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GOLDING, Andy <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0701-5737>>, PLUMLEY, Dan <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7875-0969>> and WILSON, Robert <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9657-7570>>

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# **Introducing a model of business sustainability in English professional rugby union**

Andy Golding <sup>1</sup>, Dr Daniel Plumley<sup>2</sup> and Dr Rob Wilson<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>UCFB

<sup>2</sup>Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Andy Golding\*

UCFB University Campus of Football Business

Wembley Campus

Wembley Stadium

Wembley

London

HA9 0WS

Email: [a.golding@ucfb.ac.uk](mailto:a.golding@ucfb.ac.uk)

Orcid ID: [0000-0002-0701-5737](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0701-5737)

Dr Daniel Plumley

Sheffield Business School

Sheffield Hallam University

Howard Street

Sheffield

S1 1WB

Email: [d.j.plumley@shu.ac.uk](mailto:d.j.plumley@shu.ac.uk)

Tel: +44 (0) 114 2255499

Orcid ID: [0000-0001-7875-0969](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7875-0969)

Dr Rob Wilson

Sheffield Business School

Sheffield Hallam University

Howard Street

Sheffield

S1 1WB

Email: [r.j.wilson@shu.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.wilson@shu.ac.uk)

Tel: +44 (0) 114 2253981

Orcid ID: [0000-0002-9657-7570](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9657-7570)

\*Corresponding Author

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**Abstract:**

**Research Question:** The transition of rugby union as the last major team sport to go professional in 1995, has remained problematic. With ongoing challenges with financial health, the impact of COVID-19 and the need for more effective governance, the game has reached a pivotal moment in its history, if it is to become a sustainable sports business. The purpose of this paper is to introduce a model that identifies key characteristics of business sustainability in English professional rugby.

**Research methods:** This paper is designed to position a case for change, by examining a range of issues that can deliver a theoretical method to support the achievement of sustainability of professional rugby union, and specifically the Gallagher Premiership. The development of the model is considered a starting point for further research based on the theoretical application of the economics of team sports and sports business modelling.

**Research findings:** The development of a sustainable business model in professional rugby union has led to the identification of four key characteristics related to cost control, profit maximisation, business model innovation and governance.

**Practical implications:** The authors argue that unless the custodians of the game take note of the need for reform relating to the extant models of business practice being operated in the Gallagher Premiership, there is the acute possibility that the growth of the game may be stifled or even cease to exist when the game is at its most popular.

**Keywords:** rugby union; business models; professional team sports economics; business sustainability

## **Introduction**

Premiership Rugby has reached a pivotal stage in its 27-year history in terms of how to make it financially sustainable, and to grow the game as a going concern. With issues such as poor financial health driven by spiralling wages (Conn & Rees 2018), the financial impact of COVID - 19 and the need for more effective governance, the professional game could not be in a more precarious position, where some clubs may not ultimately survive (Roberts, 2020). This has been borne out by the recent financial demise of Worcester Warriors RFC, who in early October 2022, having amassed £25m of debt went into administration because of £6m in unpaid tax bills. This resulted in the termination of all player and staff contracts, suspension and relegation from the Premiership and Director of Rugby, Steve Diamond, quoted as stating that this was “the darkest day for English rugby”, (ITV News, 2022). Later in the same month, Wasps RFC, who have been part of Premiership Rugby since it’s inauguration, were placed into administration with 167 staff and players being made redundant. This was because of a winding-up order of £2m by HMRC for unpaid taxes and having to repay a £35m bond, which helped finance Wasps RFC move to Coventry in 2014 (The Guardian, 2022).

Consequently, the key aim of this paper, is to propose a model of business sustainability in rugby union that attempts to address the historical and current issues faced by the English professional game. This model has been formulated by examining the economic theory of professional team sports as well as business and sports modelling principles to provide insight and knowledge that can be applied by those that are directly and indirectly involved in the governance of the professional game to instigate both change and reform – it is naturally, therefore, theoretical in its outlook. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We address the historical development of the game to provide context before covering the economic theory of professional team sports. We then present business models to support sustainability in a wider sport industry setting. We use these models and the uniqueness of professional sport economic theory to arrive at a model of sustainability for professional rugby union clubs in England that we present as the main contribution of the paper.

