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RECRUITMENT PRACTICES WITHIN PROFESSIONAL RUGBY

– A presentation and contrast of processes
between France and Japan



Bachelor's Abstract

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A presentation and contrast of processes between France and Japan

The aim of the thesis is to understand the recruiting context from the academy into the professional level in France with a view to utilize these methods in the Japanese landscape. While rugby in France follows a traditional and successful pathway to develop players, Japan has a unique system whereby a reliance on high school and university rugby has slowed the development of the academy players progressing to the professional level. In order to understand the current state of rugby development in both countries, focus is directed on why France places an emphasis on the academy players and how Japanese methods differ from those in France.

In using a semi-structured interview with participants of professional clubs from both countries, the thesis provides an insight as to how France develops the player from an academy level, partnering with high schools and universities. While in Japan the corporate ownership and traditional scholarly competitions are having a ripple effect on the national team due to an influx of foreign players and lack of continuity throughout the development process. The significance of this study is to provide the Japanese rugby environment a credible insight towards the possible implementation of methods which have proven results in France.

Keywords:

Recruitment, Professional Sport, Management, Strategy

Contents

List of abbreviations (or) symbols	6
1 Introduction	8
1.1 Background and reasoning for the chosen subject	8
1.2 Rugby and its clubs as a business – Financial and administrative perspective	8
1.2.1 Japan	9
1.2.2 France	11
1.3 Recruitment in sport	12
1.4 Aim of the thesis and Research Questions	14
1.5 Structure of the Thesis	15
2 Research Methods	16
2.1 Research Targeting	16
2.2 Data Collection	16
3 Recruitment in Rugby	18
3.1 The start of professionalisation – 1995 to today	19
3.2 The role of the recruitment department	22
4 Recruitment processes in the French Rugby Landscape	25
4.1 Unstructured efficiency	25
4.2 Importance of the homegrown player	26
4.3 Initiatives and incentives for the academy player	28
5 Recruitment practices in Japan	33
5.1 A corporate structure with long lasting traditions	33
5.2 The absence of an academy system within professional clubs	36
5.3 Japan Rugby League One – Will the new league force change in recruitment strategies?	37
6 Recommendations	40

6.1 Exploitable French aspects in the Japanese environment	40
6.2 Implementation of a draft system	41

7 Conclusion	42
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References	44
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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions presented to professionals - France

Appendix 2. Interview questions presented to professionals – Japan

Figures

Figure 1. Revenue and Expenditure in Japan's Top League	10
Figure 2. Spread of revenue sources in French Top 14 rugby	12
Figure 3. Data assembled for Annual salaries (average and highest) of global professional clubs post 1995 (Professional Era)	20
Figure 4. Academy to professional graduates within the same club	27
Figure 5. Example of the French developmental progression of a player	29
Figure 6. Average number and origin of integrated players at academy level	30
Figure 7. Foreign quota rule in the Japanese Top League	33
Figure 8. Managers and coaches thoughts on the foreign quota rules currently in place	34

Pictures

Picture 1. Comparison of economic impact between the 2015 and 2019 Rugby World Cups	21
Picture 2. The general makeup of a club's recruitment department and their defined roles	22
Picture 3. Calender of a typical 3 week cycle in an academy program in France	31
Picture 4. Pyramid of progression of the young player in Japan	35

Tables

Table 1. Difference of ownership in both Japanese and French professional leagues	9
Table 2. List of professional coaches and directors used for emperical data	17
Table 3. Difference in foreign player quotas between the old Top League and the new JRL1	38

List of abbreviations (or) symbols

AFP	Agence France-Presse
ASM	Association Sportive Montferrandaise (Sporting Association of Montferrand)
AUD	Australian Dollars (\$)

FFR	Fédération Française de Rugby (French Federation of Rugby)
IRB	International Rugby Board – ‘World Rugby’ as of November 2014 (World Rugby, 2014)
JRL1	Japan Rugby League One. The new league taking place in Japan, replacing the ‘Top League’.
JIFF	Joueur Issu des Filières de Formation (Player Developed in a French Academy)
LNR	Ligue Nationale de Rugby (National Rugby League)
MLB	Major League Baseball
NBA	National Basketball Association.
NFL	National Football League
NHL	National Hockey League
SMH	Sydney Morning Herald
NPB	Nippon Professional Baseball

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and reasoning for the chosen subject

Recruitment in rugby is an ever-evolving process with each professional club using their own unique methods and strategies in order to attract talents. The challenge, or 'art' of this process is striving for a successful formula, while working within the regulations put in place by governing bodies. While undertaking recruitment assignments, the author has experience managing, assisting and coaching with the following professional clubs Union Bordeaux Begles – Bordeaux, France and ASM Clermont-Ferrand – Clermont-Ferrand, France.

Through these diverse experiences in the industry, the author has developed first-hand knowledge regarding this subject in France through personal experience and interactions. Invaluable information has also been shared through contact with fellow coaches and directors in Japan. Through these exposures to both environments, the career goal of the author is to coach and manage a professional rugby club in Japan's professional league.

1.2 Rugby and its clubs as a business – Financial and administrative perspectives

The sport of rugby itself and the clubs which operate within the sport carry out their functions as a business. Each club has an outlined budget that they must adhere to in order to function at an efficient capacity– be it in liaison with an imposed salary cap such as in France (Reyrat, 2020) as well as many other countries. The risk of consequences of penalties, both financially and professionally (AFP, 2020), are much the same as in the business world, with companies obliged to adhere to the laws and financial regulators.

The crux of success boils down to how efficient a club is in using their resources to attract the best talent available, while complying with the financial constraints enforced by the relevant governing bodies. Both France and Japan have

different structures due to contrasting corporate versus private ownership models. As in Table 1, Japanese professional clubs are governed by corporations such as Toyota and Panasonic. France meanwhile have individual













Snapshot of Owners of Professional Clubs			
Japan		France	
Owner	Club	Owner	Club
Canon Inc.		Jacky Lorenzetti	
Panasonic Corp.		Laurent Marti	
Toyota Motor Corp.		Hans-Peter Wild	
Toshiba Corp.		Mohed Altrad	
Suntory Holdings Ltd.		Bernard Lemaître	
Kobe Steel Ltd.		Vincent Merling	

Table 1. Difference of ownership in both Japanese and French professional leagues (LNR, 2021), (Japan Rugby Top League 1, 2020)

owners, auto-installed as presidents of their respective clubs. Japanese clubs' hierarchy consists of employees from multiple branches of the parent company (Abe, Sugiura, 2019). While in France the make-up of staff is solely at the owner's discretion (La Depeche, 2020).

1.2.1 Japan

The governing body in Japan, the Japanese Rugby Football Union (JRFU) organises and governs the competition in the country. They do not enforce a salary cap, however will impose a 20% rule of foreign players that make up a club's squad for the 2022-23 season (Asie Rugby, 2021). The parent-

companies of clubs are the financial sponsors of the JRFU and the national team (Japan Rugby, 2021). Due to this relationship, the clubs in the Top League have voting power in regards to any changes to the competition put forward by the JRFU (Abe, Suguria, 2019).

Japan is unique in that the rugby and business world are intertwined. Each club is owned by popular companies such as Toyota, Panasonic or Yamaha (World Rugby, 2021).

Japanese players recruited by these multinational corporations are seen as long-term investments for these companies. There are around 50% of players who originally sign on as players, and continue to work for their respective companies after their rugby career is over (Abe, M, Sugiura, E, 2019).

These companies provide a safety net for the clubs, given the importance of fielding teams out of both tradition and pride (Sakata, 2004). Compared to French clubs, Japanese clubs are less concerned with financial aspects as they have ongoing financial input from their parent company.

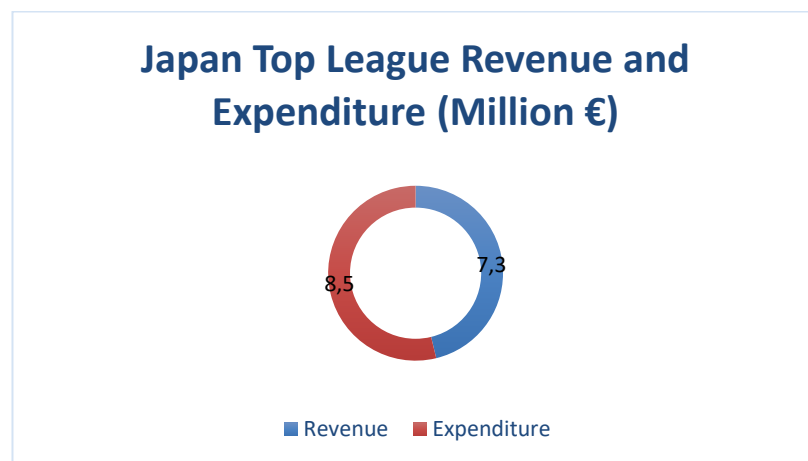


Figure 1. Revenue and Expenditure in Japan's Top League (Arba, 2021)

A major focus however is providing a competitive team that represents their company honourably. Any incident that is considered detrimental to image of a club or the league itself has serious implications – such as suspending the Top League competition itself in 2020 (NZ Herald, 2020). It is through this lack of

promotion and emphasis on traditional image, that ensures the league itself is operating at a loss (see Figure 1).

