



“THESE GIRLS CAN”

THE WIDER IMPACTS OF THE DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH OF WOMENS AND GIRLS RL

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CLARE BALDING

1

FOREWORDS

Girls' and Women's Rugby League is changing our sport and our communities – a foreword by RFL President Clare Balding OBE.

When I shared the outline findings of this report with all members of the Rugby Football League Council, I reflected on the rise of Women's Rugby League and the positive impact of the sport on the lives of girls and women.

“If you could bottle increased self-esteem and aspiration, career-goals, body-confidence, fitness and a sense of purpose – you would” I suggested. “That’s what developing and supporting Girls’ and Women’s Rugby League does. It has positive impacts on the girls and women who play – on and off the pitch – and it is changing the whole sport of Rugby League and its communities.”

I am pleased to introduce this report on behalf of the RFL and its members and every volunteer who has worked so hard to grow this part of the sport. Our thanks to Betfred for their support to the Women's Super League and Women's Challenge Cup; and to Sport England who partner with the entire grassroots game and the talent pathway.

This is the second in a series of reports into the positive social impacts of Rugby League and follows the Rugby League Dividend Report.

This impact report looks at:

- **Increasing Profile**
- **Family & Community**
- **Personal Achievement**
- **Inclusion & Safe Environment**
- **Confidence & Personal Development**
- **Role Models & Aspiration**

Over the last few years and in particular during this last very difficult year for everyone, the RFL has reminded Government and other partners that Rugby League is more than a sport. This report demonstrates this once more. In this very special year for the sport with a home World Cup we have an opportunity to share what is unique about Rugby League with the widest possible audience; and girls and women are at the heart of that.

Finally, I am delighted to announce that The National Lottery is an exciting new partner to the RFL to support the development of Women's Rugby League. Thank you to them.

Here's to season 2021 and RLWC2021 – I cannot wait to watch our wonderful players in action.

CLARE BALDING OBE
RFL PRESIDENT



WOMEN
N
SPORT

WOMEN
IN SPORT

Sport is ‘transformational’ for women and girls – a foreword by Stephanie Hilborne OBE, CEO Women in Sport.

Women in Sport wants to ensure that no-one misses out on the joy, fulfilment and life-long benefits that sport and exercise offers to our health and personal development. As this report shows, whether at grassroots or elite level team sport has a unique role to play. The safe space and inclusive community that Rugby League has provided to women and girls has had a staggering impact with a tenfold improvement in the self-confidence and wellbeing of participants. Too many girls and women have been missing out on playing in a team with all the community and personal benefits that can bring. So we applaud the very real commitment that the RFL has made to ensuring the women’s game is more visible and more highly valued.

Attitudes to women’s sport are increasingly positive despite the impact of the pandemic. The norm is shifting, assumptions are being challenged but the structural gender inequalities in sport will remain until women’s sport has still greater investment, profile and prestige. The rapid growth of women’s Rugby League reflects the passion in local communities and the leadership in its National Governing Body.

If any sport can change things for women, Rugby League can. But even with such genuine commitment it needs visionary commercial sponsors and broadcasters. It is high time female athletes in Rugby League and beyond were given the same access to opportunities and the same recognition for success on the field as men. England is due to host the Rugby League World Cup in 2021 and Women in Sport is excited to see how running men’s, women’s and wheelchair competitions together will boost inclusive sport as a whole. As the 2012 Olympics showed events like this can go on to inspire and empower generations of young people to participate and prosper in sport.

As the world reels in the wake of the pandemic, so too does sport. As well as underlining the critical importance of our physical and mental health, the pandemic has lifted the lid on countless inequalities in society. As we emerge from the pandemic we must find ways to undo some of the economic, racial and gender inequalities that hold so many people away from the joy, fulfilment and lifelong benefits of sport. Sport and exercise is as transformational for women and girls as it is for men and boys, but society has never invested in it in the same way. Now is the time for leadership and the RFL are showing unstoppable determination to change.

STEPHANIE HILBORNE OBE
CEO Women in Sport



2

INTRODUCTION – WOMEN'S SPORT

Participation in Women's Sport

In the UK 61% of women over the age of 16 and 43% of girls under the age of 16 are considered active, participating in more than 150 minutes of physical activity a week [1]. Whilst encouraging, female participation is still behind that of men. The benefits of sport and physical activity to women is wide reaching and varied, from physical and mental health outcomes to improved confidence, social skills, and career aspirations. It is therefore vital women and girls have the opportunity and resources required to get involved.

Significant work has been undertaken by organisations such as Women in Sport and Sport England to encourage female participation and break-down barriers. Award-winning national campaigns such as 'This Girl Can' have a wide reach on social media, whilst Sport England's most recent 'Women in Sport' week was able to reach over 10.6 million women and young girls. In 2020 sporting and activity levels across the country have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and women have been disproportionately affected. 42% of women say their activity level has dropped, compared to just 35% of men [1].

2.1

Elite Women's Sport

Elite women's sport is undergoing a period of rapid growth, the number of professional and semi-professional women's competitions is increasing, attendance is rising and the presence of women's sport within the national media is at

an all-time high. Just over 1/3 of people agree that the gender gap within sport has diminished in the last 12 months alone [3].

Attitudes towards women's sport are changing. 66% of the general population are interested in women's sport, interest increases to 84% amongst those that identify as sports fans, of those that are interested 51% are male and 49% are female [2]. Part of the attraction of women's sport is that it is perceived differently from men's sport; it is seen as inspiring, progressive, and family-orientated whilst it is less likely viewed as money-driven and competitive [2].

Stand-alone women's sporting events are drawing bigger crowds than ever before. Over 1.1 million fans attended the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2019 in France, whilst a crowd of over 86,000 attended the 2020 ICC Women's T20 World Cup Final - the highest attendance for a women's cricket match anywhere in the world. Domestically the FA Women's Super League has attracted crowds of over 30,000 whilst the Women's FA Cup Final drew over 40,000 spectators to Wembley. Interest in attending elite women's sport is increasing with 45% of the population saying they would consider attending a women's sporting event [2].

It is a similar story on TV. Audiences have been steadily growing for women's sports, the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2019 had global audiences of over of 1.12 billion 2019, whilst the Women's Wimbledon Tennis Final in 2018 generated 4.6 million viewers in the UK, which was higher than the Men's Final. 46% of the general population say they would watch more women's sport if it were readily available on TV [2].



of the population are interested in women's sport.
Of those that are interested **51%** are male **49%** are female



of elite sportswomen are full time athletes



of people say they would attend
a women's sporting event



of the general population would watch women's
sport if it were freely available



believe it is important that women are
presenters and pundits



of people think the gender gap in sport has
diminished in the last 12 months



the number of women regularly playing sport in England



the number of active adult females (16+)



the number of active girls (5-16)



drop in the number of active females due to COVID



the global audience for the FIFA Women's World Cup



the attendance for the 2020 ICC Women's T20 World Cup Final, the highest ever for women's cricket

Along with the increased exposure of live women's sport on TV, women are becoming better represented in the sports media, 79% of people believe it's important that women have roles as presenters and pundits on both male and female sports [3]. But the demand is there for more, with 70% of women and 50% of men feeling that women's sport still does not receive enough TV and media coverage [3], this is reflected by the 7% of all sports media coverage in the UK which features women's sport [4]. Despite the rapid growth of women's sport and the continued push for equality only 48% of elite British sportswomen are full-time athletes. 34% of elite British sportswomen do not receive any income from their sport, of those that do, 80% receive less than the UK average wage of £29,600. Unsurprisingly 84% of elite British sportswomen feel the financial rewards are inadequate compared to male athletes [5]. The income generated through sponsorship and commercial partners plays a significant role in the provision of remuneration for athletes. Between 2013 and 2017 the number of sponsorship deals within women's sport announced annually increased 37%, whilst the revenue generated through sponsorship deals increased 49% [2].

This marks significant progress and sustaining such growth will be key in achieving financial parity between male and female athletes. Women's and Girl's Rugby League has undergone significant and unprecedented growth in recent years – however it remains vastly smaller than the male game on key metrics – participant numbers, commercial partnerships, support structures in clubs, profile and reach, environments. The advent of the Women's Super League has though demonstrated the appetite from existing and new fans for women's Rugby League. Audiences at Women's Super League fixtures are regularly higher than tier 4 and occasionally tier 3 (men's) fixtures. Women's Rugby League is uniquely placed within communities to provide not only an excellent player and sports-fan experience, but also to influence, improve and transform the lives of those involved. This report aims to evidence that wider positive social impact of girls' and women's Rugby League.