## **Historical context**

Rugby union was the last major international team sport to turn professional in 1995. This followed a highly successful rugby world cup, held, and won by South Africa in the same year, attracting world-wide media attention and highlighting the potential of rugby as a globalised, commercial business (World Rugby, 2020). The event also marked the beginning of an era of significant change in a game that had been amateur since the inauguration of the Rugby Football Union (RFU) in 1871.

According to Philpotts (2000), the early years of rugby union were fraught with conflict leading to a split with the working-class clubs of the North of England, to form the game of rugby league under the 'Northern Union' resulting in the professionalism of rugby league in 1898. For the next 100 years, the RFU utilised its influence to keep 'amateurism' at its core, which led to a problematic transition when rugby union eventually turned professional. Smith (2000) focussed on the shifting balance of power from the RFU from 1995-99 to the elite clubs as a result of professionalism, stating the paradoxical situation of the balance of power residing with only a few clubs out of the 12, who had a stable commercial base and the continuing influence of satellite television as a totem of global capitalism.

Malcolm, Sheard & White (2000) undertook broader examinations of the ways in which rugby union has changed from amateur to what was phrased as 'shamateur' to full professional status. Identifying professionalism as eliciting the most dramatic of changes of any team sport, and highlighting several issues, including the structural change of clubs towards incorporation and investment and the role of players as assets, which gave rise to a sport driven by the need for commercial activity in the form of broadcasting and sponsorship.

Suffice to say, that the transition to professionalism was by no means straightforward and no-one was quite prepared for the magnitude of shift required. Rob Andrew, former England international, British and Irish Lion, Premiership rugby player until 1999 and Director of Rugby at Newcastle until 2006, likened rugby union to the "wild west" when it went professional in the mid-1990s (Rees, 2015). Despite a deal being struck with league sponsors Courage, worth £200,000 per year, there was no broadcasting package in place, and there were no player contracts despite the furore of clubs trying to

sign players up. Revenues did increase by 228% because of a television deal with Sky, but costs went up by 309% despite the introduction of a salary cap in 1999 to support the delivery of financial viability. By the end of the decade, the RFU had lost £10.3m and leading clubs had lost £20m (Rees, 2015) as they fluctuated between profit, loss and reckless decision making - characteristics of unregulated sports markets (Alywin, 2020).

Ironically, it was Rob Andrew that led a working party to look at restructuring the English game in 2000 that included several radical proposals. Central to this was a plan to address the club versus country conflict by proposing a linear sequencing of domestic, European, and International competitions, a franchised, ring-fenced Premiership of 12 clubs, bonus points, end of season play-offs, a salary cap of £1.8m, and a two-year block on promotion from the second division of English rugby. Having received early enthusiasm, the plan was scrapped due to issues raised by the second division clubs and the RFU withheld monthly payments, whilst the matter was resolved (Williams, 2008). Frustrated by lack of progress, Andrew resigned his position on the RFU joint board due to RFU bureaucracy, only to emerge some years later as the RFU's first professional Director of Rugby from 2011 to 2016.

Williams (2012) continues in his criticism of the Rugby Football Union (RFU), citing their inability to manage the transition to professionalism with any effectiveness, believing too that the late conversion to professionalism stifled the financial development of the game. McMillan (1997) claims that the RFU's lack of leadership reduced England's first professional season to a 'shambles', with Massey (2019) supporting the view that the transition to professionalism historically had been a torrid affair, impacted by wage inflation, the viability of revenue sharing and the introduction of salary caps to maintain competitive balance.

When the Allied Dunbar Premiership was established in 1997, clubs were reliant on wealthy benefactors and began to adopt a business model that was comparable to professional rugby league and football (Williams, 2012). Rugby union was the last of the four main team sports in the UK to turn professional, behind football, cricket and rugby league. This, coupled with a reluctance by the RFU to manage the transition to professionalism led to stalwart clubs, London Scottish and Richmond, going into

administration due to spiralling wage bills that their financial backers refused to bankroll. Indeed, Ashley Levett, then owner of Richmond, who pulled out after originally investing £8m was of the view that being a rugby owner was a lottery and that there was no sound business sense as to why someone would want to be keep throwing “money down the drain” (Rees, 2018). Smith (2020) further states that the “prospect of a cohesive, profitable industry remains a distance dream”, particularly when professional rugby seems unable to grasp the basis of any business, which is to generate revenues to cover costs, not to build a cost base and then try to generate revenues to cover them.

