

“I was there!”

The Psychology of Welsh Rugby Supporters

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Executive Summary

In September 2002, The Prospectory and The University of Glamorgan ran 7 discussion groups with 45 rugby supporters at Newport RFC and Llanelli RFC. The groups included children, parents, singles and occasional supporters.

The discussions explored the psychology of supporter allegiance and the live match experience. They were part of a research project which also included a detailed survey questionnaire administered at all 9 Welsh Premier Clubs. The results of this survey are reported separately.

The research was motivated to understand the outlook and motivations of the Welsh rugby supporter to help inform the debate about the future structure of Welsh rugby and how to increase support at Premier clubs *from a consumer business perspective*.

An analysis of the discussions showed that the core motivations for becoming and staying a committed rugby supporter are not, in fact, rugby specific. They are based on 3 fundamental human needs that supporting a rugby team fulfil:

1. The need for drama/sensation in everyday life – people experience an intense buzz of excitement from watching their team play. The more emotionally engaged they are with the team, the more intense the drama.
2. The need to belong to a community or social group – people experience an emotional high from the bonding which comes out of sharing the intense highs and lows of the weekly rugby drama.
3. The need to develop and reinforce a sense of one’s own uniqueness and self-worth – people gain a strong sense of their own identity from being a supporter of their chosen club. Rivalries with other Premier clubs are a necessary part of establishing this sense of uniqueness and self-worth.

¹ This study was one part of a collaborative research project between The Prospectory and The University of Glamorgan. I would like to acknowledge the significant contribution made by my University of Glamorgan colleagues (Rob Thomson, Gareth Davies, Peter Mayer, Dave Shearer and Paul Bennett) in planning and running the discussion groups, video recording them and discussing the results. My Prospectory partner, Peter Williams played an invaluable role in working through the implications of this study for Welsh rugby. I would also like to thank Newport RFC and Llanelli RFC for their help in recruiting and hosting the discussion groups.

The majority of the 45 supporters involved in the study were more emotionally committed to their club side than to the Welsh national side.

The results show that rugby is an emotional, rather than just a technical, product for most supporters. This was true for the majority of the men in our discussion groups and for *all* the women and children. This has the following implications:-

1. If centrally managed and drafted sides are to develop sustained supporter commitment and so become successful consumer businesses in their own right, they will need to take factors beyond the quality of rugby and player development into account. These include:-
 - how the new sides will evolve strong individual identities and associated rivalries - this social process takes years to build and is especially difficult for sides who are effectively owned by the same organisation,
 - how to reflect the natural cultural groupings in South Wales which, unfortunately, do not necessarily equate with practical geographical 'regions',
 - how centrally-contracted and drafted players can be perceived as being as strongly committed to their assigned side as the supporters are, over a sustained time period.
 - how any new or shared stadium can become personalised so it instinctively feels like 'home territory' for both team and supporters.

From a consumer business perspective, the results outlined in this report suggest that the game would be taking a significant business risk in discarding the strong existing club identities and trying to re-build new committed support bases from scratch.

However, *if* the purpose of provincial rugby is simply to improve the standard of the national side, with no requirement for commercial success or viability below national level, then these results give less cause for concern.

2. To build support for rugby sides, whether at existing clubs, provinces or super clubs, our results suggest:-
 - Clubs should recognise that they are marketing a compelling 'experiential product' which provides drama, social bonding and a sense of identity/self-worth. Experiential products command a growing share of the consumer economy.
 - Clubs need to develop and refine 'the whole product experience' (e.g. advertising, facilities, catering, entertainment and child-care) to attract a wider range of people than rugby enthusiasts, men and boys. Young teenagers look a particularly promising sector to target.
 - Experience is most powerful when supporters themselves contribute to creating it. Clubs should be careful not to over-choreograph supporter experiences at matches but rather to find ways to enable supporters to shape and create their own unique drama, social groupings and sense of identity. The clubs should then find ways to amplify and enhance these.

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1 Introduction

In September 2002, we ran 7 Discussion Groups with rugby supporters at Newport RFC and Llanelli RFC.

The discussions explored two topics:-

1. The psychology of supporter allegiance - how and why people become rugby supporters and what it means to them.
2. The psychology of the live match experience - what creates a compelling match day experience for different kinds of supporter?

This report describes the results of these groups and explores their implications for (i) the future structure of the Premier League in Wales and (ii) increasing the support base for Premier club rugby.

2 Motivations for study

3 factors motivated this study:

1. Welsh rugby is considering a radical restructuring of its professional game. Most parties agree that there need to be fewer Welsh teams competing at the top level so that financial and playing resources are concentrated, resulting in games of a higher standard. The hope is that this will improve the fortunes of the Welsh National team which is currently struggling to compete on the International stage.

There is intense debate about how many top teams there should be and whether a reduction should be achieved by reducing the number of, or merging top level clubs or even creating totally new regional or provincial sides.

To date, the debate has been dominated by what is considered best for the quality of top level rugby in Wales. We wanted to consider the outlook and motivations *the Welsh rugby consumer*, i.e. the person who pays (or not!) for the modern 'rugby product'.

2. Attendance at premier division rugby matches has fallen to levels where most clubs are dependent on TV revenue and generous benefactors for survival. We felt that a better understanding of the reasons for falling support numbers might start by finding out what makes people want to attend live matches in the first place.

So, we tried to find out what makes live matches a compelling experience for different types of supporter (adults, children, men, women, etc) and to understand the social dynamics around attending (or not attending) matches in today's society.

3. Academic research into sports spectator psychology has largely been U.S. based, and focussed on other sports (baseball and soccer primarily). U.K. research has been dominated by the issue of spectator violence.

We wanted, therefore, to conduct the first ever academic enquiry into the psychology of *rugby* support. This could enable Welsh rugby to lead the way in shaping the modern game as a successful consumer business using modern social science.

3 The Discussion groups

To keep costs under control, and to provide early results, we decided to conduct discussion groups at two Premier Clubs: Newport RFC and Llanelli RFC. Ideally, we would replicate the groups at all 9 premier clubs, and possibly in other divisions and countries.

We chose Newport and Llanelli because they have had some recent success in growing their support bases, but have different demographic constituencies and recent histories.

We planned to run four groups at each club consisting of four different kinds of supporter:

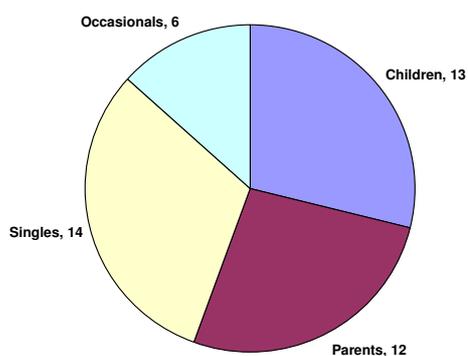
1. Children (aged 10-13 years).
2. Parents (who attend matches with young children).
3. 'Single' people, i.e. people who attend matches alone or with friends.
4. 'Occasionals', i.e. people who do not hold season tickets and attend matches on an occasional basis.

We hoped for equal numbers of males and females in each group.

The clubs selected names of supporters matching these criteria from their databases, sent out the invitations for us, and provided the rooms. The clubs generously provided complimentary match tickets as an incentive and a reward for attendance.

At both clubs, we struggled to attract enough 'occasional' supporters and at Newport this led us to collapse two groups into one at the last minute. At Llanelli RFC, we did not recruit as many girls and women as we would have liked. So overall, 45 supporters attended 7 groups. Figure 1 shows the proportions of each type of supporter.

FIGURE 1 : Discussion Group Constituents



Whilst the numbers were roughly equal at Newport, men outnumbered women at Llanelli by nearly 4 to 1.²

Each discussion group lasted an hour and was led by two members of our research team: Alison Kidd and Rob Thomson. The discussion informally covered the following topics:-

² This is actually representative of the gender balance amongst Llanelli's season ticket holders.

- how and when people first became supporters,
- what motivates them and what being a supporter means to them,
- what they see as a typical supporter,
- how they perceive their club in relation to the other premier clubs and to Wales (including which team they most like to beat),
- the pattern of match days and who they attend matches with,
- what they think makes a good or poor match and what factors affect their attendance.

All the discussions were video-recorded, transcribed and entered into a computer database for categorisation and analysis. Sections 4 to 8 present and analyse the results of the discussions, and their implications for professional rugby as a business. Section 9 offers some conclusions.

4 Origins and social patterns of attendance

78% of the adults in the groups started supporting the club as young children anything from 20 to 70 years ago! Most of these had been brought by their fathers. (*“it was through my father I came ... as far back as I can remember, he was lifting me over the turnstiles, same turnstiles as are there now, to come into the match and I used to love it”*).

Quite a few people reported a break in their active support at some point in their lives. This was as a result of: playing rugby themselves; moving away from the area; having young children; children growing up and leaving home or losing interest when the club went through a lean period. As their own or the club’s circumstances had changed they had returned. (*“I first came to Newport when I was 6 years old ... I watched them up to the age of 18 but then I started playing football on Saturdays and it coincided with their lean years and lack of success. I watched them fairly casually, then I started watching them again over the last 3 years with the infusion of big money and star players.”*)

Today, the supporters in the discussion groups attended matches in the following groupings:-

- Father plus children (boys and girls). This seemed to be the most common family combination, especially at Llanelli.
- Father and mother plus children. This was more common at Newport than Llanelli.
- Single mothers (friends) with a combined group of children. This again seemed to be more of a Newport phenomenon.
- Extended family groups, e.g. combinations of uncles, cousins and grandparents. This seemed more common at Llanelli.
- Small groups of young teens as single sex groups. (The 13 year old girls in our Newport group came to matches with a group of 7 friends, dropped off and collected at the ground by their parents. A 13 year old Llanelli boy had recently made the switch from attending with his Dad to meeting up and coming with his friends.)
- Young (mostly) men as groups of friends.

- Older men attending with one (male) friend or on their own.

We will explore some of the experiences of these different groupings and the family dynamics surrounding them in section 7.

5 Supporter motivations - overview

The supporters talked extensively about what it felt like to be a supporter and what motivated their ongoing support of the club. On analysis, they followed 3 broad categories of human motivation: drama/sensation, social bonding and identity. This correlates with other studies on the motivations for sports spectatorship and on the nature of consumer experiences^{abcd}.

