The Changing Face of Rugby
The Changing Face of Rugby
The Union Game
and Professionalism since 1995

Edited by

Greg Ryan

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<tr>
<td>ANC</td>
<td>African National Congress</td>
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<td>ARL</td>
<td>Australian Rugby League</td>
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<td>ARU</td>
<td>Australian Rugby Union</td>
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<td>CNRE</td>
<td>Commission Nationale De Rugby d’Élite</td>
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<td>ERC</td>
<td>European Rugby Cup Ltd</td>
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<td>ERL</td>
<td>England Rugby Ltd</td>
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<td>FFR</td>
<td>Federation Française De Rugby</td>
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<td>FIRA</td>
<td>Federation Internationale De Rugby Amateur</td>
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<td>FORU</td>
<td>Federation Of Oceania Rugby Unions</td>
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<td>FRU</td>
<td>Fiji Rugby Union</td>
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<td>GAA</td>
<td>Gaelic Athletic Association</td>
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<td>IFU</td>
<td>Irish Football Union</td>
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<td>IRFU</td>
<td>Irish Rugby Football Union</td>
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<td>JRFU</td>
<td>Japan Rugby Football Union</td>
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<td>LFRT</td>
<td>Ligue Française De Rugby A Treize</td>
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<td>LNR</td>
<td>Ligue Nationale De Rugby</td>
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<td>MSRL</td>
<td>Manu Samoa Rugby Ltd</td>
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<td>NFU</td>
<td>Northern Football Union (Ireland)</td>
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<td>NSWRU</td>
<td>New South Wales Rugby Union</td>
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<td>NU</td>
<td>Northern Union</td>
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<td>NZRFU</td>
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<td>PIRA</td>
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<td>Rugby Football Union</td>
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<td>RWC</td>
<td>Rugby World Cup</td>
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<td>SANZAR</td>
<td>South Africa New Zealand Australia Rugby</td>
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<td>SARB</td>
<td>South African Rugby Board</td>
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<td>SARFU</td>
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<td>Samoa Rugby Football Union</td>
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<td>SRU</td>
<td>Scottish Rugby Union</td>
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<td>SUFC</td>
<td>Sydney University Football Club</td>
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<td>TRFU</td>
<td>Tonga Rugby Football Union</td>
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<td>UFRA</td>
<td>Union Française De Rugby Amateur</td>
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INTRODUCTION

GREG RYAN

In 1995 rugby union became the last significant international sport to sanction professionalism. To some, this represented an undesirable and problematic challenge to the status quo in which the traditions of the game would be eroded and benefits would accrue only to a small coterie of talented players. To many others, the change was inevitable and overdue. In various countries, different combinations of veiled professionalism or officially condoned shamateurism lurked behind the amateur facade throughout the twentieth century. Such hypocrisy, especially to generations shaped by rapid social and economic change and exposure to global cultural forces from the 1960s, exposed the once cherished amateur ideal as an inconvenient anachronism. Legions of rugby league players in Britain and Australasia who were entirely amateur in the sense that they never received any remuneration for playing their preferred game at local club level no doubt also wondered why many in rugby union had for so long treated them as pariahs.

But there is no easy generalisation as to how each country managed the relationship between amateurism and professionalism. As Tony Collins explains in the opening chapter, the cleavage that developed in English rugby during the late nineteenth century, and that produced the Northern Union antecedent of rugby league from 1895, was as much if not more about regional and class divisions within English society than the implications of pay for play. It follows that the translation of rugby to places, both within and without the British Empire, with rather different geographical and social relationships, inevitably produced different interpretations of the underlying ideals of the game’s founders. Such differences were further exacerbated by the position of rugby within a particular society – whether it was historically the dominant winter code with cross-class appeal and a stake in national consciousness, as in New Zealand, white South Africa and Wales, a sport of particular regions, and sometimes only of particular classes within them, as in Australia, France and Scotland, or a predominantly middle-class activity dwarfed in a number of its settings by professional soccer, but also by Gaelic games,
rugby league and Australian rules football with their own traditions of acceptance or rejection of professionalism. While there are commonalities in the response to professional rugby, the chapters that follow reveal far more that is derived from particular local contexts.

The timing of rugby’s move to professionalism is, however, significant in all cases. Other sports undertook this transformation much earlier – cricket from the eighteenth century; soccer, rugby league, baseball, basketball and American football during the late nineteenth or early decades of the twentieth century - when the modern sporting world was not quite fully formed. For most of them the rules, traditions and competitions, be they local, regional, national or international, were only decades old. The guiding hands of corporate and media power over sport were significantly less developed. Consequently, although the struggle between amateurism and professionalism always caused friction, the latter became a normal part of proceedings relatively early in most modern team sports and went hand in hand with later phases of expansion and modernisation. By contrast, although from the mid 1980s rugby administrators retreated from the worst excesses of their inquisitorial approach to amateur transgressors and began to improve commercial opportunities for elite players, such actions did not go far enough to quell all discontent from within or to stop the defection of talented players to rugby league. Moreover, the emergence of Rupert Murdoch’s Super League proposals in late 1994 presented a significant new rugby league outlet for those discontented with rugby union. Therefore, from 1995 the union game had to move very rapidly to find its niche not only in an environment with which its sporting counterparts were already very familiar, but one in which they were jostling more aggressively than ever for profile and market share. Survival required new competitions and schedules and fundamental changes in relationships between different levels of the game’s stakeholders. The extent to which rugby administrators paused for reflection, carefully digested the lessons from other sports and reconciled these with the values of their own game, or simply plunged confidently into the unknown, is central to the different accounts presented here.