Such was the concern raised over the challenges that rugby union faced as the youngest international professional sport that a report entitled *The Future of Professional Rugby*’ was published in 1999 by the Culture Media and Sport Committee. The report was highly critical of the organisation, funding and sustainability of professional rugby union quoting management failure, political infighting, and financial ineptitude. The report further stated that few clubs, if any were making a profit with the cost of players wages being cited as the major cause of financial problems with clubs losing collectively £20m per year, a trend of losses which has continued un-checked throughout the history of the Rugby Premiership (The Culture Media and Sport Committee, 1999).

In 2018, after the Premiership amassed losses of £88m, a new partnership was formed with CVC Capital Partners to inject £200m in cash for a 27% stake to support the vision of Premiership Rugby to grow the sport and ‘take it to the next level’ (Lawton, 2018). CVC Capital Partners are a market leader in sports equity, with a demonstrable eye for buying into sports franchises experiencing financial difficulties, having also brought a stake in the Rugby Six Nations for £365m due to revenue losses following the COVID-19 lockdown. CVC see immense scope for commercialism in terms of the sale of TV rights. Whilst for many, this short-term liquidity is welcomed, some may need to be reminded of the acrimonious split with Formula 1, investment from a company that uses debt to boost profits, with much of its emphasis on short -term investor returns (Brummer, 2020).

Despite a four year deal of £40m with the current sponsors, Gallagher in 2018, Rugby Premiership has not been a profitable business for most clubs, with collective club losses of £30m per year (Rogers,

2018) and regardless of £88m government loan to help Premiership Rugby clubs to complete the 2020/21 season due to lost spectator revenue attributed to COVID-19 and a £110m broadcast deal with BT Sport from 2020 to 2023/4, only Exeter achieved a pre-tax profit in the 2020-21 season (Heagney, 2020). In 2021/2022 season only five clubs made a profit, mostly due to COVID loans, which according to media sources totalled £124m across all clubs (Nolan, 2022). The most recent published accounts also reveal that Premiership rugby clubs have amassed collective debts of £500m with only two clubs in credit with HMRC and number of clubs admitting concerns that about whether they can operate as a viable business (Dineen & Miller, 2022).

Ultimately, without exploration and application of the key characteristics identified to create a sustainable business model by the custodians of game, the development and growth of the English professional game will be severely hampered with the acute possibility that more Premiership Rugby clubs may suffer that same fate as Worcester Warriors and Wasps. There is also the immeasurable impact that this will have on rugby fan culture and the hundreds of players, officials and administrators who rely on the professional game for their livelihood.

### **The Economic Theory of Professional Team Sports**

Professional sport is first and foremost a business that exhibits different organisational assets and business models in its pursuit of economic success (Bourg & Gouget, 2010; Makarov, n.d.) Yet, there is very little academic literature available which focusses on the strategy that supports effective performance off the field and how that can be sustained despite its significant commercial and social influence (McGaughey & Liesch, 2002). Whilst, professional sports teams ultimately operate under multiple objectives, the two most prominent, in a general sense are to maintain a high level of on-field performance and to maximise off-field commercial business operations in the pursuit of revenue gains (Wilson 2017). Further research suggests that there is a link between these two objectives but as to which is the cause and effect is unclear (Carlsson-Wall, Krauss & Messner, 2006; Chadwick, 2009; Fort & Quirk 2004; Pawlowski 2013 & Syzmanski, 2003).



