busy set of outcomes to deliver, one of which is women's and girls' rugby, it's easy to get missed off the list, as it were. But the same happens to volunteering and to refereeing. You tend to get missed as the focus is on getting boys to play the game but I don't think we're unique in that. The challenge for me is to keep banging the drum so that we become part of the whole system and we do boys, we do girls, we're doing some work on refereeing, we're thinking about volunteering and the whole thing is part of one puzzle.

Anecdotal evidence points to a significant drop off in girls' participation between the ages of seven and 12. Is this indicative of a lack of openness from coaches and clubs towards girls' participation? By the time they are 12 girls' rugby drops off completely from most club's agendas.

I think that's right. We have recognised that over the last 12 months. We have just concluded an age-band review. We currently have the age bands under 18s and under 15s, which we changed to four years ago to take into account various issues we were facing then and we have 'reviewed the review' this last 12 months. It's gone to our board and we're just waiting for them to approve any changes. I can't go into the changes as we haven't had approval yet but it will address that area because it's something we recognise. We have thousands and thousands of girls going through primary school TAG Rugby programmes and we have lots of girls playing, as you say, mini rugby up to under 12 but then suddenly there is nothing for them. To an extent it's the same for boys, in that the amount of rugby we do in primary school doesn't transfer to those boys and girls playing rugby at secondary school. We hope we can do something about that by changing our age bands and the introduction of a different game for girls to play at 13. We have trialled that and the trials have been immensely successful. The feedback we have received has been fantastic so that's something we are looking to implement for next season as an addition to our youth programme. We see that as addressing that area and growing the game with those participants who come through.

So change is ongoing?

Indeed. One of the benefits of being a small organisation, albeit within the larger RFU, is the ability to make change quickly. We still consult very widely with our members and do appropriate piloting but we can make changes relatively quickly to service the needs of the game. We started last season with a new CB [constituent body/county] and divisional programme which recognised that the old regional programme was taking up too much of the season and clubs weren't able to play. So we've freed up a lot of playing dates by taking away that regional programme, introducing a CB programme and divisional and integrating that. We now have a proper process for players to be nominated and selected, for coaches to be selected and appointed so we've made that first step in terms of the player pathway. The next step is to look at the age bands to increase the potential for people to play at other ages. We are really moving quickly to address some of the key challenges we face.

Is there a challenge in the uneven spread of players geographically? There seems to be a significant disparity with far more players in the south east of England than other parts of the country and 10 years ago an official of the RFU was quoted as saying, "The heart of Women's rugby in the south."

I wouldn't say in any way that we are a southern-based game. We have made significant inroads around the country so we are much more geographically spread. I will admit we have some issues in terms of the distance some teams have to travel as they move up through the leagues but that's the same in men's rugby. The issue of for us is it starts slightly lower down and that's probably the next piece of work we have to look at. At youth level we have lots of cluster leagues now. In the south west Devon and Cornwall has become a real hotbed for us. There's a lot going on in the Midlands both west and east. Yorkshire is very strong and the only area we are probably really struggling now is Cumbria where there are unique geographical challenges with a huge range of mountains in the middle of the county. The number of people wanting to start teams up and the number of clubs involved is growing year on year. This year the RFU alone, from their information, have identified 14 new adult teams who

want to start next season. We grew 16 new adult teams this year and we grew 23 new junior teams this year. The interest in the World Cup [held in London in autumn 2010] helped although the challenge is in sustaining that impetus to address the geographic issues in terms of travel.

Is the politics of sexuality an issue in women's rugby?

To be honest we don't come across it, and I'm not just saying that as a sop to the answer. The RFU has got a strong policy on welfare and bullying and we don't have any instances where this issue has been raised with us. And that's at the RFUW and the RFU. We worked closely with Nic Scott [former Welfare Manager with the RFU] looking at those types of things and I think, as with a lot of things in female sport, it has become more of a perception than a reality. Certainly our national team is much more representative of society now than perhaps it was at one particular time in terms of sexuality. Things have changed as times have changed and certainly for us we don't see it as a problem or a barrier to people. The WSFF [Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation] did some research last year on women's participation in the eight major sports and the issue around sexuality was not raised as a barrier to participation in any of the sports. For us, one of the major barriers was the opportunity to play in schools, would you believe? We have addressed that through the schools programme we did last year where we went into 200 new schools working across 50 partnerships to introduce girls' rugby at years 7 and 8. We haven't buried the issue of sexuality. We don't go out and ask attitude questions on it every day but certainly it is a question that has been raised by several people and I raised it myself in my early days in this job.

