Expanding Rugby in the United States: a Historical Analysis

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Abstract
This study utilized a mixed methods approach to address the question of how to grow rugby, given the current obstacles faced by the sport within the United States. A comparative historical analysis of rugby, soccer, and football’s fluctuating histories is presented along with an extended literature review and synthesized timeline. This paper presents historical causes for the sport’s current minority status in the U.S. market. We find that the United States’ sports market has unique characteristics which need to be considered as organizers seek to expand rugby in America. Specific characteristics of the U.S. market and specific obstacles are presented, along with policy recommendations.

Introduction
This mixed methods study looked at how best to grow rugby in the United States given the current obstacles faced by the sport there. By finding what current and historical road blocks existed, and how best they could be overcome, it was hoped that limited resources could be more effectively used, allowing the sport to grow at an expanded rate. This study was conducted with the cooperation of Minnesota Youth Rugby as well as many people involved in the game.

At the time of this study there were numbers suggesting that rugby was on the rise, but participation rates were still nowhere near mainstream sports; most kids still did not grow up immersed in the sport, and the US National teams were still nowhere near dominant internationally (The Economist. 2011). No single study had looked at how to move the sport back into the mainstream. While conducting preliminary research and interviews, a commonly agreed upon notion – that rugby was on the verge of taking off in the United States – was seen (Doreau.
2010.). On the ground, at the local level, there was a lot of hope but also a lot of uncertainty as to how rugby should proceed. It was clear that organizers did not know why rugby was in the position it was while other sports were more popular, and there was no previous research to look to.

The overarching question which needed to be answered was “How can rugby be grown effectively in the United States given the current obstacles faced by the sport?” It became clear that to answer this question research first needed to show why rugby was in the position it was; this study looked to answer that question, and in doing so lay the foundation for future survey and focus group data. The research question for this study therefore was simply “Why is rugby not a bigger sport than it is in the United States?”

When talking to those within rugby both at the national level (USA Rugby), and the local (Minnesota Youth Rugby), people identified soccer’s rise as the model they wanted to emulate, but no clear picture of what that really meant was available. They also looked at American Football as the gold standard for what a full contact sport in the U.S. could achieve. In fact the histories of rugby, soccer and football within the United States were so closely linked at their start that it would be irresponsible to talk about one without also explaining the other. In addition because so much of their histories ran parallel, many variables – for instance location and time period – were controlled for by default. Unfortunately no definitive synthesis of this shared history with in the US existed. There was no single timeline or historical analysis to look to. This study looked to fill that void.

This study took the form of an extended literature review and comparative historical analysis. The majority of data was collected through document analysis. Additionally interviews were used to direct research and to clarify findings. The historical analysis looked to clarify why the three sports were where they found themselves at the time of the study. It then looked to identify what mechanisms caused these outcomes. Three of John Stuart Mill’s five “Methods of Experimental Inquiry” (Sion. 2005. p. 1) were used as the theoretical framework of this study. Because his Method of Agreement, Method of Difference and Joint Method are all related, but used for slightly different situations, it made sense to use all three.

Data was gathered from previous literature, to create a
detailed timeline of all three sports, and when possible the causes of their ups and downs were identified. Additionally moments when two sports histories paralleled each other were highlighted, this proved to be particularly key in using soccer as a model for rugby. Key elements of the US population as consumers of sports (both as participants and as spectators) were then identified in order to better understand what obstacles needed to be overcome. Key contemporary data on all three sports as well as on international rugby was then used to identify where rugby needs to get to be a global and domestic competitor. Because historical accuracy is not always a priority in sports reporting, everything that could be cross checked was, and firsthand accounts, photographs and video footage were used whenever possible.

**Extended Literature Review and Historical Analysis**

For an overview of the history of rugby, in the US, internationally, and its interaction with soccer and football, please see the timeline section below. According to the BBC article by Geoghegan (2011), after conducting a survey on sporting participation of 120 different sports, the Sporting Goods Manufacturers’ Association found that rugby (as of 2010) was the fastest growing sport in the US. The number of people playing in the US grew from 617,000 in 2008 to 750,000 in 2009 and to 1.13 million in 2010 (p. 1). Nearly a 200% increase. But as Chadwick, Semens, Schwarz, & Zhang (2010, March) show, those numbers were still too low for the US to be competitive on the international stage. Soccer boasted the 3rd most participants for a team sport with 13.7 million outdoor players and 4.9 million indoor within the U.S. Combined in 2012, these numbers put the sport behind basketball (24.0 million players) and baseball (13.8 million players), and ahead of Football (according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association. 2010).