1.2.2 France

The French professional system is different to that of Japan, notably due to the Federation Française de Rugby (French Rugby Federation) (FFR) not being the governing body of the professional leagues in the country. The main role of the FFR is to govern the amateur game, the national teams and the referees (FFR, 2022).

The Top 14 and Pro D2 competitions are run by the Ligue Nationale de Rugby (LNR). The LNR imposes an annual salary cap regarding players salaries, while clubs maintain strategies of how to 'stretch' their cap through rules imposed by the LNR. Clubs must target players with 'Joueur Issu des Filières de Formation' (Player developed in a French academy) (JIFF) status, as well as differing contract structures for certain players, all in order to adhere to the LNR's regulations (LNR, 2019). Striking this balance is crucial and it is through effective recruitment strategies that a club can achieve success, or suffer failure.

The average revenue for each professional club competing in the highest level of rugby in France was over 25 million euros in 2017 (Statista Research Department 1, 2021). The majority of this revenue is coming through sponsorships (Gaudiaut, 2021) (see figure 2). Due to the exposure and popularity of the game, companies seek to build partnerships with successful clubs. In 2019, the difference in total revenue generated between the two professional divisions was 217 million euros. If a club is relegated into the

second division, their revenue sources for recruitment are drastically reduced (Bailleul, 2019).

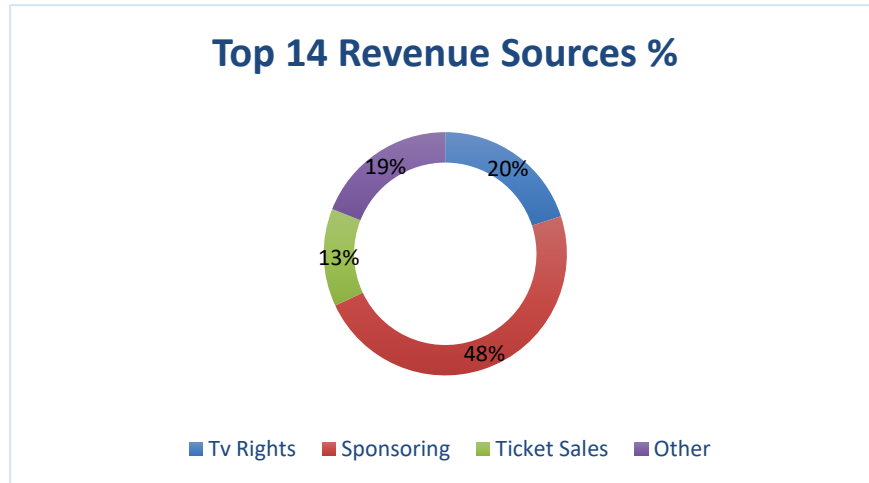


Figure 2. Spread of revenue sources in French Top 14 rugby (Gaudiaut, 2021)

As mirrored in the business world, success guarantees more lucrative partnerships and revenue opportunities. A winning team, especially in the highest division, is more likely to attract sponsors due to their increase in exposure (Marcaillou, 2021). In rugby success is measured through the number of titles won, producing quality players and breaking even or posting a profit. For some clubs with lower budgets, success can be maintaining their status in the highest professional league possible.

1.3 Recruitment in sport

Recruitment in sport is not a new concept. Some of the earliest recruitment 'transactions' can be traced back to the late 1800s. In American Baseball, a trade of two players was registered on November 15, 1886, the first of its kind in any sport (Clair, 2015).

As time elapsed and sport shifted into a professional era, financing of such transactions increased and it became a norm to release, deal and acquire players in order to strengthen a team based on the squad's specific needs and desires through financial contracts (NFL, 2021).

Recruitment processes are diverse and changes from sport to sport. For example, the National Football League (NFL) recruit players according to a 'draft process' for players who have played at a Collegiate level for at least 2 years and are eligible for selection. Teams then have draft 'picks' determined based on where they finished the previous season, as well as acquired picks through trade transactions - another measure how teams recruit already established players (NFL Operations, 2021). This recruiting system is similar to other big sporting leagues such as the NBA, MLB and NHL.

Football for example has a global transfer window – albeit with slight variations. Transfer fees are paid by clubs to acquire players who are still under contract with their current club. Variables such as current length of contract, player age and position can diminish or increase a transfer fee (Littler, 2020). What started with the first fee for a player in 1893 for £400 between Blackburn Rovers and Everton Football Club (Simkin, 2020), has now ballooned to today's fees of €222 million (PSG for Neymar in 2017) €145 million (PSG for Kylian Mbappe in 2018) and €117.5 million (Manchester City for Jack Grealish in 2021) (Lange, 2021).

Due to the financial power of professional football, transfers such as these have become a regular occurrence. However, each professional club has a dedicated academy, much the same as with most rugby clubs. When a player is developed to an adequate level, the need to invest heavily on outside recruitment is much less prelevant (Ford, 2020).

Clubs who have the financial means however, are constantly on the lookout for talent that could improve the squad in the short, mid and long term. The interest of having a player perform upon arrival, without added development is lucrative for a club to invest in. Success being the ultimate goal, the balance between developed and non-developped player management is implemented by dedicated recruitment departments.

These staff scout, research and analyse player performances before determining whether a player is worth the money needed to acquire their

services (Jacksonville Jaguars, 2021). These departments exist in rugby, however are mainly carried out by coaches and managers and not necessarily specific employees (Doyle, 2021).

1.4 Aim of the thesis and Research Questions

The purpose of the research has been to explore recruitment practices in France, with a view of implementing these relevant methods within professional rugby clubs in Japan. In doing so, a specific focus has been centered on the academy level and the path to the professional squad. With this overall goal in mind, the objectives to come out of the thesis are as follows:

- Recognise the unique recruitment practices at the academy level and how players progress into the professional domain.
- Provide an insight into the exclusive world of professional rugby through current professional coaches and staff.
- Identify recruitment practices for the Japanese environment, in utilising several methods implemented in the French landscape

In order to provide credible data from the aforementioned objectives, the research questions have been determined as follows:

- How has recruitment evolved in rugby over the last three decades since becoming a professional sport?
- How is the emphasis of the academy player effecting recruitment?
- How do Japanese recruitment practices differ from French ones?

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

The first chapter is the introduction of the thesis. This chapter provides a background into the subject itself and the context of the both environments. The objectives are defined through the research questions. The second chapter displays the empirical methods in which the data was collected and displayed. Chapters three to five (Recruitment practices in Rugby, France and Japan) presents analyses of both primary and secondary data from interviews and literature. Chapter six discusses the recommendations French recruitment methods to be utilised by Japanese professional clubs. Chapter seven concludes the research.

2 Research Methods

Through research both online and first-hand, the focus is concentrated on aspects in recruitment, mostly in rugby but also in the sports world as a whole.

2.1 Research Targeting

The author is working as a coach and currently immersed in the professional rugby landscape. Being within this environment allows access to colleagues' recruitment methods, as well as personal experience. The collection of this observational data as an active participant allowed the author to utilize both primary data, as well as secondary data in order to provide a credible overview of a subject lacking in published information.

In utilising a qualitative type of analysis, the author is interpreting the collected data in order to produce a coherent documentation of the information presented. Specifically, a benchmarking analysis was performed with the objective to unveil methods used in the French professional rugby environment. This information was taken so to be adapted and implemented, in order to improve the Japanese professional rugby environment (USPS, 2022). The author used a deductive approach, using existing knowledge and tendencies through the questions posed to the participants well-versed in this environment (Saunders et al., 2012).

2.2 Data collection

The empirical data is collected from employees in positions of power within professional clubs in both France and Japan using a semi structured interview process. This process was non-standardised and although a series of questions was prepared, these questions were posed in an unstructured manner to allow the participants to elaborate on relevant information, yet not pre-determined in the questions (Saunders et al., 2012). Secondary data through literature and publications are also utilised, in order to confirm the qualitative data provided by the participants throughout the thesis.

Selected head coaches and directors of professional rugby clubs in both Japan and France were contacted through mutual colleagues, as well as LinkedIn. The participant's provided their relevant insights and convictions through over 100 years combined experience in both the French and Japanese rugby environment. The semi-structured approach allowed for the interviews to be conducted in an informal manner, allowing the participants to speak freely and at a time and length of their choosing (Saunders et al., 2012). The process of interviewing each participant individually commenced in June 2020 and lasted until January 2022.

France				Japan			
Club 1	Club 2	Club 3	Club 4	Club 5	Club 6	Club 7	Club 8
Director 1	Director 2	Coach 2	Director 4	Director 5	Coach 4	Director 7	Coach 5
	Director 3		Coach 3		Director 6		
	Coach 1						

Table 2. List of professional coaches and directors used for empirical data (Blair, 2022)

A total of 7 directors and 5 coaches were interviewed from 8 professional clubs – 4 based in Japan, 4 based in France. The decision for this number of clubs was the sample size of four clubs per country was large enough to gather qualitative and comparable data.