1. **Drama/sensation** – i.e. experiences which take you to levels of arousal and emotion which are beyond your everyday life
 - *“it was on a knife edge, wasn’t it – the match was on a knife edge – we were just praying for the whistle to go”*
 - *“I can remember the very first time I stood there and listened to Sospan Fach being sang and I just can’t put words to the sort of feeling that went through my body at the time”*
 - *“I was there and if I’d had a bad heart, it would have gone”*
2. **Social bonding** – i.e. the experience of close bonding with others or belonging to a group
 - *“like you all feel the same because you are shouting ‘come on!’ and so are they – everyone’s shouting the same thing”*
 - *“even when they’re losing, it’s like you’re part of a group ... part of a group that all want the same thing and they’re all cheering for the same thing”*
 - *“.. there was a guy next to me and I’d never known him before but when we scored that try, we were hugging each other”*
3. **Identity** – i.e. acquiring or reinforcing a sense of who you are and your self worth through association
 - *“I’m an English woman but I’ve got a Welsh dragon tattooed on my backside just to prove that I want to be Welsh!”*
 - *“he’s thinking he’s Stephen Jones when he’s out there – kicking the ball over the posts at the end of the game”*
 - *“we’re arrogant, conceited – we know our team is the greatest of all time!”*

These 3 dimensions can be experienced independently and in isolation but can also closely be related as we will see below.

Although we never explicitly introduced the game of rugby as a discussion topic in its own right, it was interesting to note how small a percentage (15%) of the motivational remarks mentioned the game itself. This reminds us that rugby provides *a* way, but not the only way, for people to bring drama and sensation, social bonding and identity into their lives, and it is the intensity of those emotions that actually matter.

We will now analyse each of these 3 motivational dimensions in more depth.

5.1 Drama/sensation - factors

Analysis of the discussion groups highlighted 8 elements that create or heighten the dramatic experience for supporters:

1. A long build up and an unpredictable outcome.
2. Immediacy of physical action and sensation
3. Being directly involved as an actor in the drama
4. The possibility of emotional highs *and* lows
5. Mingling with stars
6. Atmosphere
7. Large crowds
8. Well-defined heroes and villains – exercising rivalries

These will now be discussed in more detail.

5.1.1 A long build up and an unpredictable outcome

The drama is highest where there is a long build up of suspense before the match:-

“Nottingham now last year, that was just unbelievable – it was just the build up, the build up, the build up”

“by the time I got on the train, I was nearly wetting myself”

And the outcome is uncertain until the last moment:-

“it was on a knife edge, we were praying for the whistle to go”

“the game which really set me going was the Cardiff Llanelli game in Cardiff where we were 28:6 down and we came back and beat them ... the adrenalin runs faster definitely”

5.1.2 Immediacy of physical action and sensation

Other studies have shown that dramatic intensity rises the closer you are to the action and the more your 5 senses are involved^e. People often mentioned this when contrasting live matches with watching on TV.

“when Rod does one of those hand-offs and they go ‘bang’ on the floor”

“all the steam’s coming off their heads – it’s like they’ve come out of a cauldron”

“I was sitting right by the posts where that ball bounced on it – it was a choker”

5.1.3 Being directly involved as an ‘actor’ in the drama

Shouting and singing by spectators greatly adds to the dramatic sensation:-

“in Bath, we made so much noise that you couldn’t hear Bath shouting at all!”

“once you start singing, you feel the hairs on the back of your neck go up”

“shouting is a release .. it gets all my aggression – well maybe not my aggression, my emotions, my frustration out – I can have a good shout”

And supporters feel as if they are directly able to affect the way the story unfolds:-

“I felt we were a major part in the victory”

“you start shouting when they’re down and they lift their heads up”

“every time we sing, they score a try!”

5.1.4 Involves highs and lows

True drama necessarily involves a range of human emotions. The discussion was littered with emotive words like: *“euphoric”, “unbelievable”, “elated”, “wild”* on the one hand and words like: *“tears”, “horrible”, “nightmare”, “intimidating”* on the other. Indeed at least a third of the adjectives used to describe people’s experiences described negative rather than positive emotions.

5.1.5 Mingling with ‘stars’

People experience a particular kind of magic when they encounter people they see as stars.

“I want to see them in the flesh .. one of the things that brought me down here was a multitude of stars playing week in week out for Newport”

“(the children) are seeing stars – they’re seeing their heroes”

Interestingly, TV coverage of the match can actually enhance this sense of fame and stardom for the match day crowd (especially if the supporters are caught on camera and become ‘stars’ themselves!).

“you see your home town on there”

“every score, the camera was coming back to the boys. The last kick, half of us weren’t looking – the camera was looking at us”

The teenage girls at Newport actually video matches they attend, not so they can replay the game, but so they can check for shots of themselves and replay those!

5.1.6 The atmosphere of the place

Sports stadia have been described as ‘part theatre, part cathedral and part prison’^f. We certainly found that supporters talked about the various rugby grounds in terms of the ‘atmosphere’ they created or in some cases failed to create.

“we had one away trip up to Sardis Road on a Sunday and it was such a bonding experience. If you’ve ever been to Sardis Road, you’d understand what I mean, it is one of the most terrifying places to go”

“Lawrence Dallaglio had slated us as being no hoppers before they even came down but he said that the atmosphere in the full Stradey is something to behold”

“I like the place (St Helen’s) – you stand on the stone steps and the atmosphere it creates. I’ve been in the stand and it’s nothing”

People talked of deliberately coming to a ground early to “soak up the atmosphere”.

5.1.7 Large crowds

Unlike many mass consumer activities, the presence of a large crowd enhances the experience for most supporters. Being part of a large crowd makes you feel you are part of something exciting which is happening:-

“the atmosphere before the Munster match – it was choc a bloc, it was”

“did you come over for the breakfast in the morning? – there was 100’s of people, Black and Amber everywhere”

5.1.8 Heroes and villains – playing out established rivalries

All the supporters talked about how playing long-established rivals intensifies the drama of the game, regardless of the quality of the rugby. It is as if supporters enjoy the heavily stereotyped ‘hero’ and ‘villain’ of the conventional pantomime. We will discuss this phenomenon in more depth in 5.7.

“it’s an intense local Derby that both sides want”

“like playing Swansea, it doesn’t matter how bad the game is as long as you win”

“the English bring an arrogance about them and it’s just wonderful to see their faces drop as they realise this small Welsh town in the middle of nowhere is just going to beat them”

5.2 Drama/sensation – implications

From the point of view of motivating rugby support, it may be useful to distinguish ‘drama’ from ‘entertainment’. Whilst supporters appreciate the entertainment on offer at matches (e.g. face painting, mascots, singing choirs, cheerleaders etc), they do not describe it in emotive language. The ‘drama’ they talked about seems to be different in 3 ways:-

1. The supporters see themselves as actors – playing a part in creating and heightening the drama. For example, the singing or shouting (or even pin-dropping silence) which rises spontaneously from the supporters will always be more emotionally charged and powerful than choreographed singing or cheering– *“many supporters have said that – the hairs on the back of your neck stand up when we start singing”*.
2. Entertainment is usually pre-scripted, whilst the most gripping dramas are those where no-one knows the outcome – it is open-ended – anything can happen, and you have to be there to witness it.
3. The dictionary defines entertainment as ‘holding attention pleasurably’. Drama isn’t always pleasurable – it elicits a range of emotions from elation to despair. Coaches and players can take comfort from the fact that losing a match (especially narrowly), can create more compelling and memorable drama than an easy or consistent win!

Clubs should therefore seek to create an environment where compelling drama can emerge, rather than trying to choreograph events and how people respond to them. The design and layout of the stadium has an important part to play. For example, a new stadium or new

facilities at an existing stadium could offer acoustics and layout that make the crowd sound bigger than it is and as close to the field of play as possible³.

Loud shouting reduces muscular tension in the body⁴ and reduces stress levels. One woman actually recognised this effect, *“it’s a release for women because women haven’t got anything they can release their aggression into ... at home you don’t get that opportunity to raise your voice as much as you can here”*.

It has long been known that athletes’ testosterone levels increase during the excitement of the game. Recent research has shown that highly engaged soccer or basketball supporters have testosterone levels that mirror those of the players. The supporters of the winning side can experience a 28% increase in testosterone⁵ whilst the losing supporters experience a 27% decrease⁶. This research was done at both live and TV matches, but our supporters’ accounts suggest that the subjective ‘buzz’ they feel is much higher at the live match than on the TV. It would be interesting to test the differences in testosterone levels.

5.3 Social bonding - factors

When talking about what they enjoyed about attending rugby matches, many supporters referred to the extraordinary sense of bonding and community they experienced. Humans are more socialised than other animals, and their survival depends on forming and maintaining successful coalitions^h.

Analysis of the supporters’ language suggests that the strong sense of bonding at rugby matches arises from:

1. Sharing the same emotion at the same moment

- *“you’ve all got the same feelings”*
- *“the whole group was crying in the semi final when we lost”*
- *“they’re all happy when we win and sad when we lose – it’s nice to be part of that”*

Indeed some supporters confessed that they cannot cope with experiencing such strong emotions on their own (e.g. watching on TV), *“I get too nervous .. if I come down to the ground, I’m sort of involved in it with crowd, there are supporters who vent their feelings”*.

2. Shouting and singing together

- *“everyone’s shouting the same thing”*
- *“I mean we started ‘Sospan Fach’ against Leicester at home and it went round the whole ground”*

3. Sharing the same values or attitude

³ Apparently, the greatest factor in perceived atmosphere is close proximity to the game and also studies have shown that home advantage can be directly attributed to the closeness of the crowd to the pitch^f.

⁴ this is the basis for so-called “scream therapy” !

⁵ Measured via saliva samples.

- *“we share each other’s one eyedness”*
 - *“it’s the loyalty – there’s a lot of fans that, if we start losing, they wont come. We don’t walk away, we didn’t leave early..”*
4. Sharing the same interests
 - *At work, our first 2 hours is discussing the sport at the weekend. We have a cup of tea and it’s ‘what do you think of this?’ and ‘what do you think of that?’ – it’s so interesting and so entertaining..”*
 5. Looking the same
 - *“and you were in town the week after, everyone was wearing Black and Amber all the time”*

People talked of enjoying the power of this bonding:

1. Across age boundaries
 - *(from 12 year old) “you see a lot of older men – they really shout loud ... you think ‘Wow!’”*
2. Within the family
 - *“it’s probably the one thing I do with my family. Usually they’re doing something and I’m just the taxi service!”*
3. Between friends
 - *“we had one away trip up to Sardis Road on a Sunday and it was such a bonding experience”*
4. Between strangers
 - *“.. there was a guy next to me and I’d never known him before but when we scored that try, we were hugging each other”*
5. And even with the opposition
 - *“we could stand shoulder to shoulder supporting opposite teams and just enjoying the game and the banter together about it”*
 - *“oh the craic at the Munster match”*

Interestingly, away trips were often singled out as the most bonding experiences regardless of whether the match was won or lost.

