

O&O SPORTS INSIGHT PAPER (SEPTEMBER 2016) – BOOSTING RUGBY UNION’S APPEAL – A BETTER GAME PLAN?

New O&O research has found that despite recent calls for reform to the Six Nations, the competition is widely appreciated across the UK and is actually more popular now with both core rugby fans and more casual followers than it was a few years ago.

Rugby Sevens has been seen as a way to grow the profile of the sport; whilst this may have had some impact in developing rugby markets, it is not proving to be a way of increasing the reach of rugby in its core markets such as the UK.

There is, however, significant interest in a potential world club competition, featuring a dozen of the best and biggest club brands from the UK, France and the Sanzar countries.

This may provide an opportunity to bring in more fans from all markets – core markets and new markets, through a more accessible global club competition eventually involving top sides from more nations.

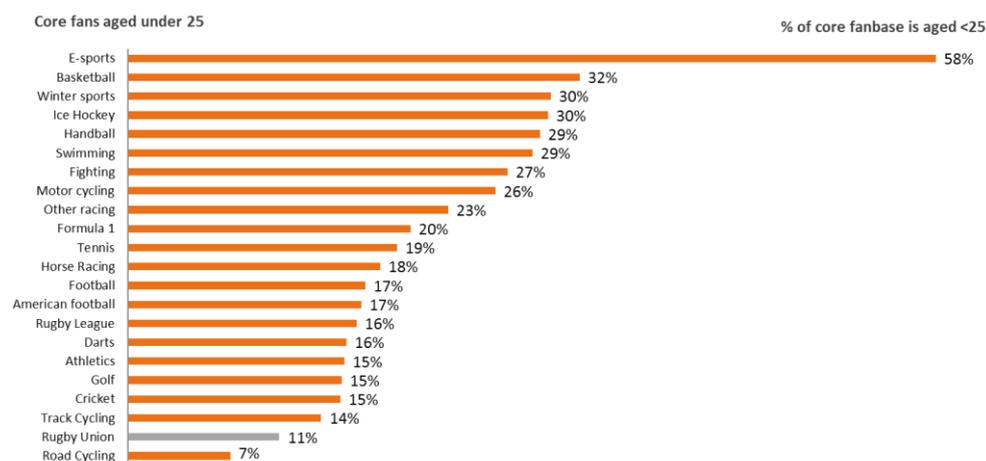
It may suggest that more focus should be given to pushing and reformatting club rugby and looking to create new global franchises as a way to break into emerging rugby markets, such as the US.

Rugby Union is one of the most followed sports in the UK; however, its relatively old audience is primarily interested in international matches

The last 12 months has seen both highs and lows for the RFU; from the ignominy of England becoming the first host nation to fail to make the Rugby World Cup knock-out rounds to Grand Slam winners and a rare tour win Down Under.

The dominance at the World Cup of the Southern Hemisphere nations (particularly impressive on European soil) sparked calls in the UK for a revamp of the international calendar. New figureheads at the governing bodies agreed to consider reforms to the season schedule as well as review other formats such as Sevens.

Rugby Union does not have a particular problem with the size of its fan appeal. New research commissioned by O&O has found that rugby still has a big core fan base in the UK, but its most passionate core fans are getting older; its proportion of under 25s core fans is amongst the smallest in the UK.

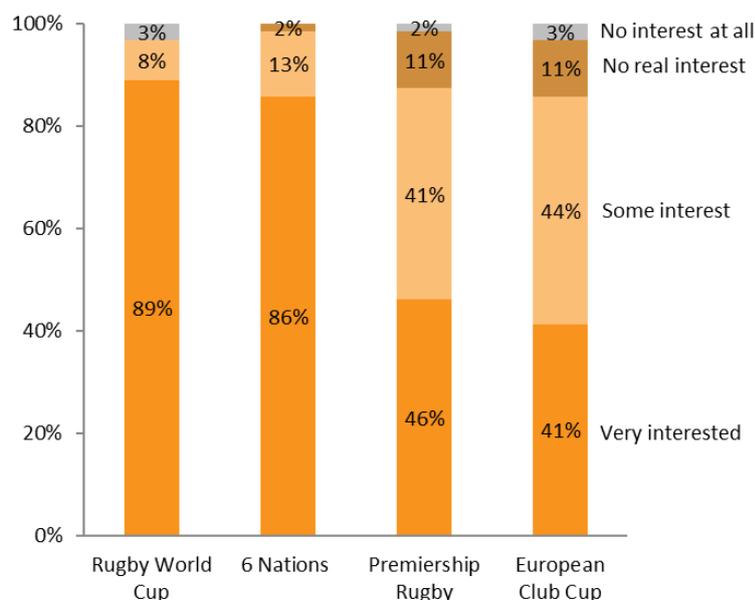


Source: Oliver & Ohlbaum Sports research: July 2016 (sample = 1066)

International rugby still has by far the greatest appeal in the UK, with between 80%-90% of core fans interested in the Rugby World Cup and Six Nations and almost half of casual rugby fans also interested.

Club rugby has much more of a select group of fans – less than half of hard core rugby fans have a strong interest in Premiership Rugby, and only around 15% of casual fans.