A potential limitation regarding this method is the bias participants may show for certain subjects, such as their own club or opinion on the governing body. Several answers to the same question were varied, thus making it difficult to provide a consistent determination for certain subjects. Coaches being on the field and more focused on immediate performance, may have a different view to that of a director. A director focuses more on the administrative and financial impact of recruitment. Because of this, their views may differ and provide varied data.

As shown in Table 2, aliases such as Club 1 or Director 5 are used to protect the identity of the participant. The sensitive information they are sharing could be shown to be critical of their club, other clubs and governing bodies. In order to keep their anonymity, when referenced throughout the thesis, the participants and their clubs will be displayed as referenced in Table 2.

3 Recruitment in Rugby

The recruitment in professional rugby (of most first-class rugby nations: France, Australia, New Zealand etc.) can be separated into two main categories:

- Academy Players are players who are recruited at a young age, usually between 15 and 17 years old. From here they integrate in a club's academy and development system. This method, explained in detail in chapter 4, is considered a long-term investment for the clubs. The end goal for both player and club is to progress into the senior professional set up within a set period of time - most likely from between the ages of 19-21 (Bonnet, 2016).
- Professional Players – This recruitment method is for confirmed players – those who are already considered 'professional'. Regarding the needs, both positionally and the type of player suited for certain systems implemented by a team. The cost of recruiting a player via this method, depending on the club in both France and Japan, can range from as little as 1500 euros and up to 100 000 euros of a monthly salary (Raisey, 2021). Additional add-ons such as signing bonuses, club benefits, as well as transfer fees can increase the investment of any given player (Director 2, 2021). A 'transfer fee' in the context of rugby is when a professional player has remaining years left on their current contract and another club wants to sign the said player (Shaw, 2019). The purchasing club must pay a transfer fee to the current club - usually the entire wages of the remaining years of the player's current contract (Director 3, 2021). As well as this, the current club will also request a further fee for the fact of liberating the player. This fee can range from 10-20% of a player's existing contract (Director 3, 2021).

Regardless of which type of recruitment is undertaken, what remains clear however is that both categories are necessary for a club to be successful (Coles, 2021). Having too many young players in the professional set up might

create a lack of experience and can even hinder development due to repetitive negative experiences (Coach 2, 2020).

In the French system, if a club neglects their role as a development hub for young talents, the financial consequences could be severe. Paying over the market-value on established players can hinder any future recruitment budget. While not meeting certain quotas of Academy players in the matchday squad, as required in France, can result in fines from the governing body (Mazella, 2021), (L'equipe, 2021).

The only exception in the rugby world regarding the use of these two methods is in Japan, where they focus purely on non-developed recruitment as a means to build their squad. There are several factors involved, namely cultural and traditional, which will be covered in depth on pages 31-34.

3.1 The start of professionalisation – 1995 to today

Rugby itself is a unique business in that its most important commodity, the players, have only been 'professional' since the year 1995 (The PA Team, 2017). Prior to 1995, players, no matter the country, worked regular jobs while playing and would receive a stipend from their club (The Telegraph, 2011). The multi-million-dollar tv rights packages, as well as the high-profile players (through the clubs) receiving private sponsorship for their services, forced the hand of World Rugby (IRB at the time). In order to take the game into the professional era, the sport was declared professional on the 27th of August 1995 (Carter, 2020).

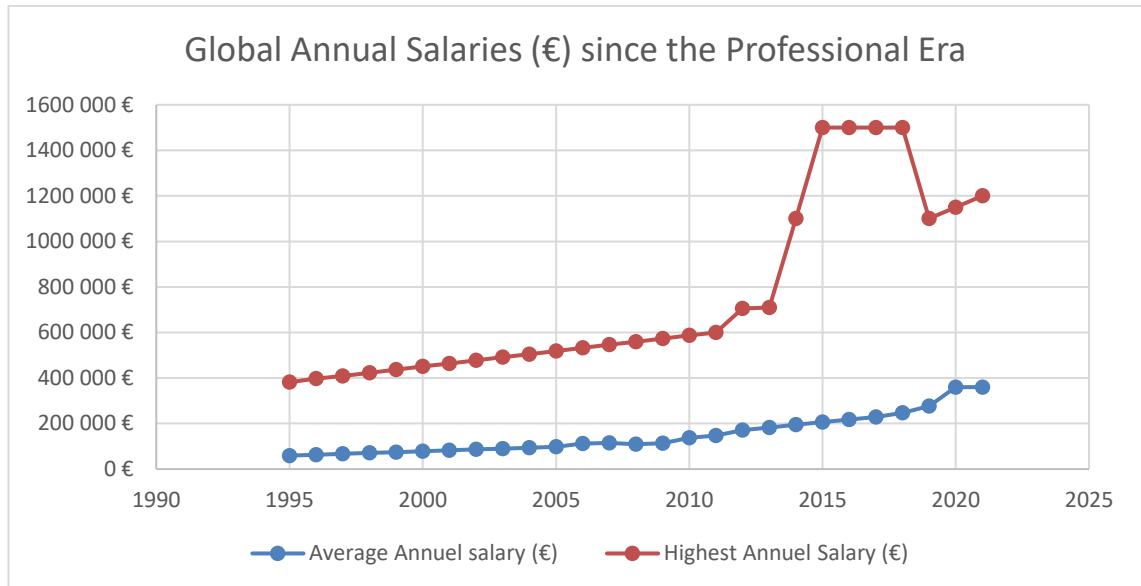


Figure 3. Data assembled for Annual salaries (average and highest) of global professional clubs post 1995 (Professional Era) (Blair, 2021, based on data from Carter, 2020, SMH, 2009 et al.,.)

Once the professionalisation had begun, the salaries of the players were at a premium. From earning (theoretically) zero dollars a year prior, established names were now commanding up to \$350,000 AUD (roughly \$608,000 AUD in today's market) (See Figure 3) per season (SMH, 2009).

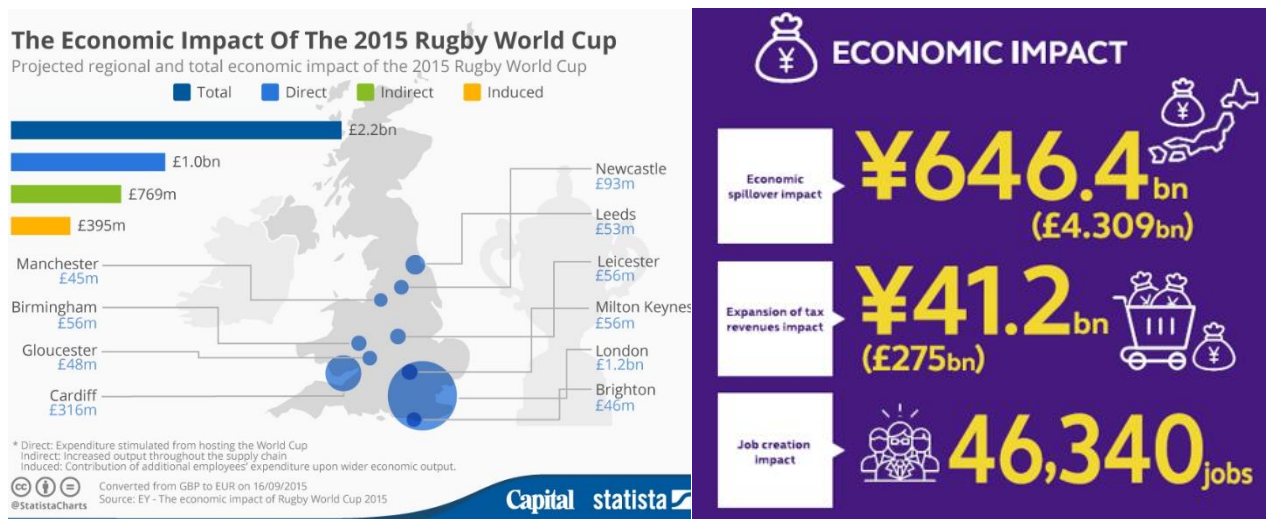
The rapidity with how the game transformed seamlessly from amateur status to professional status is not necessarily reflected in the salary figures from year to year. Steady growth can be noted from years 1995 until 2011 (Carter, 2020). This can be attributed to both regular global annual inflation, as well as the increase of television rights. Sponsorship of both players, organisations and the competitions themselves increased and thus facilitated the upward economic trend of the sport (Leaf, 2019). 2012 marked a significant augmentation as the first player to break the 700,000-euro mark as an annual salary was recorded (The Telegraph, 2011).

The following year would see the sport of rugby reach a landmark achievement, when the first player would earn over one million euros per year (Desprez, 2014). While small in comparison with football, this ground-breaking deal for

New Zealand’s Dan Carter, with French club Racing 92, paves the way for a new era of salary expectations for the players.