There is of course much more to this saga than machinations between corporate forces, upper level rugby administrators and their elite players. These groups, for all of the changed circumstances and new obligations confronting them, derived tangible rewards from the game and, after an initial period of negotiation and adaptation, few seriously questioned the necessity of professionalism. But there is significantly more contested terrain to be found in the world of the amateur rugby player and
committed fan. Many who had invested time, emotion and sometimes their own money into the fortunes of rugby teams at the local level found that these strong community and historical reference points were being subtly altered or simply obliterated in the face of new commercial imperatives – and especially new competitions that separated the elite from the grassroots of the game. Some eventually adapted to the replacement ‘product’ with relish, others have not. Some have genuine and well articulated grievances against the changes, or at least the process of change, thrust upon them. Others have fallen victim to an instinctive conservatism and nostalgia which appropriates very selective memories of the amateur past to insist that things are not as good as they used to be. Often they fail to recognise that rugby does not exist in isolation either from other sports or from society as a whole. A number of changes, and especially declining participation at local club level, are not unique to rugby and can be traced to broader social forces that shift the priorities of potential sporting participants. But issues of personal agency are also important here. Some critics of professionalism would do well to remember that the rugby public are not entirely passive actors being manipulated from the board room. They, just as the players do, make their own decisions about where, or not, to place their allegiance.

The process of transformation in rugby union is still moving very rapidly. The Australian Rugby Championship, heralded as a great leap forward for 2007, was scrapped after one season due to heavy financial losses. Meanwhile, the International Rugby Board presides over almost annual alterations to the laws of the game while northern and southern hemisphere administrators struggle to reconcile their respective domestic and regional competitions with a coherent and competitive international calendar. Hence this book makes no claim to have cornered the whole professional rugby herd for close scrutiny of its history and development. That, because of the diversity of traditions and contexts shaping quite distinct rugby cultures, is a very difficult and voluminous task. Rather these chapters offer a range of perspectives on the structure of the game and the environments within which it functions as it sprints towards a still uncertain future. But rapid change does not suggest for a moment that what is here will soon be outdated. It is essential to periodically take stock and to remind ourselves where the game came from and where it has got to. Amid such rapid change matters of historical importance can easily be forgotten. Moreover, the full meaning and magnitude of different parts of the professional rugby jigsaw since 1995 may not yet be fully appreciated. In ten or twenty years this book may provide readers with grounding to interpret crisis as yet unimagined. It may confirm that a new generation of
administrators have, yet again, failed to digest the lessons of the past, or it may serve as a counter to nostalgia. Those looking back on what is outlined here may not be so keen to return to the way things were - just as some of the present generation who vigorously complain about change may realise over time that although it is sometimes painful it can also produce new opportunities and rewards. Let us not forget that, despite periodic predictions to the contrary, other sports survived their transition to professionalism and found, to varying degrees, a balance between elite and amateur competitions and the needs of fans.
CHAPTER ONE

‘THE FIRST PRINCIPLE OF OUR GAME’
THE RISE AND FALL OF AMATEURISM:
1886-1995

TONY COLLINS

As the catechism was to the Catholic Church and the Talmud to Judaism, so too was amateurism the very essence of rugby union for over a hundred years. ‘The first principle of our game is its amateur status without compromise or qualification,’ President Harry Cleaver told the Rugby Football Union (RFU) annual general meeting in July 1952. This belief was echoed throughout the white dominions of the British Empire where the game was played. ‘It is better that a game should be played badly, and that no-one should go to see it, than that the price should have to be paid for professionalism,’ wrote the 1905 All Blacks’ captain and vice-captain Dave Gallaher and Billy Stead. ‘When rugby is played with the motive of financial advantage, none of its objects can be achieved: the [moral] lessons are lost,’ declared Australia’s weekly Rugby News in 1923. And in South Africa, Danie Craven stated ‘My expression for the love of the game is to play it – and not to be paid to play’.

Amateurism was a badge that signalled the moral superiority of rugby union. It was a symbol of the sport’s purity in the face of commercialism and professionalism. And it was a code by which the elect could live and the damned could be excluded. Yet despite the reverence with which the principle was treated by the sport, it was an ideology that was inextricably tied to the social position and values of the middle classes of the white dominions of the British Empire. And as those imperial links dissolved in the second half of the twentieth century, so too did the seemingly unchallengeable position of amateurism.

The issue of amateurism was barely discussed in rugby during the first ten years of the existence of the RFU. Indeed, it was not until 1886 that the
Union formally banned any type of payment to players, fifteen years after its formation. This was not because the game existed in a state of prelapsarian amateur purity - expenses payments to players, including for time taken off work to play, were common and the offering of ‘inducements’ to players to change clubs was not unknown - but because the sport was conceived as a recreation for young middle-class males who had been educated in the traditions of the public schools. Monetary considerations were secondary to their shared social assumptions and affiliations.

However, the burgeoning popularity of playing and watching rugby among the industrial working-classes of the north of England in the late 1870s and early 1880s began to undermine the self-confidence of those who led the sport. ‘The recent foundation of a large number of clubs in the North has resulted in the drafting into club fifteens a large proportion of tyros, who may know how to drop and place kick, but are unlearned in the various points of the game’ complained RFU president Arthur Guillemard in 1880. Moreover, the example of the Football Association, which in the face of similar developments had legalised professionalism in 1884, served as an awful warning to those who led rugby: ‘Only six months after the legitimisation of the bastard [professionalism] we see two professional teams left to fight out the final [FA] cup tie,’ wrote Arthur Budd in 1886. ‘To what does this all end? Why this - gentlemen who play football once a week as a pastime will find themselves no match for men who give up their whole time and abilities to it.’

