

## The “R” Word

No...not rugby. Respect. The RFU Code lists Respect along with Teamwork, Enjoyment, Discipline and Sportsmanship.

Respect and rugby are often (but not always) linked – with rugby being pointed to as a bastion of true sportsmanship.

One of the wonderful things about rugby is that it encompasses players from toddlers to veterans. The incredible advances being made to champion inclusivity and diversity in rugby is something we can all be proud of. We are all one big Rugby Family and we can take a certain pride in our sport being enjoyed almost from cradle to grave.

It is hard not to notice that the media is currently full of schemes to promote positive mental health – in the community, at home, at work etc. etc.

This is all good stuff. The traditional stiff upper lip is being challenged like never beforehand and long may that continue.

Here’s another word that is often placed next to Respect - Dignity. And this is arguably where rugby sometimes fails.

I’m talking here about respect and dignity being shown to all our players. How they are spoken to and managed can have far reaching and long-term effects upon their mental health. They are all unique human beings who react in hugely different ways, and we should never treat them as mere names on a team list.

Playing any sport takes huge amounts of determination, focus and commitment. Rugby, being a contact sport, requires an additional grittiness and willingness to get stuck in on the pitch. To say you play rugby still garners a certain amount of respect from your peers.

We have in place a fine system for promoting positive physical health in rugby. Competent coaches, planned training and fitness sessions, nutritional advice, and superb back up physiotherapy and medical support services should they be required. We are also robust in our safeguarding practices.

But what do we do to promote positive mental health support to our players? Broken limbs are visible – but mental injuries are easily masked or ignored.

The recent television documentary about Sam Warburton covered the physical and mental health impact of the modern game and it has received plenty of positive feedback on social media. We are pushing at an open door in raising this as an issue. But raise it we must.

Just take a moment and think about the mental stress our players go through each week - below are a few examples:

- The players not being picked for their team at the weekend
- The ones that get a scant 10 minutes of a game off the subs bench
- The players that have a “bad” game – or miss an important tackle
- The players that lose a big game i.e. Quarter/Semi/Final
- The players being sent for a coveted County Trial but don’t get through to the final squad
- The players that are injured playing rugby
- The players that cannot continue to play rugby due to injury
- The older player who retires from the game and loses the structure to their week

Do we really take enough care of them? Do we take the time to explain the selection decisions, encourage two-way communication, or check up on them enough? Do we treat them with the respect they deserve?

It's not just the youngest of our players who struggle with managing their feelings when they aren't picked or lose a game. Learning to lose is a key skill in sport (and life) and I've seen strapping adult 6 footer's faces crumple when they think nobody is looking. Self-medication with alcohol etc. as a way of dealing with negative feelings, stress and anxiety is commonplace. Those who do not make "the cut" are easily forgotten in the rush to get a team out at the weekend. But this group of "set aside" players is often larger in numbers than the 20 or so who are picked for the team. They are in fact the often "silent majority" in our game.

So, what can we do to improve at grass roots level?

Let's get the important conversations going with players - encourage them to talk openly about disappointments, what went wrong in a game, what can be improved. Players that are injured should certainly be checked on regularly, invited to matches (remember Dan Carter acting as water carrier for the All Blacks when he was injured?) and kept in the loop. Anyone can do this checking up – not just the hard-pressed coaches and managers. Be a Buddy!

Retention of players at age 16+ is a key concern for many Clubs. Wouldn't it be great if our Colts saw their rugby family as a main source of positive mental health help and support as they enter the adult world? How much better would they be in dealing with the big bad world of 2019 knowing that the rugby family had their back? How much more likely would they be to remain in the game too?

Let's train our coaches and managers in how to spot players who are struggling to cope and teach them to always communicate with players in a respectful and timely manner. We must certainly manage player expectations – not everyone is going to play for their Club's First XV, County or Country – but every player should have their feelings respected and be dealt with courteously. This must become non-negotiable. It's often not what we say- it's how we say it, or if it's even said at all.

For those players coming to the end of their playing career, do let's give them the choice of remaining actively involved in their Clubs. Don't let them fade away after the last whistle has blown. Enlist them into the dedicated volunteer army that keeps Clubs and the County afloat, find ways that they can share their knowledge, skills and experiences with the next generation. Encourage them to spend time with our younger players. The results, from someone just taking an interest and imparting a few words of wisdom, can often be immediately apparent. Player, veteran and Club all benefit.

Rugby is unashamedly tough and the culture, when a player isn't coping well, is often to ignore it or tell them to "man up" or "grow a pair. Sports science tells us that a positive mental attitude is an important weapon in a player's armoury. It can and will influence results on the pitch. So, if we are to produce players that are physically and mentally robust enough to flourish at the highest level of the sport - we need to change our attitude to mental health fast.

If we as a proud rugby family can do this at team, Club, County level and beyond, we can establish a positive mental health culture for rugby that is the envy of other sports and wider society.

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