

Sports

Pacific rugby: The great brawn drain that left poor nations behind

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Lobby group Pacific Rugby Players Welfare estimates about 20 percent of all professional players come from islander backgrounds, highlighting the region's contribution to the international game.

While the figure is open to interpretation, there is no doubt Pacific islanders have long bolstered the Test squads of New Zealand and Australia, and more recently England and France.

Fiji coach John McKee said there was an "X-factor" about Pacific rugby which could electrify the game. "They're very gifted athletes and have that warrior spirit, which goes back in their history. It's in their DNA and carries on into their rugby," he said.

But for all their on-field attributes, the Pacific nations face serious off-field issues that prevent them from consistently challenging the game's global superpowers. Some are beyond their control, including geographic isolation, lack of financial resources and the actions of player agents luring top talent overseas. Other problems such as poor governance and political interference in the game can be controlled and there are signs things are slowly improving.

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The islands, with a collective population of less than 1.5 million, lack financial clout and most promising players soon sign for foreign clubs, making it hard to forge a cohesive national team.

"Our top players are spread all around the world, particularly in Europe," McKee said. "So keeping an eye on their form, current fitness and injury status is a major task for us. It puts us at a disadvantage against our competitors, particularly tier one nations, who get a

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For years, some unscrupulous player agents exacerbated the problem, signing up budding teenage stars to one-sided European club contracts in a situation former Fiji sevens coach Ben Ryan likened to "the Wild West". McKee said tighter eligibility rules in Europe meant the problem had eased but young players still needed support when leaving their family networks to travel to a foreign culture where they often did not speak the local language.

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"But who looks after the other nine who don't get contracts? They slip down the levels and end up playing federale (amateur) rugby. It's difficult to make a living." Further complicating matters, the governing rugby unions in Fiji, Tonga and Samoa have all faced questions in recent years about how they run the game.

Concerns have ranged from financial irregularities to incompetence and political interference. "A lot of (problems) have come from home, from the Fijian Rugby Union," said Englishman Ryan, who coached Fiji's sevens team to Olympic gold at the Rio 2016 Games. "There's serious things they need to get better at around governance and things like that." Again, there has been improvement. Fiji and Samoa were welcomed onto an expanded World Rugby Council late last year after meeting strict governance criteria laid down by the game's ruling body.

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Rice terraces and 'turtle shell' scrums: Barefoot rugby in Vietnam

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But the game isn't totally unfamiliar in Vietnam, as it echoes aspects of the traditional "vat cau" new year festival that sees shirtless men wrestle for possession of a large wooden ball on a field. Now Vietnam's budding young rugby stars hope the sport will start to gain popularity.

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Orphan goes from sniffing 'Rugby' glue to playing for the Philippines

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If there was any luck in his hellish world, it was that the brand of glue he and other street kids used to get high was called "Rugby".

The name still resonated with Ramirez years after he stopped using and was building his life in a Manila orphanage. Counsellors there had urged him to pick a sport, but he didn't like football or basketball, the national obsession. Then they asked him if he wanted to give rugby a try. "I didn't have any idea it was a sport," he told AFP. "I thought it was the glue. That's why I chose rugby for sports."

This fateful misunderstanding would redirect his life, giving the scrappy five-foot six-inch (1.7-metre) wing/fullback a way off the streets and into the sort of full-time career he can only have dreamt about. It culminated with him becoming, in 2015, one of the first born and bred Pinoys (Filipinos) to land a spot on the Philippines national squad, the Volcanoes. To this day, the team is composed mostly of foreign-born players whose primary tie to the nation is a Filipino parent.

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Jake Letts, general manager of the Philippine Rugby Football Union, has watched Ramirez develop from a raw talent to what he called a "dangerous" player on the pitch. "His strength is his speed and his agility. It's really hard for a big guy to catch him," Letts told AFP. "When they do catch him it can be painful." Letts said Ramirez's brutal upbringing is now a strength: "He's definitely got the grit. He's been through it all."