For team sports the intertwining of these factors creates somewhat of a dichotomy, given that from a strategic perspective, they need to maximise performance both on and off the field and at the same time satisfy a range of stakeholders (Wilson, 2017). This on-field/off field juxtaposition is not easy to apply, and pursuant discussions are often based on financial issues in relation to business operations and trophy success (Chadwick, 2009). There is some academic literature which considers the relationship between financial and sporting performance in professional team sport but the outcomes of this research is not conclusive (Kessenne, 2000; Garcia-del-Barrio & Szymanski, 2009, Sloane 2015; Szymanski & Kuypers, 1999). According to Goddard and Stone (2011), the key question in the economics of sport is the nature of ownership of teams and the leagues that control them based on the premise of maximisation of team profit and utility maximisation. This has naturally led to comparisons being drawn between the North American and the European models of sport (Hoen & Szymanski 1999; Andreff & Staudohar, 2000; Sloane, 2003; Szymanski, 2003; Plumley, Wilson & Ramachandi, 2014). Historically, the North American model is more closely linked to profit maximisation and the European sport model linked to utility or 'win' maximisation (Andreff, 2011), although this is refuted by some (Markham & Teblitz, 1981; Fort & Quirk, 2004; Zimbalist, 2003).

Whilst, there are fundamental differences between the two sports models, which impinge on factors such as revenue generation and the ability to compete, there are areas in which they converge. This includes the emergence of joint ventures that can be seen as a single entity, clubs are separately owned with discretion to set prices, market the games, and adopt strategies to compete with other clubs and leagues operate under salary caps (Wilson, 2017). Regardless of the professional sports model employed in North America and Europe, most of the research to date on professional team sports is aligned to the field of economics and the related concepts of uncertainty of outcome, competitive balance and profit and utility maximisation (Buraimo, Frick, Hickfang & Simmons, 2015; Fort, 2015; Kessenne, 2015; Leach & Szymanski, 2015; Sloane, 2015; Vrooman, 2015), with the success of professional team sports being seemingly, inextricably linked to both financial and sporting performance (Wilson, Plumley & Barrett, 2016). The task of attempting to meet these dual objectives creates a practical management dilemma which suggests that professional rugby union clubs need to

change their orientation from their original amateur ethos to one that requires strategy and supporting business models to succeed and is not based on other sports, who have exhibited similar financial difficulties and business sustainability issues.

It is clear from the literature that rugby union as a sport is not currently financially sustainable. Most Premiership Rugby clubs are losing money, mostly through poor financial management and significant issues with cost control. This is not a new phenomenon in professional rugby and parallels in economic terms can be drawn with its sister sport rugby league, who in the 1990s adopted business models supported by wealthy benefactors, that then led to spiralling wage costs, static income streams and a reliance on the governing body to attract sponsorship and negotiate television broadcasting deals to provide financial stability (Wilson and Plumley, 2017). This resulted in seventeen out of thirty clubs becoming technically insolvent (O'Keefe, 1999) and led to subsequent formation of the Super League in 1996, which was supposed to help make the game the top-level professional rugby tournament in Europe.

Wilson et al. (2016), analysed the state of UK Super League Rugby, 20 years on from its formation. They found that the predicted outcomes, which included greater uncertainty of outcome, increased attendances, and higher revenues for clubs had not been met and concluded that rugby league needed to produce a sustainable business model to keep both the clubs and sport alive. In the present day, having been severely impacted financially because of COVID -19, and relying on government loans to prevent insolvencies in the sport, rugby league is also having to re-think its business model to enable the sport to survive and thrive (BDO, 2022).

Comparisons to professional rugby union can also be drawn in economic terms to the inception and commodification of the English Premier League (EPL) in football, which provided the fastest and largest revenue growth of any of the English professional sports, driven in part by its symbiotic relationship with broadcasters and the subsequent global appeal of the sport resulting in the EPL becoming the biggest revenue generating league in Europe (Wilson and Plumley, 2017). However, this is where the similarity ends. Smith, (2020) is of the opinion that professional rugby needs to stop

thinking it is or can be like football. For professional rugby union to become viable, he believes that it needs to acknowledge its position in the market and seek a business model which reflects this.

### **Business Models to Support Sustainability**

Sustainability within the context of business and economics is about keeping a business going over a period of time by responding to both short-term financial and future financial needs (Bansall & DesJardine, 2014; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). It is clear that the Gallagher Premiership have failed, thus far, to achieve a level of sustainability, which has led to the demise of clubs being placed in to administration both in the early days of professional rugby union and those latterly.