The potential to create a new ‘transfer market’ whereby clubs can target players currently under contract is one that could mirror, albeit on a smaller scale, the sport of football. In 2021, rugby’s largest transfer fee of 1.8 million euro took place in France’s top 14 for the South African International Cheslin Kolbe, moving from Toulouse to Toulon (Heagney, 2021).

The increased expenditure and money injected in the game is in turn due to the professional era creating a greater profile and access to the public. Currently rugby is broadcasted in 148 countries (RWC, 2019), while World Rugby boasts 128 member unions (World Rugby, 2022). The general global popularity of the sport, however is largely thanks to the game’s biggest asset, the Rugby World Cup (World Rugby, 2020).



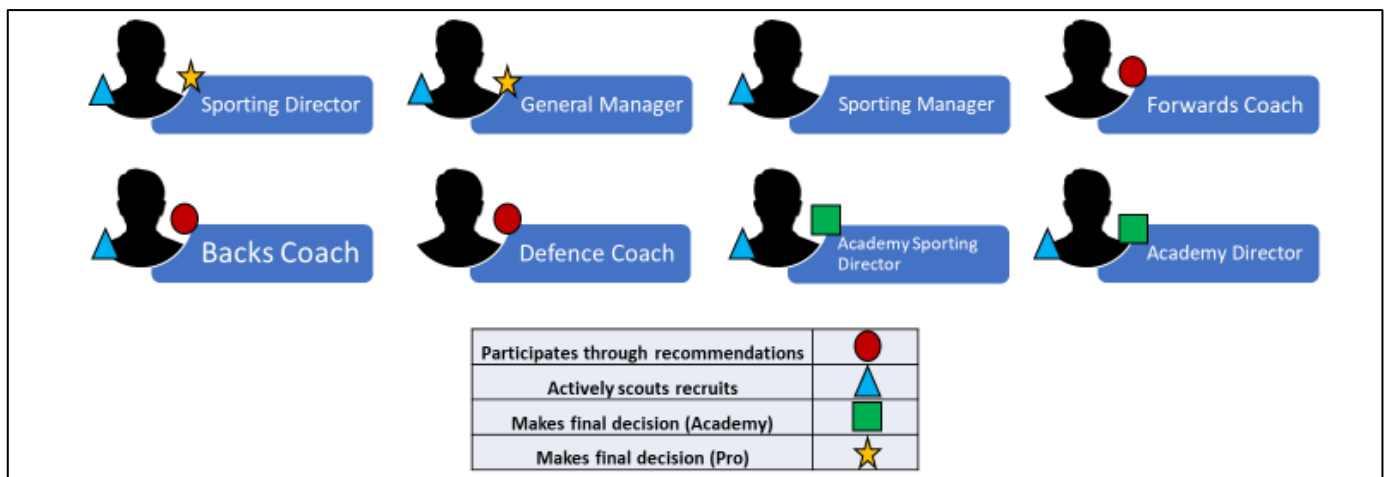
Picture 1. Comparison of economic impact between the 2015 and 2019 Rugby World Cups (JRFU, 2020), (Capital, Statista, 2015)

It is clear to see the financial effects this quadrennial event has in both the host country and globally (see Picture 1), with the increase between 2015 and 2019 tournaments' economic impact being \$2.51 billion US dollars (White, 2020).

3.2 The role of the recruitment department

Rugby is still in its infancy in regards to professionalisation when compared to football or any of the aforementioned American sporting leagues. Recruiting departments in rugby are seldom made up of specialised staff. Instead, the position of 'Sporting Director', 'General Manager', as well as the coaches themselves make up the department responsible for recruitment within professional clubs (Director 4, 2021).

Designated positions such as 'Head of Performance Recruitment' at Leicester Tigers (Williamson, 2021) or 'Chief Scout and Head of Rugby Operations' at Leinster Rugby (Leinster Rugby, 2022) are an anomaly. However, the more the game continues to grow, both financially and in popularity, the more these specified roles could emerge as a common occurrence within professional clubs.



Picture 2. The general makeup of a club's recruitment department and their defined roles (Blair, based on interviews with Director 2 and Director 3, 2021)

As shown in Picture 2, the makeup of a professional rugby club's recruitment department is undertaken by those with already existing roles. The sporting director occupies on-field organisation and team selection. While the director or

manager is responsible for the administration and financial management of contracts. They both however have equal input into identifying potential recruits (Director 1, 2020). The thought being that as these members are competent in the development of a player, as well as understanding the functioning of a team, these stakeholders are competent enough to manage the recruitment process.

Instead of having independent scouts tasked with analysing a player, both in person and via video, members of staff such as directors and managers take the lead here. This is contrary to other sports where the scout is predominately lower down on the hierarchical chain (Archibald, 2019). Most assistant coaches have an input regarding preference and need of a certain position, however ultimately the managers and directors have the final decision via their own behest.

Recruitment departments are apparent in all clubs, such as in Picture 2. Each department will ponder, evaluate and strategise the transactions of players, both incoming and outgoing, on a daily basis. This can include anything from formal meetings with a player involving the full tour of the town the club is located within. Alternatively, this can be as simple as sending a message to an agent or contacting the player directly in order to gauge the interest of a potential recruit (Director 4, 2021).

The overall purpose of the recruitment department, at both academy and professional level, is to evaluate the best players on the market, pertaining to the needs of the club in the short, mid and long term. Ideally the process is broken into four simple steps (Director 1 et al., 2022):

- Track and identify – Through targeted needs such as a player's position or due to injury in the current squad, scour over hours of video footage of potential recruits
- Contact – Once a player has been confirmed as 'of interest', contact begins with the player directly or the most likely through their agent to gauge potential interest

- Calculate – Both financially, as well as through their overall performances and track record. This step involves watching the player in person to gain a better 'feel' of the player. Constructing attractive incentives will be different with each environment.
- Decide – This four step process can take many months and in some cases with academy players, contain trial periods lasting around one week. Decisions often have to be made within one to two months due to external interest. The likelihood of a club offering the most money before other, the higher the chance they will land their player

Both French and Japanese clubs are engaged in ongoing recruitment, however both have unique aspects which may sway a player. Japan has direct flights to the southern hemisphere for players from New Zealand and Australia. Coupled with a minimum 15 game season, playing in Japan offers the foreign player more time in their home country (McMorran, 2022). France, while logistically is a long way away for these players, can offer the participation of the additional European Cup competition. In doing so, can create greater exposure for the player and generate a potentially higher income (Wilson, 2019).

Essentially, the recruitment department is engaged in a continuous game of chess, preparing for the future season - constantly moving (offloading or restructuring contracts of their current signed players) and calculating (players they want to sign) in order to strike a winning formula (a successful and balanced squad).

4 Recruitment processes in the French Rugby Landscape

Rugby in France is entrenched in tradition and clubs throughout the professional leagues have a fierce following (Reyrat, 2019). Being the oldest team sport in the country, many clubs are well over 100 years old and the championship itself is currently in its 123rd edition (Dine, 2001). The continual exposure of the sport in the country for over a century, as well as the popularity of the national team is evident through the professional domestic competitions (Reyrat, 2021). The recruitment of players is a highly publicized and continuous subject. Each club has their unique processes and constraints depending on their respective budgets.

The current recruitment system in place has allowed France to obtain a current world ranking of 2nd overall (World Rugby, 2022). This is a reflection on the development of players within a French club's academy. Currently the national team boasts 45/47 players in the national team who have developed within an academy) (FFR, 2022).

4.1 Unstructured efficiency

Recruitment practices and roles varies slightly depending on the club. As shown in Picture 2, the recruitment 'cell' of Club 2 is made of of eight people. For certain clubs however, the number can be as low as three individuals, or as many as eleven (Director 2, 2021).

Upon gathering information from members of staff from clubs in France, it is evident the approach to recruitment is fairly liberal – 75% of coaches and managers agree that there are no policies or specific roles outlined in regards to recruitment at their respective clubs (Director 1 et al., 2021).

A factor as to why the structure around recruitment is so different could be attributed to the length of the season. In France, professional competitions are

just under a year in length (August-June), with clubs only having four weeks between seasons (Provale, 2018). Recruitment for these clubs is an ongoing process, with seemingly no player off limits. The only limiting factor is that a player can not join their new club until the 1st of July (official end of the previous season) (Dymock, 2020). This is due to the fact players can not be registered with two clubs at the professional level (FFR 1, 2020).

While most transactions for the following season being officialized anywhere from November until May (Allrugby, 2022). This process includes coaches and managers, with staff turnover a regular occurrence (Ouest France, 2018). It is because of this continuous change in both players and management, that the practices of recruitment by these clubs are ever-evolving.

4.2 Importance of the homegrown player

The aforementioned JIFF quota in French rugby ensures that recruiting academy players is an obligation for every professional club. Due to this fact, all clubs start the recruitment - with incentives, of players from between the ages of 15 (scholarly) -18 (financially and scholarly) years of age (LNR 1, 2019).

