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Rugby Player Migration from New Zealand to Japan¹

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Abstract

Within an increasingly global sporting economy scholars continue to investigate and map the migration patterns of elite athletes. This study involved an analysis of one particular flow of athletes (rugby players) from New Zealand to Japan. While previous studies have provided important information about the quantity of migration this study focuses on the experiences of the athletes themselves. The study involved individual one-hour interviews with ten rugby players who played for top level clubs in New Zealand (NPC/Super 12/All Blacks) and who subsequently became members of corporate teams in Japan. The focus was on the reasons why the players shifted countries and their experiences with both sport and wider culture. The preliminary results indicate that five players were attracted to Japan by lucrative contracts (including multi-year agreements that included new cars and accommodation), and three players were attracted by the opportunity to experience a distinctive culture. Furthermore, players indicated that there were many differences between New Zealand and Japan in terms of the systems and organisation of rugby teams, methods of training, and human relationships.

Introduction

One particular consequence of globalisation is the increasing movement of people, products and processes. Within the world of sport this has included the migration of athletes across a range of sports who migrate from their home country to work/play in foreign countries (Bale & Maguire, 1994; Chiba, 2004; Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001; Maguire, 1996). Indeed, there would be few, if any, international sports or nations untouched by global athletic migration. Consider, for example, the relatively small South Pacific nation of New Zealand with its population of four million people. Evidence shows that at least 650 New Zealand rugby players were registered in foreign countries including France, Japan and the U.K. in 2002 (Howitt & Haworth, 2002: 7). In a couple of instances players applied for citizenship and were selected for their new country. New Zealand born players Andrew McCormick and James Joseph, for example, were selected for the Japanese team in the 1999 Rugby World Cup. To this extent the case of rugby migration out of New Zealand represents what some have referred to as a player drain.

While athlete migration itself has a fairly long history and is not surprising given the increasingly global nature of sport, in some cases there are apprehensions about the longer term consequences of 'player drains'. In New

Zealand, for example, there are major concerns about retaining top players and by default, top level competition within the New Zealand Rugby Football Union (NZRFU) as ultimately this could impact on international success and arguably the very status of the 'national' sport. This study focuses specifically on the case of New Zealand rugby players migrating to Japan.

Since the 1990s, many researchers have focused on the phenomenon of globalisation in the sporting world (Maguire, 1994; Houlihan, 1994; Rowe, Lawrence, Miller & McKay, 1994; Harvey, Rail & Thibault, 1996; Donnelly, 1996; Horne, 1998; Jackson & Andrews, 1999; Chiba, Ebihara & Morino, 2001). Not surprisingly, as most of the early research focused on theoretical and conceptual issues, there have been calls for more empirical work. In response there have been a number of studies examining sport migration across different sporting codes and different countries. Studies by Maguire and colleagues (Maguire, 1996; Maguire & Stead, 1996, 1998) have helped quantify and map out the flow of athletic talent in English cricket and British ice hockey as well as that of professional footballers in European countries. There have only been a few studies, however, that have examined the issue from the perspective of the athlete; shedding light on why they migrate, and the nature of their experience living and working in a foreign cultural context.

In one study, David Stead and Joseph Maguire (2000) explored the migratory motives and experiences of twenty Nordic/Scandinavian soccer players in the English League. Amongst the explanations offered for migration they found that: 'nearly all the Nordic/Scandinavian players rated the development of soccer skills and knowledge as an important migration objective' (Stead & Maguire, 2000: 44). Furthermore, some also regarded experiencing another culture and earning high salaries as important factors.

In another study Naoki Chiba (2002) sought to understand migratory motives and national/ ethnic identification of four Japanese-Canadian/American players who represented the Japanese ice hockey team at the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics. The results indicated that three players regarded learning about their Japanese heritage as the most important factor for their migration to Japan with only one player citing finances as the primary reason. Aside from the journalistic work of Bob Howitt and Dianne Haworth (2002), however, the migratory patterns of rugby players, and New Zealand players in particular, has been largely overlooked.

In brief, this study of the migration of New Zealand rugby players focuses on two key questions: Why were New Zealanders attracted to go to Japan to play rugby and What differences, conflicts and surprises did they experience with respect to sport, work and wider culture? The specific aims of the study are first, to gain first hand knowledge about the characteristics and motivations of New Zealand players in Japan, and second, to explore the unique characteristics of Japanese rugby culture through the viewpoints of foreign players.

Methods

This study involved a qualitative approach via interviewing in order to understand the experiences of ten New Zealander players. The selection criteria for participants in the study was that they were New Zealand citizens and they had played at an elite level which was operationalised as competing in the National Provincial Championship (NPC) or higher, for example the Super 12 which involves teams from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Notably, of the ten players interviewed, six were selected for the All Blacks, the highest level attainable within New Zealand. In each case, following their New Zealand career they moved to Japan to join corporate rugby teams. The interviews with each player were conducted in English for about one hour from March of 2003 to August of 2004 in Japan and New Zealand.