Rugby union competitions by level of interest – Core fans



Source: Oliver & Ohlbaum Sports research: July 2016 (sample = 1066)

Attempts to widen the appeal in core markets through the Sevens format do not appear to be working

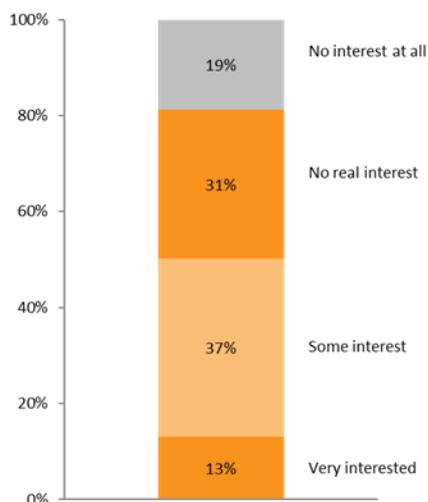
Much has been made of Rugby Union's inclusion in the Rio Olympic Games (albeit as a Sevens tournament) and the boost the extra publicity and reach the platform would provide to the sport.

However, O&O's research suggests that Sevens Rugby has not cut through to new audiences in core rugby markets like the UK, only a third of the core fan base in the UK has a strong interest and less than 15% of the casual fans.

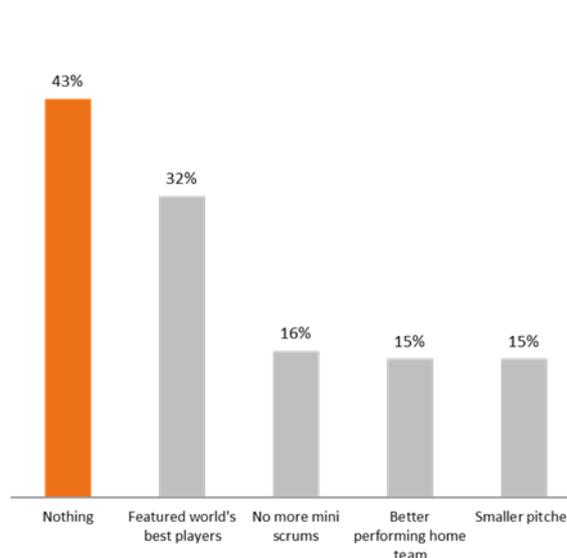
Sevens is considered by most to be a second or third tier rugby event, rather than a potential youth-focussed, broadcast-friendly property.

Almost half of casual rugby fans surveyed stated they will never be interested in Sevens rugby. The only means of appealing to potentially interested fans would be with the inclusion of the best players of the 15-player format. An unlikely prospect given the limited finances in Sevens and the belief from many clubs and nations that demands on players are already too high.

Rugby 7s interest level (casual rugby fans)



What would make you more interested in Rugby 7s?

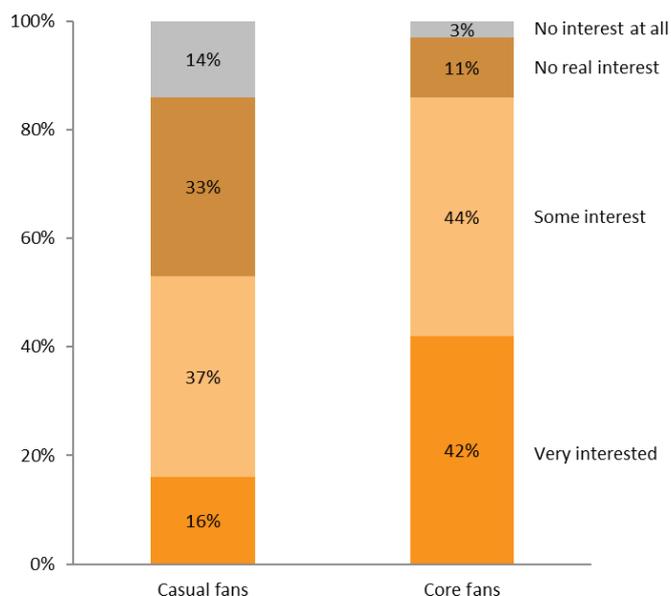


Source: Oliver & Ohlbaum Sports research: July 2016 (sample = 1066)

The creation of a global club competition could be the best way to expand the appeal of rugby

The O&O survey found that rather than make changes to existing tournaments and calendars, a world club competition could be rugby’s best opportunity to appeal to both core and casual fans. The concept resonates with the core fan base in the UK, but more importantly over 50% of the casual fan base showed an interest. It also has a stronger appeal with younger consumers, with around 45% of the under 35s we surveyed in the UK favourable towards the idea.

Level of interest in potential World Club Rugby Union competition – Casual fans vs Core fans



Source: Oliver & Ohlbaum Sports research: July 2016 (sample = 1066)



The governing bodies might do better to focus on developing global club franchises rather than changes to the current international calendar

The governing bodies have acknowledged the need for reform in rugby. There has been some friction between various parties on calendar clashes, the latest regarding the Lions Tour of New Zealand next year.

The Six Nations seems to be enjoying a period of high popularity and is probably best left alone for now. Sevens could be used as a support property to bigger 15-a-side matches, to promote and engage more young and female fans to break into rugby globally, but it will probably still have limited appeal and commercial value.

There is certainly a case for changes to the international calendar, especially if players are at risk of being over-selected, but the biggest commercial impact could be if rugby union can create and develop a new global club tournament. A world club competition resonates with both established rugby fans and younger more casual fans.

It could boost club and player brands and attract new investment into the sport. Promoted as the best club competition in the world, akin to the Champions League in football, it could even help rugby break into new markets such as the US, with the creation of strong franchises able to compete in a global tournament.

For more details about the O&O research contact Nick Beazley - +44 (207) 313 5900, nick.beazley@oando.co.uk

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O&O has been tracking developments in the sports market as rights holders look to reinvent, reform and reposition to ensure they keep or better their place in the pecking order of popularity with fans.