The benefit of starting the recruitment process from this age allows clubs to develop players who can eventually break into the professional team. In doing so, a certain percentage of the developed players salary is not attributed to the salary cap - depending on how many previous years the player has been with the club (Munoz, 2019).

As well as this, there are benefits in developing players that may not reach the professional team of their club. If these players go on to sign elsewhere, the club itself receives financial compensation for developing the player (FFR 1, 2021). The financial gain of this process is usually re-invested in the recruiting of players and upgrading performance installations (Director 1, 2020).

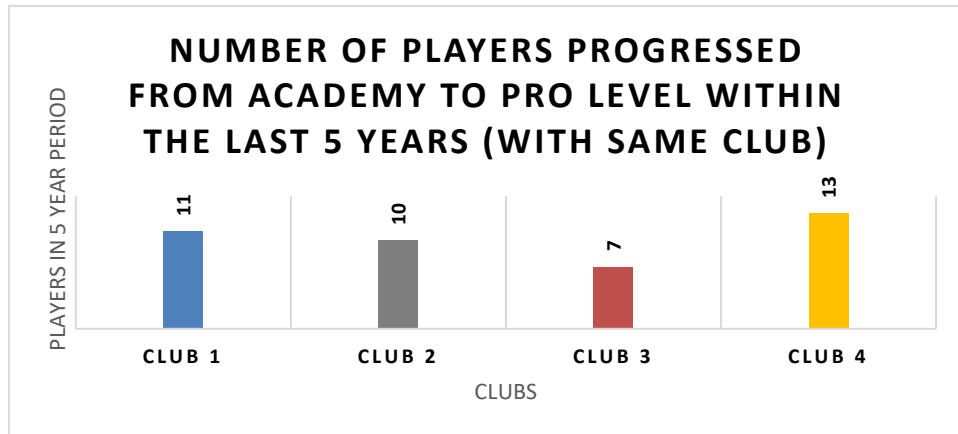


Figure 4. Academy to professional graduates within the same club (Blair, based on interviews with Director 1 et al., 2021)

Of the four clubs targeted for the research, over the last 5 years, only 13 players have played professionally for their first team squad (see Figure 4). In a squad of roughly 40 players, the number of JIFF players is around 70% (MHR, 2021). The majority of these players will have been developed through another club (Director 4, 2021). The emphasis and overall goal is to develop academy players that transition into professional senior team. However, the financial advantages of developing these players, who then sign with another professional club ensures the academy system will continue to be utilized by clubs in France (Director 3, 2021). Through specific performance coaching, clubs are now prioritizing greater academy development (Stade Toulousain, 2022). The view is that of a long term approach for these players which is a more financially viable resource to invest in (Midi Olympique, 2018).

In order to source these academy level players, the following practices have been outlaid by all the featured clubs 1 to 4:

- Open Trials – Accessible to all players, the focus is finding the ‘diamond in the rough’ as the quality varies greatly (Coach 1, 2020). Held 1-2 times throughout the season.
- Closed Trials – Players who have been identified from the open trials or in competition that may possess qualities necessary to integrate into the academy. Tests conducted such as speed, strength and stamina, as well as in the case of one club, size projection tests (Coach 3, 2020).
- Scouting Regional and Departmental combines – Cherry picking players who have already been identified by departments affiliated with the FFR (FFR, 2020). Used as a barometer to evaluate players in a high quality environment and how they perform within.

4.3 Initiatives and incentives for the academy player

Once the talent has been identified, the question remains how to seal the deal and sign the player. Financial means, through a contract with a monthly salary is allowed by law for players aged 17 and above (Director 2, 2021). A lack of player agents to negotiate compensation is apparent with academy players aged 15-17. This is due to the FFR regulating agents to stop player poaching from a young age (Director 2, 2021). Agents themselves are not entitled to a signing fee - approximately 10% of the yearly player salary, until the player is 18 and over (FFR, 2021).

An academy is a developmental branch of a professional club. Players between the ages of 15-21 harness their skills in order to potentially become a professional player (Racing 92, 2014). The club has an obligation to mould the player in a rugby sense, but also within the school system (Coach 3, 2020). The importance clubs place on the players regarding a player's studies is high. The FFR confirms this by compelling clubs to ensure all players are undertaking some form of study upon signing an academy contract (FFR, 2021).

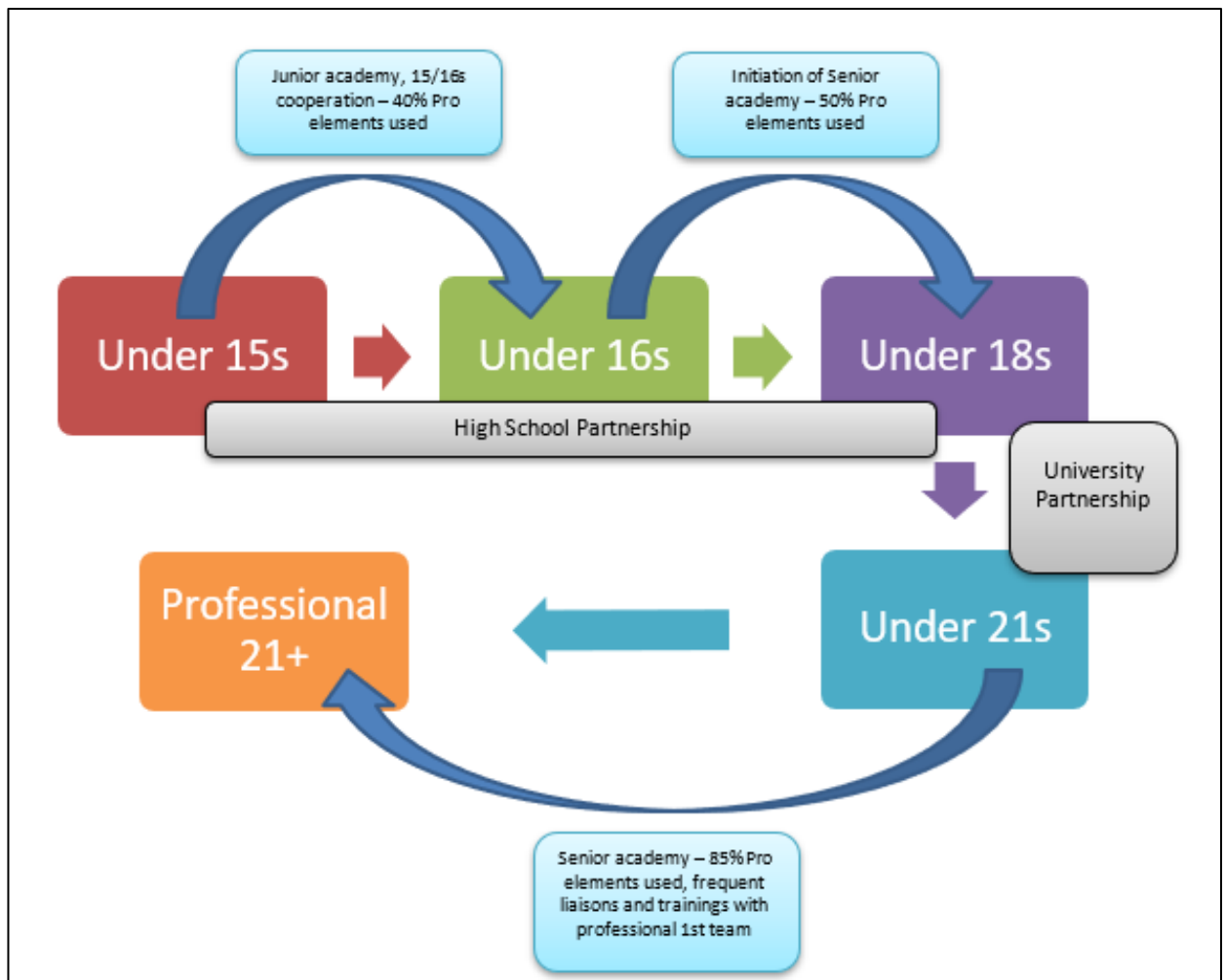


Figure 5. Example of the French developmental progression of a player (Blair, based on interviews with Director 1 et al., 2021)

The academy process ensures a coherent transition from the under 15 years of age to the professional first team. Elements such as strategy and pre-set movements are taken from the professional team and used increasingly the older the academy player becomes (Coach 1, 2020). This specific process

allows the players to be exposed to a high-level training environment, which facilitates the transition between categories (Coach 1, 2020). No matter which category the academy player is in, the educational aspect is established with partnerships with multiple high schools and universities (See figure 5). These partnerships provide additional support, given the players busy schedule. This support can include conducting classes on-site at the training centre, flexible study hours and providing specific mentors for subjects (Coach 2, 2020). The means in which coaches and managers entice the players to sign with the academy is through the opportunity they can provide, through both rugby, as well as in education (Director 3, 2022). In this sense, the players' parents act as the 'agent' for their child, given the aforementioned restrictions.