- *“it was a very memorable trip to Leicester; the result wasn’t favourable but the day was and it just went on from there”*
- *“it’s because you’re together – you’re with your group all day long”.*

5.4 Social bonding – implications

Our primate cousins maintain their social bonds through physical grooming (i.e. picking nits from each other’s hair) an activity known to release opiates into their bloodstream. It is thought that equivalent grooming activity among humans (e.g. laughing together or hugging) may release similar opiates into our bloodstream inducing a sense of well being or ‘high’¹.

Humans acquire a large part of their self identity from the identity of the social groups they join^j. Primitive human societies organise into “tribes” which typically number between 1500 and 2000 people and are primarily linguistic groupings, i.e. the set of people who speak the same language or dialect^h. Although Welsh rugby supporters are often accused of ‘tribalism’ or ‘villagism’, all human beings are innately tribal and the formation and maintenance of these distinct social groups happens in all cultures and histories.

In modern post-industrial society, where many of our traditional “tribal” groupings (e.g. churches and chapels, and close-knit industrial communities) have gone, people feel isolated and can actually suffer ill-health. The rugby club, that was once a *facet* of a wider community, is now *providing* a community for some of the supporters we talked to.

Rugby clubs can actively organise social bonding and the formation of communities around them. However, people socialise naturally and natural bonds will always be stronger than artificial ones. Clubs would be better advised to create the environment in which social bonds form naturally both within and across different age groups or genders. For example, the size and membership of social groupings can vary week to week and fixed seating arrangements (for season ticket holders) don’t accommodate these characteristics well. It is also vital that people feel they are in a relatively safe, friendly and inclusive environment. Newport RFC seems to have done an excellent job of achieving this atmosphere with the deployment of their ‘family village’ – *“you’ve got the kids there, playing in the tent or whatever and the adults having a pint or whatever – there’s a good atmosphere”*.

At Llanelli RFC, this sense of community comes from feeling Stradey Park is very familiar to supporters, a kind of home from home where they are happy to let their kids roam as they did when they were kids themselves, (*“yea I feel quite safe when they’re here ... from the start of the game until the end of the game, except for half time when he sort of checked in, I didn’t see my son at all”*).

It is worth noting that people always feel safer (and indeed are safer) on territory which is perceived as being owned by someone they know, rather than being ‘public’^k. So, a ground which belongs to and is also effectively the home of the club will always feel a safer place – at least to the supporters of that club. Even for away supporters, visiting a strongly associated ground is akin to visiting someone’s house and people will behave accordingly.

5.5 Self-Identity – factors

Individuals gain an important part of their sense of who they are and their relative self worth from the groups they belong to, e.g. their family, the company they work for, or the clubs and societies they join^j. Previous research has explored the relationship between levels of identification with a sports team and individual self-esteem and found that higher identification levels lead to greater psychological well being (as measured by levels of fatigue, anger, vigour, tension, self-esteem, confusion and depression)^{lmn}. This can either come through identifying with the success of the team or failing that through a sense of belonging.

Analysis of the discussion groups offered clear evidence of people gaining this sense of who they were and enhanced self-esteem from being a supporter of their chosen club. Enhanced self-esteem is important for psychological well-being. And the more of your identity you get from being a supporter, the more committed you become.

Some supporters identify most closely with individual players, others with their home town, others with the club as a distinct identity and some with groups of fellow supporters. We will consider each of these in turn.

5.5.1 Identification with individual players

In the discussion groups children were much more likely than the adults to identify strongly with individual players. The most common form of identification was to aspire to be (like) that person.

- *“Garan Evans – I play in the same position as him – he’s really talented”*
- *“he’s thinking he’s Stephen Jones when he’s out there, he’s kicking the ball over the posts at the end of the game”*
- *“my boy’s 4 years .. he loves Shane Howarth – when I chase him, he packs his bag to go and live with Shane Howarth”*

Indeed, the children actually spoke of supporting other teams because they contained players they admired (*“I like Neath as well because it’s got Shane Williams”* or *“I like Scotland, I’ve got to say .. I like Kenny Logan”*).

Where adults identified with individual players, they tended to see them simply as people like themselves.

- *“.. when they walk off the pitch with the crowd, makes you feel like they’re just one of us really”*

The characteristics of players, with which supporters identified, included: skill, success, attitude, and personality.

5.5.2 Identification with home town

Both adults and children identified strongly with their home town. For some, this was the single most important aspect of supporting the club as a representative of the town.

- *“I’m a Newport girl – I’m just dedicated to my home town”*
- *“I am Newport”*
- *“you live this side of the Loughor bridge – you are a Llanelli person”.*

People talked about the attributes of their home town which gave them a sense of pride:-

- *“to know the history of my town gives me a lot of pride”*
- *“Newport is mostly sponsored by Newport firms”.*

5.5.3 Identification with the club itself

Adults identified much more strongly with their club (as a distinct identity in its own right) than did children.

- *“Newport stands out on its own really in that respect – there’s a lot more foreign players”*
- *“Llanelli has got its roots in the community”.*

Identification with a club requires you to believe that it is different from and better than any other club along the dimensions in which it differs (“*the other sides just can’t live up to what Newport’s got*”). We will explore the concept of club identities in more depth in section 5.6.

For some, but not all supporters, it was important to advertise their own identification with the club:-

- “*she’s crazy – he whole bedroom is Black and Amber, bed clothes, pillow case, everything*”
- “*I’d wear my shirt all around Cardiff*”

5.5.4 Identification with other supporters

Some supporters identify themselves strongly with other types of supporter. For example:-

- the most loyal (“*we don’t walk away; we didn’t leave early*”) or
- the most partisan (“*we know we share each other’s one eyedness in the fact that none of us sees the other side*”) or
- the most knowledgeable (“*I like to think I’m a discerning rugby fan*”).

This identification seems to give supporters the opportunity to gain a certain status within the supporter group itself (“*the players actually know where we are – they actually acknowledge us*” or “*there’s a lot of fans, if they start losing, well they won’t come but we’ll still be here at the end of the season*”).

5.5.5 Identification with Wales

When quizzed, a few supporters said they identified more strongly with Wales than with their club.

- “*irrespective of what your club team is, you’ve got a Welsh shirt on*”
- “*more Welsh than Newport. Even though I’m Newport, I’ve been away, come back, been away, come back but Wales is a stable thing – it’s always Wales*”

However, the majority of supporters claimed that they identified more strongly with their club. This was particularly true for children and young adult supporters.

- “*definitely Newport, I’m from Newport*”
- “*we see Llanelli as Wales, full stop!*”.

One reason for the weaker identification with Wales seems to be that they rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to attend major International matches. (“*I’ve seen one 5 Nations match, that was only because I was working for a firm who had tickets – it’s the only one I’ve ever seen*”). A second reason is the recent poor success record of the Welsh side in comparison, so to speak, with their own side.

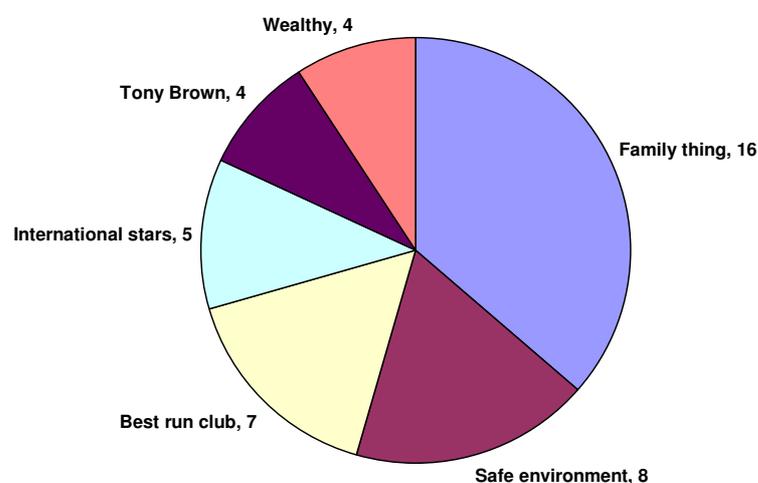
- “*Llanelli are better than Wales*”
- “*I want to support someone who I think will win – Wales just aren’t that good*”.

5.6 Group/club identity – factors

The supporters' sense of their own club identity is where we saw the single biggest difference between the Newport RFC and Llanelli RFC groups. The Llanelli groups mentioned their own club's identity 50% more than the Newport groups. In fact, Cardiff's identity was talked about (by both groups) as much as Newport's identity. It is important to note that the characteristics that make up these identities are not necessarily based in fact (although they most likely have some factual roots) but they do reflect how people perceive their club.

Figure 2 shows the identity dimensions which were used by Newport supporters to characterise their club.

FIGURE 2 : Perceived Identity of Newport RFC

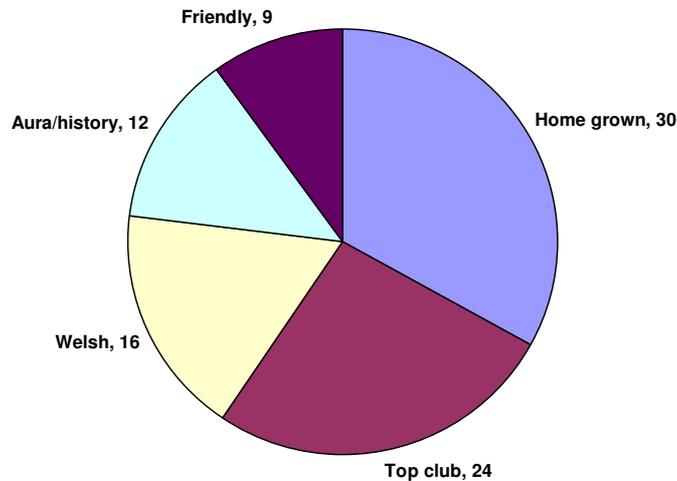


The dominant identifying dimension for Newport by far is “*the family thing*”. The supporters see this as the main factor which sets them aside from other Welsh clubs and it is a source of great pride to them (“*of all the other 1st class clubs in Wales, all the others have got nothing on Newport ... the other clubs are all so geared up for middle-aged gentlemen who want to go and have a pint on a Saturday afternoon .. whereas Newport are catering for kiddies, young people, older people*” or “*the village is a really go-ahead thing*”). Interestingly, when asked which Premier club they thought was most similar to Newport, a number mentioned Llanelli because “*they’re trying to create the family atmosphere too*”. So, they were using this identity dimension as the basis for comparison with other clubs.

The second two dimensions used by Newport supporters to identify their club are: a friendly, safe environment (“*the Bridgend and Ponty guys said the same things, they love coming to Newport – they don’t feel threatened*”) and being the best run club in Wales (“*marketing – that’s the big factor that’s put Newport on the map*”). Finally, it is worth noting that they named Tony Brown several times as being key to the ‘*ethos*’ of the club (“*if Tony Brown pulled out, I think a lot of the energy and ethos of the club would be dissipated really – it really would*”).