3

GROWTH OF WOMEN'S RUGBY LEAGUE

3.1

Overview

'The momentum around women's sport is unstoppable. Led by football as most would expect, the nation's sporting consciousness has awakened to the power and possibility of women's sport. Our Women's Super League was in some ways a leap of faith – designed to be inspirational to young girls and to bring the sport to new audiences. It has done that and more. Previously, women's Rugby League had smaller audiences, mainly of partners and families. Now they have been joined by

club supporters and new female and male fans. The commercialisation of the sport is beginning to ignite and more analysis of the market for women's sport helps us all. It is full of commercial and media potential – and opportunities for social impact partnerships too. It is challenging and will continue to challenge men's sport - rightly. The sexism of the past is less prevalent and will, eventually, be pushed aside.'

RALPH RIMMER

CEO, The Rugby Football League

TIMELINE >>

THE WIDER IMPACTS OF THE DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH OF

WOMEN'S AND GIRLS RUGBY LEAGUE



WOMEN ARE REGULAR SPECTATORS at men's fixtures and are involved in the running of supporter clubs and amateur teams, there are no reports of women playing at this time

1895- >
1940



< 1940

WINNIE POWELL COACHES' schoolboys' team at Wakefield St Austin School



KAY IBBETSON FOUNDED East Hull ARLFC which remains one of the game's largest and most successful community clubs

1958 >



Elizabeth Beal was **BANNED FROM PLAYING** for Normanton amateur rugby league under 14's, the ban was overturned due to equal opportunity laws



KATH HETHERINGTON becomes the first woman to sit on the RFL Council where she represented Sheffield Eagles



WARLA founded and 6 teams form the first women's league



Julia Lee becomes the **FIRST WOMEN TO OFFICIATE** a men's professional game



FIRST ever GB **WOMEN'S TOUR** to Australia



ENGLAND WOMEN'S TEAM FOUNDED

<1969

Betty Haile becomes the **FIRST WOMEN TO BE APPOINTED** a Rugby League Club director as she is elected to Whitehaven RLFC's board of directors



1978 >

<1980

The **FIRST FEMALE CLUBS** are formed at Huddersfield, Leeds, and Pilkington Glassworks



1984 >

<1984

Julie Fitzpatrick becomes the **FIRST FEMALE REFEREE**, taking charge of a West Yorkshire amateur league fixture



1986 >

<1991

WOMEN'S LEAGUE EXPANDED to 18 sides across two divisions



1993 >

<1993

Sophie Cox becomes the **FIRST WOMEN'S RL PLAYER TO PLAY AT WEMBLEY** during the school Under 11's final ahead of the Challenge Cup Final



1996 >

<2000

FIRST ever **WOMEN'S RUGBY LEAGUE WORLD CUP** was won by New Zealand



2007 >

2008

Brenda Bobek becomes the **FIRST FEMALE COACH OF ENGLAND WOMEN**



2012

WOMEN'S CHALLENGE CUP founded



2014

WOMEN'S RUGBY LEAGUE CHAMPIONSHIP formed



2013

Sally Bolton OBE is the **Chief Executive of the Rugby League World Cup** held in England & Wales



2017

The Women's and Men's world cup final are **PLAYED ON THE SAME DAY**, the first time in any sport



Natalie Gilmore is the **FIRST FEMALE** to be awarded an **MBE** for her services to Women's Rugby League



2018

Women's Super League expanded to **7 TEAMS**



2019

Women's Super League Grand Final is the first women's RL game to be broadcast live on **SKY SPORTS**



Women's Super League gains first title **SPONSOR IN BETFRED**



ENGLAND WOMEN play in the **WORLD CUP 9s** in Sydney and tour Papua New Guinea, the players are paid for the first time in the women's game



Coral sponsorship of the **CHALLENGE CUP**



2020

Women's Super League expanded to **10 TEAMS**



2021

Women's Rugby League World Cup 2021 will **SHARE THE SAME STAGE** as the Men's Tournament with all games shown live by the **BBC**



Rugby League in England is predominantly, though increasingly not exclusively, played in the north of England. The women's and girls' game is no exception with most clubs based in Yorkshire, the North West and Cumbria. Clubs are disproportionately distributed in areas of high deprivation, to the extent that 49% of community clubs are situated in areas within the top 30% of deprivation [6]. This overrepresentation in the top 30% occurs in other specific forms of deprivation such as health (56%), employment (45%) and education (44%) [6]. Due to its presence in areas of high deprivation Rugby League is uniquely placed to improve and transform the lives of those living in communities with multiple inequalities.

Currently 11% of women and girls playing Rugby League are from ethnic minorities. This is significantly higher than the 6% seen in the men's and boys' game. The ethnic minority population in core Rugby League areas varies but can be as high as 30% in some towns and cities. The sport recognises that it is still not representative of its communities.

In October 2020, the RFL launched a new sport-wide action plan 'TACKLE IT – Rugby League versus Discrimination' with a clear set of measurable actions to improve opportunities for people from all underrepresented groups to become more involved in the sport.

3.3 Women's Super League

The RFL Women's Championship was founded in 2014 as a premier domestic women's Rugby League competition. It consisted of 13 clubs, predominantly community clubs with only a few connected to men's professional teams and none connected to the men's Super League teams. In 2017 the Women's Super League was formed as the sport's elite female competition. Central to this strategy is 'brand extension' – harnessing the power, reach, aspiration, and emotional connections presented by professional clubs. The RFL Women's Championship became the second tier, and a third competition - the RFL Women's Championship 1 was added below. The inaugural Women's Super League was contested by four clubs, Bradford Bulls, Castleford Tigers, Featherstone Rovers and Thatcho Heath

Crusaders. The season culminated in Bradford Bulls defeating Featherstone Rovers in the first ever Women's Super League Grand Final. The Women's Super League expanded the following year to include Leeds Rhinos, York City Knights and Wigan Warriors, and St Helens also joined the league replacing Thatcho Heath Crusaders creating a seven-team competition. The league expanded further in 2019 with the inclusion of Wakefield Trinity and again in 2020 with the debut of Warrington Wolves and Huddersfield Giants giving the current 10 team configuration. At present seven of the ten UK based Men's Super League clubs have an affiliated women's team playing in the Women's Super League. This affiliation with the Men's Super League clubs has been pivotal in establishing the credibility and brand awareness of the Women's Super League, the strong association and support fans have for their club now extends to the women's teams.



The women's and girls' game has been a significant focus of ours over the last 4 years, in particular creating and implementing the Betfred Women's Super League. In 2016, we devised the strategy of launching an elite women's competition, to act as a big lever to drive growth across the whole of the women's and girls' game. Together with our partners the club Foundations, we felt we needed to level up the women's and girls' game - so that girls and women across our country could benefit from the same opportunities afforded to our male counterparts and equally move the sport into new markets. We knew if done correctly, this would provide positive outcomes and enhance experiences for all involved and provide significant growth across all parts of our women's and girls' game. The work which has been done to date, is part of longer-term plan, which looks to maximise every possible opportunity linked to the Women's Rugby League World Cup in 2021.



THOMAS BRINDLE
General Manager Betfred
Women's Super League

“

We have had a long partnership with the RFL since we took the Super League sponsorship in 2017 and Championship and League One sponsorships a year later. A strong presence in women's sport was missing from our portfolio. Across the sports industry, the progress and exposure around women's sport has increased so much in the last few years, this opportunity [Women's Super League] was the perfect one for us given our relationship with the RFL and our standing in Rugby League.

”



LEWIS SMITH
Betfred

In 2018, the Women's Super League secured its first title sponsor with Betfred, a deal which was renewed for 2021. Already sponsors of three male professional Rugby League competitions, Betfred wanted to expand their footprint in women's sport and saw the extension of their Rugby League portfolio as an exciting proposition.

2018 was also the year the Woman of Steel Award was introduced. This annual Award recognises the best Women's Super League player of the season and is decided through a poll of the players. The award is presented to the winner at the Steve Prescott Man of Steel Awards dinner, alongside the Men's Super League awards. Just one year after its introduction the award attracted a commercial partner and was rebranded the Telegraph Women of Steel.

The profile of the Women's Super League has grown significantly since its inception. The 2017 and 2018 Grand Finals were played at the Manchester Regional Arena, however, in 2019 the showpiece fixture moved to the Totally Wicked Stadium in St Helens – a leading Super League stadium. It drew a four-figure crowd and was also the first domestic Women's Rugby League game to be broadcast live on Sky Sports.

2020 was gearing up to be the biggest year yet for the Women's Super League. Sadly, as in many other sports, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the season being cancelled. The RFL, clubs, Foundations, commercial partners, DCMS, and Sport England are all committed to maintaining the momentum behind the competition and returning in 2021 with the best Women's Super League to date.