In October 1886 therefore the RFU voted to ban all payments to players, either directly or indirectly, with the sole exception of ‘legitimate travel expenses’. Transgressors would be punished by suspension or expulsion from the game. Over the next nine years the RFU waged a war of attrition against those who did not follow its strictures. In response, clubs in the north of England campaigned for the allowance of ‘broken-time payments’ to players who took time off work to play the game. After the broken-time proposal was defeated at the RFU’s 1893 annual general meeting, ‘it remained to drive out the professionals’, as the RFU’s official historians put it, and a state of barely concealed warfare existed until, faced with being picked off by ever more draconian regulations, twenty-two of the leading northern clubs resigned from the RFU in August 1895 to form the Northern Rugby Football Union (NU).

Thus an amateur ideology had been created for rugby. But this was an ideology that was largely defined in the negative. The RFU never clearly identified what an amateur was, only what he was not. Thus the debate in the RFU, and subsequently the other national rugby unions, revolved
around the definition of what constituted professionalism. The rigorous rules introduced by the RFU in September 1895, in the wake of the northern split, started with the declaration that ‘professionalism is illegal’ and then went on to define professionalism as ‘asking, receiving, or replying to a promise, direct or implied, to receive any money consideration whatever, actual or prospective; any employment or advancement; any establishment in business; or any compensation whatever.’ Along with many other transgressions, the twenty-seven clauses and twelve sub-clauses also declared that all members of any Northern Union club were to be considered professionals, regardless of whether they had ever received any payment for playing rugby. Contact with the rebel body, either by playing or signing a contract with it, was punished by a life ban from the rugby union game.

The Northern Union (which changed its name to the Rugby Football League in 1922) was therefore an intrinsic component of rugby union’s self-identity. Lacking a positive definition of amateurism, union defined itself in opposition to the ‘other’ of professionalism, the embodiment of which was rugby league. In the eyes of the RFU, whatever league was, union was not. As Moriarty to Twickenham’s Holmes, the spectre of league continuously haunted the RFU. And, despite the rival body’s geographic isolation in the north of England, the 1895 split was to shape the evolution of world rugby union for the next one hundred years.

This was most immediately seen in the fortunes of the English national side, whose dominant position in the international game was disastrously undermined by the loss of northern working-class players. Between 1890 and 1895 England won eleven of eighteen international matches. Almost forty-three per cent of the side’s players between 1890 and 1894 (pre-split manoeuvres ruled out northern players in 1895) came from clubs or would join clubs that joined the NU. But between 1901 and 1909, when the purge of the splitters had been completed, England won just six, and drew one, of twenty-seven matches with the three home nations.

This had major implications for the rugby-playing nations. In Britain, it effectively meant that rugby union became the national sport of Wales. From 1899 to 1909 Wales were undefeated by England, providing the sport with inestimable national prestige at a time when modern Welsh identity was being formed. Without this ability to vanquish the English decisively and regularly, Welsh rugby would not have been able to hold back the challenge of soccer so convincingly. In a similar way, the all-conquering march of the 1905 All Blacks through England (although not in Wales) was made possible by the fact that they did not play England’s strongest rugby sides. The huge impact of the tour on New Zealand
society, which cemented rugby union as the national sport, would undoubtedly have been less if the All Blacks had met the same levels of resistance that faced A.H. Baskerville’s pioneering 1907 New Zealand rugby league tourists to Britain (the tour which provided the catalyst for the establishment of league in New Zealand and Australia). And in South Africa, the success of the 1906 Springbok tourists to Britain gave rugby a national importance that helped to consolidate its position as the country’s dominant winter sport. Paradoxically, therefore, the weakness of English rugby union became one of the game’s greatest strengths. Without the opportunity to compete on an equal footing with, and defeat, England the importance of the sport to the three countries where rugby union became the hegemonic sport would not have been so great. The events and aftermath of the 1895 split became the defining moment in not only the history of rugby league but also that of rugby union too.

A crucial component of the RFU’s self-identity was a belief in the indivisibility of its game with the British imperial mission. The men who took rugby football to the Empire were explicitly seeking to transplant the values of muscular Christianity into the colonies. Indeed, rugby became the dominant football code in the southern hemisphere because it offered a common framework of sporting rules and moral beliefs that was shared by the dominions and the ‘Mother Country’. The symbolism of tours to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa heightened the RFU’s belief in its own imperial importance. Writing in 1919, The Times declared that rugby was ‘a most practical means of continuing and strengthening the bonds of interest between us and our relations scattered over the world.… Often in the past the ties between this country and the colonies have been slender, and the strongest of them is the common interest in British games.’

Thus the RFU’s unchallengeable authority among the rugby-playing countries of the Empire was based not only on its status as the founding body of the sport but also on the fact that it represented ‘Britishness’ and the centre of the Empire. It was this, rather than any strongly-held attachment to amateurism, that led to the dominions’ default adoption of amateurism. But, while accepting the RFU’s amateurism in principle, the dominion unions did not necessarily share its unremitting zeal in its implementation. Distance from the imperial centre, less rigidity in social divisions among whites in the colonies, and the development of local sporting traditions all tended to create a slightly more liberal outlook towards monetary questions on the part of rugby administrators outside of the ‘Mother Country’. For example, it appears that payments for play were
not a major concern in southern hemisphere rugby before the 1907 establishment of league in Australasia. Although there was opposition to outright professionalism, the dominions’ experience of cricket, and to a lesser extent horse-racing, suggested that there was no imperative to completely remove monetary reward from sport. Indeed, as Stuart Ripley has noted in his work on rowing in Sydney, amateurs and professionals often happily coexisted in colonial sport.8 Nor were the governing bodies of colonial rugby completely averse to paying players themselves when expediency warranted it. In 1907 the New South Wales Rugby Union (NSWRU) paid Dally Messenger £2.10s to compensate him for loss of earnings in order to play in the second test for Australia against New Zealand.9