Rugby, soccer and football’s early histories are confusing and muddy. While all three sports eventually became distinct in the US there are many events which all three claim in their early histories as their own; a fact which points to their early shared origins and blurred distinctions as the three sports came into their own in the US. In fact, almost every historical sporting event from the 1800s is claimed by more than one sport. As the historical and contemporary analysis was conducted, some key
points about the U.S. Market (both in terms of consumers and competitors) became prominent.

The point that American Football probably could not have developed anywhere else in the world the way it did here was prevalent in the literature. The US at the time was connected enough to the rest of the world for soccer and rugby to make their way here, but was isolated enough that it was not bound to keep rules as they were in Europe. Two phrases were used often in various books and articles to describe the United States; one was insular and the other referred to American exceptionalism.

Andy Markowitz explained that “America’s sports exceptionalism, we submit, remains inextricably linked to the other exceptionalisms that have rendered American politics, American social relations, and American culture so similar and yet at the same time so different from other comparable phenomena, particularly in Europe…” (qtd. in Goldblatt. p. 96.). This phrase was also found being used to describe the peculiar fact that women’s soccer in the U.S. has often surpassed men’s in terms of popularity (Hong & Mangan. p. 14). A fact most often attributed to the incredible success of the women’s national team, and the publicity that followed. The other phrase “insular” refers to the fact that Americans tend to prefer to keep to themselves; and to be able to do what they want independently of the rest of the world. As author David Wangerin says “To many Americans the United States is the greatest sports nation on earth. To many elsewhere it is merely the most insular” (Wangerin. p.15.).

If rugby’s organizers want to grow the sport within the Unites States – it needs to be sold as an American sport, not as a foreign interest. The sport’s past within the US needs to be used. There has been an attempt to emphasize that the US is the defending Olympic champions; the US won in 1920 and 1924, and rugby has not been in the Olympics since, however it will return in 2016 with the 7 a side version (A Giant Awakens). But that’s not enough. As seen in the timeline below, Americans were actually big innovators of early rugby. The first rugby game played in American counted touchdowns as scores while the rest of the world (outside of Canada) was still only counting them as a try at goal. Americans were the ones who introduced numerical scoring to the game of rugby in 1883. And it was thanks to future football legend Walter Camp (Danzig. 1956.). The rest of
the world would not catch onto using numbers for three years (Waves Falcons Rugby Club. p. 1.). Football has the advantage of having been developed here, along American lines, and just as our nation was coming into its own. As Danzig says “It is interesting to note that the progress of football paralleled the growth of our great country” (P. vi). This is a very distinct advantage, but there are ways for rugby’s past to be tapped into.

Another aspect of the American market that needs to be addressed is the love of things combative and “extreme” as spectators, and the desire for safety when it comes to playing a sport. Soccer has solved (as far as perceptions go) the player part, and in fact it’s “safety” has been a major selling point for generations. In The Ball is Round, Wangerin explains why soccer grew the way it did despite there being other options; he points out that it is less expensive, easy to learn, and that “football [soccer] is played more easily and with less danger to the participants on poor quality surfaces” (Wangerin. p. 42). This may go a long way towards explaining soccer’s youth boom as well. Soccer is perceived as safe, even though concussion rates among girls were second only to boy’s football in 2012 (Huffington Post). On the other side football has been sold as a gladiator sport, and spectators love it. Enjoyment is found in watching gigantic professionals crashing into each other, but football is also under constant attack when it comes to injury rates, particularly when it comes to youth concussions.

The question of how rugby should be presented (extreme or safety conscious) will require follow-up survey data and unfortunately is beyond the scope of this study to accurately answer. What is clear from looking at football is that just as important as the actual statistics – is the spin that can be put on it. While football continues to be number one when it comes to concussions among youth, the NFL has made a few subtle, but highly publicized changes to their rules (NFL.com. p.1.). Most of these are designed to limit helmet to helmet contact, and to create return to play protocol (something the International Rugby Board already has). In an interview with a recent high school graduate who played football, it became clear to me that those high level changes had had very little impact on the ground where he said it remained “do what needs to be done to get the job done, body be damned” (C. McVey, personal communication, June 22, 2012). Parents still feel better because
of the steps that are being taken.