“

You don't care who is wearing the badge, if you're a supporter of that club it doesn't matter if it's the men's team, the women's team or the PDRL team, you want that team to do well, because that's your club and you've got pride and loyalty to it. That's what forming the Women's Super League did, it gave respect to the women's game.

”



JODIE CUNNINGHAM
Women's Super League & England
Player, Rugby League World Cup
Ambassador

“

My little girl loves the women's team. Before the Women's Super League she always used to say, Dad I want to play for St Helens when I'm older, but at that time the WSL wasn't a thing, and it was impossible for her to achieve that. I never wanted to ruin her dream, now I don't have to lie to her anymore. I can tell her that if she sticks at it and works hard then absolutely she can pull on the St Helens shirt and represent her club.

”

**PARENT OF GIRLS' RUGBY
LEAGUE PLAYER**

3.4

Women's Challenge Cup

The Women's Challenge Cup was first introduced in 2012, establishing itself as the premier domestic cup competition in Women's Rugby League. The competition follows a knock-out format culminating in a show piece final at a neutral venue and is contested by clubs from all levels of the women's game.

The profile of the Women's Challenge Cup has grown significantly in recent years. The competition has been introduced to new audiences through live streaming of games on the BBC Sport website and the RFL Our League platform. In 2019 the competition gained its first title sponsor as Coral extended their partnership of the men's Challenge Cup competition. This was also the year a new, redesigned trophy was unveiled and awarded to the eventual winners, Leeds Rhinos, in the biggest final to date. The match was played at the University of Bolton Stadium as part of a triple header with the men's semi-finals. Around 4,000 fans were in attendance for the 2019 final making it one of the highest attended Women's Rugby League games in the UK.

3.5

Attendance, Viewing & Media

Rugby League has a strong female following; of the 14.2 million people interested in Rugby League in the UK, 48% of them are women [7]. Audience demographics show that 36% of TV viewers for Rugby League broadcasts are women, higher than many other major sports [8]. Around 16% of women in the general population reported attending live sport events in the last 12 months [1], however, women typically make up around 30% of major Rugby League event attendees.

Within the women's game attendance has been growing steadily, since the introduction of the Women's Super League, games have regularly drawn crowds of over 1,000 spectators for stand-alone events. Games are regularly staged as double-headers alongside the elite men's fixtures; increasing exposure and introducing new audiences to the women's game.

Women's Rugby League has been featured extensively on the RFL's Our League platform (a fan App) since its launch in 2018. Up to 30 live fixtures are broadcast per year across all forms

of the Women's game including Super League, Challenge Cup, Community Competitions, and Internationals. Streaming numbers for the Women's games compare favourably to the men's professional competitions and drive a new and engaged audience to the platform.

In addition, 2019 saw the first ever live televised broadcast of a Women's Super League fixture. Rugby League's long term broadcast partner Sky Sports aired the Women's Super League Grand Final between Leeds Rhinos and Castleford Tigers and audiences peaked at over 120,000.



As a company, GVC have been involved with the men's RFL Challenge Cup since 2015, initially with our Ladbrokes brand and more recently with our Coral brand. During that time the Women's Rugby League game had developed to such a high level that we felt this was a great opportunity for us to assist in raising the awareness of the women's game and supporting the Rugby League community as a whole.



JOE BURTON
GVC Group



[A memorable moment was] 2019's Grand Final and the media coverage it gained. It was brilliant to see the game live on Sky Sports. Personally, to be part of the build-up and the game day coverage of the Women's Super League Grand Final on Sky, will be something I'll never forget. To give the game that kind of exposure and allow viewers the chance to see it LIVE on TV, with the coverage, like what RL fans are used to from the men's game was brilliant!



JENNA BROOKS
Sky Sports



The BBC has also played an active role in promoting the women's game in recent years by streaming games from the Challenge Cup and the England Women's tour of Papua New Guinea. The national broadcaster will be showing every game from the Women's 2021 Rugby League World Cup live.

There is an active commitment to get more women involved, both on and off screen, at the BBC and at Sky.

Women are increasingly becoming more prominent on Sky Sports broadcasts, with Women's Super League players featuring as pundits and co-commentators for live men's Super League broadcasts as well as featuring on Sky Sports News.

3.6 Commercial Partners

Both major Women's Rugby League competitions have secured commercial partners in recent years. The first major partner was Betfred, who secured the title sponsorship of the Women's Super League in 2018. Having already been involved with the sport through the men's professional game, Betfred viewed the Women's Super League as a valuable property, with new opportunities to stream games and access talent. The RFL was able to package broadcast rights for several live Women's Super League games to be shown live on Betfred's social media channels. Betfred is both a partner and content creator in the sport, and its content and commitment to working with female players in the studio has elevated the sport.

The following year Coral became the title sponsors of the Women's Challenge Cup. Alongside securing its first major sponsor, the 2019 competition was also the first time the final was played as a triple header with the men's semi-finals live on the BBC. This resulted in unprecedented profile and coverage of the Women's Challenge Cup.

More recently, Betfred has extended its support by becoming the title partner to the 2021 Men's, Women's and Wheelchair RL Challenge Cup competitions – the first time a partnership has spanned all three cup competitions. It follows their announcement in December 2020 that

they will be a back of jersey partner to all three England teams in preparedness for RLWC2021.

The England Performance Unit which brings together the Men's, Women and Wheelchair RL programmes, has benefited from the support of front of shirt partners Dacia, and of Ronseal with both commercial partnerships extending across all three teams.

Players have recognised the impact commercial partnerships with established brands has had on the women's game.



Whenever possible I try to use the Sky Sports platform to help promote the women's game by coming up with story ideas/features to either go out on our live broadcasts or for Sky Sports News dedicated programme 'Sportswomen'.



JENNA BROOKS
Sky Sports



Having women presenting, writing, and bringing their expertise to media coverage helps to break down the myth that women's involvement in Rugby League is somehow less valuable than men's involvement. It has a growing part to play. Over the next few months, we intend to dedicate more of our weekly podcasts to the women's game and would like to encourage more women players to join us in the commentary box as we build towards the World Cup.



DAVE WOODS
BBC Rugby League Correspondent



[During the 2019 season] we were getting real value from a social media perspective by streaming games on our social channels, the viewing figures and interaction we generated from those live streams regularly ranked in the top 10 across all sports we feature. The interest was two-fold, interaction was coming from Rugby League supporters but also the general bounce behind women's sport is driving that higher engagement.



LEWIS SMITH
Betfred



[On the Betfred and Coral becoming partners to the Women's Super League and Challenge Cup] I'd never given it much thought before but we felt honoured to have a backer for the first time, the fact that people actually saw value in what we had as a product, all the girls were buzzing at the announcement. I hope it's something companies are starting to realise, that with a relatively small investment [in comparison to men's sports] you can have a massive impact on the individual athletes that play and the future of the sport.

WOMEN'S SUPER LEAGUE PLAYER



The partnership has benefitted both sides extremely well. The exposure of the 2019 Women's Challenge Cup Final hit a high when it formed part of a triple header with the men's semi-finals all held on the same day, with extensive coverage across the BBC. From a wider perspective there is an increased media focus on Women's sport, with higher engagement levels, and we feel it would only be correct to support that as best we can if and when the right opportunity arises.



JOE BURTON
GVC Group



3.7

International Women's Rugby League & World Cup

Following an invite from Australia in 1996 the Great Britain Lionesses embarked on the first ever tour for a women's international Rugby League team. The team self-funded the tour which ended in victory over the Australia Women.

Just four years later in 2000, the first Women's Rugby League World Cup took place. The inaugural event, hosted in the UK, was contested by 8 teams. The final was held at the Wilderspool Stadium in Warrington where New Zealand defeated Great Britain to become the first Women's Rugby League World Cup winners. Subsequent World Cups were played in New Zealand and Australia before returning to the UK in 2013. Whilst previous women's tournaments were played around the same time as the men's and in some instances using the same stadia, the 2017 competition in Australia was the first in which the women's final was played as a curtain raiser to the men's final. A significant portion of the over 40k fans that attended the event in Brisbane watched the women's final, seeing Australia retain their title by defeating New Zealand in a repeat of the 2013 final.

The 2021 Women's World Cup in England is set to be the biggest to date and will share the stage with the Men's and Wheelchair Rugby League tournaments. Games are to be hosted in some of the best stadia in the country and major double-header events are scheduled for the opening ceremony in Newcastle's St James' Park stadium and the final, to be held at Old Trafford, Manchester, has the potential to set a record attendance for a women's Rugby League game.

Over the last 4 years, with the ongoing support of Sport England, the women's and girls' game has grown rapidly both in terms of the number of participants and the emerging opportunities there are for aspiring athletes to engage in the Talent and Performance Pathway at many levels.

