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RUGBY

Shute Shield team copies Richmond's AFL blueprint for success

Rugby Australia is at an all-time low. The Wallabies are out of form, Super Rugby crowds are dropping and the Israel Folau scandal haunts the code. Club rugby, though, is thriving and it's all thanks to the AFL.

Resisting the temptation to lay the boot into Rugby Australia, Sydney's clubs have offered some free advice on how to rescue the professional game.

The dismal performances by the Wallabies, the rows of empty seats at Super Rugby matches and the bitter fallout from Israel Folau's sacking have left many fans disillusioned with the sport.

But the Shute Shield competition has emerged as a beacon of hope — attracting record crowds and a resurgence of interest.

And although they are still livid at having their funding cut a few years ago, Sydney's premier clubs are only too happy to offer some tips to Rugby Australia and Rugby NSW on what they should do to win back supporters.



Almost 10,000 fans packed Manly Oval for the local Shute Shield derby.

LEARN FROM OTHER SPORTS

When their funding was cut, the Warringah Rats felt let down by their code so they turned to an unlikely source to help them get of trouble — the AFL.

The Richmond Tigers hadn't won a premiership since 1980 but Warringah president Phil Parsons was intrigued at how they had managed to get 200,000 people at supporter days so he travelled to Melbourne to find out.

“What they do so well is that they make an event out of every game, so every game has a purpose that goes beyond,” he said. “So we took that away and applied it to our club. That was six years ago but that was the moment the penny dropped for us. Now every club in Shute Shield makes each game an event.”

MATCH-DAY EXPERIENCE

To get more fans in the gates, the Rats realised they also had to offer diverse experiences for different people, so they did, and their numbers have soared.

They have their corporate boxes for the well-heeled, but also a spot for their flannel shirt wearing “hillbillies.” There's a grand stand for people who want to sit in comfort and other areas for people who prefer to stand. There's also a forecourt, with live music and cocktails for people who aren't that fussed about watching the game. There's jumping castles for the kids and pieces of cardboard for them to slide down grassy banks. And when the last match finishes, a live band performs so people stay around.



Warringah celebrate its derby win

REAL DIVERSITY

An estimated 30 per cent of registered rugby players in Australia are of Pacific Island heritage.

Yet there is not a single board member, at either Rugby Australia or NSW Rugby, of Pacific Island heritage.

Given the deep divisions over the punishment handed out to Folau, that should change

FAMILY ATMOSPHERE

Family ties have always been the lifeblood of club rugby, as Randwick president and 1991 World Cup winning coach Bob Dwyer says: “The local rugby club is more like the old village square where families all know one another and their kids know one another.

“That’s what rugby is, the other bit, the representative bit, that’s just an add on. You can’t judge the support for the game by Super Rugby.”

FULL DAY EXPERIENCE

When people go to club rugby, they can watch four or five games, not just one. Rugby NSW has recently added curtain raisers to the Waratahs games but Easts President John Murray said it needs to be a full day experience.

“I think NSW Rugby are doing a wonderful job in the circumstances but Super Rugby is not packing out stadiums in New Zealand or Australia either, even though the quality of rugby is fabulous.

“People don’t turn up to watch players warm up, they want to watch games, so I’d have a Shute Shield game, a Subbies game, a women’s game and a school kids game.

“It makes it better value money and you can build a festival of events around it.

“And Tah Man. I wouldn’t let him out of that suit for the entire day. In fact, I’d have five of them, starting at 8am at the under 6s and going to games all over Sydney and reminding everyone who the Tahs are.”



Waratahs are struggling to draw a crowd.

AFFORDABILITY

The last two Shute Shield grand finals have drawn record crowds. Last year, Randwick drew their biggest crowd since the Galloping Greens hosted the All Blacks in 1988. Last weekend, almost 10,000 turned up at Manly Oval for the northern beaches derby, and the reason is simple.

“Rugby’s a community thing and you should never lose focus from that,” Parsons said.

“So for us, we make sure that anyone who comes through the gate will have a great day out, and be able to buy a ticket, a couple of drinks, a couple of steak sandwiches or whatever they want to eat and some lollies for the kids and still get change out of \$50.”