3 in 4 coaches interviewed concluded that there is no distance:age ratio when it comes to recruiting academy level players (Coach 1 et al., 2021). While this may be true, what is evident is the higher the age group, the more willing the club is to look outside their regions borders for talent (see Figure 6).

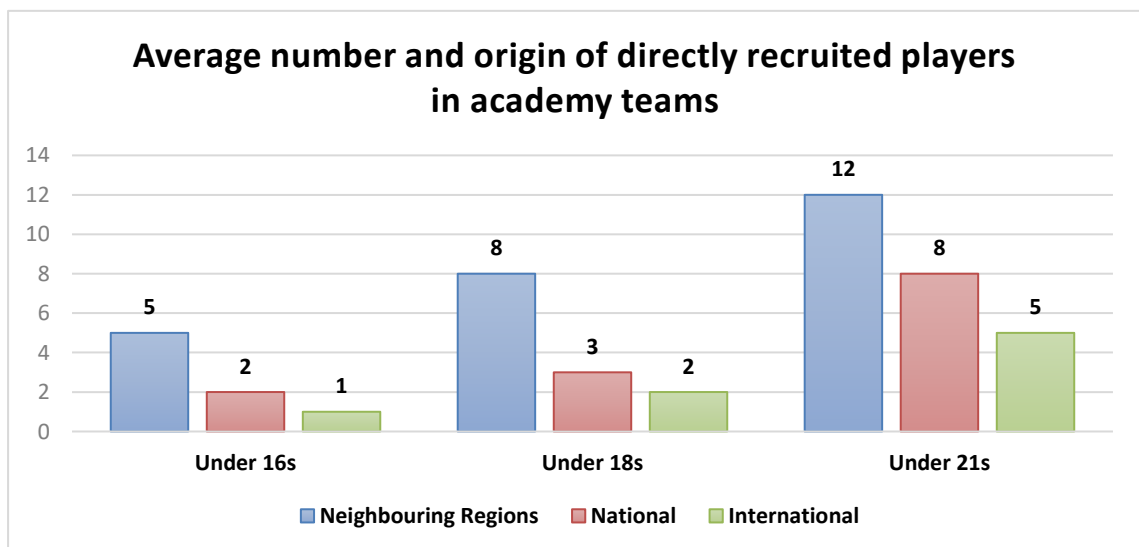


Figure 6. Average number and origin of integrated players at academy level (Blair, based on interviews with Director 2 et al., 2021)

In order to attract these players from afar, clubs in France have created a 'Section Sportif' (Sporting Section) (Pagnoux, 2022). In liaison with partner colleges and high-schools, a branch is created, enabling these talented players

to receive: Room and board, pursuing of educational interests, access to extra training sessions and scheduling tailored around their training program.

With the help of a government subsidy to help young sporting talent, the family of the player may have to pay a reduced fee (Clermont Auvergne Metropole, 2021). This fee is around 300 euros per trimester, instead of roughly 900 euros per trimester for an average student (Coach 2, 2020).

This partnership allows the player to receive a quality education, while the club have access to the players for between 5-6 training sessions a week (Coach 2, 2020). Because of this, clubs can develop the player according to their specifications regarding position and style of player best suited to the professional level (Montpellier Herault Rugby, 2022).

Lundi	Mardi	Mercredi	Jeudi	Vendredi	Samedi
8	9	10	11	12	13
VITESSE*** 17:30	ENTRAÎNEMENT P RéFO 15:30 MUSCULATION P RéFO 16:30 ENTRAÎNEMENT EQUIPE 18:15		MUSCULATION P RéFO 9:30 ENTRAÎNEMENT EQUIPE 11:15	ENTRAÎNEMENT EQUIPE 18:15	MATCH - CHAMPIONNAT 09 h
15	16	17	18	19	20
VITESSE*** 17:30	ENTRAÎNEMENT P RéFO 15:30 MUSCULATION P RéFO 16:30 ENTRAÎNEMENT EQUIPE 18:15		ENTRAÎNEMENT P RéFO 15:30 MUSCULATION P RéFO 16:30 ENTRAÎNEMENT EQUIPE 18:15	ENTRAÎNEMENT EQUIPE 18:15	MATCH - CHAMPIONNAT 09 h
22	23	24	25	26	27
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Picture 3. Calender of a typical 3 week cycle in an academy program in France (Blair, based on interviews with Coach 3 et al., 2022)

Picture 3 shows a typical week in the life of an academy player. The schedule of an academy player is demanding both physically and mentally. Study councilors are employed by the clubs ensure the player can perform both in the classroom as well as on the field (Coach 1, 2020).

In summary, French clubs have invested heavily in their academy programs in order to ensure quality players are being produced. Financial benefits from the

FFR ensure the current system of developing players at the academy level will continue. Through the scholarly partnerships in place with the clubs, recruitment in France is open to both a younger and larger pool of talent.

5 Recruitment practices in Japan

5.1 A corporate structure with long lasting traditions

The current professional competition, JRL1, formerly the 'Top League' started life as the 'Japan Company Rugby Football Championship' in 1948 (Hanazono Rugby Museum, 2022). The keyword of 'company' is one that remains an important element. As each club is financed by a corporation, the image of any club represents that of the parent company (Director 5, 2020). Financial discretion is with both senior management and the accounting department as to how much investment the rugby department receives (Director 6, 2021).

In order to solidify this image, foreign recruitment targeting has been used to acquire established players - such as Australian international Matt Giteau (34 years old) (Reuters, 2017) and New Zealand international Ben Smith (36 years old) (Meikel, 2022), despite their age or current form (Coach 4, 2020). Players from top-tier rugby playing nations make up 44 of the 185 foreigners in the competition (AP, 2021). The acquisition of these players enhances the image of the club. The knowledge they can pass on to the younger members of the squad is a valued asset (Coach 4, 2020).



Figure 7. Foreign quota rule in the Japanese Top League (Freeman, 2018)

The competition has however mainly been viewed as a traditional Japanese operation – created solely to provide a positive image of a company by providing a ‘leisure’ experience for employees and the public alike (Director 7, 2020). In turn the foreign quota regulations in place are arguably stricter than those in France (McElhinney, 2019). Figure 7 displays the requirements the foreign quota in Japan demands when selecting a squad of 23 for a match in the Top League. While 6 foreigners can be named in the squad, 3 must be eligible for the Japanese national team, despite their nationality. This is due to the World Rugby law regarding eligibility for a national team. The law outlines that only three years of permanent residence is necessary to represent a country’s national team (Sky Sports, 2021). While a maximum of 5 foreign players can be on the field at any given time (Freeman, 2018).

Despite the strict nature of the foreign quota rule, the national team rely on foreign players to make up their squad. 22 of the 38 players in the national team have arrived in Japan after being developed in other countries’ academies (Japan Rugby, 2022).

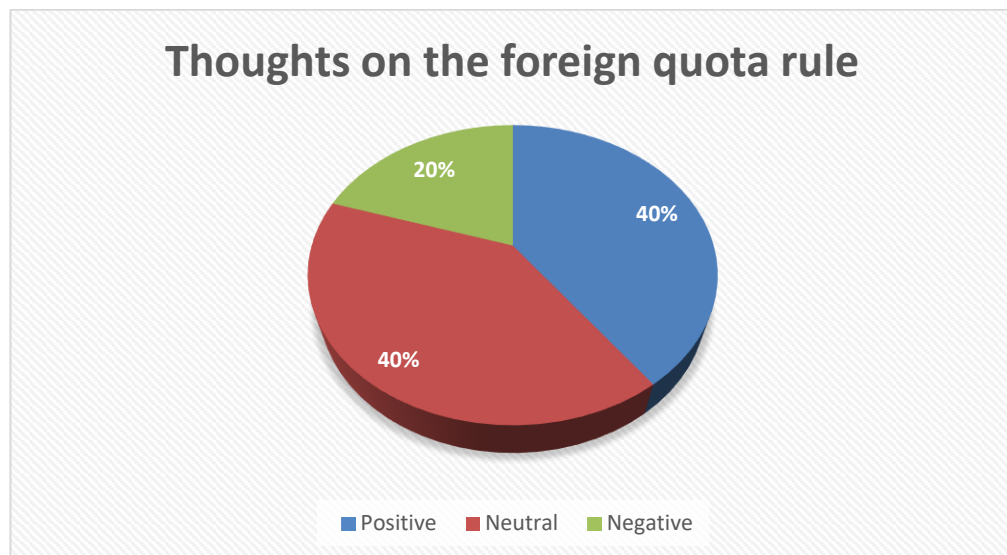
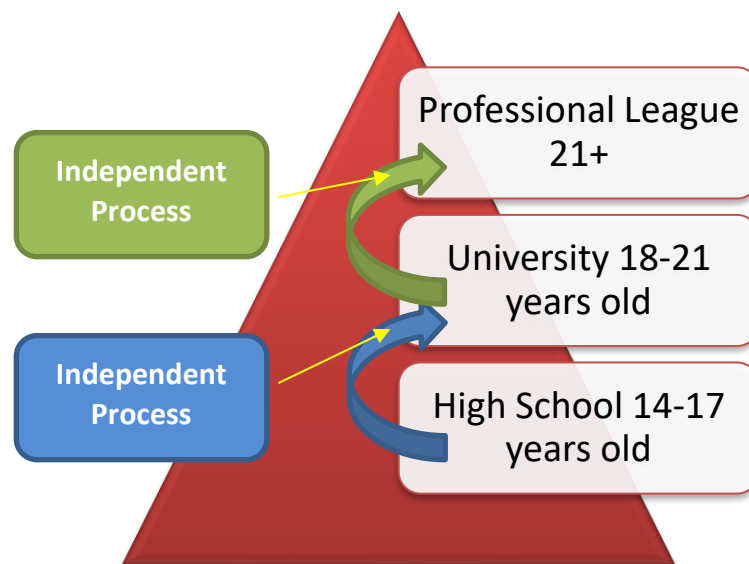