There is now an established Talent and Performance Pathway for female players to progress to the senior England Women's team.

Each year women are invited to join the National Performance Squad. This training squad is used to select teams for the Women's Origin Series, in which Yorkshire and Lancashire representative sides compete over a three-game series. The Women's Origin Series allows coaches to assess players in a competitive environment from which they will select around 30 players for the England Women Performance Squad (EWPS) and a further 10 for the England Women Knights Performance Squad (EWKPS).

The EWPS and EWKPS are supported by a 15 strong performance team, including experienced coaching staff headed by Level 4 Coach Craig Richards and an expert multi-disciplinary support team led by Professor Ben Jones of Leeds Beckett University and Head of Performance, England Performance Unit.

The elite performance environment provides the best opportunity for the women involved to develop and progress as athletes, giving themselves the greatest possible chance of selection for the final England squad.

Female players between the ages of 16-18 years may also be invited to join the RFL's Diploma in Sporting Excellence (DiSE). Alongside their regular studies in sixth form or other Further Education settings, these young women work towards achieving the Diploma in Sporting Excellence – a BTEC Level 3 qualification (which is also recognised by The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service UCAS). Supported by the RFL and Loughborough College, these committed athletes will learn about what it takes to compete at the elite level in sport, including technical and tactical elements of the game, and all aspects of physical and mental preparation such as nutrition and psychology.

Even in a tough year when no women's International games were able to take place due to COVID-19, the EWPS and EWKPS have been supported by the England Performance Unit and this continued support and development is vital building towards the 2021 Women's World Cup.

“

The tournament gives us five weeks of spectacular sport and five weeks of watching the sport's best athletes. We have both men's and women's World Cup finals on the same day at Old Trafford live on the BBC and I think that is a huge statement from us as the organisers about how important International Women's Rugby League is.



JON DUTTON
CEO, RLWC2021

”

“

Thanks to our continued relationship with key partners such as Sport England and the opportunities afforded by a vibrant domestic competition offer, we can provide an inclusive environment for female athletes to access the sport and be on the journey to Elite Performance and represent England in International competition.



DAVE ROTHERAM
RFL Chief On-Field Officer

”

“

I'm a big admirer of Jon Dutton and what he's done with the Rugby League World Cup, I believe that's where women's and wheelchair sports needs to be. There is equality, that sees the women and wheelchair on the same platform and the same stage, that's when it will fly because the potential is there.

”



JULIA LEE

First Female Referee, Former Player,
Coach and Administrator

“

We believe we are continuing to set higher standards, through allowing the group to influence each other's behaviours and in doing so creating strong and more confident leaders/people within the group. The experience of Papua New Guinea was life changing for some and reinforced the importance of their individual and group roles in affecting and influencing positive change around the world through sport.

”



CRAIG RICHARDS

England Women Head Coach

“

On the DiSE programme we now have 60 students, some of the best under 18's from around the country, all wanting to develop themselves within our game. Alongside our partners at Loughborough College and the Women's Super League clubs, we are offering them an established talent pathway. Those who go on to university will also be well positioned to access scholarship schemes for talented athletes when they get there.

”



STUART BARROW

RFL National Women and Girls Talent
Manager





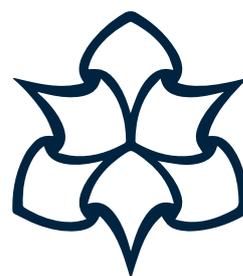
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SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT

When commissioned in 2019 the Rugby League Dividend Report [9], produced by Manchester Metropolitan University, calculated the social impact of Rugby League as £411.52 per person. The social return on every £ spent by Rugby League community clubs in sport generates a social return of £4.08.

Based on the same methodology used in the Rugby League Dividend Report, Manchester Metropolitan University researchers have been able to calculate the social value and return on investment per female player. The social value is an economic estimation derived from participation in terms of health, social inclusion, and education / employment, as well as from volunteering. For the purpose of applying it to women and girls only, it needs to be considered that reduced risk of breast cancer applies only to women, while reduction in crime applies only to males in the methodology. [Please see the **Rugby League Dividend Report** for full details on the social value and return on investment calculations].

After having adapted the calculations to focus solely on women and girls, it has been determined that the social value per female player is £409.60 and the social return on investment is £4.06 for female players. In other words, every £ spent by Rugby League community clubs in sport generates a social return of £4.06 for female players. This evidences the positive contribution the sport of Rugby League makes currently in England in terms of its social impact and return on investment specifically for women and girls.



**Manchester
Metropolitan
University**



I was impressed with the social value of Rugby League in the initial Dividend Report and am encouraged that the revised calculation shows this also applies to female players.



DR NICOLAS SCELLES
Senior Lecturer, Manchester
Metropolitan University



5

SOCIAL IMPACTS OF WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' RUGBY LEAGUE

To assess the social impact of Women's and Girls' Rugby League and how it affects the personal development of the individuals involved, a questionnaire was distributed to all players, coaches and volunteers within the Women's and Girls' game. In addition, a series of consultation interviews were conducted with key stakeholders across the game.

Thematic analysis was conducted on the results of the survey and interview transcripts; the key themes are summarised below.

- **Increasing Profile**
- **Family & Community**
- **Inclusion & Safe Environment**
- **Personal Development & Achievement**
- **Role Models & Aspiration**

5.1

Increasing Profile

Undoubtedly Women's and Girls' Rugby League has grown significantly in recent years both in participation and profile.

96% of those surveyed agreed that the game is growing whilst 91% believe the profile of the Women's and Girls' game is rising.



I do think it's growing, we can see it in our club alone, when the girls team started a few years ago we had 6 players and now we've got 90 girls registered at the club. The under 10s is absolutely booming, we've got girls as young as 7 coming along, because not all girls are confident enough to play with the boys so we invite them to train. We used to have to look for new players but we don't have to do that anymore, the girls talk about it loads and are really passionate, it rubs off on their school mates and it grows from there.



GENNA BANKS

Women's Player & Girls' Coach
Leigh Miners Rangers

This has also been recognised at the top level of the game. Many current Women's Super League players started their rugby careers over a decade ago, they have watched the women's and girls' game evolve making them grateful and appreciative for the opportunities and experiences the game is able to give them now.

93% of those surveyed felt the women's and girls' game is as important as the men's and boys' game, yet only 12% feel the sport gets the recognition it deserves.

74% feel the game does not have resources it needs to grow.

99% would like to see more effort go into growing and supporting the women's game by everyone in the sport.

There was a feeling that where the men's and boys' clubs supported the formation of women's and girls' teams, the team flourished, and the club benefited as a whole.

Despite feeling that still more needs to be done to grow and support the women's and girls' game, participants do acknowledge the support received thus far from all stakeholders in the game, acknowledging the significant progress the women's and girls' game has made in a short space of time.

“

[On playing at Headingley Stadium] Every single one of us when we walked out at that ground was like wow, everybody took that moment to look around and think as if we're playing here, as if we've got this opportunity. From playing on parks to this, if you compare where we have been prior to where we are now it's unreal.

”



JODIE CUNNINGHAM

Women's Super League & England Player, Rugby League World Cup Ambassador

“

The attitude and support from [the men's and boys'] clubs is essential, unless your club buys into the girls' section and backs you 100% it's hard, it's not cheap at the beginning, the subs don't cover anything at the start. Our club backed us and believed in what we were doing, that investment has paid off and now the club receives nearly £1000 a month in subs just from the girls; it is worth that long term investment from clubs.

”



GENNA BANKS

Women's Player & Girls' Coach
Leigh Miners Rangers

“

[On her move from Bradford Bulls to Leeds Rhinos] That first game at Odsal playing and getting called 'Judas' from the stands for me was class, it was like we've got somewhere here, someone has to care enough to shout that so it felt like we'd created a bit of momentum around the game.

”



LOIS FORSELL

Former Women's Super League & England Player, Current Coach and Ambassador

“

As a woman, there's now somewhere for us to progress. And if the men can do it, why can't the women do it too? Women's Rugby League is only going to grow.

”



NATALIINA ROMANO

Women's Rugby League Player
HULL FC

Many view a strong women's and girls' game as vital to the long-term health of the sport, both in its ability to capitalise on new trends within the sporting market but also to attract a new and diverse audience to the sport.

5.2

Family and Community

When surveyed, 56% of coaches and volunteers within the women's and girls' game got involved in the sport because their daughter plays, whilst 38% of players took up the sport because they were from a Rugby League family and wanted to get more involved.

58% of players said Rugby League has brought their family closer together.

When asked about their proudest moment in the sport many recalled memories involving their close family. Common themes were the pride and happiness these family moments created.