Rugby is perceived in the US as less “tough” than American football but also too dangerous because of the lack of padding. The lack of padding may actually make the game safer (Triad Youth Rugby Association. p. 1.), and internationally it is seen as one of the toughest sports in the world – convincing the US population of one or both of those things will be key, as will be figuring out where to put emphasis. I interviewed a gentleman who ran a number of rugby teams successfully in Canada and he used the phrase “contact versus collision” repeatedly to describe the difference between unpadded contact versus padded collisions. When explaining rugby, many people I interviewed proclaimed “it’s like football without the pads” but this statement may do more damage than good. The contact is very different, and so is the game. What is needed is enough publicity that people don’t have to explain rugby in the context of football and soccer.

And it is possible to get there; soccer has proved that much. In Soccer in a Football World, Wangerin talks about how soccer fans of his generation can recall “…the ground-breaking broadcast of the 1982 final by ABC where commentary team felt it necessary to explain that Italy’s 2-1 lead over West Germany was ‘like a score of 14-7 in football’” (Wangerin. p. 6). This is an almost exactly parallel experience to the NBC broadcast of the USA Rugby Sevens Collegiate National Championships in the summer of 2011 where every aspect of the game had to be explained in terms of American Football. It appeared that rugby in 2011 was in a very similar situation to soccer in 1982; and that is important because those 1982 broadcasts were at the start of a US Soccer wave, which saw soccer become a main-stream sport in the United States.

Soccer successfully sold their sport as great for kids, and had a clear pathway for player development – while independently this was not enough to build a successful national men’s program, it was enough to build a successful women’s program. The US Soccer program reached a pinnacle in 1999 when the women won the World Cup, at home, in front of record numbers of spectators – inspiring droves of young women to pick up soccer. Many successful soccer nations did not have the equivalent of Title IX giving the US Women’s team an advantage as they leveraged their youth and college programs to form a
successful team. It took a program of sustained success to get there (that win was FAR from their first success) and it took the media, and public, falling in love with the players, team and the sport. USA Rugby has thus-far been supportive of its women’s game, but perhaps not to the extent they could. USA Rugby professionalized their 7s national team in 2012 by extending contracts to 23 athletes… 15 of them men, 7 of them women (Stoney in a New York Times article). While this was a critical move in the advancement of US programs, that gender split was certainly not representative of national team success. And the women’s game is a huge part of US rugby. In fact, of the top 10 nations for overall participation numbers, the United States boasts the most female players (Chadwick). The U.S. women are far more competitive than US men internationally and there is a clear model of expansion from soccer showing that a women’s national team program can advance a sport.

Rugby can take this same pathway. Youth programs, emphasis on safety, clear player development, support and media attention for the women’s game… Rugby needs to do all of the above if it wants to follow soccer’s path. Rugby may also be able to leverage its “character building” characteristics to parents which historically helps draw boys and young men to a sport, something soccer has struggled with. According to Wangerin in the 1890s “Masculine Christianity helped make rugged, combative games accepted in higher education, where the ‘extracurricular’ was emerging as a feature of campus life and where ‘character’ needed to be ‘instilled’ (p.19), and the idea that sports make people better has continued for both genders. Rugby can tap into this; it is a full contact sport with a huge emphasis on sportsmanship and respect. It’s a sport where, by convention, only the team captain may speak to the referee in a match; there is no back talking, no disputing plays. It is a game where it is customary to cheer the other team at the end of a match, where hugs are the norm after games, and referees are thanked regardless of how they performed. Rugby needs to make itself more known in this respect, and it needs to maintain its character as it expands.

Participation is the key to international success. In a Master Card sponsored report on emerging markets the Master Card Press Release states “though a number of other factors are important, if countries are to improve their playing quality they
need to increase participation” (p.1.). Currently in the US there is an emphasis being put on attracting cross over athletes – those people with incredible athletic ability, but no idea of how to play rugby – of course if those same people had grown up playing they would be far better. We also know from soccer that international success breeds participation. Effective planning and use of resources at all levels of the game is going to be the only way to jump start this system.