Ramirez says he has no memory of his parents and is not even sure of their full names. In fact, he has no birth certificate, so he's not sure of his true birthday. He uses March 17, 1994, which was assigned to him when he was taken in by an orphanage. That makes him 25 years old, on paper at least.

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Orphan goes from sniffing 'Rugby' glue to playing for the Philippines

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If there was any luck in his hellish world, it was that the brand of glue he and other street kids used to get high was called "Rugby".

The name still resonated with Ramirez years after he stopped using and was building his life in a Manila orphanage. Counsellors there had urged him to pick a sport, but he didn't like football or basketball, the national obsession. Then they asked him if he wanted to give rugby a try. "I didn't have any idea it was a sport," he told AFP. "I thought it was the glue. That's why I chose rugby for sports."

This fateful misunderstanding would redirect his life, giving the scrappy five-foot six-inch (1.7-metre) wing/fullback a way off the streets and into the sort of full-time career he can only have dreamt about. It culminated with him becoming, in 2015, one of the first born and bred Pinoys (Filipinos) to land a spot on the Philippines national squad, the Volcanoes. To this day, the team is composed mostly of foreign-born players whose primary tie to the nation is a Filipino parent.

'HE'S BEEN THROUGH IT ALL'

Jake Letts, general manager of the Philippine Rugby Football Union, has watched Ramirez develop from a raw talent to what he called a "dangerous" player on the pitch. "His strength is his speed and his agility. It's really hard for a big guy to catch him," Letts told AFP. "When they do catch him it can be painful." Letts said Ramirez's brutal upbringing is now a strength: "He's definitely got the grit. He's been through it all."

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After his parents went missing, he and his older brother had ended up in the hands of a man he believes was an uncle. The man was an addict who sent the boys to beg on the streets of Manila, which is where they were introduced to glue-sniffing.

So-called "Rugby boys" have been a problem in the Philippines for decades, despite promises of reforms from solvent manufacturers, merchants and the government. A small bottle of solvent still costs less than \$1 in most shops.

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Sports

Pacific rugby: The great brawn drain that left poor nations behind

'They're very gifted athletes and have that warrior spirit'

WELLINGTON: Rugby aims to open up new frontiers this year when Japan host the first World Cup held in Asia, but the talent-rich Pacific island nations feel they are still being neglected by the game's powerbrokers.

The island nations of Fiji, Samoa and Tonga all boast a rich rugby heritage and a wealth of playing talent, but have battled to overcome financial hardships and geographic isolation.

Lobby group Pacific Rugby Players Welfare estimates about 20 percent of all professional players come from islander backgrounds, highlighting the region's contribution to the international game.

While the figure is open to interpretation, there is no doubt Pacific islanders have long bolstered the Test squads of New Zealand and Australia, and more recently England and France.

Fiji coach John McKee said there was an "X-factor" about Pacific rugby which could electrify the game. "They're very gifted athletes and have that warrior spirit, which goes back in their history. It's in their DNA and carries on into their rugby," he said.

But for all their on-field attributes, the Pacific nations face serious off-field issues that prevent them from consistently challenging the game's global superpowers. Some are beyond their control, including geographic isolation, lack of financial resources and the actions of player agents luring top talent overseas. Other problems such as poor governance and political interference in the game can be controlled and there are signs things are slowly improving.

'WILD WEST'

The islands, with a collective population of less than 1.5 million, lack financial clout and most promising players soon sign for foreign clubs, making it hard to forge a cohesive national team.

"Our top players are spread all around the world, particularly in Europe," McKee said. "So keeping an eye on their form, current fitness and injury status is a major task for us. It puts us at a disadvantage against our competitors, particularly tier one nations, who get a

lot more time together."