“

For young girls sport is so important, and to be part of a team can be a huge boost to confidence, friendships and discipline in terms of how you live your life and balance your time. Also, in a time where body image can be such a toxic subject it can help to teach them that muscles, strength and eating the right food to fuel your body is good. If you want to be your best in sport your body is your tool and you need to look after it.

Coming back to the World Cup, if boys and grown men can see women playing at the highest level of the game and getting the same level of coverage and support as the men hopefully that will translate to them taking their female peers more seriously and realising they deserve the same level of respect as young boys and men who want to play the game.

”



TANYA ARNOLD
BBC Sports Reporter and
Presenter

“

‘The growth we've had wouldn't have been possible without all the stakeholders investing time and money and just backing the women's game and pushing it to the next level, if that's taken away it can easily go backwards, just as quickly as its gone forwards, we can't afford to do that, we've seen that it works, with just a little investment and time dedicated to it you're going to get huge rewards from it.

”



JODIE CUNNINGHAM
Women's Super League & England
Player, Rugby League World Cup
Ambassador

“

For the health of the sport it's so important we have an equitable and strong female competition. Across the whole sporting landscape increased funding is going into women's sport because of the nature and honesty of it, you need a healthy women's game for the sport to survive.

”



JULIA LEE
First Female Referee, Former Player,
Coach and Administrator

“

We need to see the women's and girls' game as a route to engage new people, it's not about seeing the women's and girls' game in isolation, it's one piece of a puzzle and a new way of engaging fans to the sport, we need the women's and girls' game to expand the reach of the sport, bringing in new people from different backgrounds, a completely different dynamic. We pride ourselves on being inclusive and diverse and it's something we can continue to thrive in.

”

**WOMEN'S RUGBY
LEAGUE PLAYER**

“

My proudest moment as a player is being able to represent one of my hometown teams. Being able to wear the Hull KR badge is a massive honour and seeing how proud my family are, makes me proud to play.

**WOMEN'S RUGBY
LEAGUE PLAYER**

”

“

My fondest memory as a player is walking out on to the pitch and my grandad finally having the chance to watch me play. The smile on his face was the biggest smile I have seen from him in years.

WOMEN'S RUGBY LEAGUE PLAYER

”

“

[My fondest memory is] my dad being my coach.

**WOMEN'S RUGBY
LEAGUE PLAYER**

”

“

Seeing my daughter and her friends begin to love the sport that I do and smile whilst playing the sport.

**GIRLS' RUGBY LEAGUE
VOLUNTEER**

”

“

They fell in love with it through my love of the sport and through watching me, my Mum and Dad are complete diehard fans now, even my grandma has been converted!

**WOMEN'S RUGBY
LEAGUE PLAYER**

”

“

[When talking about a St Helens teammate] Through Rugby League my mum and dad and her mum and dad are now best friends, that's purely through us playing together and standing on the side-line watching us; it's had a massive impact on their lives too.

”

“

It's special to us at [Leigh] Miners because we feel like we've created a family, I think it's really special for girls to feel part of that, it's a tough time at the moment [due to COVID] and it's tough being a girl, especially one that doesn't tick the normal girl boxes, it's all about friendship, for them the rugby is a bonus, these lot have made friends for life.



GENNA BANKS

Women's Player & Girls' Coach
Leigh Miners Rangers

”

“

It's so nice for us as players to see people want to watch our sport, when I first started playing there was no one on the side-line apart from your family and friends, no one else was interested. Now to see people that don't have a connection to any player and just come to watch the sport to be a fan and part of that community, it's amazing.

”



EMILY RUDGE

Current Women's Super League
Player & England Captain
St Helens

As previously evidenced in the Rugby League Dividend Report (2019), the sport of Rugby League has a unique sense of community.

91% of respondents said Rugby League makes them feel part of the community. The response was highest amongst those under 16 with 94% saying they feel part of the community, 76% said Rugby League is important to their local community.

5.3 Inclusion & Safe Environment

A common theme throughout was the feeling of inclusion and acceptance the women's and girls' game provides for its participants.

Participants also recognised the role the sport played in providing a safe refuge for young women who have experienced a difficult home environment. The discipline and accountability of Rugby League provided structure and stability to their lives, this has allowed them to progress and achieve beyond what may have been possible before.

Even those with a stable and happy home life can enjoy the release and escape Rugby League brings.

Insecurities around body image are common for young girls [10].

When surveyed 90% of players and 78% of coaches and volunteers claimed Rugby League has improved their self-confidence.

68% of elite British Sportswomen feel that female athletes can be more open about their sexuality than male athletes, whilst only 7% felt their sexuality had negatively impacted them within their sport [5].

The proportion of openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual athletes is significantly higher within women's sport than men's [11].

Women's Rugby League is no exception, **22% of players surveyed identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual [12] showing the inclusivity and acceptance of different sexualities within the women's game.**

“

Even when I played with the boys, I remember us all coming together as a family and they had my back and protected me as part of their family and called me their sister and that was when I fell in love with rugby and from then on I got took in and rugby became my life and family.

**WOMEN'S RUGBY
LEAGUE VOLUNTEER**

”

“

There's a real sense of bonding between the girls, as a former teacher it's something girls don't often have a feeling of bonding and of self-worth but I see that in the girls' game, it's important that they come together, they do other things outside of the girls' game to keep those bonds, that has an enormous effect on those girls.



PAT CRAWSHAW
Former RFL Vice President
& Chair of the Women's and
Girls' Advisory Group

”

“

Some of these young girls without sport you don't know what path they would take, you can see that they don't have a lot of parental involvement or don't have a good relationship with their parents, but putting them in a social setting with a group they feel comfortable with it keeps them on the straight and narrow and gives them purpose and keeps them engaged with something.



ANDREA DOBSON
England's Most Capped Player and
Current Coach

”

“

We have players that have come from broken homes, one girl had to leave home at 16, but she turns up to training, by sticking with rugby and taking on the values you try to instil in the players she used the club as a backbone to her life, the club was the only constant she had for a good few years. Now she's stable with a job, she's completely focused on playing in the World Cup next year, it's all she wants to do.

”



LINDSAY ANFIELD

Former Player and Current Women's Super League Coach

“

Rugby League is sport that no matter what your shape, size or skillset, there's a place in which you can contribute to the team, there's positions where a bigger body size is a benefit, I've seen players who were uncomfortable and self-conscious about their body but when they came to rugby league they lost that, those things that they are self-conscious about become a positive and they can use that to their advantage in a game, making it a really welcome environment for those that are nervous about playing other sports.

”



JODIE CUNNINGHAM

Women's Super League & England Player, Rugby League World Cup Ambassador

“

I'm helping someone get her daughter involved, she recognises how much discipline and how much work you have to put in to Rugby League and it all comes with life lessons, that's what Rugby League is, it's not just a sport that you play at the weekend it's something that builds you as a person, it gives you characteristics that not many people have.

”



CAITLIN BEEVERS

Women's Super League & England Player
Leeds Rhinos

“

As a mother, I'm still training the girls twice a week and joining in myself, it's hard to leave the house but when you get there you're glad that you went and you come back feeling better for it. It's like a release from the demands of everyday life, when you're at your club, you're 100% immersed in what's going on there, it's very rare you bring the outside into it.

”



LINDSAY ANFIELD

Former Player and Current Women's Super League Coach

“

Yes, they like to play on a Sunday but it's not all about that, it's a sense of belonging, it's being with a group where they feel comfortable and not ostracised because they're a certain stereotype, it's that sense of belonging.

”



ANDREA DOBSON

England's Most Capped Player and Current Coach



RIMLA AKHTAR

Rugby Football League (RFL) non-executive director and Inclusion Board Chair Dr Rimla Akhtar MBE says it is imperative to address the “gender investment gap” across sports - content courtesy of Sky Sports News, Jenna Brooks and Dev Trehan.

RFL Inclusion Board chair Dr Rimla Akhtar MBE wants more action in 2021 to tackle the disparity in investment between men’s and women’s sport. Former British Muslim Women’s Futsal team captain Akhtar is a non-executive

director at the RFL, and her presence across different sports has grown since receiving the Community Award at the 2013 Sunday Times and Sky Sports Sportswoman of the Year Awards.

Akhtar has been involved in numerous initiatives aimed at diversifying sport since but has told Sky Sports investment is needed in women’s sport to redress a historical imbalance exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

“We talk about gender pay gaps in organisations in terms of pay parity, but for me there is also a gender investment gap,” Akhtar told Sky Sports on International Women’s Day.

“What I want to see is even greater investment into women’s sports, so that we can create competitions that are more compelling than they already are and grow them into bigger sporting spectacles. For me, that’s a huge thing.”