To support business sustainability, strategy and modelling are key constructs. According to Wheelan and Hunger (2012), business strategy enables businesses to improve their competitive status and determines the performance of businesses in industry. Teece (2010) stated that a good business model lies at the core of business strategy and Margretta (2002) described a business model as being a 'general blue-print' of business activity. Demil and Lecocq (2010) further state that the business model synthesises the way of creating value and revenue inside an organisation through operations, competencies, relations, and resources. Shafer, Smith and Linden (2005) states that business models have the function of creating and capturing value, and that these components are essential for any organisation to perform in order to be sustainable.

A business model is not a strategy per se (Shafer et al., 2005) but a way in which the cause-and-effect relationships of a strategy can be tested, analysed and validated, and how well an organisation delivers value to its customers using the various elements in the business model as a system, such as the Business Model Canvas (Osterwalders & Pigneurs, 2010). According to Margretta (2002) business modelling can also be seen as the equivalent to the scientific method, where a hypothesis is tested in action and revised when necessary. Furthermore, a business model needs to adapt to the competitive environment in which it operates, taking into account changing technologies, markets and legal structures (Teece, 2010).

In contemporary professional sports models, much of the emphasis has been on the role of sponsorship, broadcasting, investment, and vertical integration through ownership of sporting events, control of sports facilities, TV rights and merchandising (Andreff & Staudoher, 2002). More recently, the focus has been on stakeholder maximisation (Pitzz, Benedickson, Cowden & Davis, 2021) and Sports Business Model Innovation to enable sports organisations to be more forward-thinking (Næss & Tjønnndal, 2021).

Most of the research into professional sports business models and how to achieve on-field and off-field success, focuses on football, a sport which introduced its first professional league in 1888, some 108 years before professionalism in rugby union. McNamara, Peck and Sasson (2011) identified that the central strategy problem for managers is how to formulate and implement strategies that create value for customers and capture profits. Kase, Gomez, Urrutia, Opaza & Mati (2006) analysed the strategies adopted by Real Madrid and Barcelona in relation to their financial and sporting performance as a measurement of success. Plumley et al. (2014) attempted to measure the holistic performance of professional football clubs using established financial and sporting indicators. Most significantly, Lieu, Skinner and Grossman (2019) analysed Business Model Innovation shifts in the Ecosystem of the Chinese Super League in relation to Club success and refer to the work of Demil and Lecocq (2010) in their case study of Arsenal FC, as an example of the need for business models to change and evolve in the light of changing ecosystem factors.

Harris and Jenkins (2001) explored intra and extra organisational barriers to the development of professional rugby clubs. Whilst this focussed on marketing planning, it raised a range of issues related to ineffective planning and reactive approaches that were more akin to the management of not-for-profit amateur clubs that were not suited at all well to the speed of change into professionalism. Indeed, it was not until the study by Bodet (2009) on French Club, Stade Francais that the role of planning and innovative business methods was identified as being integral to the club's successful implementation of the marketing mix and their ability to differentiate themselves in the marketplace.

Rayner (2017) traces the evolution of attitudes towards professionalism from a player's perspective and develops a critical review of the impact of professionalism has had upon the sport of rugby union, including the increasing influence of a business ethos, which exposed rugby union to the realities of commercialism. Alonso et al. (2012), alludes to the significant change in professional sports and the influence that these have on the strategies adopted by managers and marketers in achieving competitive balance and the enhancement of organisation revenues. With specific reference to the Southern Hemispheres Super rugby competition, they highlight the dilemmas of securing financial sustainability and the constraints of labour market controls in terms of salary payments and Championship expansion.

Wilson and Plumley (2017) examined concerns about the financial development of professional rugby union in the English Premiership using a holistic performance assessment of Rugby Union (2006 - 2015). Whilst acknowledging that revenues have risen marginally since 2006, this has been paralleled by a significant incidence of debt levels, for a sport, where the opportunity of revenue potential has not been as great as the EPL in football. Despite increases in attendance and revenues principally through broadcasting and sponsorship income professional rugby union is still playing catch-up in commercial terms. Massey (2019) assessed rugby union's late conversion to professionalism from an economic perspective and provides an overview of the turbulent transition to professionalism since 1995, based on significant structural changes with clubs, associations, and leagues, using a range of business models in Europe.