Figure 8. Managers and Coaches thoughts on the foreign quota rules currently in place (Blair, based on interviews with Director 1 et al., 2021)

Despite a mixed feeling of the regulations themselves as displayed in Figure 8, Director 5 explained that “The foreign quota rules are positive for the future of

Japanese players progressing to the national team. Without a limit, there would be an increase of foreign-developed players in an already diverse squad”. While Director 7 felt the opposite, “More foreign players, given the right level, could raise the standard of the competition and prepare the Japanese players for the international game.” The recruitment priority for clubs however will continue to be Japanese-based and eligible players (Director 6, 2021).

As with most traditional corporations in Japan, candidates seeking employment, including within the rugby department, must be university graduates (Akimoto, 2022) (Director 7, 2020). There are a handful of exceptions to this unwritten rule of going straight from high school to professional competition – Japan International Hyuga Shimada at Panasonic for example arrived straight from Gose Industrial High School (Asia Rugby, 2020).



Picture 4. Typical Pyramid of progression of the young player in Japan (Blair, based on interviews with Director 5 et al., 2021)

The university rugby competition, much the same as the high school rugby competition in the country, is the direct link to the professional league (Coach 4, 2020). The typical journey of a young player in Japan (see Picture 4) ensures they will pass through three different development systems (Tatsumi, Tsuchiya, 2016). The three levels of the rugby pyramid in Japan have no relevant link with one another (Director 6, 2021). Each progression on the rugby pyramid in Japan comes with an independent process put in place by each team for the player to learn – this could include strategy, management and individual player

progression (Coach 4, 2020). In order to play in a new system, players must forget certain aspects of previously learned gameplay (Coach 4, 2020). This can mean that some of these young players find themselves having to restart their development. For example, a high school rugby team in Osaka focus on a passing technique 8 hours a week. When a player then moves up into a university team, they may focus only 2 hours a week on passing, utilizing a completely different technique the new player has learned.

5.2 The absence of an academy system within professional clubs

The absence of academies within Japanese clubs is due to the nationwide historical traditions of both the high school and university competition. Players train between 5-8 times a week with their respective educational institutions (Coach 5, 2022), all for the chance of playing in their much publicized competitions (Stoney, 2013). The National High School Tournament, held in Hanazono, Osaka is in its 101st year (Rugby Asia 24/7, 2020). While the All-Japan University Rugby Championship is currently in its 58th edition, university rugby competitions were established in the country since 1918 (Hanazono Rugby Museum, 2021).

Because of this structure, most professional clubs do not identify potential recruits until their third year of university (Director 5, 2020). Establishing and maintaining a relationship with the universities' director of rugby or 'Kantoku' is imperative for clubs to attract players. Players at the university level consider the Kantoku as a sage guide bringing them into the professional game. Their advice and direction is often crucial in determining which company a player will engage, and eventually sign with (Director 7, 2020). Clubs are essentially forced to select several universities from who they will sign players from (Director 6, 2021). Clubs are forced to engage in the targeted recruitment between a small (3-4 universities) but high quality talent pool of players and a large (5-12 universities) talent pool with a mixed level of potential (Director 7, 2021). The strategy is in the understanding of which players to pursue. This can include the positional needs of the club versus the potential upside of a player from the university competition, despite their position being filled by multiple seasoned

professionals (Director 7, 2021). The competition of rival clubs creating pressure to attract and sign players renders directors and coaches to gamble the desire of signing a player through the quality of the relationship with the university's Kantoku (Coach 5, 2021).

Development of the player is an aspect all clubs would like to have control of. High school players (15-18 year olds) are what clubs are really looking for – Open-minded and adaptable (Coach 5, 2022). However, When the university player arrives into the corporation's professional first team, they are usually between 21-23 years of age. After up to four years with squad numbers as high as 70 players per season (only fifteen players allowed on the field at one time), the window to correctly develop these graduates is small given the player to coach ratio of 70:4 (Solomon, 2019) (Meiji University, 2022).

Japanese culture incorporates tradition as a pillar of public image (SBS Cultural Atlas, 2022). The fact the school competitions are over 50 years older than the corporate competition (now the JRL1) (Rugby Asia 24/7, 2020) is an unfortunate detriment to recruiting young talent (Director 7, 2020). The place these competitions hold in that of the Japanese public is immense – over 57,000 spectators attended the University championship final in 2020 to see Waseda defeat Meiji university. (Waseda University, 2020). A change in the dynamic through the new JRL1 brings the professionalization of rugby departments and the obligation of clubs to adopt a town or region (Japan Rugby League One, 2020). This shift in policy could be an instigator for a developmental and cultural shift within the game, as well as the potential to recruit and develop players from the club's local region.

5.3 Japan Rugby League One – Will the new league force change in recruitment strategies?

From the season 2021/2022 and beyond, the Top League will be known as Japan Rugby League One. The change in name also brought changes that will have an everlasting effect on the Japanese game (Yoshida, 2022).

Clubs are now obliged to function as standalone ‘business’ entity. While companies are still heavily involved through financial input and recommended governance, officially clubs must present a sustainable and profit-making business model (Japan Rugby League One, 2020). Profitability in the Top League was not a priority until the formation of the JRL1. Recruitment has emerged as a key factor in generating income (Coach 4, 2020). Players in their prime are being favoured to experienced veterans, once relied on to act as player-coaches (Coach 4, 2020). While the cost of recruitment is an increasingly expensive activity, on-field success in the JRL1 has been confirmed to bring a financial injection to winning clubs (Kyodo, 2022).

While not official, the emergence of JRL1 has recommended clubs to create academy sections within their organization (Director 6, 2021). Despite this emphasis on development, only 9 out of the 24 clubs in the three JRL1 divisions have launched both under 12 and under 15 academy squads (Asia Rugby, 2021). These ‘academies’ are more for local area engagement, rather than performance development given there is no more academy after the age of 15 (Director 5, 2020). Furthermore, there is no league for these age group squads to participate in. Irregular matches are held with clubs who decide to field the same categorie of academy squads (Director 6, 2021).

Player Quota Rules	Top League (2003-October 2021)	JRL1 (as of January 2022)
Squad Rules	No limit imposed	25% players can be foreign in total squad
Matchday Rules	5 foreign players maximum in matchday 23 (Maximum 3 on the field at any one time)	No matchday regulations

Table 3. Difference in foreign player quotas between the old Top League and the new JRL1 (Akimoto, 2021)

In a move designed to focus the development of local players, the JRL1 has imposed a stringent foreign player quota from season 2022/2023 (Akimoto, 2021). 10 foreign players are permitted to be under contract in a maximum squad capacity of 40 (Akimoto, 2021). As referenced in Table 3, the JRL1 has moved to a more progressive view of that of its predecessor the Top League. In doing so, the JRFU have ensured the reduction of foreign recruitment, which emphasizes the focus on quality rather than quantity (Director 7, 2020). This initiative shifts the focus on younger Japanese players and the greater need to identify local talent. However, the power of recruiting and developing players still lie with high schools and universities and out of the professional clubs hands (Director 6, 2021).

The focus of Japanese clubs is on players who can perform at the professional level with an immediate effect - through both the national university competition and the international professional competitions. Due to this fact, the academy system such as in France, has been neglected in Japan. Despite a centenary of national exposure, the majority of Japanese players from the high school competition must pass through the four year university program. Japanese clubs therefore focus recruitment on players who can transition into the professional level without the need to develop them first.

6 Recommendations

6.1 Exploitable French aspects in the Japanese environment

After gathering the credible from Japanese coaches and managers, it is clear that change in the way academy players are recruited and developed is necessary (Director 5, Director 6, 2021). It would be unrealistic for the author to recommend that Japanese professional rugby clubs adopt the French model as seen in Figure 5.

The traditional competitions of both high school and university are certainly entrenched in rugby history in the country and will continue to be held in their current capacity (AFI, 2021). However, with the JRL1 already pressuring clubs to have academies in both the under 12 and 15 year categories, one idea could be to go one step further and create an under 18 year old category.