Even the question of the Northern Union was viewed differently. In 1903 Billy Eagers, a former Bradford and Yorkshire NU player, was almost picked to play for Transvaal against the British side touring South Africa before his NU links were discovered. By 1907 it was estimated that at least fifty former NU men - mainly miners who had emigrated from northern England to South Africa - were active players, including some former NU professionals. Initially South African clubs had been required to ask immigrant players to provide letters of bona fides from an English rugby union club but the prospect of recruiting an experienced player meant that this was always likely to be ignored. In 1908 the president of the South African Rugby Board (SARB), L.B. Smuts, raised the matter of NU players with the RFU. He persuaded the RFU that the circumstances of the game in his country were such that the SARB should be allowed to reinstate as amateurs those NU players who had not been professionals. The RFU, reflecting the fact that the SARB had become its closest ally, agreed, with the proviso that any such reinstatements applied only to players while in South Africa.10

The fact that the ‘Colonial’ unions did not always fully share the RFU’s instinctive recoil when faced with the Northern Union was demonstrated to a much greater extent in New Zealand. As Greg Ryan and Geoff Vincent have pointed out, the impact of A.H. Baskerville’s 1907 rugby league tour on domestic rugby union was much greater than conventional histories have supposed.11 In Auckland, where the struggle between league and union was at its most intense, rugby union had introduced NU-style rule changes in 1916 and regularly reinstated league players to its ranks. Moves to reduce the number of players to fourteen-a-side and similar rule revisions were also regularly discussed.12 ‘Actaeon’, the rugby correspondent of the Auckland Star, appears to have been speaking for many when in 1917 he blamed the hostility to league on ‘the
bitterness [that] is a legacy from that conservative body the English Rugby Union, which unfortunately has been made a fetish with a number of our New Zealand football legislators’.13

The most graphic example of the relative liberalism of the New Zealand Rugby Football Union (NZRFU) in comparison to the RFU can be seen in the career of Auckland’s Karl Ifwerson. He played league for New Zealand against the British tourists in 1914, captained the Kiwis in all four tests against the Kangaroo tourists in 1919 and then again against the 1920 British tourists. In 1921 he switched to union and played for the All Blacks against South Africa that same year. Deference to British sensibilities meant that he was barred from selection for the 1924 All Blacks tour to Britain.14 In contrast, it is unlikely that a league international would even have been allowed inside the clubhouse of a British rugby union club, let alone play for a national side.

The distance between the RFU and the New Zealand and Australian rugby unions was at its most pronounced in the immediate aftermath of World War One. In October 1919 the NZRFU, supported by the NSWRU (then the de facto governing body of the Australian game), had proposed to the RFU a series of rule changes designed to speed the game up and relax the amateur regulations.15 Moreover, they also called for an Imperial Rugby Board to be set up on which the three southern hemisphere ‘colonies’ should have equal representation with the four ‘home’ nations. This was met by an emphatic no from the RFU. Moreover, a sustained campaign was launched to reaffirm the essential identity of the rugby union game with British patriotism. From the RFU’s perspective, the huge toll of war-time deaths suffered by rugby union players gave it an unchallengeable moral authority. Thus it replied to its critics by reiterating the blood sacrifice made during the war, as was strikingly done by an English correspondent to the Sydney Referee in 1921:

The rugger game [is] a beautiful edifice, built up by years of patient labour, and over which is shed the lustre of a tradition that will live as long as red blood flows in Australian veins - this tradition (I quote from the 1919-20 Rugby Football Annual): ‘On the last Saturday of the 1913-14 season the London Scottish [rugby club] placed four teams in the field, of these sixty players, forty-five have been killed. Altogether the club had seventy of three hundred members killed and fifty-two wounded. Some of the smaller clubs have lost almost all of the playing members ...You know the record of the New South Wales and New Zealand rugby unions in the terrible but wonderful years of Armageddon. Before you and your friends, in this sudden, new found zeal of yours for 'improving the rules' destroy that edifice - think! And think again! In England it is imperishable and indestructible.16
For the British patriots who led the game in Australia and New Zealand, this was an unanswerable challenge. It effectively destroyed any thoughts of substantive rule changes, amendments to the amateur regulations or even reunification with rugby league. ‘Dispensations’, such as the limited ban on direct kicking into touch, were allowed by the RFU in the southern hemisphere only insofar as they would help constrain or defeat the league threat.

The RFU’s ‘counter-reformation’ of the 1920s sought to extend to the rugby-playing dominions of the British Empire its own iron rigour in dealing with rugby league. League’s ‘otherness’ was identified with a lack of patriotism and moral purpose. ‘Every town must have its sewer,’ declared the manager of the 1930 British Isles touring side, James Baxter, when asked by a journalist why he thought league was strong in Auckland. *The Times* had even placed question marks around the word English when describing the 1924 league tourists to Australia and New Zealand. In Britain the zealouslyness of the drive to identify and expel transgressors reached absurd heights in the 1930s as the RFU ruthlessly drove out anyone with the remotest connection to rugby league. These ranged from a schoolboy who played league for a local club rather than his school union side to England full-back Tom Brown, who was banned for life from the game in 1933 merely for having a discussion with officials of a rugby league club.

Such extremes, however, were not usually seen in Australia and New Zealand, where, unlike South Africa, the two codes daily faced each other. In Australia the social divide between the two codes replicated to some extent that in Britain but the popularity of league in New South Wales and Queensland meant that a draconian policy would weaken union more than league. In practice, the NSWRU in the 1930s had an unofficial policy of reinstating at club level league players who had not received regular payments. In 1930 the Union even discussed approaching the RFU about relaxing the amateur regulations ‘to meet local conditions and the development of the game throughout Australia’ but, perhaps aware of the response it would receive, the idea does not seem to have been pursued.