In contrast, Figure 3 shows the identity dimensions most often mentioned by Llanelli supporters referring to their club. These were almost entirely different from Newport’s, certainly in the dimensions which dominated.

FIGURE 3 : Perceived Identity of Llanelli RFC



The top dimension in Llanelli’s case is the concept of being a community based club⁶ with a ‘home grown’ team and management (“*Llanelli has got its roots in the community*”, “*players are bred into the Llanelli side*”). This dimension also reflects a value set that players need to be developed not bought (“*you can’t buy players*”) and the supporters use this dimension particularly to set themselves apart from clubs like Cardiff and Newport (“*Peter Pies just went around in the first season of professionalism and he just picked a load of players – they didn’t play well because they were good players but they weren’t a team*”).

Secondly, Llanelli supporters see their club simply as the best in Wales! (“*Llanelli are better than Wales*”, “*Llanelli are more like the Manchester United of rugby in Wales*”). Thirdly, Llanelli see themselves as the most Welsh club and are intensely proud of this, (“*we’re the most Welsh side, we’ve got a Welsh dragon as our mascot and we’ve got the colour*”).

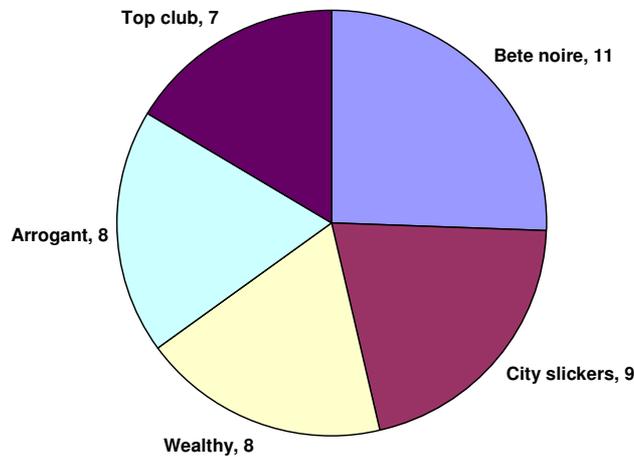
Social Identity Theory^j argues that maintaining a positive self identity involves making favourable comparisons between your ‘in-group’ (in this case your club) and some relevant ‘out-group’ (in this case other premier clubs). The in-group must be seen as both distinctly different from and superior to the out group or your own sense of identity and self-worth will suffer. Groups which perceive themselves to be of high status on particular dimensions will choose these dimensions as a basis of comparison with the out-group. So, for example, Llanelli talked disparagingly about Newport buying their way to success (i.e. not being home-grown) and also about their recent poor success on the field (i.e. not really being a top club). Whereas, Newport disparaged Llanelli for copying *their* family village idea (“*they’ve copied a lot from us; it’s all from us*”) – i.e. for not being as successful as they are at being a family club.

Both Newport and Llanelli supporters talked a great deal about the identity of Cardiff RFC, as they saw it. In jargon terms, they were both using Cardiff as the ‘out-group’ or main rival and, inevitably, this means the identifying dimensions are cast in a negative tone in order to ensure

⁶ Significantly, the word ‘community’ was used 11 times by the Llanelli supporters in talking about their club and not once by Newport supporters.

a feeling of superiority. Figure 4 shows the perceived identity of Cardiff RFC, as seen by these two other clubs.

FIGURE 4 : Perceived Identity of Cardiff RFC



This would not be the profile which would be generated by Cardiff supporters themselves although we would expect the two to bear some relation to one another. Whilst both clubs perceive Cardiff as their 'bête noire' (*"I belong to the ABC club 'Anyone But Cardiff'"*), Llanelli tend to perceive them as *"city slickers"* and *"money boys"* (i.e. the opposite of them) whereas Newport are mainly focussed on their arrogance (*"you can tell the Cardiff people – it's an arrogance, it's an arrogance"*.)

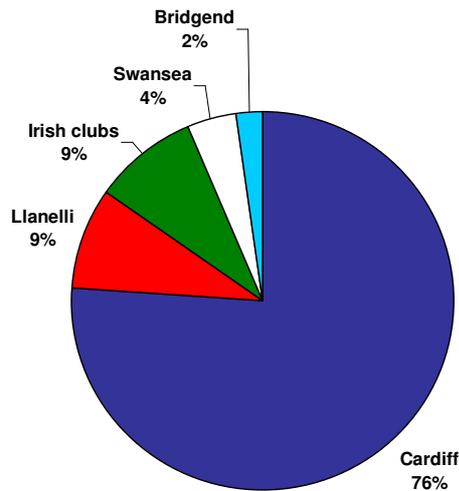
The other 6 clubs were not mentioned frequently enough to draw out their perceived identities. This would need to be the subject of a further study.

5.7 Group rivalry

In the case of sports clubs, there is the opportunity to 'decide' the relative worth of your in-group – at least along the playing dimension - by competing with the relevant out-group once a year on the pitch. This is the basis of rivalries and greatly intensifies the drama outlined in section 5.1 because the supporters' own sense of self-worth is, so to speak, on the line! In the build up to such matches, it is interesting to see the sides trading challenges and insults focussed on the dimension of relative skill which is, of course, what will be tested on the field. After the event, the winning side will continue to use this dimension as their basis for gloating but the losing side will switch comparison to completely different dimensions of identity along which they can still believe they are superior, e.g. having a larger or more loyal support base or the fact that they develop local players rather than simply buying in talent, etc! It is a sophisticated exercise maintaining one's identity intact!

Figure 5 shows the percentage of times different clubs were mentioned by Newport supporters in terms of being rivals with them.

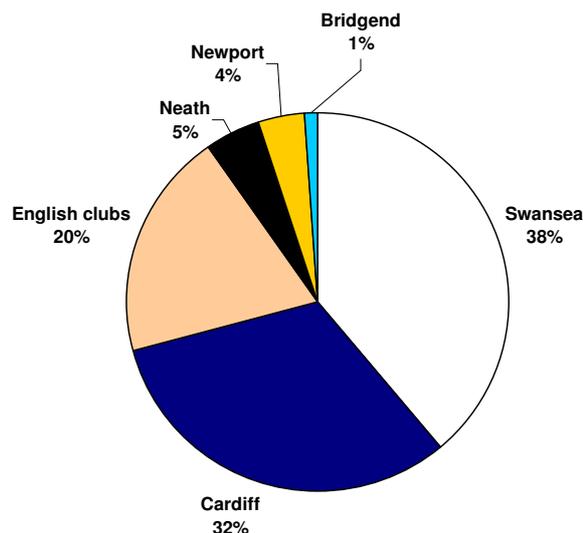
FIGURE 5 : Newport's Perceived Rivals



Newport supporters are very single-minded about whom they perceive their main rival to be: Cardiff (*“it’s kind of ingrained in you about Cardiff plus tribalism”*). In analysing the basis for the rivalry, we found that Newport supporters resent Cardiff’s arrogance and the fact that their supporters act superior (*“it’s arrogance isn’t it with Cardiff”, “every time Cardiff supporters have a chance to, they love to rub your nose in it”*) and they are motivated to beat Cardiff in order that they can gloat over them (*“just getting one up on them”, “just to get on their nerves, just to annoy the people of Cardiff”*).

Figure 6 shows the rivalry pattern for Llanelli supporters.

FIGURE 6 : Llanelli's Perceived Rivals



Here the rivalry is almost equally split between Swansea and Cardiff but further analysis showed interesting differences in the motivations for this rivalry. The motivation for rivalry

with Swansea was expressed either in terms of local geography (“*it’s just a bridge between us, that’s all it is*”) or in terms of gloating over individuals you know and work with (or ensuring they are not in a position to gloat over you!) (“*Well, Swansea’s your local Derby – your bragging rights!*”, “*it’s great to go to work when Swansea have lost and Llanelli have won – that gives me pleasure going to work*”). The impression was very much one of personal rivalry played out in the pubs and workplaces of the region. It was mostly good humoured and there was little gross stereotyping of the other side because they know many of the individual supporters concerned.

In contrast, when Llanelli talked about their rivalry with Cardiff, it was in very different terms. In this case, it seems to be a rivalry of principle. It is not based on gloating or bragging rights at all (maybe because they don’t know or regularly encounter individuals from Cardiff?) but on reinforcing that ‘home-grown’ (i.e. their lead identifier) is the best principle by demonstrating that money/privilege can’t necessarily buy you success (“*they’re the richest and there’s a lot to be said for seeing the richest lose*”, “*everyone hates Cardiff because up until this season, they will go in and rape clubs of their best players – they’re the money boys. Everyone likes beating the money boys*”). Again, we see an example of strengthening one’s own sense of identity and self-worth by caricaturing and then demeaning someone else’s.

Interestingly, Llanelli supporters didn’t complain about Cardiff acting arrogantly or lording it over them, although they *did* talk about English clubs in this way. They were keen to beat the English because of their arrogance (“*the English are too arrogant, they come down here and they just absolutely don’t think we are going to do anything*”) and because they see the English as having the best teams (“*we like to beat the English because they’re good. You beat the English and you’re something!*”).

5.8 Self and Group Identity – implications

‘Out-groups’ or rivals are not some unfortunate by-product of Welsh culture, but an essential feature of the way people everywhere create and maintain their own sense of uniqueness and self worthⁱ. The only difference might be that the Welsh more often use rugby as their primary means to do this. Indeed, it is not possible to have a strong sense of in-group in the absence of an out-group from which to differentiate yourself. You could argue that in rugby, it is healthier than in other areas of life because (a) the comparisons do get put to the test on the field and (b) the two sets of supporters regularly encounter one another and this helps keep the comparisons grounded in some reality.

If clubs can use techniques like those we have used here to make explicit their currently-perceived identity, then this could help them in a couple of ways:-

- They can use this knowledge to attract sponsors, because it gives them a distinctive personality which differentiates them from ‘the competition’ (for sponsorship) in eye-catching ways.
- They can simply play on the existing identifying dimensions of identification as Llanelli RFC does for its “Welshness” dimension through its presence at the Eisteddfods. This can create a powerful feedback loop where the supporters help create the initial dimension of identity, the club then amplifies this in tangible ways, making the supporters feel even prouder and more invested in the club.
- The clubs can attempt to reduce supporter identification along dimensions that are difficult to sustain indefinitely – e.g highly dependent on a specific coach, manager, benefactor or player, or week in week out success on the field.

- They can more consciously recruit managers, staff and players who, in different ways, are ‘in tune’ with the clubs’ identity and will strengthen and maybe extend it.