In doing so, partnerships could be formed with high schools participating in the national tournament. Professional clubs could provide a high performance environment, better suited for players in transition to a higher level (Coach 5, 2022). High schools could benefit associating with professional clubs through added public exposure, targeting more students to enroll through interest in the academic program while training in a professional environment (Lyon OU Rugby, 2022). The potential for the parent companies of clubs to provide funding to the schools themselves is another advantage in creating this partnership (Director 6, 2021).

The potential for a university partnership is different from the proposed high school version. Players are eligible to play in both the professional (JRL1) and university competitions due to their age (Coach 5, 2022). While this is currently an issue preventing a partnership, there are aspects which could mutually benefit both parties. A player signed with a professional club while being enrolled as a student, could play for the university when not selected by their club. Many players in their first year in the professional ranks play notably less matches than more experienced players (Director 7, 2020). By playing regularly, the club are still developing the player in their system and the player obtains valuable match experience (Coad et al., 2013). The university also benefits by having access to players that would potentially finish their studies early in order sign a professional contract (Director 6, 2021).

6.2 Implementation of a draft system

In order to bypass the unwritten rule of maintaining a relationship with the university's 'kantoku' (Director 7, 2020), an NFL-style draft process could be created for players eligible to be signed by professional clubs. While factors need to be determined such as a minimum contract offer and player eligibility (years of university attendance). From a recruitment standpoint, clubs could focus on all eligible university players, rather than potentially missing out on a signature of a player due to the current relationship with a university (Director 7, 2020). From a player's perspective, this system would also increase their opportunities to play in the professional league. This is due to the exposure of additional clubs through the draft and not the select few the university has a strong relationship with (Greene, 2013)

In creating a draft, the university competition would continue to stay independent of the professional clubs influence. It would also assist in the spreading of talent amongst the professional clubs, creating a more balanced competition (Premiership Rugby, 2022). The calls to have a draft would force the JRL1 to enforce a salary cap, which currently exists in the professional French competitions (LNR, 2019). The salary cap guarantees clubs do not overspend, both on players and over set periods of time (Cripps, 2016). A set percentage could also be set of how much must be spent of a the salary cap itself per year, such as in the NFL (Brandt, 2021).

The draft process itself is not unfamiliar to Japan. The Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB) competition conducts a draft annually (NPB, 2022). The event itself is another opportunity to promote the sport, clubs and universities (Garcia, Pallotta, 2018).

7 Conclusion

The recruitment practices in both France and Japan are unique given their context and relationship with the sport differs in each country. France can be considered more successful in a performance sense. Due to the revenue generated by the professional league, their current world ranking, as well as the number of players who had been developed through the academy system, currently in the national team. The choice has been validated in using French methods as a means to improve recruitment practices for clubs in Japan.

In response to the first research question, how recruitment has evolved from its professionalisation in 1995? The game itself has become a truly global sport. In doing so, the exposure has led to an increase in financial power amongst clubs, notably in Japan and France. The recruitment of foreign players is now the norm, with foreign player quotas being introduced in many countries, particularly Japan and France.

Addressing the second question, how is the emphasis of the academy player effecting recruitment? Through the aforementioned professionalisation, clubs are not just looking for the present senior player, the future generation is also being targeted. With tiered-age categories, young players can be developed using professional infrastructures and training methods. The objective is that these players may progress into the senior professional level in the quickest means possible. It is apparent that in France that the academy system is a successful means in preparing players for the highest level, as well as generating success both financially and through on-field performance.

This leads to the third research question, how do Japanese recruitment practices differ from French ones? This question is of most importance, given the objective of the thesis is how to implement the proven recruitment methods utilised in France.

The focus on recruitment by professional clubs in Japan is solely on players with a confirmed level. Targetting players from university competition or foreign professionals ensures a lack of identification and development at the junior level. The JRL1 has recommended that clubs organise academies, at their own discretion, for both under 12 and 15 years of age in the professional club's local area.

However, the lack of older categories and competitive matches against other academies, the word 'academy' appears to be just a word and not an actual institute for professional development. Recruitment of younger players into these academies is counter-productive. Players will go on to play in the high school and university competitions after the under 15's academy with a club and are free to sign with any other professional club. The young players participating in the two categories and not having a continuous progression into the professional first team is illogical. Clubs cannot thoroughly invest at the academy level knowing that the development of these players does not lead to them eventually playing professionally in the JRL1 with the club itself. The hard work of recruiting these players in a long term perspective appears to be erroneous, given the high probability they may never play for the professional first team.

The use of high school and universities as partners in order to develop the player in a coherent manner, favourising match experience and professional training methods provides aforementioned benefits to both parties. Clubs could specify their recruitment needs at the professional level, by implementing targeted strategies and recruitment at the academy level. The financial benefit to clubs could also increase due to assurance in player performance. By using players from their own academies – a known asset, there is less chance of signing an outside player with the risk they will not perform and in turn, cost more through the player's contract.

Given the evident success in developing the academy player, through further research and first hand accounts from professionals, Japanese rugby could indeed benefit from the implementation of a French academy-style system.

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Interview questions presented to professionals – France

Questions regarding recruitment in French rugby clubs

- **Does the club implement general principles (clearly outlaid/displayed) in regards to recruiting players?**

Yes / No

Comments:.....

- **From what age does the club start recruiting players with financial incentives?**

Age bracket: 16+....18+....20+....22+

Comments:.....

- **Is there a <distance-age> ratio in regards to getting a player to a club?**

Yes / No Age bracket: 16+....18+....20+....22+

Comments:.....

- **Is the club open to foreign players, if so from what age? And what are the restrictions regarding foreign recruitment in the junior sector?**

Yes / No Age bracket: 16+....18+....20+....22+

Comments:.....

- **Is recruitment overseen by a committee? And is there one person in charge that has the final word?**

Yes / No

Comments:.....

- **Does the increase of the JIFF quota change the strategy of recruitment?**

Yes / No

Comments:.....

- **What are your thoughts on the JIFF rules? Do you think they will improve the level of French players over the long term?**

For / Against / Indifferent

Comments:.....

- **Do you feel the French club system is beneficial to the recruitment and retention of young players? What are your thoughts on systems such as Australia and New Zealand where the governing body is the main organ of recruitment, through collaboration with the pro clubs?**

Yes / No

Comments:.....

- **Do you know the percentage of players approximately who graduated from the academy to the pro team within the last 5 years?**

Comments:.....

- **If you could change one aspect of recruitment in French rugby what would it be?**

Comments:.....

- **Have you had any negative feedback/criticism from overseas clubs when wanting to take a player, or is it more so through agents offering the player to you?**

Yes / No

Comments:.....

- **Similar with French clubs, are there 'unspoken' borders that clubs can't cross i.e. ASM Clermont-Ferrand venturing into Rhone-Alpes, Correze or even Paris?**

Yes / No

Comments:.....

Interview questions presented to professionals – Japan

Questions regarding recruitment in Japanese rugby clubs

- **Does the club implement general principles (clearly outlaid/displayed) in regards to recruiting players?**

Yes / No

Comments:.....

- **Are the club open to foreign players, if so from what age? Why do some clubs target foreign players that would be considered ‘past their prime’, compared to going for younger foreign players in their prime?**

Yes / No Age bracket: 18+....21+....23+....25+

Comments:.....

- **Is recruitment overseen by a committee? And is there one person in charge that has the final word?**

Yes / No

Comments:.....

- **How much of an impact does the foreign player rule impact the strategy of recruitment?**

Minor / Indifferent / Major

Comments:.....

Appendix 2

- **What are your thoughts on the foreign player rule? Do you think it will ultimately improve the level of Japanese players over the long term?**

Minor / Indifferent / Major

Comments:.....

- **Do you feel the current Japanese club system is beneficial to the recruitment and retention of young players?**

Yes / No

Comments:.....

- **What is your team's relationship with universities like? Are communications clear and fluid? Can there be some problems regarding recruiting a player?**

Needs improvement / Varies depending on the University / Positive

Comments:.....

- **Is there any one particular University the club has a strong relationship/partnership with?**

Yes / No

Comments:.....

- **Are there financial incentives from the league or union for players coming through the club system at a young age?**

Appendix 2

Yes / No

Comments:.....

- **As most Japanese players are signed from Universities, what are the ramifications, if any, when/if you sign a player straight from high school?**

Comments:.....

- **With the new U15 program being adopted by clubs, do you think there will be a U18 to create that direct link to the senior set up?**

Yes / No

Comments:.....

- **From what age does the club start recruiting players with financial incentives?**

Age bracket: 16+....18+....21+....24+

- **If you could change one aspect of recruitment in Japanese rugby what would it be?**

Comments:.....

- **Have you had any negative feedback/criticism from overseas clubs when wanting to take a player, or is it more so through agents offering the player to you?**

Yes / No

Comments:.....

Appendix 2

- **Are there ‘unspoken’ borders that clubs can’t cross i.e. Toyota trying to sign a player from a University where another club has a stronghold/partnership?**

Yes / No

Comments:.....

- **What are your thoughts on the ‘New League’ coming into place in 2022? will it have an effect on recruitment?**

Minor / Indifferent / Major

Comments:.....