

TALENT IDENTIFICATION IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND AND A POTENTIAL WAY FORWARD FOR SCHOOLS' RUGBY HERE

BY
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When considering the methods used for talent identification of young players in these countries, it is very easy to look at the findings through rose-tinted glasses; in the current climate in Yorkshire, where youth players are being expected to play match upon match and perform in trial after trial, any opportunity to reduce the constraints on players would be well-accepted. Martin Pepper, Master i/c Rugby at Barnard Castle School in Durham, has alluded to similar problems, writing an article in a recent publication, voicing his frustrations of the current County system and Elite pathways for young players. In my time, whilst being involved with County rugby since 2001, there have been no shortages in potential solutions to the problems identified here and, despite a huge amount of work behind the scenes, I am not convinced that we are any closer to where we would like to be. I say 'rose-tinted glasses', as any system that alleviates any of these problems has the potential to move our situation forward, but it is important to appreciate that the systems in place Down Under also have their limitations. I do, however, think there may be some mileage in buying into some of what they do.

In my time in Australia I was introduced to the Head of the National Talent Squad (NTS), Manu Sutherland, who is responsible for the designing and delivery of programmes run in the National High Performance Units. The New South Wales State currently has approximately forty players identified, a large proportion of the approximately one hundred and twenty players in Australia, ranging between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. These players are screened, assessed and monitored over a

three-month period, working three times a week and then worked with twice-monthly throughout the regular season.

At this stage, there is little different from the format of the old EPDC and the new Schools of Rugby system, designed and led by the RFU. The differences, however, look at the identification of players in schools and clubs that progress towards representative rugby. In New South Wales there are seven schools' organisations that nominate sides to play in the NSW State Championships, which is a week-long tournament that takes place during the last week of the half-term. The organisation in which I spent my time, the GPS, is traditionally the strongest and it is their identification process that initiates the potential to move forward in similar schools. The eight GPS schools play in a league during a season that also allows for trial fixtures and traditional fixtures with schools in different organisations. GPS selectors watch each school play in three fixtures, from which three GPS squads are selected to play in the State Championships – they each play fixtures within the other six schools' organisations that are of suitable standard, given their size and strength. This identification process puts players on centre stage to impress the selectors over three fixtures, after which there are training sessions for the three squads in the last week before the school half-term holidays, thus avoiding a clash with any fixtures. There are no trials within the GPS set-up, with players put forward purely on their performances in those three fixtures. The selectors are committee members with years of experience and the State Championships include coaches and selectors from the Waratahs' Academy, who obviously have a vested interest in the players on show who might not already be within their system or the NTS. The players selected to represent New South Wales in the National Championship compete against ACT, Queensland, etc, from where the Australian U18s are selected.

In the Auckland region of New Zealand the top twelve schools play each other in the A Grade, with twenty four teams involved in the B Grade in a further two pools of twelve teams. There is promotion and relegation at the end of each season, with a mix of State and Independent schools in each league. At the start of the season each school is asked to nominate its top five players to a central database that is co-ordinated by the schools' development department at Auckland Rugby. After each league fixture the coaches nominate players from the *opposition* schools who stood out in their fixtures; their names are added to the database. When it comes to the time for selecting Regional sides to play in the Auckland Championships, the coaches effectively decide how many players in each position they want for their squad and then take the ranking players from the database. There are no trials or development days to influence the list of players, as the selected players are taken directly from the information submitted by the respected coaches on a weekly basis. The squads that are finalised play in the Auckland Provincial Championships, with the potential to be selected to represent Auckland in the National Championships Festival against Canterbury, Wellington, etc, from which the All Blacks U18s are selected. This process, again, does not clash with school fixtures in any way, taking place during the half-term holidays.

From the schools' point of view, the top four teams in the four regions of New Zealand (three North Island and one South Island) compete in the Super 16s competition, from which an overall New Zealand Schools champion is crowned.

There is a huge amount of pride and prestige associated with winning your Regional Championship, as there is to make the Super 16 competition – it is a huge status symbol for a school to achieve these successes, and a great deal of attention is placed on this success locally and nationally.

So what is there to take from these systems? Firstly, the use of a league system not only gives purpose to a number of the schools' fixtures played in Australia and New Zealand, but is also the basis of talent identification and the channels towards representative rugby. I feel that there could be the opportunity for leagues to be created regionally to include the current 'traditional' fixtures that dominate English school rugby, with remaining fixtures with schools from other regions maintained, but not contributing to the league standings. It would require an audit of the fixtures that each school plays on an annual basis to determine the size of the leagues and the boundaries of the regions. A certain number of fixtures would need to be decided upon in order to differentiate between the one-term and two-term schools. In order for the recording of players to be kept in place, it would require the RFU Academies to be involved, which would obviously be in their interest anyway, and I feel the Academy support staff should be interested parties in watching fixtures themselves to see the identified players in action; it is all very well inviting such players to attend training sessions at the Academies or in the Schools of Rugby, but it is also important to view them in the environments in which they have excelled to warrant note from respected coaches. This could all lead into a Super competition that puts together the Regional finalists to play over a festival weekend at an appropriate time before the Sevens season commences, but it would require consideration of the latter stages of the Daily Mail competition so that there would not be any conflict.

There are limitations in the Southern Hemisphere models that should be considered before final judgements are made. The NSW GPS model described involves annual fixtures against set schools and does not account for differences within the schools taking part today. St Joseph's College and Sydney Grammar School could not have been further apart in terms of their rugby ethos, culture or resources - yet they still play in the 'traditional' GPS season each year. Sydney High are the perennial whipping boys of the competition, so it might be questioned what their players gain from the competition. The notion of coaches nominating *opposition* players opens the possibilities of misrepresentation, with prejudice amongst certain schools evident in Auckland – some players miss out due to not being given a fair go, although it does tend to 'even itself out', so I am told.

If English rugby were to buy into any parts of these systems, there would need to be a massive shake-up of organisation and extensive discussion between the people that it would be most affecting – the schools. Should the leagues be limited to 1st XV rugby only, or could there be opportunity to extend through different age-groups to raise the profile of Junior rugby? Should relegation and promotion be considered, which would massively disrupt fixtures currently in place? These are questions that I do not have the answers to, although I have my own thoughts on the issues raised in this piece, related to my own circumstances at Leeds Grammar School. Ultimately, I have found the whole representative process to be disillusioning over the past few years, with committee members and coaches coming and going with alarming regularity - and I have found the practice on the other side of the world provides competition of quality

for players and clear processes for identifying and developing talent that do not involve over-playing or clashing with existing fixtures; by that alone, this should surely offer food for thought.