If Wales moves to a provincial or other system, and if strong identification with these sides is to develop over time, ‘out-groups’ or rivals must be allowed to form and this means that the sides will need to be or become differentiated from each another. These differences must have a quasi-rational basis. We will discuss this issue in more depth in the Conclusions.

6 The Match Day Experience

As part of the discussions, we asked the supporters to describe what they like to do when they come to matches, what they feel makes a good or bad match and what factors affect their attendance.

6.1 Match day activities

The children were much more concerned with activities on match days than the adults; mainly, it seems, because they are more energetic and need something to be happening all the time. When the adults did talk about off-the-field activities, it was mostly in terms of what their children liked.

6.1.1 Meeting up with friends

An aspect that was important to both adults and children was being able to meet up with friends at the match. For most, this was meeting up with existing friends (“*we all arrange to meet in the pub and then go down to the game*”) but some of the single mothers at Newport regarded match days as opportunities to meet new people (“*oh yeah, it’s our day out now – the bar, the men, the legs...*”).

At both clubs, the family village seemed to be providing a very useful gathering point (“*we know where to meet – it’s a focal point*”). Although the children still spoke of the problem of meeting up with friends who happened to sit in the opposite stand.

6.1.2 Meeting players/collecting autographs

For the children, contact with players is very significant (“*they’re idols to these children – idols to them*”). The Newport children, in particular, complained that the players didn’t hang around long enough for them to collect autographs, (“*they just come in, do a couple and then go straight into the changing rooms*”).

Even the adults seem to get a real buzz from seeing the players out and about, (“*when you look at Luke Gross, you think, ‘this guy is huge!’ or ‘my wife and daughter are ogling the players*”).

6.1.3 Playing on the field

At Stradey Park, the parents and the children all talked about how much the children liked to play on the pitch at half time or the end of the game. This was an enormously significant part of the day, (“*but the main thing for my boys at half time and the end of the game is to go on the pitch; that’s all they want. If they’ve forgotten their rugby ball, they’re distraught*”).

6.1.4 Freedom to play around

At both grounds, children and parents both talked about how important it was for the children to be able to stand with their friends, move around the ground and be active during the game. None of them liked being confined to a seat (“*we stand so we can jump up*”, “*they just go and kick around and run around Stradey and mess around*”).

6.1.5 Visiting the Family Village

At Newport RFC, the ‘Family Village’ is well established and all the children were enthusiastic about how much they enjoyed the activities in there (“*you can have your face painted*”, “*and your nails and your hair – Black and Amber – that’s good!*”). These activities had become part of their match day routine. At Llanelli RFC, the ‘Scarlets Zone’ is new and the children were only just discovering it but they were equally enthusiastic (“*that’s a brilliant thing you’ve got there – well, before the match, you can have drinks and play games*”). Although, again, they were keen to see it used for more contact with the players (“*.. you know the tent, I think the players should go in there, after the game*”).

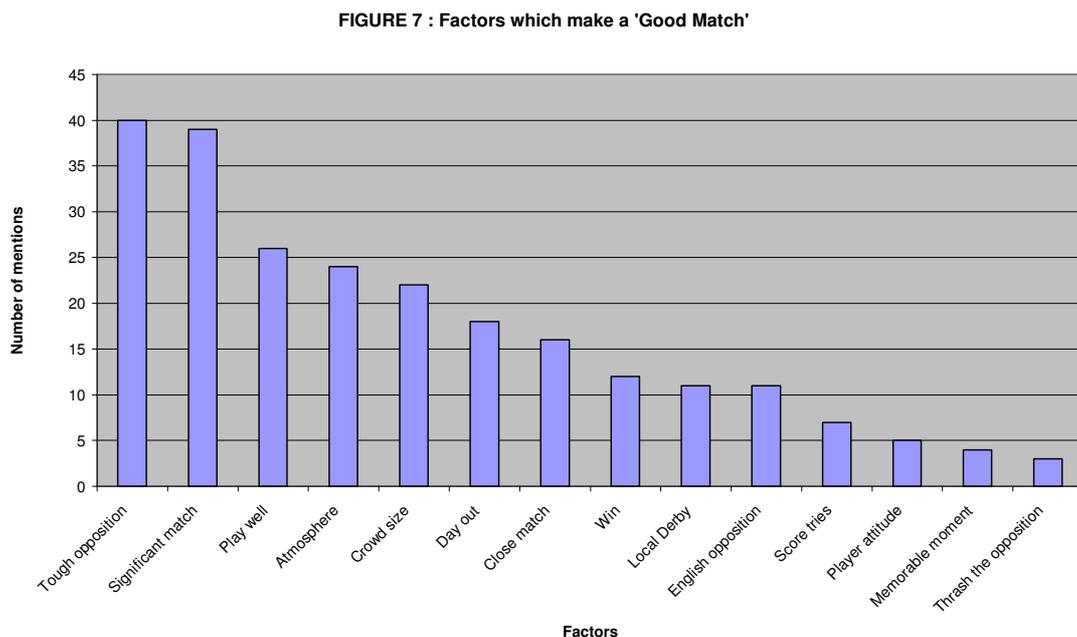
6.1.6 Being on TV

The children were particularly enthusiastic about televised matches and the opportunity to feature on TV (“*we always stand right by where they’re filming*”). As mentioned earlier, some of them video taped the match simply in order to capture themselves on TV.

6.2 Factors which make a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ match

We asked the groups to describe to us the best match they could remember coming to or to tell us about the kind of match they would definitely not want to miss in the coming season.

Figure 7 shows the set of factors which the two sets of supporters felt created the best kind of match.

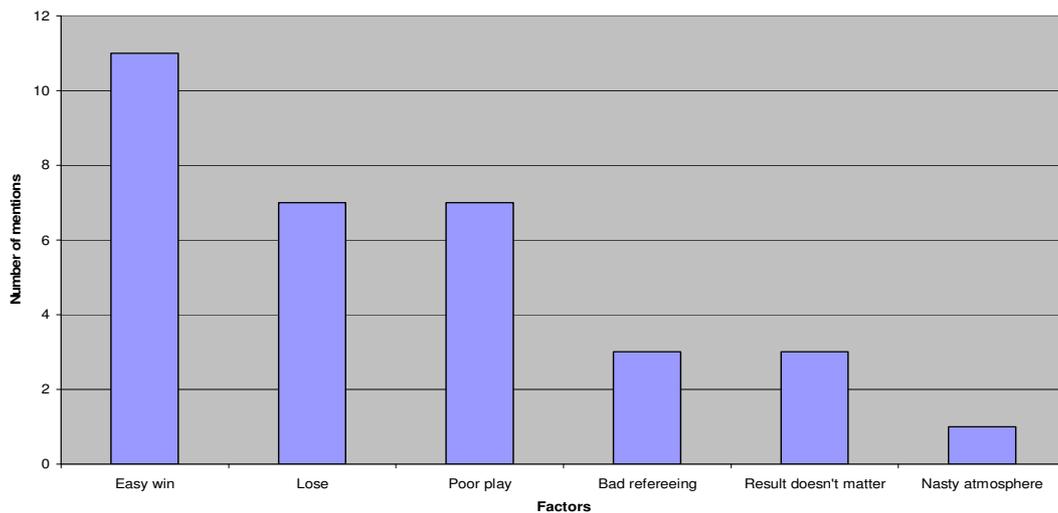


The two dominant factors are: tough opposition (“*I think the biggest game for Newport in Europe is going to be the Toulouse game because they are one of the top sides in Europe*”) and the significance of the match (“*cup matches, it’s all on the day, if they don’t perform, they’re out*”). Interestingly, these two factors came a long way ahead of how well the team played. Winning came even further down the list. Indeed, a number of the ‘best matches’ described by people were ones that they had in fact lost! (“*the other one was Boxing day, Cardiff versus Newport here – even though we lost. The atmosphere was just amazing – everybody came out for it*”, “*the Munster game was an example, the atmosphere was phenomenal – that’s because it was a top class side*”).

The other interesting point was that very often the ‘best matches’ people remembered were actually away matches. There seem to be two reasons for this: (i) most of the significant final or semi-final matches are away matches and (ii) people are able to enjoy an entire day out together (“*and coming here .. did you come for the breakfast in the morning? – everything was starting to build*”).

Not surprisingly, people were less interested in talking about ‘bad matches’ or the kind of match which they probably would not bother attending. However, Figure 8 shows the factors they thought made a match ‘bad’ or ‘miss able’.

FIGURE 8 : Factors which make a 'Bad Match'

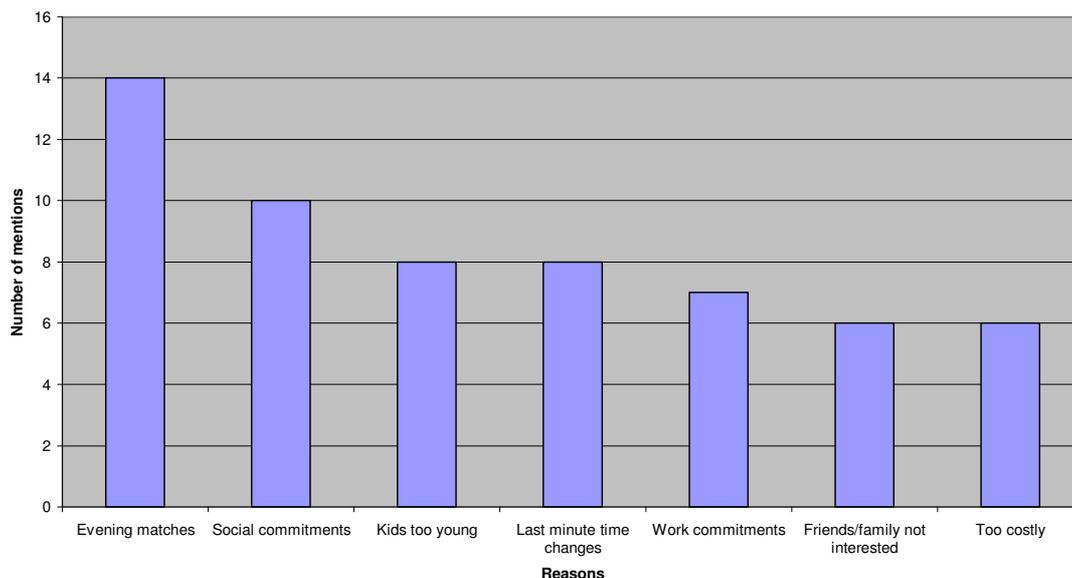


In this case poor play and losing feature more prominently. But, by far the most significant factor is when the sides are not well matched and the win is too easy (“*if you know it’s like going to be easy, it’s a waste of money to come and watch the game – if you know they’re going to win*” or “*just the simple ones at home, the ones where we’ve beaten them loads of times and you think ‘they’ll probably do it again’*”). Interestingly, the children were particular vocal on this point. They found such matches boring.