In Queensland, rugby union collapsed after World War One and did not re-emerge until 1927, during which time league had been the only rugby code in the state, making it impossible for the union authorities to exclude men who had played league. Indeed, the Queensland union authorities had been given a tacit green light to do this by the actions of the RFU. In 1923 the RFU had investigated the case of Tommy Lawton, a Rhodes Scholar from the University of Queensland, who played three times for Oxford against Cambridge. He confessed to playing league in...
Brisbane on the grounds that there was no rugby union to play there. Although this defence had regularly been rejected when offered by transgressing players in the north of England, Lawton’s plea of mitigating circumstances was accepted by the RFU and he went on to captain Australia.20

In New Zealand, the initial shock caused by the formation of rugby league had dissipated by the early 1920s and the two codes developed in largely parallel spheres, at least at a senior level, in the inter-war years. However, the outbreak of World War Two led to the NZRFU granting an amnesty to league players, unilaterally extending the RFU’s own lifting of its ban for the duration of the war. One of those who played union in the services was Ponsonby rugby league full-back Bob Scott, who went on to become one of the great All Black full-backs. Johnny Simpson, an Auckland league player, also took advantage of the amnesty and went on to play nine tests for the All Blacks, including one against the 1950 British touring side.21

Both Scott and Simpson were stars on the 1946 New Zealand Army tour of Britain and France, a tour which in many ways marked the beginning of the end of the RFU’s uncontested leadership of international rugby union. In 1948 Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were finally given seats on the International Rugby Football Board (IRB), which in the past were confined to the ‘Home’ nations. That same year the National Party came to power in South Africa, which at the time seemed to have little relevance to the sport but was to have profound implications. And in 1947 France took its place in the Five Nations championship for the first time since being expelled in 1931.

The British had always had an uncomfortable relationship with French rugby. Despite the anglophilia of those who established the game in France, the Federation Française de Rugby (FFR) never embraced the same enthusiasm for amateurism as its Anglo-Saxon cousins. And the English were always acutely aware of this. E.H.D. Sewell had warned in 1911 about the danger of ‘veiled professionalism’ in French rugby, something cheerfully acknowledged by a French correspondent the following year who wrote to the Northern Union describing how broken-time payments were commonly paid by French clubs.22

Indeed, in the years following the end of World War One French rugby resembled pre-split rugby in the north of England or Australia. Allegations of payments for players, inducements to switch clubs and protests about violence in what became known as ‘le rugby de muerte’ created intolerable tensions both within the French game and with the RFU.
Appalled at the ‘unsatisfactory condition of the game of Rugby football as managed and played in France’, in 1931 the IRB stopped fixtures with French teams at all levels, expelling the French national side from the Five Nations championship. Two years later French international forward Jean Galia compounded the FFR’s problems by leading a rugby league breakaway to form the Ligue de Rugby à Treize, which soon began to rival the FFR.23

In many ways, the emergence of rugby league across the Channel only confirmed the RFU’s view of the French. Indeed, the RFU did not much care for anyone outside of the imperial family of British peoples. A 1933 RFU meeting expressed the view that it ‘should confine its activities to the English-speaking peoples’, and in 1935 the RFU decided to stop accepting memberships from overseas rugby clubs, preferring instead to focus its attention on ‘the British Commonwealth of nations’.24 However, by 1939 it had begun to rethink its attitude to the French, partly due to the growth of rugby league but also because of France’s Federation Internationale de Rugby Amateur (FIRA), a European version of the IRB which included Germany, Italy and Rumania. In July 1939 the British unions accepted the FFR’s renewed vows of amateurism at face value and allowed the French back into the Five Nations, although the outbreak of World War Two precluded their immediate participation.

When they did return, the relationship was no less fraught. Controversy erupted during the 1948 Five Nations tournament when it was revealed that French scrum-half Yves Bergougnan had previously been a professional with the Toulouse Olympique league club, one of ninety-nine French former league players who were now playing union. The issue flared up again in 1953 when former league international Jean Dauger was selected to play for France against Scotland.25 In March 1951, the IRB expressed its ‘considerable misgivings’ about the state of the French game and reiterated the conditions under which the FFR had been accepted back into the Five Nations. It demanded that ‘immediate steps to comply with these conditions’ be taken, otherwise relations between France and the IRB would be put in jeopardy. In response, the FFR executive voted to abolish the French Championship league, although a month later French clubs overwhelmingly vetoed the decision. The IRB once again asked the FFR to affirm its amateurism in 1957 but by the end of the 1950s an unspoken modus vivendi had largely been reached under which the French pretended to be amateurs and the IRB pretended to believe them.26

Part of the IRB’s reluctance to act against the French was due to the changing balance of power within international rugby union. French rugby union had grown tremendously in the 1950s, when the successes of the
national team gave it a centrality in French national culture. France’s leadership of FIRA, which had seen the game expand into Eastern Europe, also meant that they could not easily be dismissed. But, more importantly, this shift was a direct reflection of Britain’s decline and the end of its empire. Following the debacle of the Anglo-French attack on Egypt’s Suez Canal in 1956 and the gradual granting of independence to many of its former colonies, British foreign policy began to focus on Europe and joining the Common Market (later to become the European Union). Rivalry between Britain and France intensified, especially after French president Charles de Gaulle blocked a British bid to join the Common Market in 1963. At the same time, Britain’s moves towards closer economic ties with Europe and the introduction of new immigration laws severely alienated Australia and New Zealand, effectively ending their previously deferential attitude to all things British. If Harold MacMillan’s ‘winds of change’ were blowing through a decrepit empire, their breezes were also being felt in rugby union.