**Conclusion and Results**

Rugby is at a critical point in the US – it could become huge, or it could dwindle; rugby organizing bodies (local and national) need to do the research now, create an effective plan, and follow through with it. The pieces are all there already. An emphasis needs to be placed on national teams, on domestic history, on youth, on women, and on building up for the 2016 Olympics. If rugby is going to be sold effectively in the US it is going to do so by convincing people that it is not a foreign invader, but by giving them ownership of its history. It needs to be promoted as an extreme and entertaining spectator sport that is also as safe, if not safer that, other sports that people already accept the risk of playing. Rugby's best players need to be built into stars. It may be hard to build international super stars when players pick it up late, but there are some amazingly talented athletes in the U.S. who are worthy of kids hanging their posters in their bed rooms.

At the same time rugby’s youth programs need to be grown. Whatever changes take place in the US, the spirit of the game needs to be maintained and its appealing characteristics need to be effectively sold to the public. One of the characteristics that should be emphasized is the fact the women and men play exactly the same game with no variation. It is the only contact team sport available to girls in High School, and the only NCAA approved contact team sport for women in college. The women’s game has the numbers, and the talent, now they need the support. This all comes down to money and planning. Effective use of resources could lead to more participants, exposure and eventually more money.

**Timeline of Key Events**

* denotes international events

1860 to 1870 - Widely varied rules but soccer/football/rugby
popular in US
Rules varied widely, but some variation of football/rugby/soccer was popular on campuses across the US. Depending on the campus the games would resemble one more than the other, but usually some mix thereof was played. Author’s note: differentiation between the three sports extremely difficult for any one event at this point in history. (Wangerin. p. 20).

1862 - First organized team in America
The Oneida club (which played the “Boston game”) was the first organized team. They played a version of soccer (with rugby and football thrown in), you could run with the ball but only when chased. If the chaser gave up, he could yell and the person with the ball had to stop (Wangerin, p. 20).

1869 - Princeton vs. Rutgers soccer game
Credited as being “first football game” in reality it was a soccer match. The ball is currently housed in the US Soccer Hall of Fame. (Wangerin. p. 20).

1874 - Harvard Switches to Rugby
After win over McGrill University (Canada) in one game of rugby, and one of the “Boston Game” Harvard switches their major sport to rugby (Wangerin. p. 20).

1874* - RFU Introduces Umpires
The Rugby Football Union formally introduced umpires into the laws of the union. But theses umpires had little power, and the law re-affirmed captains as the “sole arbiters” of disputes (Richards. p. 64).

1875 - Touch downs (tries) counted in Harvard vs McGrill rugby game
McGrill (Montreal, Canada) vs Harvard. Played by Canadian rugby rules where touchdowns counted, as opposed to most of the rest of the world where they were just a try at goal (Danzig. p. 9).

1875 - Yale drops soccer goes to rugby
Harvard plays Yale in rugby match. Yale drops soccer and goes to rugby (Wangerin. P. 21).

1876 - IFA picks Rugby over Soccer, count tries
Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Columbia form the Intercollegiate Football Association (IFA). At this point they were all playing various versions of the sport – making intercollegiate
competition difficult. They held a convention where colleges had to pick which rules they would play by rugby or soccer; schools chose rugby and made the decision to count touchdowns (tries) for points. 15 players per side, 45min halves (Danzig. p. 10. Wangerin. P. 22).

1876* - Tries counted when goals were even
Before 1876, international rugby was won based on the number of goals (kicks) scored. In 1876, tries were counted in cases where teams scored the same number of goals. Numerical points were still not used (Farmer. Np.).

1885* - Referees Introduced
Umpires (who had little power) were kept, but moved to the touch lines to become touch judges. And a referee was added. (Richards. p. 64).

1886* - IRB Formed
International Rugby Board is formed. But England refuses to join. (Richards. p. 63).

1888* - Points System Accepted by the IRB
IRB (International Rugby Board) accepts the RFU (Rugby Football Union)’s laws in exchange for England joining the IRB, including penalty goals, and points for tries and goals – although the numerical value was still in flux (Richards. p. 64).