This year’s theme for International Women’s Day is ‘Choose to Challenge’, a call to action to challenge gender bias and inequality, and to seek out and celebrate the achievements of women.

It’s a theme that resonates with 38-year-old Akhtar, who insists celebrating womanhood must be an all-year-round affair.

“It’s great having one day a year, where there’s this huge focus, but I really want to celebrate what we do and the amazing contribution that we give throughout the year,” said Akhtar, who in 2014 became the first Muslim and Asian woman to join the FA Council.

“This year’s theme is really interesting for me, ‘Choose to Challenge’, I like it particularly because it’s a clear call to action that we can apply throughout the year.”

Akhtar, who is a proud British-Pakistani, says sport has always played an important role in her family’s life, even becoming a haven for her to escape racism, particularly when she was younger.

“My family and I dealt with a lot of racism, and a lot of Islamophobia,” Akhtar said.

“I didn’t really know what people were saying, or what their words actually meant, but I knew it wasn’t nice. I knew I wasn’t welcome and that I wasn’t accepted.

“Despite all that negativity around me and my family, sport was the one space outside of the family circle where I felt like nobody cared about the colour of my skin, nobody cared about the fact that I am a girl, or about this piece of cloth that I wear around my head.

“All they cared about was my ability. To be honest, it’s where I felt accepted.”

Akhtar told Sky Sports that it was these early memories and experiences that motivated her to promote change.

“I started to think what can sport do for other people and when I looked within myself, I realised what a huge impact it had on me in terms of that confidence, in terms of belonging and I wanted to help others to feel that as well,” she said.

“That feeling of acceptance gives you a sense of confidence in life. The confidence [for me] has come from sport.”

“I might be the first Muslim woman, I might be the first Asian woman, or sometimes even the first woman in a space in the sports sector, but I better not be the last, because I would have truly failed. For me, the power of sport cannot be underestimated...ever!”



JODIE BOYD-WARD

JODIE BOYD-WARD BLAZING A TRAIL FOR LEEDS RHINOS AND ENGLAND WHEELCHAIR RL - content with kind permission from the Yorkshire Post

Jodie Boyd-Ward was interviewed following Leeds Rhinos Wheelchair Rugby League team's Grand Final victory over Halifax.

"My grandad is a big rugby fan," she said. "And I always sat and watched rugby with him but actually, I kind of fell into the sport."

"I started playing wheelchair basketball because I wasn't able to do able-bodied sports and at the time my team back in Wolverhampton had decided to give Wheelchair Rugby League a go. I tried it and honestly I can say, I hated it!

"I kept trying to give it a go and see how I felt and it was only when Andy Gardner, the chairman of Spider-Y, contacted me and said "how would you feel about playing in the Home Nations?" – I went into that and tried to be a bit more open-minded about how the game worked because for me, I wanted to play a sport that's as close to the able-bodied version and when I first tried it I was very closed-minded about it."

"As I got older I realised it's the closest you'll get to the running game in a wheelchair. So, I played in the Home Nations and that kicked it all off for me. We actually moved to Yorkshire so I could play Wheelchair Rugby League because there wasn't really anything in the West Midlands, it was either down south or up north."

With the club only being put together in 2012, Boyd-Ward recalls some fairly hapless performances when she first moved from her native Wolverhampton. But in time, coach Martyn Gill and his staff helped to turn the club around, to the point where Boyd-Ward is now one of six Rhinos players spending the winter training with the England Performance Unit.

Boyd-Ward was the only female member of the England squad at the 2017 World Cup, where they were narrowly beaten by France in the final. It was an experience that she clearly took a lot from, and she now has a little piece of history to help commemorate her international exploits.

“We received our first international caps,” said Boyd-Ward, “which is history in the making because both the women’s team and the wheelchair team were awarded those for the first time ever.

“Mine is currently in the process of getting framed to send out to my grandad. As much as I’d like to keep it, I think he deserves it for pushing me at times that it got tough and I had moments where I didn’t want to carry on.

“Both him and my nan were great influences saying, ‘no, you need to keep going, you can and you will.’”

The determination she drew from her grandparents was fully rewarded at the end of September 2018, as the Rhinos put the disappointment of consecutive Grand Final defeats to bed with their first title. Opponents Halifax were huge favourites and were something of a bogey team for Leeds, having beaten them in the previous two years’ showpiece events.

Looking back, though, Boyd-Ward’s overriding feeling is one of immense joy and pride, rather than the satisfaction of revenge.

“I had the ball in my hands for the last few seconds of that game – and I just passed it back to our captain because I thought if anyone deserves to have this ball, it’s James [Simpson],” she said.

“This year everything just felt right. Going down, everyone was pretty calm. There was a little bit of tension, you could tell, but we’d had a really good season and thought, ‘right, let’s get this done’.

“Every single little thing within the team, we always talk about those little one-percenters, things that can make you better, and even things down to getting to the venue.”
“I’ve made it my mission to get more females into the sport,” she added.

“My team-mates always joke that it doesn’t matter who it is, whether they’re male or female, I will go out and hit them and tackle them just as hard as I would for anybody else. I remember why I first started, that was one of the reasons why I absolutely detested the sport because I didn’t realise I would have guys that are twice my size barrelling full-speed at me and knocking me out of my chair.

“But I’ve got quite a few brothers, so to me it’s just the same really.”

“We had a wheelchair sports camp in the summer and there were a couple of females there who came to try out the sport, so hopefully they liked it and they’re going to come back. I don’t tend to notice it until somebody points it out – quite often somebody will say ‘you were the only female there’ and I’ll answer, “oh, was I? Because it’s an inclusive sport it doesn’t matter whether you are male or female, disabled or able-bodied, it’s there so that people can take part in it. Don’t get me wrong, I would love it if we could get a female team together. But one of the things that I love about my sport is that there’s no segregation.

“In other sports you have a male team and a female team whereas in this it’s mixed which is something I appreciate every time I go to training, every time I play in a game, every time I play in an England camp. I don’t know many sports where you can play at league level and at International level in a mixed group and that is something unique and amazing about Wheelchair Rugby League.”

A photograph of two women, Emily Rudge and Gemma Walsh, sitting outdoors. Emily Rudge is on the left, wearing a dark blue t-shirt, and Gemma Walsh is on the right, wearing a dark blue t-shirt with red accents. They are both smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a bright, sunny outdoor setting with green grass and trees.

EMILY RUDGE AND GEMMA WALSH

MARRIED RUGBY LEAGUE STARS EMILY RUDGE AND GEMMA WALSH ON BEING ROLE MODELS, ALLEGIANCES AND SEXUALITY IN SPORT - content courtesy of the Manchester Evening News and Ross Heppenstall

The St Helens players open up on their position as role models on and off the field in Rugby League.

As England captain Emily Rudge bids to drive the women's rugby league team to World Cup glory this autumn, she does not need to look far for inspiration. Rudge's wife, Gemma Walsh, is her biggest fan and now, she's also her team-mate. Walsh has swapped allegiances from Wigan to Saints for the new season, which will see the pair play together in the Women's Super League, which will proceed the World Cup.

It's a huge year for the women's game which will see the sport gain increased exposure. There remains a stigma, certainly within male sport, about sexuality. As an openly gay couple, they will be seen as role-models to many, though they don't see it that way.

Being team-mates will mean spending more together amid their hectic schedule.

Rudge, who hails from Warrington, is a PE teacher at Rainford High School and Walsh works as a driver for a hygiene company.

They met through Rugby League in 2008, became a couple in 2010 and recently celebrated their three-year wedding anniversary.

In addition, prize money will also be awarded to women's and wheelchair nations for the first time as the tournament celebrates inclusivity.

Rudge says: "I think that's amazing and definitely a step in the right direction.

"I really hope that after the World Cup, hopefully on the back of some success, that women will start getting paid at club level."

"I think it's about time that happened and it's definitely something that I'll be pushing for. So many women in other sports are now getting paid and Rugby League is just a little bit behind.

"We dedicate so much time to it because we're working in a full-time 9-5 job and then training and playing a lot in our spare time. I think you would find more women and young girls playing, plus a higher standard of rugby, even if it was just semi-professional."

"We don't necessarily want to bring our private lives into rugby. We're happy to play the game and leave it at that. I think a lot of people are the same because there is little benefit to being openly gay apart from the fact that you can just be yourself."

"But there is a backlash that comes with that. We did a podcast with Keegan (Hirst – professional Rugby League player) where he said he had not really experienced much negativity at all."

"I think that's because he's a very masculine guy and people are more comfortable with that."

"Whereas if he was a really feminine guy, then people wouldn't be comfortable with that because it's against the social norms for the male gender."