6.3 Factors affecting match attendance

Figure 9 shows the main reasons people gave for not attending matches.

FIGURE 9 : Reasons given for not attending matches



Unfortunately, most of these data come from a population of season ticket holders and people who regularly attend matches anyway. In a future study, we would be interested to try to poll the population who see themselves as supporters but only turn out to one or two matches a year. Unfortunately, we failed to recruit such people for the discussion groups⁷.

None of the supporters in the discussion groups talked about televised matches being a factor for them in not attending matches. In fact, for the children, televised matches were the best ones to attend. Unfortunately, we probably were talking to the wrong population of people if we wished to understand the TV issue more fully. The discussion groups talked about how much more compelling live matches were compared to television (“*just the live match atmosphere – it’s totally different seeing a match here than watching on TV*”). ‘Atmosphere’ was the factor people mentioned most often in comparing the TV and live match experience.

A number of highly committed supporters even confessed that they do not like watching their club play on TV because it is too emotionally stressful (“*I was actually on my own in the house and I just couldn’t watch it .. I’ll watch any football team play .. but I can’t watch Llanelli on TV!*”). They seem to find two things unpleasantly stressful: the lack of control (“*if you’re there, you can do something*”) and the lack of people with whom to share the emotion (“*if I come down to the ground, I’m sort of involved with the crowd..*”).

Interestingly, they were mostly happy to watch Wales play on TV (“*I’ll watch on TV – I’m not going to pay £38 to watch it*”). This seemed to be a combination of expense, lack of opportunity to attend the major internationals and a reduced level of personal involvement in the game.

6.4 Match day – implications

Facilitating matches as social events is vitally important – providing ways for different age and gender groupings to naturally meet up both with friends and meet new people. This may be the most important role which the new family villages will play.

⁷ It’s tough to motivate people who don’t even bother to come to matches to attend discussion groups!

Increasing the possibility of contact with players at matches (particularly for the children) is enormously important in the identifying process.

Tough opposition and significant matches seem to score highest because they are the ones providing the most intense drama and the most risky levels of emotional identification with the side.

7 Different types of Supporter

In this section, we look at how supporters differed in their motivations, patterns of behaviour and concerns. First, we will consider children, secondly women and thirdly the sub groups (based on different attitudes) which the supporters themselves seemed keen to delineate.

7.1 Children as supporters

7.1.1 Attending matches

The children who took part in the discussion groups were all aged between 10 and 13 years: 5 girls and 8 boys. We chose this age group because they were old enough to take part in a discussion group but also were at a critical stage of moving from mainly engaging in activities initiated by the family to mainly engaging in activities with friends.

Both the Newport and the Llanelli children offered sophisticated knowledge of rugby and players, and analysis of matches which they considered good or bad. They actually talked about aspects of the game of rugby more than the adults did! It was interesting, for example, to hear a 10 year old boy seriously discussing the need to develop young players at his club (*"we've got a few youngsters coming through the Under 19's and Under 21's and they stick at it"*).

Most of the children attended the matches with their father (occasionally with their mothers as well) and one or more siblings. Around the age of 11 or 12, the children seemed to want to switch to attending matches with their friends rather than their parents (*"I'd like to come with my friends – it would be better. When you start to get older, you'd rather go on your own. Sometimes your parents can embarrass you in front of your friends"*). Whilst the children talked about enjoying seeing people of all ages shouting for the team, they were very uncomfortable if it was *their* parents doing the shouting! (*"when I just come with my Dad – he gets on my nerves"*). This was a common theme with even 40 year old men remembering how much their fathers used to embarrass them by shouting at the referee!

A few of the older children had successfully made the switch and were now coming with their friends (*"I just said to my father, 'Dad, I'm going to town, I'll see you at the game'"*). As mentioned earlier, a group of seven 13 year old girls at Newport always came on their own, dropped off and picked up by their parents. However, negotiating this important social milestone was an issue for the older children. There was a sense that if they didn't manage to make this transition soon, they might lose interest in coming (*"if my sister didn't come, I don't think I'd go with my Dad, he's a bit embarrassing!"*).

The girls at Llanelli, in particular, were discouraged by the fact that none of their girl friends were interested in rugby. At the moment, they don't meet other girls who attend matches and make new friends, as there is no natural forum for this. The 'Scarlets Zone' might fulfil this role, were it not targeted at a younger age group. The Llanelli girls also complained that their friends didn't like rugby because they didn't understand it and said how much it would help if there was someone at the match explaining it to them (*"all my friends, they are not coming because they don't understand rugby – we don't get a chance to understand"*). They also feel strongly that they should have the chance to play rugby at school (*"when you go to school,*

you are just given netball or hockey to play and we ask, 'can we play rugby or football?' and they say, 'no, that's a boy's game'").

The children actually talked more about 'bad matches' than the adults. This may be because they have a lower boredom threshold and need fairly constant distraction or entertainment while they are at the ground (*"I think they should do something which we could do because sometimes half time is really boring waiting 10 minutes for them to come back on"*).

7.1.2 Identification

As mentioned earlier, the children identified much more strongly than the adults with individual players; they love to collect their autographs and have a chance to meet the players. A number of the children, when talking about their favourite players, said it was because they had met them, (*"because when Martyn Madden came to my school .. he was telling these jokes and it was fun!"*). The adults also talked about the impact one meeting with a player had had on their children, (*"my nephew, he lives in Usk and Jason Jones-Hughes came to his school and he's now totally Black and Ambers and he wants to play rugby. He had no interest in rugby whatsoever before that happened"*).

7.1.3 Rivalry

We were interested to note that the children had already developed a keen awareness of rivalries between sides but tended, more than their elders, to see as rivals the teams they considered hardest to beat, (*"Swansea I'd like to beat because they're good as well"*). But there was also evidence of out-group stereotyping (*"Cardiff don't score tries – they just put over penalties"*) and an awareness of rivalry based on principle (*"I always support the underdog"*).

The children were even less interested than the adults in beating sides who are easy to beat (*"when Newport just play the same people, you know they're going to win because they won last time – it's a bit boring"*).

7.1.4 Loyalty to Wales

The children were all much more interested in and committed to their club than to Wales. It was simply much more accessible to them⁸. More worrying, they were very critical of the Welsh team (*"Wales, you know, they keep letting the ball die, they're always fouling, always giving lip to the ref."*) and they even talked of wanting to support another team in next years' World Cup (*"we know they'll lose by miles and it will be like that in the World Cup – I think I might support another team"*).

7.1.5 Children – Implications

The next step, after attracting younger children into matches (in the way, Newport RFC, for example, have so successfully done), is to find ways to help teenage children (and their parents) who wish to make the shift, from attending matches with their families to seeing matches as a place to meet up with groups of friends. This might be facilitated by creating an area of the family village or other facility which is made attractive as a refreshments and meeting place for young teenagers.

⁸ Most have only seen Wales play on TV, whereas with the club, they frequent the ground and they see and talk to the players.

Entertainment before, during and after matches is an important aspect of holding children's attention.

The children talked about how important it is for them to be able to see all the action on the pitch and when asked what change they would most like to see at matches, a number mentioned how much they would like a large screen TV at matches so they can follow every detail of the action. One young supporter also suggested that children might like an ear phone, which was like a reflink⁹, but in this case allowed them to listen to someone explaining what was happening in the match and why.

It might be that the Women's rugby players would be willing to help in visiting local schools and encouraging girls to become interested in the game. However, making the ground a 'happening place' for teenagers to meet is probably the most promising approach for attracting teenage girls.

7.2 Women as supporters

As mentioned earlier, we had great difficulty recruiting women to attend the discussion groups at Llanelli RFC in particular. Both sets of groups felt that the grounds and matches were a friendly and welcoming environment for women but they described how often their wives, mothers or women friends were not interested in coming to matches. The following reasons were cited (by men, women and children):-

1. They are not interested in any sport (*"none of my friends are interested in sport, full stop"*).
2. They prefer shopping (*"she takes the view, 'I'm not going to sit in Stradey for a couple of hours on a Saturday when I could be doing my shopping'"*) and will do this even on away trips (*"you go on an away trip to Ireland and, if the women come with you, they go shopping whilst you go to the match"*).
3. They don't know much about the game because they never played it (*"I drag my wife along who doesn't really know much about rugby"*).
4. At Llanelli RFC, at least, there is still a perception that rugby is *"a man's game"* (*"they think rugby is more a thing for boys"*).
5. They sometimes have to look after younger children or ones not interested in attending the rugby (*my mother doesn't come really because my brother took no interest in the game so my Mum said, 'OK, he can stay at home with me'"*).
6. Depressingly, they are sometimes not 'allowed' to come! (*"she wants to come but it's my day out – I tend not to bring her along because it's my day out, my day away from her"*).

Where women are coming to matches, the following factors seem to have attracted them:-

1. Great social life - it's somewhere they can take the kids and they can enjoy a social life at the same time (*"you're not just dragging the children along; they're dragging you along because they so much want to come – it's great"*). A couple of the single mothers stressed that this made it unique in their eyes (*"oh yeah, it's our day out now – the bar and the men and the legs!"*).
2. Feeling left out (*"my wife got involved because of our infectious attitude at home. We were always talking about it at home and she felt left out"*).

⁹ For listening to the referee's comments.

3. The players are sexy (*“one day she came along and Shane Howarth seems to have done the trick”, “good looking players helps”*).
4. Emotional release (*“it’s release for women because women haven’t got anything they can release their aggression into ... I can have a good shout and there’s no-one I’m going to offend”*).
5. Away trips (*“my wife came along, we made a weekend of it and it was a great family day out”, “when we go away for the weekend, she tends to come along with us”*).

7.2.1 Women supporters – implications

The clubs should be encouraged to learn that women felt welcome and quite safe to attend rugby matches at Newport and Llanelli on their own (*“I can come on my own and bring the children and not have to worry at all – as a woman with 3 children you just wouldn’t want to do that in most places”*).

It looks like attracting and catering for the younger children is the best way of attracting the mothers. One supporter even suggested the club might think about operating a crèche for small children so that parents weren’t prevented from coming by the needs of one younger child. He said he’d be happy to pay extra on his season ticket to make use of such a facility.

It is then important to try to use the facilities to ensure there are areas where women, on their own or with children, feel comfortable and welcome to sit and meet other people. The traditional club bars may not fulfil this need.