Despite past work in this area surrounding different sports models and rugby contexts, there remains a gap in the research. Notably, this gap includes identifying the key characteristics for a sustainable business model in professional rugby union and specifically Premiership Rugby that takes account of its own ecosystem and the challenges it is currently facing.

### **Positioning the argument**

This 'positioning paper' examines a range of issues, related to the growth and sustainability of professional rugby union with the primary aim of providing a theoretical model of specific 'characteristics' and in response to what is currently happening in the professional rugby environment.

The grounding for this paper and future research in this space is based on an interpretivist approach, which is concerned with an understanding of the world from the subjective experience of others to provide meaning (Howell, 2016). According to Hunter, Schmidt and Jackson (1982), it is well known that a single study will not resolve a major issue. It is reliant on the culmination of knowledge from the many studies. A central method for the accumulation of knowledge is meta-analysis (Aguinis, Dalton, Bosco, Pierce & Dalton, 2011); Kepes, McDaniel, & Whetzel, 2013). It is similar to a narrative review in relation to undertaking topic-related literature reviews and has been used in a variety of related fields including general management (Bergh et al., 2016; Combs, Crook & Rausch, 2016); international business (Steel, Beugelsdijk, & Aquinis, 2021) and economics and finance (Geyer- Klingeberg, Hang & Rathgeber, 2020). This paper involved a review of the status of professional rugby union, based on the economic theory of professional sport and business modelling to support sustainability. This was applied generally to the professional game and specifically to the EPRL in support of sustainability and growth using a range of academic, industry based and online sources.

Meta - interpretation as designed by Weed (2005) and which draws on many of the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) for the interpretive synthesis of quality research has also been used in generic terms to explore participant, thoughts and beliefs (Choak, 2012). This involved one subject who has been a Director of Rugby and CEO of two Premiership Rugby clubs and who now leads an ambitious project that looks to build a new professional rugby league in the Asia-Pacific region.

The interpretations derived are used to support a need for reform, based on key characteristics to propose a model for sustainability that goes beyond the current considerations of those involved in the governance of the EPRL.

### **Towards a Model of Sustainability**

To date, reform of Premiership Rugby has largely been reactive to significant and negative events. The first of which was the well documented breach of the salary cap and subsequent relegation of three times Premiership and two times European Cup winners, Saracens. This resulted in the Lord Myners Report (2020), commissioned by Darren Childs, Premiership Rugby, CEO in December 2019 ahead of

the COVID-19 pandemic with the primary aim of providing financial regulation and improving the governance of Premiership Rugby. The second key event was prompted by a need to financially recover from the impact of COVID-19 as part of the RFU Recovery Plan with the specific aim of improving the financial stability and sustainability of professional rugby between 2021 and 2024.

Further reform has now been accelerated by the financial demise of Worcester Warriors and Wasps, which has finally led to the acknowledgement by Bill Sweeney, Chief Executive of the RFU “that rugby’s business model is broken” and that there is a now need to consider alternative models. Ideas being mooted include a 10 team Premiership, a ‘slimmed down’ Premiership Rugby calendar, a more thorough ‘Owners and Directors Test’ and emulating aspects of the French professional rugby governance system, which includes an independent audit body that acts in the interests of the professional leagues (Frost, 2022). Such are the concerns over the future of Premiership Rugby, that a parliamentary inquiry was launched in 2022.

Industry expert, Mark Evans, former Premiership CEO (Harlequins) and Director of Rugby (Saracens when the league went professional) believes that a more pro-active approach should have been taken, particularly when COVID-19 presented a timely opportunity for more radical reform. Evans supports the view that a greater overhaul of governance has been required for some time and that “it needs 10 or 12 things to happen if we are to build a Premiership into a sustainable league that can grow over time” (Jones, 2020). Specifically, Evans identified and has since endorsed RFU decisions to ring-fence the top two English rugby leagues, albeit it over three years and cut the salary cap from £7m pre-pandemic to £5m post-pandemic to help Premiership Rugby clubs control costs. He also supports the need for playing fewer games but is a seemingly lone advocate for initiating a collective bargaining agreement with players as used in United States professional franchised sport to protect the welfare and rights of professional athlete-employees (Harvey, 2020).