This was especially true in South Africa, although the prevailing winds there seemed to be travelling in the opposite direction. South Africa’s relationship to international rugby had begun to change as a consequence of domestic and foreign politics. Rugby’s national importance had been founded on an alliance between English speakers and Afrikaners. The 1906 touring side to Britain had been picked to reflect that relationship and also to demonstrate the fealty of all South Africans to the Empire. Throughout the interwar years South African rugby had been the most loyal supporter of the RFU, rarely disagreeing with it and supplying a stream of players to the English national side, including England captain ‘Tuppy’ Owen-Smith. But this alliance had tilted heavily towards the Afrikaners following the National Party’s 1948 election victory and the national euphoria surrounding the 4-0 humbling of the visiting All Blacks in 1949. As it grew in self-confidence, the South African Rugby Board became increasingly critical of the RFU’s leadership of the IRB. From the mid-1950s it began to propose alterations to the rules and was criticised openly for the first time by the IRB for allowing substitutes, then strictly against the rules, during the 1958 French tour of South Africa.27

Attitudes towards players’ expenses were diverging too. In 1963 SARB President Danie Craven called for expenses’ payments to touring players to be increased and offered to make ‘out of pocket’ payments to players going to South Africa for its seventy-fifth anniversary celebrations. As early as 1937 there had been public grumblings among South African players touring Australia about low expenses payments, one going so far as to ask ‘why can’t rugby union players be amateurs and get
an adequate allowance?"  

28 Although all members of the SARB loudly proclaimed their adherence to amateurism, it was apparent that many Afrikaners, like the French, did not entirely share the enthusiasm of the Anglo-Saxons. Moreover, the late 1950s saw attempts to bring rugby league to South Africa and a number of prominent Springboks, such as Tom van Vollenhoven, Wilf Rosenberg and Alan Skene, left to play for English league clubs. Martin Pelser, one of those who turned to league, stated bluntly that ‘I cannot recount the many days of unpaid leave I had to take for the sake of amateur rugby… Amateur rugby, and especially Springbok rugby, is a game for rich men’s sons. I, and others like me, could no longer afford it.’  

29 Although rugby league in South Africa never got off the ground, the need to protect its players from the lure of professional league became a major concern of the SARB.  

Most importantly, the increasing international isolation of South Africa following the Sharpeville massacre in March 1960 and the subsequent imposition of a police-state ‘state of emergency’ allowed the SARB to claim a greater degree of flexibility in its amateurism because of its unique circumstances.  

30 Commercial involvement in the South African game grew significantly throughout the 1960s. Writing in the British Rugby World magazine in 1965, Vivian Jenkins highlighted the great successes of South African rugby in attracting financial support from breweries and tobacco companies. In 1969 the SARB opposed the IRB ruling that ‘commercial sponsorship is contrary to amateur principles’ and the following year the IRB queried the extent of commercial involvement in the sport.  

31 As the isolation of the South African game intensified in the 1970s, especially following the diplomatically disastrous Springbok tours of Britain in 1969 and Australia in 1971, so too did its commercialisation. By 1976 the British unions were sufficiently concerned to register their alarm at the number of players ‘being invited, in some cases with their wives and families, to South Africa to play and coach in what would normally be their close season’.

32 The meaning was, as ever with the British, implicit but clear: players were being paid to play.

But it was more than just the development of commercialism that meant South Africa became the fulcrum around which rugby union’s future turned. The worldwide social upheavals and protest movements of the 1960s eroded the deferential attitudes upon which amateurism depended. Cricket and tennis abandoned the distinctions between amateurs and professionals. Although a profoundly conservative sport, rugby union had a significant proportion of university-educated players and some of them
were deeply affected by student protests against the Vietnam War and the apartheid regime. In 1969 Wales and British Lions’ flanker John Taylor refused to play against the South African tourists and two years later seven Australian players also boycotted the Springbok visitors. This questioning of traditional authority seeped into other aspects of the sport too. Coming back from a match at Llanelli in 1975, Bedford and England winger Derek Wyatt queried his role in the game: ‘the crowd must have been 12,000 or more; the car park, which had a capacity of perhaps eight hundred cars, was full; the programmes were sold out; the bars were packed. Where, I pondered, was the money going?’ Wyatt was not the only one, and the trail from Britain to South Africa in the off-season became increasingly well-trodden.

But by the late 1970s, the British unions and the IRB were unwilling and unable to act against such violations of their amateur beliefs. Unwilling because they had invested considerable political capital in supporting the SARB against the movement to boycott the apartheid regime, and unable because they knew that to take decisive action against the SARB would lead to a devastating international split. The example of cricket and the establishment of Kerry Packer’s television-driven World Series Cricket competition in 1977 demonstrated what could also happen to rugby union. Indeed, plans for a Packer-style professional rugby union circuit based on New Zealand were unveiled in 1977 and in 1979 the SARB was also approached by businessmen to discuss a joint venture to establish a professional tournament.