The idea of rugby matches being a place where women can release their aggression is an interesting one. Apparently, Delia Smith¹⁰ claims that the main attraction for her in attending football matches is that she can let her hair down, sing rude songs and be abusive. Certainly, the men who attended the groups occasionally described particularly aggressive female fans who they knew (*“she’s the most terrifying figure among us”*).

7.3 Other categories of supporter

Ever refining their identities, the supporters actually divided themselves into in-group versus out-group categories within the supporter base. We saw the following distinctions:-

1. Loyal through thick and thin (*“at the end of the day, we’re Newport supporters and we’ll be there to show that we support them whether they’re losing every game or not”*) versus choosy or ‘fickle’ (*“sometimes I’ll go – it just depends how the mood takes me”*).
2. Discerning rugby connoisseur (*“I like to see good rugby, I may be different to some of the others. I mean, if there was a great player playing for Cardiff, I would go and watch him play”*) versus partisan (*“there is only one side and every decision that goes against us is the wrong decision”*).
3. Life time supporter (*“I came in the Glenn George, Paul Turner era so I’ve been a long term supporter”*) versus recent convert (*“I’m not from Newport .. I haven’t got your history, I’m an outsider really, come here on a good thing”*).
4. Positively supportive(*“we don’t sing anything abusive – it’s all supportive”*) versus aggressively critical (*“it’s middle-aged men you are talking about, I think it’s taken them over a bit”*).

¹⁰ The famous chef and shareholder in Norwich Football Club.

5. People who see matches as a day out with the family (*it keeps the family together as well because you are going everywhere as a family*) versus people who see matches as day out to escape the family (*it's space for yourself for that time, you don't want to be chasing around the children*).

7.3.1 Sub group – implications

The obvious point is that there are significant variations in motivations and behaviours between the supporters and these need to be recognised and taken into account when catering for them. For example, it is easy and comfortable for a club to focus on the 'loyal supporter' when, in fact, the 'fickle or choosy supporter' is, arguably, a much more important business target for their efforts.

When a club suffers criticism from 'negative and aggressive' sub-groups of supporters, it may be helpful to recognise that these could be the supporters who are, in fact, most closely identified with the club. It is important to try to understand what the sub-group's dimensions of identification are, since it is along these that the club is likely to be letting them down.

8 Supporter conversion and maintaining commitment

Most of the supporters in the discussion groups had originally come to rugby matches as young children, even if they had taken a break from attending matches at some point. Only 6 of the supporters were converted to rugby supporters as adults (3 from either club). They had moved to the locality as adults and been introduced to the club by a spouse or friend. Only one 'convert' had started to coming to matches off their own initiative and only one had lived in the locality all her life.

Among these 'converts', a single match had been enough to convert them and it was usually the drama of the event (see section 5.1) that had this effect (*just the live match atmosphere – it's totally different*, *that was it, hooked, straight away, in at the deep end*). They came again because they wanted more of that experience (the testosterone rush, maybe?).

However, once people start coming, then they quite often start making friends and creating a social life around the club. This social aspect becomes an increasingly important part of being a supporter (*after the match – down to Weatherspoons*). We noticed that away trips were often the initial trigger in people starting to join or form new social groups (*it all stemmed from one trip*, *it was a very memorable trip to Leicester – the result wasn't favourable but the day was and it just went on from there – the camaraderie just kicked in basically*). As the social aspects kick in, then being a supporter starts to spill over and become part of someone's wider life outside the ground (*I've geared my life up now to come and watch on a Saturday afternoon or Friday night – meeting up with friends, watch a game – rather it's an excuse to go out socialising* or *now I look back and think, 'what did I used to do on the weekends 3 years ago?'*).

Also, over time, people's identity becomes increasingly associated with the club's identity (*it's funny how quickly your allegiance to a team can build* or *I'm converted now. I've crossed to the other side. I'm Newport*).

As we tried to understand what kept people coming to matches and supporting the club over years, it seemed that it was a balance of one or more of the following 3 factors:-

1. It's in their blood (*dragged up a Scarlets supporter*, *it's in your blood*).
2. It's their 'drug' – it's the thing which gives their life excitement and sensation beyond the ordinary^d (*I think it's the highlight for lots of people's weekend or life, at the moment*).

3. It's their social life ("*it's not just here – when we go out on a Saturday night, after the match, everyone's there*").

8.1 Conversion and maintaining commitment - implications

It should be encouraging for clubs that one taste of a live match experience *can* be enough to convert people - although this research doesn't tell us how many people come to matches once or a couple of times and never come back again.

Our sense was that there was a great deal more potential for 'network marketing' of the product than happens today. Network Marketing means using existing customers and their natural social networks to recruit new ones. The clubs need to make it very easy for people to invite their friends and colleagues to a match (e.g. using complimentary tickets or 'taster' packages) and make it easier for them to have friends sit with them.

It would be very much in a club's interests to facilitate the formation of larger, fairly flexible social groups amongst its supporters. At most clubs, when someone turns up for the first time, they may not naturally meet other supporters and start to get acquainted with them. It looks as if away trips can play an important role in this regard.

9 Overall Conclusions

The discussion groups at Newport RFC and Llanelli RFC set out to explore the psychology of Welsh rugby supporters. We hoped that understanding the 'mind of the consumer' would help inform the debate about the future structure of professional rugby in Wales and how to increase support at Premier club matches.

We deliberately did not ask the supporters directly how they felt about provincial or super club rugby. This was partly because the concept was, at the time of this project, still too ambiguous and ill-defined to pose meaningful questions about. In any case, research has shown that people are poor at predicting their future behaviour or how much they will like a new product concept. However, the better we can understand *why* people support rugby and what it fulfils in their lives *today*, the better chance we have of developing a different product (if that should prove necessary) which will continue to fulfil the same needs or desires. It should at least tell us what pitfalls to avoid.

Overall, we found that the core motivations for people in both becoming and staying committed rugby supporters (i.e. people who are willing to pay, on a regular basis, for the product) are not rugby specific, but are about 3 fundamental human needs that supporting a rugby team fulfils:

- the need for drama/sensation in everyday life,
- the need to belong to a community or social group, and
- the need to reinforce a sense of one's own uniqueness and relative self-worth.

In this concluding section, we will look at the overall implications of this research for (a) the structure of the game and (b) attracting and increasing support for it.

9.1 Implications for the future structure of professional rugby in Wales

The research provides little direct evidence that one structure is more likely than another to attract and retain committed supporters. In any case, this only matters if top level rugby *needs* to the kind of committed support that premier clubs enjoy today. So, when considering a

different structure, the Union must first decide whether the new top level sides (whether provinces, regions or superclubs) *need* committed supporters of the kind we talked to, or whether the sole aim is the development of future international rugby players.

If it is the latter, then the study has little to say, because it sought to understand the beliefs and motivations of premier club supporters, rather than players. It is possible, although this study provides no direct evidence one way or the other, that a rugby team cannot be consistently competitive without a committed support base¹¹. At *international* level, the Union clearly *is* dependent for much of its finance on committed support, and this is probably true for other countries. In Ireland, where the top level of the game is directly controlled by the Union, it makes no difference to a province's funding whether or not they have a committed support base.

If the Union concludes that its top level sides need committed supporters, this study strongly suggests that supporters only become and stay committed to a side ***if they develop a personal identification with one or more aspects of it***, i.e. either its players, its playing location or the side itself as a distinct 'personality'. This is not a Welsh phenomenon, it is universal.

A study of U.S. Baseball has shown that player turnover is a major factor in weakening supporter's identification with the team. In the U.S., baseball teams can experience turnovers in players of 25%, and the statistics show that for each percentage point of player churn, attendance at the games was reduced by between 6,000 to 12,000 fan attendances over the course of the season^o. This is what you would expect if fans identify with players. Other studies have shown that factors such as these, or change of stadium, can affect commitment levels harder than lack of success on the field^p.

None of this appears to apply to the Welsh team, so the Union may not consider it significant to the bigger picture. The *Wales* team can cope with a high turnover of players without undue loss of support because its supporters identify with Wales rather than a particular team or particular players. Similarly, the Welsh team manager, and the national stadium can both be changed with little apparent risk to the support base. The underlying national identity is sufficiently strong and stable that everything else can 'hang off it'.

The Union may take the view that this enduring strength of support for Wales as a rugby nation is strong enough to extend to a set of top level sides created as part of the Welsh Rugby brand. This, after all, is how some people view the Irish, Australian, South African and New Zealand unions.

Our results suggest that, if the Union chooses to create *new* sides, made up of Union contracted players allocated simply to meet the needs of the national team, supporters may have difficulty identifying with individual sides. A match between two of them would, in effect, be a Welsh trial, and a cross border match a rehearsal for internationals. Welsh trials are only really compelling for rugby purists. They are not passionate occasions and it is unlikely that sides operated on this basis would attract the enthusiasm or commitment of many of the supporters we talked to.

Nevertheless there will be a market of spectators who simply like to watch high quality rugby, just as there are people who like to watch good films or good opera. These consumers have their need for sensation and (to a lesser extent) drama met by rugby, but do not identify with particular teams or players, but rather with the game itself. Interestingly, this kind of rugby

¹¹ It might be interesting and useful to conduct a separate study which examines the effect of supporter presence and commitment on the motivation and performance levels of professional players. For example, does the presence of a partisan crowd increase their testosterone levels?

consumer has much more in common with media commentators, ex-players and national coaches¹² than with the traditional committed supporter. Interestingly, if tested, it is likely that these consumers experience far lower testosterone levels at matches (cf. ref Bernhardt). The question that our research cannot answer is whether there are enough spectators of this kind to support a professional game, or whether the market requires committed supporters of the kind who support the live professional game today. We can only note that we encountered only a very small percentage (<10%) of 'pure rugby' consumers in our groups and none of the women or children were in this category.

If the Union decides that the top level of the game needs sides that supporters can identify with, our data suggest that it makes a difference whether players are seen as having chosen to play for the side - i.e. how strong the *player's* commitment to the team is seen to be. The stronger the player's perceived commitment, the stronger the supporters' commitment to him ("*Salesi's a guy from Tonga who has been adopted more or less by the Llanelli public as a son and he's responded by effectively being born and bred in Llanelli*").

One obvious structure for the top level of the game is to base it on geographic regions. Because our study only covered two clubs, it is difficult to talk about supporters' identification with their regions, but supporters of the two clubs we chose showed very different patterns of regional support. The Newport supporters felt a very strong affiliation with their city ("*I'm a Newport girl just dedicated to my own town*") but relatively little with the surrounding region. One woman, born in Pontypool, described how she still felt uncomfortable supporting Newport ("*I did feel I shouldn't be here, that I was doing the wrong thing*") and another man, born in Cwmbran, labelled himself "*an outsider*". The Newport supporters were most anxious to differentiate their identity from the other big city (Cardiff) or the adjoining valleys which they saw as having a separate "*Valleys mentality*" which they considered alien to their own.