According to Magretta (2002), a good business model is essential in achieving organisational success, regardless of whether it is a new venture or an established organisation. It also needs to answer the key question of “how do we make money?” based on an economic logic of how to deliver value to customers

at an appropriate cost. Ranjinth (2016) is of the opinion that to deliver any strategy or competitive advantage requires a robust business model as part of an overall strategy, whose soundness rests on its ability to propel growth. Figure 1 identifies a number of key characteristics which are considered to have the most significant influence on developing a business model for sustainability and the achievement of growth in a constantly changing professional rugby environment.

The key characteristics are based on the following:

- The need to establish benchmarks of performance in the professional rugby ecosystem for on-field and off-field success based on current ‘best practice’ examples and innovation and as a strategic response to the COVID -19 pandemic. For example, much of the transformation of Exeter Chiefs and their inexorable rise has happened since the sport went professional. In the 1990s, Exeter took the strategic decision to create a limited company answerable to a Board of seven Directors under the Chair of Tony Rowe, a local businessman, who still presides as CEO and Chairman. This structure enabled them to attract local sponsors to finance players and advance through the English National League system from semi-professional to full professional status with a re-branding in 1999 to become the Exeter Chiefs and a move to a new state-of-art ground at Sandy Park, in their quest to join the Premiership. Exeter, then went from strength to strength including a £12m re-development of the current ground to double the capacity in 2015. Performances culminated in Premiership (2017 and 2020) and European (2020) title success, and they remain the only team to have won all 4 tiers of English rugby. In the sports world, this meteoric rise has been billed as one of the best team sports stories of the last decade leading to the release of ‘Exe Men: The extraordinary rise of Exeter Chiefs (Kitson, 2020). They were also the only club in the Rugby Premiership to make a profit pre-pandemic and in the two years prior to the investment by CVC in 2019 (Heagney, 2020). A good deal of this attributed to effective financial stewardship but also the development of their business model (Finch, 2022).
- The need to explore how different sports business models operate in pursuit of solvency profit maximisation and how this could be applied to the current governance of the Premiership Rugby .



This includes analysis of sports such as the NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL in North America and the AFL, the National and NRL operate in Australia (Alywin, 2019). Smith (2020) believes that one the biggest commercial disasters is the inability of Premiership Rugby to find a commercial response to the business model adopted by the French Top 14, which does not rely on cash injections from rich owners but is supported by global corporations and local councils and which allows for high salaries.

- The need to have effective cost controls in place to improve financial stability and solvency of the Premiership rugby clubs, by minimising cost and identifying cost-over spend based, primarily due to the need to operate within a reduced salary cap and by control player wage inflation. This approach will draw upon the recently published data contained in the inaugural annual Premiership Rugby Salary Cap Report (2020-21) to reflect the need for transparency and integrity as recommended by Lord Myners. This includes a detailed analysis of the expenditure of each of the 13 Premiership clubs in relation to the operation and management of the salary cap as well as information on player salaries by position and performance level.
- The need for effective governance structures and procedures to safeguard the integrity of professional rugby union is required and an over-arching theme. According to Nigel Melville, Executive Chairman of the PRL Investor Board in a sound-bite conversation with the author(s), the governance of professional rugby is complicated and the key issue as he sees it is how Premiership clubs are represented. Each of the clubs in the Gallagher Premiership is independent but work within the rules of the game as laid out by World Rugby, the RFU and English law. Premiership Rugby work with the RFU, having signed a partnership in 2016, called the Professional Game Agreement to work together towards the best long-term interests of the game in England. In addition, each year, the RFU approves the rules of the game that the Premiership clubs need to play to and is responsible for player discipline in the RFU.