"I think someone who was a feminine gay guy would get a lot more negativity towards them because it's not what people expect or think is normal."

"It's just down to stereotypes of being feminine which either don't exist or are not what everybody thinks they are."

Walsh points to her wife as an example of how gay stereotypes can be misleading.

She explains: "When Emily came out, she got 'oh, you don't look gay'."

"She's quite feminine and girly and people were shocked. It is just the way society thinks people should be."

"There literally wasn't a night when we were in the house together. The benefit of being at Saints is that we train together and on a matchday we are playing for the same team. Saints have been really good to me during my time there, so I knew Gemma would like it here."

While Walsh retired from international duty in 2013 after winning 15 England caps, Rudge is aiming to lead Craig Richards' side to World Cup glory this autumn.

Women's Rugby League remains amateur and players go unpaid at club level, but the World Cup will see them paid the same fees as the men's and wheelchair teams for the first time in the tournament's history.

5.4

Personal Development & Achievement

Sport has been shown to be a valuable mechanism for personal development, indeed those who participate in sport have been shown to be happier than those that don't [14]. Individuals involved in sport are less likely to be overweight or obese [15] and are less likely to exhibit depressive symptoms or stress [16].

Of the players surveyed, 37% said improving their fitness and physical well-being was a motivating factor in starting to play Rugby League, however, 97% of players reported improved fitness and physical wellbeing whilst 90% of players reported improved mental wellbeing as a consequence of playing Rugby League.

More surprisingly 70% of coaches and volunteers also reported improved fitness and physical wellbeing, despite only 6% indicating that it was a motivating factor when the getting involved in the sport.

These results show that the majority of those getting involved in Women's and Girls' Rugby League are not doing so with the intention of improving their physical or mental health, however, the sport is delivering these health benefits to its participants regardless.

Players have also seen an improvement in their emotional and mental state, with 86% of players reporting the sport had a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

The importance of self-confidence to success and achievement in sport is widely recognised [17], it is also key to an individual's enjoyment of sports.

When surveyed 90% of players and 78% of coaches and volunteers claimed Rugby League has improved their self-confidence.

35% of players began playing Rugby League to make new friends and meet new people, whilst 25% already had friends playing and wanted to join them.

98% of those survey said they had made new friends through Rugby League.

91% of all respondents say Rugby League has taught them skills which they can apply in other areas of their life whilst 90% said that it had had a positive impact on other areas of their life.

“

Although [as players] we do not financially gain from the sport, it has given me so much more from a social, emotional and physical point of view.

”



LOIS FORSELL

Former Women's Super League & England Player, Current Coach and Ambassador

“

To be successful in this sport you have to be tough, maybe society doesn't always want that from women, but Rugby League demands that from you, you have to be physically tough and strong and powerful to be successful in the sport. I love that element of the game.

”



EMILY RUDGE

Current Women's Super League Player & England Captain St Helens

“

We have girls that struggle with their mental health and with their confidence, the difference in those girls when they succeed is huge. We have one girl that's so timid and quiet but this year she transformed into a different child, she walks with a swagger, at school she won't get noticed, she's so shy but here she feels like someone.

”



GENNA BANKS

Women's Player & Girls' Coach
Leigh Miners Rangers

“

The support mechanisms the sport can be around mental health and wellbeing is so key, I wouldn't be where I am now without the sport. For the players it gives them a sense of community, helps them with confidence and self-esteem, it's important that they have a place to play where they can be themselves.

”



JULIA LEE

First Female Referee, Former Player,
Coach and Administrator

“

I know so many girls personally that have gained so much confidence, some struggle with anxiety and other difficult aspects in their lives but to come and play is a release, to be around other girls who love the same thing you're doing.

”



GEMMA WALSH

Women's Super League Player
and Former England Captain
St Helens

“

Rugby League is a unique sport in the sense that you play it and you feel brilliant, it makes you feel so powerful and strong, as a women it's difficult to find a sport that lifts you up in that way. You can't get that feeling from playing other sport, it gives you so much confidence and makes you feel good about yourself.

”



EMILY RUDGE

Current Women's Super League
Player & England Captain
St Helens



“

It provides so many life lessons for girls, you're not always going to be the biggest, the strongest or the best, one week you'll be the top dog and the next week you'll get beat and I think it's really important for them to learn that. In life you're not always going to get the job or succeed in the things they want, it's great we can teach kids these life skills and this resilience which will transition into every part of their life.



GENNA BANKS

Women's Player & Girls' Coach
Leigh Miners Rangers

”

82% of respondents said Rugby League has brought them opportunities they would otherwise have not had.

The growth and development of players is not only beneficial to themselves but provides a sense of achievement and pride for those associated with them, when asked of their fondest memory of being involved in Women's and Girls' Rugby League coaches and volunteers often referred to the players themselves - watching them grow and succeed took precedent over their own personal achievements in the game.

The theme was also consistent with coaches and volunteers who took immense pride in seeing the women and girls they support succeed.

“

It's given me something to be proud of, I'm proud of my team and how we're getting better, there's more girls getting involved and being able to be an example to the under 10's and have them look up to me is great.



GRACE BALLARD

Girls' Rugby League Player
Leigh miner rangers

”

“

The first game that my girls won, it had been an enlightening learning period and to come through it was amazing.

”

**GIRLS' RUGBY LEAGUE
VOLUNTEER**

“

I met Shannon Lacey when she was in Year 8 at Leeds West Academy, with encouragement she went to Stanningley [community club] and came through the other end playing open age rugby in a Super League team, and then playing on the other side of the world in PNG, very few people will ever get the opportunity to experience culture like that or high performance sport.



LOIS FORSELL

Former Women's Super League & England Player, Current Coach and Ambassador

”

“

Seeing the smile on the girls' faces and the way they celebrate with each other when they score or win.

”

**GIRLS' RUGBY LEAGUE
VOLUNTEER**

5.5

Personal Development & Achievement

The concept of athletes acting as role models to children and young adults is not unique to Rugby League. It is a well-documented across many sports [18], and studies have shown that boys are more likely to have athletes as role models than girls [19]. It is therefore encouraging that 86% of women's and girls' players surveyed said Rugby League has provided them with role models.

Where girls do look up to athletes, they are more concerned about the relationship and similarities between the role model and themselves more than anything else [20]. This may be where Rugby League excels. Many current Women's Super League and international players still have strong links to the community clubs, they are seen as accessible and relatable to the young girls as they come from the same area, have the same background, and played for the same community clubs. Younger girls are able to identify with these players which increases the likelihood they will be viewed as role models.

The top athletes themselves recognise their position as role models, the fact they see it as flattering and exciting means they are more likely to take the responsibility seriously.

Sport not only provides a range of physical and mental benefits to its participants [21] but may also play an important role in shaping career aspirations for those involved.

52% of female players over the age of 16 and 64% of female players under 16 have been inspired to pursue a career in sport through playing Rugby League.

“

Showing what I put in training is getting noticed on the pitch when my role model Gemma Walsh has come to watch me play and says that she can see me playing for my town and country one day that gives a girl like me something bigger to aim for.

**GIRLS' RUGBY
LEAGUE PLAYER**

”

“

The girls just want to make it in the Women's Super League or the NRL, especially me, I just really want to make it in the NRL, seeing Charlotte Booth going over makes me think I want to do that.



GRACE BALLARD
Girls' Rugby League Player
Leigh miner rangers

”

“

'The number of young girls and families that have been to our games when previously it was just family members and friends, but these are a new audience. They'll shout you at the end of the games and ask if I'll take a picture with their daughter because she's a really big fan and she wants to play for St Helens one day, you're her hero, that was just unheard of before, for me that's what really hits home.



JODIE CUNNINGHAM
Women's Super League & England
Player, Rugby League World Cup
Ambassador

”

“

I've seen young girls with the players' names on their shirts, even if these girls don't know you, they come and watch you play, then next week turn up with your name on their shirt, I never thought that would have happened when I started playing over 10 years ago.



GEMMA WALSH
Women's Super League Player
and Former England Captain
St Helens

”

Many aspire to play in the Women's Super League or the England team as a fully professional player, however, career aspirations are varied with individuals expressing a desire to become coaches, physiotherapists, and PE teachers amongst other sporting and non-sporting professions.

Players often referred to their local Women's Super League Club when stating the desire to become professional, illustrating the strong connection the clubs have with the local community and the accessibility of the clubs and players. Many young players are aware of current Women's Super League players who either played for their club or for a similar community club, this allows them to see the pathway to the top and believe it is an achievable goal for girls like themselves.

Those who currently play in the Women's Super League stated a desire for the sport to become fully professional. No references were made to making large amounts of money or financial parity with the men's game - they want to be full-time players, focusing on their Rugby League and getting paid for their efforts.