Llanelli supporters, on the other hand, demonstrated a strong affiliation with both the town and the surrounding region of West Wales. ("*Llanelli is a province, isn't it? - it's all West Wales really*"). They see the whole of West Wales as their natural catchment area for both players ("*we've got a huge catchment area going down West Wales and a lot of players coming through the club scene over the years have bred themselves into the Llanelli side*") and supporters ("*they can identify themselves with Llanelli*"). So, when the Llanelli supporters talked about players being 'home-grown' they actually meant "from West Wales", and not just the relatively small town of Llanelli.

So, if the Union creates new sides based on provinces or regions, and if it seeks to garner a committed supporter base, it needs to respect (or at least not run counter) the traditional social as well as geographic boundaries. The evidence of our two sets of discussion groups is that these will be different in different parts of this quite small country. Further research would be needed to identify a 'natural' set of 4 or 5 regions that reflect the natural affinities of the known support base. The important point for the policy makers is not to equate the practicalities of physical geographies, which obviously have to be taken into account (e.g. location of stadia and travelling distances) with the social geographies which reflect strong cultural boundaries and allegiances. For example, the supporter from Cwmbran considered himself an outsider to Newport RFC (6 miles away) whereas the supporter from Haverford West considered himself a Llanelli RFC man (50 miles away).

The research suggests that commonalities or differences between group identities (in the sense of values, outlook and principles) would, other things being equal, provide a good basis for

¹² who are, interestingly, the very people whose views on the structure of the game are most widely sought and respected.

deciding whether it is feasible to, say, combine clubs to create fewer, more capable sides. Historically, small town Welsh rugby clubs represent the whole of a community that already has an identity dependent in part on its economic *raison d'être*, but encompassing all the people who live there. In Wales, especially in the professional era, few of these communities are large enough to support a rugby side that can compete at the highest cross-border level. The towns and cities of Wales with populations large enough to support professional sides are much more diverse socio-economically, and the rugby club does not represent the whole community in the sense that a small town rugby club does. Ignoring business and contractual issues for a moment, it may seem easy to combine two rugby teams, but it is very difficult to combine two sets of committed supporters, especially where there is no regional precedent.

If the WRU creates totally new sides, then these need to play each other (not just other European sides) in *meaningful competition* to create the sense of in-group versus out-group¹³ and its associated sense of unique identity, self-worth and social bonding among the sides' support bases. If the Welsh teams only (or even predominantly) play teams from other nations, there is a risk that their only differentiation will be their Welsh-ness. While this may mean that they attract support from all over Wales when they engage in cross-border competition, as we often see in the latter stages of European Cup competition today, that support may be "floating" support that will not sustain the side during periods of moderate success or when it is rebuilding or even on rainy friday nights in January.

The drama which proved the key motivator for match attendance requires a strong sense of identity and rivalry for deeper emotions to be stirred. As we saw in our analysis, intense drama builds up over an extensive period of identification of the support with the team, and is difficult for a new team, or a new competition, to achieve. The early seasons of the European Cup lacked drama, and arguably the support for the Scottish district sides has yet to benefit from it. The continuing success of quite modest competitions like the Principality Cup shows how powerful this effect can be.

With respect to where a newly formed provincial sides should play, the research suggests that many committed supporters identify with the ground (i.e. will only identify with a side playing at a particular "home"). One of the Irish provinces, Munster, does play at two different grounds, and the Scottish districts went through a period of playing home games at different grounds¹⁴ in order to attract support from across the large regions they represented. Interestingly, the Scottish sides no longer do this, and are instead working hard to develop and market fixed home grounds. This will, in our view, create a more committed support base, although obviously may alienate potential supporters who live too far away from the ground.

A few years ago, American football and baseball teams, which rely on TV syndication money to a greater extent than rugby teams, tried to build new grounds that were deliberately undifferentiated or 'placeless', in order to make the games more competitive by reducing home advantage. But 'placeless' necessarily meant 'soulless', i.e. having no unique spirit or identity^q and the overall experience of the game suffered. Recent new stadia have reverted to being more easily identifiable. Sports grounds which are shared by different clubs or worse still, by different sports, may also be harder for supporters and teams to identify with.

Statistically, all teams fare better at home. This is not surprising since people are genetically programmed to defend their home territory^r and there is known to be a difference in testosterone levels between the home and away players^s. This may mean that having a side

¹³ For the Welsh National Side, England is a natural 'out-group'. For a Welsh provincial side or superclub, the other Welsh sides, neither Leicester nor Leinster will be the natural out-groups.

¹⁴ As geographically disparate as Aberdeen, Perth and Glasgow.

play at a number of different grounds will affect performance because neither the team nor its supporters will ever develop an instinctive sense of home territory. This will reduce crowd sizes, but even if that did not matter to the Union, it may put its top teams at a disadvantage in cross border competition with sides who *do* have a well defined home ground¹.

9.2 Implications for attracting and increasing the support base

The results of this study are also relevant to attracting and increasing support at existing clubs or at new provinces or super-clubs.

Analysis of the discussion groups suggests that:

1. Rugby is an intrinsically compelling ‘product’ – it provides drama, social bonding *and* a sense of identity/self-worth. So-called “experience” products have for some time been the fastest growing sector of the consumer economy¹⁵ and they are increasingly a strength of the Welsh economy¹⁵.
2. However, the modern consumer is more demanding and has more choice of experience products than was the case in the amateur era. Rugby clubs therefore need to develop and refine the ‘whole product’ so that it caters for a wider range of people, beyond the traditional support base of men, boys and rugby fanatics.

9.2.1 Welsh rugby as an experiential product

The supporters in this study experienced a high level of emotional fulfilment from their regular attendance at club matches. The match experience, at its best, provides them with 3 things:-

1. Intense excitement/drama in their lives giving them (potentially weekly) an adrenalin or Testosterone high (“*the adrenalin runs faster definitely*”)^g. This is the kind of physiological ‘buzz’ which hooks you.
2. An intense sense of bonding with a social group who share their feelings and outlook – conceivably giving them an opiate high¹ (“*it’s like having an extended family*”).
3. A strong sense of their individual identity and self-worth - the impact of which can, apparently, be measured in terms of reduced stress, fatigue, confusion and depression^{nv}. (“*I’m proud to be a supporter*”, “*we know our team is the greatest of all time*”).

It is hard to think of other products that offer such a powerful combination of emotional benefits. For the supporters we talked to, there is little doubt that club rugby is more compelling than international rugby because:

- club rugby offers more games,
- club rugby is more accessible (everyone can attend matches and meet players),
- the intense drama in club rugby builds over an entire season and on several fronts,
- it is easier for people to build their social life around a weekly event,
- identification with the team is stronger because emotional engagement with the team is frequent and the team itself is stable.

¹⁵ E.g. tourism, gourmet food, outdoor activities, music and the arts.

The research also reminded us that experiences are more powerful when the supporters themselves can actively contribute to them. Clubs should be careful not to over-choreograph supporter experience at matches but find ways to enable supporters to create and shape their own experience.

The best strategy appears to be a kind of dialogue where the club produces a 'performance' (on the field) or a new facility (like a family village) or a new piece of merchandise and then observes how supporters respond to it. Communities of supporters will create their own culture (behaviours and meanings) based partly on what they are offered (e.g. the areas of the ground where they congregate, the rituals they engage in before and after the match, the songs or chants they shout and sing during the match, and the banners, flags and clothing they bring). The smart club will find ways to respond positively to these cultural developments, creating a new positive feedback cycle. At each stage the supporter culture is strengthened and supporters become more strongly identified with the team. In this way the dramatic, social and identity experience is naturally and cooperatively evolved over time *and* the supporters know and feel proud to be part of that creative process.

Finally, clubs need to recognise that the drama in their product comes from two different teams - meeting and competing. If one side plays poorly, has few supporters, or has little sense of identity of its own, then the drama will be much weaker for the other. Supporters want to see competitive, meaningful games *against strongly identified opposition* where the outcome is uncertain^w. With luck, any new structure for Welsh rugby will deliver this.

If it does, then there is real opportunity for pairs of clubs, or even the entire league, to jointly market some aspects of their combined experiential product to supporters of all sides. Sides must compete vigorously on the field of play, and in asserting their different identities, because that is an essential part of the theatre on offer. But clubs do not compete commercially with each other for supporters. The commercial competition comes from other spectator sports and other products that offer a competing dramatic, social or identification experience.

9.2.2 Widening the appeal

We have discussed how to evolve and strengthen the core values of rugby as a product. However, to grow the supporter base significantly, the clubs also need to widen the appeal of the product to a broader market. Our results suggest that attracting more women, children and young people, as Newport RFC has done, is the way to go. Modern commercial marketing recommends paying attention to the 'whole' product experience, i.e. *all* the 'service' aspects of attending matches, e.g. how you find out about it, how you purchase tickets, who you come with, how you get there, what you need/want whilst you are at the ground, etc. The aim is to remove as many barriers to attendance as possible.

Here are some significant examples:-

1. Newport RFC has managed to make match days attractive and well designed for young children and has thereby increased the number of families coming and the number of women, in particular ("*It's a good family day out for the kids*"). One of our supporters suggested that a crèche facility would allow more young families to attend.
2. Young teenagers want to watch matches on their own or with their friends even if they still come with their family. This is a critical age range for clubs to foster as children naturally, as part of growing up, make the switch from family-initiated activities to peer group-initiated activities. The clubs may need to think about areas of the ground which can cater for this age group to socialise and 'make their own'.
3. The ground and match days need to feel safe/familiar enough to parents for them to feel happy for their children/young teenagers to roam. Although this can be delivered, in part, by security officers and club ground rules, it is always more naturally maintained by

fostering a positive supporter culture which considers the ground as a familiar home. The children are then perceived as part of a bonded, if sizeable, community (“we all know their faces – we know whose kids they are and everyone keeps an eye on them”). It is difficult to see how to deliver this in an occasional or shared stadium.

9.2.3 Growing the Support.

Historically, most new supporters have been created by existing supporters, predominantly through family or friends. The technical term for marketing a product through its existing consumers is “network marketing”. Clubs would do well to think about new ways of using the powerful network marketing tool they already have at their disposal – helping their supporters’ bring friends, relatives and work colleagues to share the experience. This is particularly important amongst teenagers.

Some clubs give existing supporters vouchers to bring new supporters to a first game for free. Hardly anyone goes to their first rugby match alone, and finding ways of breaking the ice for new supporters should increase crowds. It may be necessary for clubs to invent more flexible seating arrangements so that people can easily invite and sit with friends they bring.

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