Premiership Rugby is over-arched by a Board of Directors established in 2019, which form part of a revised governance structure, following the investment by CVC Capital Partners to help grow the game. There are two separate Premiership Rugby committees, comprising a club investment board and a sporting committee, which focus on issues related to sports governance.

Premiership Rugby also support the EPCR who organise the European rugby competitions, where Premiership Rugby teams compete dependent upon final league position by providing commercial support and provision of English audiences to games. They also work closely with the Rugby Players Association (RPA) to protect the welfare interest of men and women RPA members.

The involvement of multiple bodies and levels of authority makes change and reform that much harder to affect. As such, there is a very strong argument for reviewing and restructuring the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders such as the RFU and Premiership Rugby, so that each can function effectively in their own right and safe-guard and grow the professional game based on shared objectives.

It is also difficult to understand why Premiership Rugby have not created a more detailed regulatory framework for itself or looked at the Ligue National de Rugby (LNR) in France for a regulatory framework of sustainability.

<FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>

## **Conclusion**

Rugby union's late conversion to professional has been problematic and has limited its financial development as a professional team sport (Alywin, 2019; Massey, 2019; McMillan, 1987; Rees 2015; Williams, 2012). Collective financial loss, year on year has been a constant issue for clubs, which in the early stages of professionalism saw a number of hitherto established clubs going into administration because they could not make a profit due to spiralling wage bills and who could not generate enough revenue to off-set costs.

Despite the introduction of a salary cap, equity investment, the backing of rich owners and the emergence of BT Sport as a broadcaster, the trend of financial losses has continued. The need for reform has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic due to collective losses of £100m and despite a government loan of £59m and increased investment by club owners, the negative financial situation is likely to perpetuate for some time (Kelleher, 2021). Indeed, it is likely that other Premiership Rugby clubs may suffer the same fate as Worcester Warriors and Wasps if the latest set of published accounts for 2021 to 2022 are anything to go by (Dineen & Miller, 2022).

The RFU and Premiership Rugby have been reactive to negative events, culminating current in the production of the RFU Recovery Plan whose primary response it to initiate a pause in relegation and promotion as a form of ‘ring-fencing’ to allow clubs to recover financially and attract future investment. From a regulatory perspective, the Lord Myners Report on the Salary Cap due to the breaches by Saracens and the reduction in the salary cap has gone some way to providing more effective governance but it is not a total solution. Those involved in the governance of the game need to look at other governance measures and business models inherent in ‘profitable’ professional rugby, such as the LNR in France and other sports models in North America and Australia and analyse how these could be applied to the benefit of Premiership Rugby and its business sustainability. Premiership Rugby also needs to learn the lessons both positive and negative from other sports, such as rugby league and football, whilst recognising that it needs to incorporate a business model that reflects its own ecosystem and the current conflict of objectives that exist between rugby’s governing bodies.

Against this background, the purpose of this paper has been to introduce an experimental model to identify four key characteristics, namely cost control, profit maximisation, business model innovation and governance to help professional rugby and in particular Premiership Rugby become more sustainable as a sports business. The authors do not claim that the model presented is definitive. Nonetheless, it presents a reference point and framework to initiate discussion and proactive debate between the governing bodies involved in professional rugby union. The concern is that if the governing bodies do not take note of the key characteristics presented as the ‘corner stones for business sustainability’ the future of the professional game will be severely hampered, or in the extreme, may

cease to exist at a time when its appeal is at its highest and where the need to explore all possible avenues for radical reform is most needed.

The authors also hope that the adoption and implementation of sustainable business models may provide a 'blue-print' for the globalisation of professional rugby to support the limited research on those emerging rugby nations who are in the transition from an amateur to professional culture (Hall et al, 2022). Future research by the authors will focus on each the key characteristics presented to further support a model of business sustainability and increase the knowledge base of the key stakeholders involved in the game and to affect positive reform. There is also scope to explore fans perception of the model presented and for the need for reform to ensure that clubs are ultimately able to survive in an environment which is currently in a state of crisis. Additionally, given the current problems faced by the Rugby Super League, it is recommended that the model of business sustainability in professional rugby union presented in this paper is similarly explored in terms of a business model for growth as part of the professionalism of rugby and the similarities that exist between the two codes.

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