The driving force behind these initiatives was television. Fearful of its power yet drawn to the wealth it could offer, rugby union had an uneasy relationship with the medium. ‘There is an enormous amount of money available and I wonder whether we in rugby football are getting our fair share,’ remarked a member of the RFU committee in 1979. For television companies the most attractive feature of the game was its cycle of international competition. In 1968 the RFU had turned down as ‘undesirable’ a commercial proposal for a ‘world rugby union championship’ but the idea refused to go away, fuelled in part by the large increase in the number of international matches. The growth of ‘short tours’ by national teams, due to the ease of air travel, had begun in 1963 when England visited New Zealand for a two test series. But, as many supporters of pristine amateurism had pointed out, such developments were inherently dangerous for the game’s ethos: ‘if the Rugby authorities are unwise, and encourage too much play and too many tours overseas… the necessity [will] arise for substantial payments over and above those...
covered by the words “reasonable expenses”, predicted a Cassandra-like O.L. Owen of The Times in 1959.37

This was a view shared, albeit with opposite conclusions, by many of those, especially in the southern hemisphere, who wanted to emulate the success of soccer and stage a regular world cup tournament. In early 1983 the IRB rejected a proposal from Australia for a world cup and in April of that year Australian journalist and sports promoter David Lord announced plans to sign up two hundred of the world’s leading players to form eight sides to play international tournaments around the world. Based entirely on Packer’s World Series Cricket model, Lord promised payments of £90,000 each to players and seven international tournaments over the following three years. The cost of the venture would total £20 million. Initial reports indicated that eighty-eight British players had been signed up in the first few weeks of the venture and that contracts had been signed to play matches at Wembley stadium. But as the weeks went by and few hard facts emerged, the excitement generated by Lord’s initial announcement gave way to doubts. Lord himself was an undischarged bankrupt who had worked for the Australian Rugby Union (ARU) in the late 1970s. Strangely, he initially denied any interest in forming a professional South African side, despite the obvious commercial rewards to be had there. Despite announcing that the first match would kick off on 14 January 1984 at Chelsea’s Stamford Bridge stadium, rumours quickly began to circulate that Lord’s proposals were more shadow than substance.38

By the end of 1983 Lord’s scheme was dead. But for the supporters of the world cup concept, he had played a crucial role in strengthening their case by demonstrating that if the IRB did not organise a world cup, someone else would. ‘If we were to save our game and not lose it to some entrepreneur, we would have to act promptly and organise a world cup,’ commented Nick Shehadie, the president of the Australian union.39 In June 1984 New Zealand once again raised the issue and in March 1985 the IRB voted 10-6 to stage a world cup in Australia and New Zealand in 1987. The voting followed a predictable pattern, with the three southern hemisphere delegations plus France voting in favour, and Scotland and Ireland opposed. The English and Welsh delegations split, each casting one vote for and one vote against the proposal. If they had not divided in this way, the motion would have been lost.40

Despite the seemingly inevitable direction that the world cup would take rugby union, the RFU still held out. Incoming president John Burgess told the 1987 annual general meeting that ‘the RFU will continue to be a bulwark of amateurism as we believe that this is the wish of the majority
of the game in England’ and it increasingly dissented on the IRB’s relaxations of the amateur code. But its voice carried little international authority. Amateurism was now little more than a hollow phrase. In France there was no longer even a pretence that the game was other than semi-professional. If the influx of overseas’ players did not raise suspicions, the signing of rugby league internationals Jean-Marc Bourret and Jean-Marc Gonzalez by French union clubs in 1981 should have alerted even the most comatose committeeman. Across the border, Italian clubs paid even less lip-service to the game’s principles when recruiting considerable numbers of Australian and New Zealand players. For the more adventurous, company-based Japanese rugby clubs were openly offering salaries around NZ$150,000 by the 1990s for talented Kiwis. By 1990 former All Black turned player agent Andy Haden could authoritatively claim that even English clubs were offering players up to £400 a week. But, most importantly, South Africa’s desire for international competition had led to the extravagant financing of so-called ‘rebel’ tours. By the mid-1980s the international sporting isolation of South Africa was almost complete. The last official tourists were the 1984 England side but the New Zealand High Court’s ban on the All Blacks’ projected 1985 tour forced the SARBS to take matters into their own hands. In April 1986 the unofficial New Zealand ‘Cavaliers’ arrived in Johannesburg, boasting twenty-eight of the thirty players originally picked for the banned All Black tour, all of whom were paid. Three years later a World XV toured which, although sanctioned by the IRB, was no less professional than the Cavaliers’ tour. As a Welsh Rugby Union inquiry discovered, the ten Welsh players on the tour were paid around £30,000 each. ‘The SARBS,’ the inquiry noted dryly, ‘was prepared to tolerate the making of financial inducements to players to tour’. There could be no doubt, admitted RFU president Denis Easby in 1994, ‘that South Africa paid its players and its referees contrary to the regulations’. 

Nor, despite formal protestations to the contrary, could there now be any doubt that the players themselves wanted to be paid. Like a fat man at a feast, the IRB had been rapidly unbuckling the belt of restrictions on expenses and other payments to players following the financial success of the 1987 Rugby World Cup (RWC). The 1991 tournament was even more successful. It also witnessed the unprecedented sight of the French side threatening to refuse to play their quarter-final against Australia unless they were paid seven thousand francs each. They were not alone. During that year’s Five Nations tournament England players had refused to speak to the press unless they were paid an appearance fee. As the 1995 RWC
approached, to be held at the citadel of barely concealed professionalism in South Africa, it was clear that something had to give.

But, ironically, the final coup de grâce was to come from a familiar source. Just as the ‘other’ of rugby league had shaped rugby union by its actions in 1895, so too was it to have a decisive impact on union in 1995. Since the late 1970s the growth of rugby league had been a constant thorn in the side of national unions. The growth of amateur league in Britain in the 1980s had forced the RFU to abandon key aspects of its ban on league players under threat of legal action. Union players crossed to league with frequent regularity form the 1980s, especially from Wales. The booming popularity of Australian rugby league had even begun to worry the NZRFU, thanks to trans-Tasman television coverage and a steady trickle of All Blacks to league. The southern hemisphere nations had attempted to mitigate this impact, partly by continually revising local interpretations of amateurism to keep players in union and also by reinstating to the ‘amateur ranks’ virtually any player who tried league but wanted to return to union.