For years, some unscrupulous player agents exacerbated the problem, signing up budding teenage stars to one-sided European club contracts in a situation former Fiji sevens coach Ben Ryan likened to "the Wild West". McKee said tighter eligibility rules in Europe meant the problem had eased but young players still needed support when leaving their family networks to travel to a foreign culture where they often did not speak the local language.

"For some people, taking them over there was a numbers game — if they can get 10 players in France and one becomes a superstar that's great for the agent," he said.

"But who looks after the other nine who don't get contracts? They slip down the levels and end up playing federale (amateur) rugby. It's difficult to make a living." Further complicating matters, the governing rugby unions in Fiji, Tonga and Samoa have all faced questions in recent years about how they run the game.

Concerns have ranged from financial irregularities to incompetence and political interference. "A lot of (problems) have come from home, from the Fijian Rugby Union," said Englishman Ryan, who coached Fiji's sevens team to Olympic gold at the Rio 2016 Games. "There's serious things they need to get better at around governance and things like that." Again, there has been improvement. Fiji and Samoa were welcomed onto an expanded World Rugby Council late last year after meeting strict governance criteria laid down by the game's ruling body.

AFTERTHOUGHT

Fiji showed their potential with a historic Test win over France last November and McKee was confident they could spring more surprises in Japan.

But World Rugby's recently discarded plan for a cross-hemisphere Nations Championship highlights how the game's top brass often treat the Pacific islands as an afterthought.

Initial indications were that the islands would be

Launched in 2015, the ChildFund Pass It Back programme is aimed at teaching youngsters life skills, with lessons on health or planning for the future interspersed with rugby training sessions.

The players aged 11 to 16 meet regularly on weekends to play touch rugby, which has none of the full-contact version's heavy tackling. There are more than 6,100 players and coaches in the programme today, more than half of them female, in Vietnam, Laos, East Timor and the Philippines. Some players will go to Japan in March with ChildFund — travelling by plane for the first time — for rugby training and life-skills sessions.

Rugby wasn't the most obvious choice. Football, volleyball and sepak takraw (kick volleyball) were also floated as options when the programme was piloted in Laos, but rugby was considered the most gender-neutral. "The young girls in the commune wanted to try this new sport that they had never seen before, it wasn't considered a boys' sport," John Harris, regional operations officer for the scheme, told AFP. Still, some participants in Vietnam had to push back against entrenched sexism.

Coach Bui Thi Lan was told by her in-laws that she should give up rugby after marrying and having a baby — in line with expectations women should avoid playing rowdy sports. Lan would have none of it.

She came back to coaching four months after giving birth and now teaches 60 kids four times per week. "Rugby brought me money so that I could take care of myself, working and studying at the same time," she told AFP at a recent training session, where she fed her baby between modules.

COLONIAL ROOTS

Battling inequality wasn't the only hurdle. There was no vocabulary in Vietnamese for the sport and some terms were coined on the fly. A scrum is "mai rua" which means 'turtle shell' in Vietnamese, while the name for rugby is simply "bong bau duc", which translates to 'oval ball'.



FUJIYOSHIDA: France's winger Damian Penaud (2nd L) breaks away during a training session at the Fuji Hokuoku Park in Fujiyoshida yesterday, where the French squad will train ahead of the Japan 2019 Rugby World Cup which begins on September 20. —AFP

excluded from the competition's top division entirely, although World Rugby said after coming under intense pressure that Fiji would have a spot.

McKee said even then Fiji would be at a disadvantage because its players, mostly Europe-based, would be regularly pitted against the world's best teams without having enough time together to prepare properly.

"What we need is a professional team in a professional competition which allows us to keep our players," he said, citing the way the Buenos Aires-based

Jaguars Super Rugby team had lifted the Argentine national side.

A proposal for a Pacific islands Super Rugby team was scrapped late last year after organisers decided it was not commercially viable.

But McKee said if World Rugby was intent on global expansion and pursuing lucrative broadcast rights, then it needed to use some of the money to help the Pacific islands. "There's certainly no easy solutions but a solution needs to be found," he said. —AFP

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