Whilst financial remuneration has not yet reached the Women's Super League a number of players have used their status and profile in the game to carve out careers in other areas of the sport whilst continuing to play at the top level.

“
I want to hopefully be picked play for Saints and then to go Australia and play for England that would be my dream.
”

GIRLS' RUGBY LEAGUE PLAYER

“
I want play for my home-town club and then maybe play for my country.
”

GIRLS' RUGBY LEAGUE PLAYER

“
Hopefully, the time will come when Super League players like myself will be elite athletes and gain contracts and be paid to train and play.
”

WOMEN'S RUGBY LEAGUE PLAYER

“
It's actually given me something to strive towards in a career, I'm very lucky to have been employed with Leeds Rhinos Foundation and work with the RFL and Rugby League World Cup under their ambassador scheme, there's a lot of opportunities and being involved in a sport like Rugby League has opened up a lot of doors for me. Without being on that path I do not know what I would have ended up doing, but I do know I wouldn't have enjoyed it as much as I do now.
”



LOIS FORSELL
Former Women's Super League & England Player, Current Coach and Ambassador

“
I don't think there's an element of my life I could point to and say it hasn't been affected by Rugby League. I now have a full-time job with the Rugby League World Cup, I have to pinch myself every day to remind me how fortunate I am to have a full time job in sport and in particular Rugby League, which is the sport that I love. Way back when I first got involved those opportunities weren't there, so for the young girls getting involved now, there's real prospects, there's real opportunities that are worth sticking in the game for.
”



JODIE CUNNINGHAM
Women's Super League & England Player, Rugby League World Cup Ambassador

5.6

Role Models & Aspiration

It is important, especially considering the large number of younger players, that the correct pathways and opportunities are provided for them to pursue a career in sport and to use their sporting opportunities to further their educational attainment.

RFL's government-funded Diploma in Sporting Excellence (DiSE) is an important development. Alongside their regular studies in sixth form or other further education settings, the young women will work towards achieving the Diploma in Sporting Excellence – a BTEC Level 3 qualification recognised by The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service UCAS. Supported by the RFL and Loughborough College the students will learn all about what it takes to compete at the elite level in sport, including technical and tactical elements of the games, and all aspects of physical and mental preparation such as nutrition and psychology.

“

I'm studying the sporting excellence diploma alongside my A Levels at Pontefract New College and this time next year I'm hoping to be at university on my way to becoming a PE teacher. The diploma is giving me a much better understanding of the requirements of being a rugby player through being around experienced players and coaches, and learning about things like nutrition, psychology and injury prevention. I just want to be the best I can be.

”



KEARA BENNETT

Women's Super League Player
Leeds Rhinos







KELSEY GENTLES

WOMEN'S SUPER LEAGUE AND ENGLAND PLAYER

“

[AFTER PLAYING A TEST MATCH IN GOROKA, PAPUA NEW GUINEA] THE FANS WERE NOT CHEERING FOR PNG OR FOR ENGLAND, THEY WERE CHEERING FOR RUGBY LEAGUE. AFTER THE GAME EVERYONE WANTED TO SPEAK TO US, TAKE PICTURES AND HUG US, IT WAS OVERWHELMING BUT IT WAS A GOOD FEELING, I COULDN'T GET ENOUGH OF THAT FEELING, I NEVER WANTED TO LEAVE I MIGHT STAY, I'M FAMOUS HERE!

”

6

CONCLUSION & LOOKING FORWARD

This report showcases the progress made to date during the first phase of the longer-term strategy for Women's and Girls' Rugby League. Everyone involved in getting the game to this point knew that a home World Cup in 2021 provided the sport with the best platform to take the women's and girls' game to new heights.

That is why work started in 2016 to think and act differently.

Rugby League's shared goals were to achieve genuine ambition and aspiration for all girls and women, by making players and teams more visible, and providing a route to wearing the biggest club badges in the sport and playing at the best stadiums in the sport; and enabling more girls and women to become involved in Rugby League in a way that is right for them with all the positive personal, social and health outcomes as well as educational and career opportunities that can bring.

Disruption is an opportunity

As in many sports, especially team sports, the impact of Covid-19 on habits and participation is a significant concern. The RFL, clubs and Foundations are addressing the challenge of this disruption head on.

2021 presents a unique opportunity to utilise the power of RLWC2021 and use it as a springboard to reshape with the best possible regional and national frameworks for the women's game, raising standards still further. And in doing so create the platform for sustained success on the domestic and international stage.

This is what we are going to do now:

- Put playing opportunities for girls and women front and centre of the new local development plans - supported by Sport England, and by RLWC2021 programmes including CreatedBy facilities improvements.
- Continue to professionalise all elements of support for female players – environments, coaching and medical standards, mental wellbeing services, and volunteering, education and training offers so that women have the opportunity to be the best they can be.

- Develop a framework for Women’s Rugby League in the South which extends to include opportunities for clubs based in Wales; and a framework for the North which extends to include opportunities for clubs based in Scotland.
- Raise the aspirations of young female Rugby League players in Further and Higher Education settings by increasing the number of College Development Academies and the introduction of a new National University League providing a high-quality programme for dual career athletes.
- Evolve the Community Rugby League Strategy to expand the number of women’s and girls’ opportunities in all formats (including social and disability formats) so all female players can access local or regional playing offers. This includes expanding the girls’ programme with the introduction of two new age groups - under U11s and U18s - to complement the offer at the under 16s, 14s and 12s age groups.
- Deliver the sport-wide TACKLE IT – Rugby League versus Discrimination action plan (2020-2025) which includes specific targets on: participation by women and girls; more women into coaching; more women into officiating; continuing to strengthen the women’s performance pathway including growing the number of young women on the RFL’s government-funded Diploma in Sporting Excellence (DiSE) programme; and increasing the number of women in roles across the sport, including in the media and in boardrooms.
- Continue to increase the commercialisation of Women’s Rugby League building on the partnerships with Betfred, Dacia, Ronseal, and The National Lottery.
- Work with broadcast partners Sky who will again broadcast the Betfred Women’s Grand Final in October, and the BBC who will broadcast the Betfred Women’s Challenge Cup for the next four seasons to increase the breadth and depth of coverage of Women’s Rugby League – and the involvement of female players, former players and coaches in commentary and punditry roles.
- Work with new digital partners including Twitch, as well as building on the success of Our League streaming, to show more women’s games.
- Support the personal brand-building of England Women stars so they become more widely known and respect for them and the sport increases.
- All of which will continue to increase the support and respect for all players, coaches, clubs, and Foundations, and build value in the product, which will lead us to the ultimate shared aim of professionalising the league.

**“THESE GIRLS
CAN”**





AT THE END OF 2021 THE SPORT NEEDS TO RE-EMERGE TO NOT ONLY PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS BUT ENTER INTO 2022 GROWING IN ALL AREAS FROM PLAYERS, TEAMS, LOCATIONS, PROFILE, REACH AND PARTNERS. THE RFL IS DELIGHTED TO ANNOUNCE THAT THE NATIONAL LOTTERY SHARES THIS VISION AND WILL BE SUPPORTING THE GOVERNING BODY WITH A UNIQUE WOMEN'S RUGBY LEAGUE PARTNERSHIP FOR 2021-2023. THANK YOU TO THEM AND TO SPORT ENGLAND, DCMS AND, BETFRED FOR THEIR COMMITMENT AND SUPPORT.

AS PART OF THE RECOVERY AND RE-EMERGENCE STRATEGY THE RFL IS ACTIVELY EXPLORING NEW PLAYING OFFERS ACROSS THE NORTH AND SOUTH OF ENGLAND. THERE ARE OUTLINE PROPOSALS TO DEVELOP MORE SUSTAINABLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN TO TAKE UP AND ENJOY RUGBY LEAGUE - ALL GEARED UP TO GROWING AND ELEVATING THE QUALITY OF COMPETITION. WOMEN'S RUGBY LEAGUE WILL BECOME MORE WIDESPREAD AND MORE PROFESSIONAL THAN EVER BEFORE, WITH THE MEDIA PROFILE AND STATURE TO MATCH.



RALPH RIMMER

CEO, THE RUGBY FOOTBALL LEAGUE

“

I WANT TO BE A
PROFESSIONAL
RUGBY LEAGUE
PLAYER.

”

LILL SEAL

RFL National Junior Ambassador for the Women's and Girls' game, 12-year-old Lill is a huge supporter of Women's Rugby League and regularly attends Bradford Bulls and Leeds Rhinos fixtures amongst others to watch her heroes play. As a young player at Greetland Girls, Lill aspires to play at both club and national level in the future.



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