What led you to want to work in the women's game?

One of the main things I did for the RFU refereeing department was instigate the female referee development programme, which has seen an increase in female referees across the country and increase in those referees being recognised internationally. That was one of my first journeys into the female side of the game. When the new post of head of development was created I applied and was appointed.

In what areas would you like to see change so that female rugby can continue to develop?

There are a lot of negatives around female sport in general and in rugby in particular. One of the things rugby clubs should look at is fully integrating their female sections. It's a bit like mini and youth rugby in that it seems to sit outside the club and the main body of the club doesn't know it exists. Yet it has a vital role to play in the development of clubs. I think clubs should play their part and make sure they are more welcoming and inclusive to female participants. The other thing I'd ask is that schools look again at what rugby's offer is. Rugby is not about 15 men on each side going out to knock lumps out of each other like you see on television. It's a game in which you want to encourage people to catch, pass, run and have some fun. That's what the game is about at those young levels, teaching kids evasion skills, things they would not normally pick up in other sports. Rugby lets them challenge themselves in a way they would not ordinarily have the opportunity to do.

You are a top referee. How does that sit with your job?

I wouldn't say it's complementary but it doesn't do any harm. The assumption people make is that I am a professional referee because I referee in the professional game. I have to put people right but it does cause conversations. It can have benefits when you talk to journalists and people like that. It can cause interest when they ask about my 'day job'. It helps, for example, with the RFU council members who know me first of all as a referee, which gives me a certain amount of gravitas with them. That means when I have to have a potentially difficult conversation with them I automatically have an 'in'. It doesn't have any effect on my availability or ability to do my job because, at the end of the day, refereeing is what I do part time, not as my full-time job. They work side by side, to be fair.

What about on days when Brendan Venter is having a go at you? [In January 2010 the Saracens director of rugby, Brendan Venter, was charged with bringing the game into disrepute following remarks he made about the referee of his team's defeat to Leicester. That referee was David Rose.]

Again it creates conversation rather than being a distraction. I always say that if www.theleisurereview.co.uk

you put yourself in that arena you have to be prepared to get what's coming, good and bad. You know if things don't go well for a coach on a certain day you're going to get your name in the papers. Journalists are journalists. They love a story and they got one that day. The facts are that he was completely wrong and the events weren't as he described them. It was quite comical eventually. For the first couple of days it was unpleasant because the way he went about it was fairly dishonest. It did cause some banter in the office, I must admit, but it doesn't cause any problems.

Refereeing can be a very isolating role.

I must admit when I first started I did find it very difficult. Nobody would talk to you and of course every game is an away game for the referee. Even when I went back to my own club after doing a game my mates would be talking about their game and that was isolating again. After I'd done a few games I seriously thought about going back to playing as I was not enjoying it. But then I got some good reports and some good games and I decided to give it 12 months. By the end of that year things had started to go really well so I stayed at it and I'm glad I did. I would recommend refereeing to anyone now. It can be very rewarding.

Returning to your day job, what are the challenges ahead for the governing bodies of sport?

I know from a club perspective you look at today and tomorrow but as a governing body we have to look at three and five years. We still have to look at today and tomorrow and next week and next month but for the long-term health of the sport we have to say, "In three years time if we keep on doing this where will we be? In five years time, where will we be? What's coming up that will shape what we do, what opportunities will there be, what are the changes that are coming along in sport and beyond and how will they affect us?" You have to do all that research and all that planning to make sure that girls playing now at the age of 11 still have the chance to play when they're 16, that rugby is still part of their life and hasn't become irrelevant to them because it hasn't kept up with changes in society, or because their needs haven't been addressed or their opinions haven't been taken into account. That's the challenge from a governing body perspective, taking people on that journey with you.

One last question, David. Despite all this development work and all your efforts we still come second to New Zealand at every World Cup? Is it harsh to be judged on 80 minutes every four years?

We can't keep being a gallant second. But that's the nature of elite sport. We get the 6 Nations every year where we are first or second on a regular basis but the big test is the World Cup. We have got to win one in the modern era so that we can say to people, "Everything we do, wherever you're working in the game, leads to that end result." We have all those clubs, all those players in the 44 [the RFUW elite programme], everyone in the divisional programme, all those players coming through the player development pathway and that's great and it works but ultimately the final prize has to be somebody lifting that trophy at the end of a World Cup. It's an exciting time but we have to keep ahead of the game.

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