

Semi-Professional Rugby – The Way Forward?

In 1995 I was appointed as CEO of Scottish First Division Rugby Ltd (SFDR), a company formed by twelve of Scottish rugby's leading Clubs, to take forward the proposal of having Clubs manage and promote professional, club rugby in Scotland.

The SRU did not support this vision and the reasoning behind the belief that this was the best way forward for the new, professional era of Rugby Union within Scotland. Some of the main issues which were presented, by SFDR, are provided below,

- Autonomous Clubs had the opportunity to be owned by entrepreneurs, wealthy individuals or business entities who would invest in the professional club game.
- These individuals or entities would only invest substantial amounts of money if they had a high degree of autonomy over how they would manage, promote and develop their business, together with appointing their own staff.
- Having 8 – 10 Professional clubs would provide opportunity to, at least, twice as many talented players, coaches, medical, management and administration personnel, compared to the SRU proposal.
- These clubs would offer diversity in the style of rugby being played within Scotland.
- This direction would encourage financial investment, together with entrepreneurial knowledge into the sport and release the SRU from the financial burden of Club, professional rugby.
- The SRU would have control over the release of players for representative rugby, under IRB regulations, together with the ability to control competition structures in Scotland.
- The SRU could concentrate on developing grass roots and amateur rugby, together with the International game.

The SFDR Board was made up of club representatives, who had extensive knowledge of Scottish rugby and an in-depth understanding of how the English and Welsh professional clubs were being formed.

Representatives of SFDR were involved in numerous meetings between the owners of English and Welsh professional rugby clubs, while these clubs were addressing all the issues that had to be overcome with their respective Unions. This required substantial, financial investment on behalf of these English and Welsh club owners.

The Scottish amateur clubs had very limited finances to invest into attempting to convince the member clubs of the SRU that there was an alternative and more beneficial way forward, for the structure of professional rugby in Scotland, than that proposed by the SRU and Scotland's Rugby Governing Body secured total control, of professional rugby, in Scotland, at an SRU Special General Meeting, on 9 February 1996.

It has been a pretty bumpy, financial road, for the SRU, over what is almost 25 years, since the launch of professional rugby. The SRU Board's desire to control all professional rugby, in Scotland, is one of the significant reasons for the financial difficulties that the SRU have experienced over these 25 years.

During 2019, the SRU produced three documents, which suggest that the SRU Board seek to keep on increasing its control on all rugby matters other than amateur rugby. These documents are;

- *Super6 Franchise Update Document – February 2019*
Comment on this document is provided under Super6 Franchise Terms and Conditions
- *Male Adult Season & Competition Structure Consultation Recommendations – October 2019*
The competition structure proposal document did not include seven-a-side rugby. The Scottish Borders clubs, in conjunction with Scottish Borders Council, made a successful representation to ensure that this incredible omission was rectified.
- *Independent Corporate Governance & Business Review of the SRU – December 2019*
There were a number of issues, within this document, which caused real concern over the removal of more representation and powers from the member clubs of the SRU. Thankfully, groups of clubs came together to stop the implementation of the proposals within this document and another Governance review is underway.

Super 6 Franchise Terms and Conditions

The terms and conditions, within the Super6 Franchise Update document, provide the SRU, High Performance Team (HPT) with the ability to say no to the appointment of a Super6 coach. The HPT decide which of the thirty FOSROC Academy players are allocated to which Super6 squad and only they will decide whether Edinburgh or Glasgow players will be involved in Super6 rugby in the future.

Financial

There is nothing new, within the Super 6 structure, which suggests it will provide a platform to increase revenue from the numbers of supporters attending games, attract increased media coverage and, therefore, increased revenue from sponsorship or financial investment from the business sector.

Possibility of Increased Autonomy for Super6 Franchises

It is difficult to see why the SRU would make strategic change regarding the control of the professional game in Scotland. As a result, there is very little likelihood that semi-professional clubs will gain any substantial autonomy regarding the development of any franchise offered by the SRU.

Super6 / Semi-Professional Rugby Alternatives

The structure of semi-professional rugby will evolve. Scottish Border clubs have the opportunity and the potential to develop a structure, which can benefit all rugby organisations in the area.

By creating a Super6 / semi-professional franchise, under the control of a, newly constituted, Scottish Borders District Union, where the selection and movement of players is agreed and there are clear procedures for approaching Club players to play for the semi-professional franchise, the region should develop a common purpose for the best amateur players to achieve the objective of playing for their Super6 / District semi-professional franchise and return to their clubs when circumstances allow.

A natural player pathway, back and forward between club and semi-professional franchise, must benefit those players that are not getting the opportunity to play regular rugby.

The decision on ownership of a Super6/semi-professional franchise can be made by the new, Scottish Borders District Union (SBDU).

- The SBDU can own the franchise
- or
- The SBDU can decide to create a separate entity and agree on all its operational matters.

What are the future objectives of the Super6 / semi-professional franchises?

Considerations;

- One of the platforms where FOSROC Academy players can develop.
- Provide a performance target for amateur players and a stepping stone for Club International selection.
- Provide opportunity for late developing players to be seen and, for those with the desire, to be considered for obtaining professional contracts.
- Create a vehicle for ambitious coaches, medics and administration personnel to develop their knowledge and skills.
- Provide a platform from which the SRU, high performance team can assess developing talent for the professional game
- Create a high performance centre, at one venue, for each semi-professional franchise.
- Require players to train, one night per week, at their home/amateur club.
- Protocol enables the amateur club and the player to have joint responsibility over their fitness to play.
- Semi-professional franchises are created on a geographical basis, with specific, amateur clubs affiliated to each franchise.
- No promotion or relegation;
 - Player skill development can be accelerated
 - Coaches have more opportunity to develop styles of expansive play
 - Professional players can move between professional clubs and semi-professional franchises.
 - Players can stay loyal to the amateur club of their choice
 - All clubs can encourage their players to play for the semi-professional franchise which they are affiliated to

Importance of Semi-Professional rugby in a new Scottish Borders Rugby Structure

If semi-professional rugby is seen as an integral part of regional rugby, there has to be an agreed and fully supported structure below and above it.

It has the potential to be seen as a pinnacle for regional, amateur players and a very good link between the amateur and professional games.

For this to be achieved there needs to be a rethink regarding its foundations.