But in late 1994 rumours began to circulate that a ‘super league’ competition was being secretly planned by leading Australian league clubs. In February 1995, a proposal by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation to create a Super League was vetoed by the Australian Rugby League and war broke out between the two sides. Millions of dollars were spent signing players to the rival competitions. Momentary schadenfreude in rugby union ranks rapidly dissipated when it became obvious that union players would also be tempted by rugby league’s new found riches. ‘To protect ourselves from Super League, we must take the game global, we must become professional’, declared former Wallaby Ross Turnbull, echoing most of those in southern hemisphere rugby union and many in the northern hemisphere too. On 8 April ARU and NZRFU representatives met and decided that the only realistic course of action was to embrace their potential nemesis and approach Murdoch for a deal. Four days later, the New South Wales Rugby Union officially announced that rugby union was no longer an amateur sport. On 22 June the Australian, New Zealand and South African unions signed a £340 million ten year deal with News Corporation. ‘For some time rugby union has appeared to be threatened by other codes, almost like a wounded impala limping through the bushveld with lions nearby’, declared South African Rugby Football Union president Louis Luyt. ‘This agreement allows these unions to retain control of their destinies.’ Faced with a fait accompli and with no stomach to split the sport in defence of its hallowed traditions, the supporters of amateurism gave up and on 27 August 1995 the IRB
legalised professionalism. It was just two days short of the centenary of the foundation of rugby league.

The roots of the demise of amateurism can be traced to the decline in a sense of shared ‘Britishness’ among the leaders of the game in the former British imperial dominions. Deference to the RFU and its ideals simply because it represented the founding body of the game and the imperial centre of the Empire had, as we have seen, started to wane from the late 1950s. Without the common purpose of an imperial mission, the RFU’s rigorous amateurism had little purchase internationally. Indeed, it may be argued that whatever remaining authority the RFU possessed was retained not least because of its steadfast support for South Africa against the international boycott and its desire to keep the rugby world united despite external political pressure. Moreover, the growing status and financial value of international sport also undermined the RFU’s commitment to amateurism from within. From the 1960s onwards, there was increasing frustration from sections of the RFU with the acceptance of the mediocrity of the English national side - a legacy of the amateur idea that it was participation and not winning that was important. As the RFU slowly developed elite rugby, which would culminate in England’s 2003 RWC triumph, the old mores of amateur competition were cast aside. Faced with the determined thrust for professionalism by the southern hemisphere nations, the RFU and other supporters of amateurism had no ground upon which to fight.

One can get a sense of this dislocation in the final discussions about amateurism. The IRB had set up a ‘working party’ in 1994 to discuss the future of amateurism. When it reported back in February 1995, it could not even explain why the game was amateur: ‘as to quite why it was considered that the question of compensation for bona fide loss of time was thought to be contrary to “the true interest of the game and its spirit”’, is not made clear in the surviving documentation of that time,’ it declared vacantly. Moreover, if the game ‘were to be first introduced as a sport in the latter part of the twentieth century, then [its amateur principles] would be considered socially unacceptable and divisive. It is not easily defensible as a social or moral ethic judged by the standards of today.’ Although not acknowledged as such, this was nothing less than an admission that the Northern Union had been right in 1895.48

From a broader perspective, the collapse of amateurism was an example of the rise of neo-liberalism in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the coming to power of leaders such as Thatcher and Reagan, and the worldwide defeats inflicted on the trade union movement infused the middle classes with a
new self-confidence. Indeed, the financial deregulation of the City of London in the 1980s almost exactly paralleled the rise to international prominence of English rugby, not to say providing many of its players with jobs. Shedding its traditional fear of organised labour - which had been the motor force in the introduction and consolidation of amateurism in rugby - the conservative sections of the middle classes that controlled rugby union no longer had use for the formal social segregation of amateurism. Indeed, in the battle against the rugby league ‘other’, amateurism had become an obstacle to the preservation of the game. As in the wider world, the old social hierarchies upon which rugby union was based had been dissolved by the exigencies of the ‘marketplace’ and the wealth now available to sports organisations. But as rugby union was to discover in the years following 1995, the abandonment of ‘the first principle of the game’ may have been a solution to old problems, but it also created new problems for which solutions were not so easily found.

5 RFU AGM minutes, 19 September 1895.
7 *The Times*, 22 March 1919.
12 *The Referee*, (Sydney) 11 May and 12 October 1921.
13 Quoted in *The Referee*, 12 September 1917. I am grateful to Sean Fagan for bringing this to my attention.
15 RFU Committee minutes, 17 October 1919.
19 For examples of the NSWRU’s low-key reinstatement policies, see NSWRU Council minutes, 28 May and 16 June 1930. For the amateur rules discussion see NSWRU Council minutes, 16 July 1930.
20 The Lawton ‘anomaly’ was first pointed out in the Referee, 2 November 1921.
21 RFU’s inquiry into the matter is reported in the RFU Committee minutes of 23 February 1923.
24 RFU Finance and Emergency Committee minutes, 11 December 1933; RFU Committee minutes, 20 December 1935.
28 IRB minutes, 15 March 1963; The Referee, 7 October 1937.
30 The IRB’s response to South Africa’s 1961 expulsion from the Commonwealth because of its apartheid policies was to express ‘great pleasure to convey to South Africa the view shared by all the member countries that the change would not make any difference whatever in regard to South Africa’s position in Rugby’. IRB minutes 17/18 March 1961.
32 IRB minutes, 11/12 March 1976.