1889* - Referees gain ability to send players off.
Referees could now send offending players off the field. But captains still have major powers in disputes (Richards. p. 63).

1890 to1910 - Era of immigrant driven soccer
Almost all soccer in the US was driven by immigrants (Goldblatt. p. 98).

1893* - Point values stabilized
3 points for a try, 2 points for a conversion, 3 points for a penalty goal, and 4 points for a drop goal become standard (rugbyfootballhistory.com).

1894 - Football immerging
By this time there had been enough changes made to Rugby by Walter Camp and other Americans that the Manchester Guardian said that Americans had “spoiled and brutalized” rugby. (Wangerin. p. 23).

1894 - 1st professional soccer league
1st professional soccer league formed, league was ill fated (Goldblatt. p. 98).

1904 - 21 dead from Football
The NY Times reported 21 deaths and 200 injuries from Football (Wangerin. p. 23).

1904 - Soccer creeps back onto college campuses
Harvard plays Haverford in two games of soccer, as soccer creeps back onto college campuses (Wangerin. p. 24).

1904 - US Plays unofficial exhibition game at the Olympics
The US played an unofficial soccer tournament at the Olympics in St Louis (Goldblatt. p. 99).

1905 - NCAA Formed
After Roosevelt’s concern over football, National Collegiate Athletics Association is formed. Drastic rule changes follow (Wangerin. p. 26).

1905 - Return to rugby, football too dangerous (Roosevelt)
After a number of deaths, President Roosevelt steps in says Football is too dangerous. Cal and Stanford go back to rugby (Richards. p. 25).

1905 - West coast goes back to rugby
Following Roosevelt’s urging of safer rules and play for football, the major west coast universities switch back to rugby. Cal University made the switch, and began their incredible rugby history (Wangerin. p. 23).

1906 - IFA allows the forward pass
The IFA (Intercollegiate Football Association) allows the forward pass in an attempt to decrease injuries. A major victory for Walter Camp (Richards. P. 26).

1906 - Stanford and Cal return to Football
Soon after NCAA rule changes, Stanford and Cal drop rugby and return to Football (Wangerin. p. 25).

1906 - Increasing interest in international soccer competition
Pilgrim Football (Soccer) Club tours U.S., draws large crowds, and gains fans by showing what Soccer could be. This, plus the addition of Soccer as a medal sport for the 1908 Olympics led to an increase in interest in soccer, and especially in international competition (Wangerin. p. 25).

1912 - Two major governing bodies merge, join FIFA
The two major organizing bodies in the US merge and join FIFA (Goldblatt. p. 99).

1915 - Columbia Drops Rugby
Columbia University drops rugby, returns to American Football (Wangerin. p. 25).

1918 - Soccer, only 12 colleges play each other
By 1918, only 12 colleges played soccer against each other, all were on the east coast (Wangerin. p. 26).

1921 to 1933 - American Soccer League

1922 - 1st tour by a women’s team (soccer)
Dick Kerr’s Ladies were the first women’s team to tour (of any sport – but they played soccer) (Goldblatt. p. 100).

1925 - 46,000 fans at a single soccer game
46,000 fans attend a single soccer game; numbers that wouldn’t be matched for a long time (Goldblatt. p. 100).

1925 - Soccer: media coverage, fans, players at high point
Good press coverage and media interest, radio was being used to broadcast games, league were attracting players from Europe (Goldblatt. p. 99.).

1929 - Wall Street crashes.

1930 - US Makes semifinals of world cup (Soccer)
The USA (men) made it to the semi-finals of the World Cup in Uruguay (Goldblatt. p. 99).

1937 - Leagues crash, no college game to fall back on
Soccer leagues had all gone under, and the lack of a college game became detrimental. Soccer dwindled (Goldblatt. p. 100).

The US Men’s Soccer team beat England at the World Cup in Brazil. Win was nearly unnoticed at home where soccer interest was nearly none (Goldblatt. p. 100).

1966 - Soccer: ABC airs World Cup
ABC Airs Men’s World Cup. Some US interest (Goldblatt. p. 101).

1984 - Rise of indoor soccer
Indoor soccer on the rise. Also the year the NASL went under (Goldblatt. p. 782).

References
rising-fifteen-percent-new-study-finds