Overall, this study sought to understand the players' migratory motives and experiences in Japan through interviews based on symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). In this theoretical approach, the researcher attaches importance to the meaning of interviewees as they explain their actions. Therefore, this approach tried to access, interpret and record real experiences and viewpoints. The content of the interviews included their migratory motivation and the differences of rugby football culture between New Zealand and Japan.

For presentation purposes the study uses pseudonym initials to help identify and distinguish the players and protect their privacy. The key factors examined included: the number of foreign players, nationality, age, and playing position in the first and second division of Japanese rugby football in 2002.²

The Differences between Rugby Systems in New Zealand and Japan

Structurally, there is a world of difference between the rugby football systems of New Zealand and Japan. In New Zealand, rugby is supported by the club system at grass-roots level and the club ties can be for a lifetime. In New Zealand, rugby is arguably the most popular sport in terms of overall participation and spectatorship, though soccer still attracts larger numbers amongst youth. In Japan, rugby is a minor sport with baseball and soccer being much more popular. Furthermore, in Japan, teams develop elite rugby players when they are older in high school, in universities and companies. Generally, Japanese sports are supported by school and corporations. Indeed, large Japanese companies, such as the Toyota motor company, have and support semi professional teams in part as a contribution to society but more importantly as a vehicle for marketing and advertising the corporation.

There are also differences in the nature of contractual agreements of players in New Zealand and Japan. Since 1996 players in the Super 12/All Blacks sign professional contracts with the New Zealand Rugby Football Union. In Japan, players sign an employee contract with a particular private Japanese corporation.

Howitt and Haworth (2002: 8) outline the differences in players' salaries between New Zealand and other countries as follows;

Today, the best contract a New Zealand-based player who is not an All Black can hope to negotiate is around \$80,000 [NZ dollars] perhaps a little more. The same individual might sign with a UK club for three times that. And similar mouth-watering packages are available in Japan. So it isn't surprising that vast numbers of New Zealand rugby personalities have been leaving their homeland for exotic destinations.

In short, there is a large salary difference between players in New Zealand and Japan. Moreover, salary differences are also evident for coaches. A rugby coach from New Zealand disclosed that he earned about \$US 287,000 dollars a year working as a head coach in a Japanese corporate team (personal communication, 30 October 2003). It may be that famous All Blacks players can earn even higher salaries. In addition, based on the interviews conducted this study confirmed that contracts offered by Japanese corporations and the clubs in the UK are very similar.

Recently, Japanese semi-professional rugby was reformed in order to advance the development of domestic rugby. Until the 2002 season, there were three elite-level rugby competitions in Japan organised with respect to regional location. Each regional league had eight teams but competitions between leagues were very limited. In 2003, however, a new 'Top League' was formed as a high profile national semi-professional rugby. As a consequence Japanese corporate teams are very keen to recruit high-level foreign players.

In the 'Top League', only two foreign players per team are allowed on the field at any given time although there could be four or five foreign players in the team. In effect, a quota system for foreign players has been established in order to ensure development of Japanese born players.

Results and Discussion

Migration of foreign-born players to Japan

The number of foreign-born players playing on Japanese corporate sponsored rugby teams has increased dramatically during the past ten years. In 1992, 29 overseas players were registered in the first division of Japanese corporate rugby. By 2002 that number had increased to 69 players.

There are a range of possible explanations, both internal and external, for this rise in player migration. To begin, we focus on one possible internal factor. During the early 1990s the Japanese economy fell into depression and many corporations stopped supporting semi-professional sports teams in baseball, basketball and volleyball (Sakonjo, 2000). While some Japanese companies stopped supporting top-level rugby teams, corporations such as Yamaha Motor

Corporation and Sanix started to invest even more resources in their teams. In part this could be due to the fact that culturally, the sport of rugby is viewed as a type of warrior or samurai endeavour and a strong rugby team gives the corporation a solid and powerful image. Notably, corporations involved in iron manufacturing, motor and electrical industries, that is, physical, masculine linked companies, tend to support top-level rugby teams in Japan.

In the 2002 season, 98 foreign players were registered with Japanese corporate teams in the first and second division of rugby football. Of these, 49 per cent came from New Zealand with fourteen Tongans, twelve Fijians and eleven Australians (see Figure 1). For illustrative purposes it is also useful to outline the relationship between playing position and foreign players. Some 57 per cent of overseas players were forwards, and about 43 per cent were backs. In particular, there were 24 No. 8s, 21 Centres, seventeen Locks and thirteen Flankers in the 2002 Japanese rugby (see Figure 2). From the results of the playing position distribution, it is evident that team's recruited foreign players for the central positions of No. 8 and Centre as a priority.

Figure 1: The rate of foreign-born players according to nationality in the 2002 Japanese Rugby (N=98)

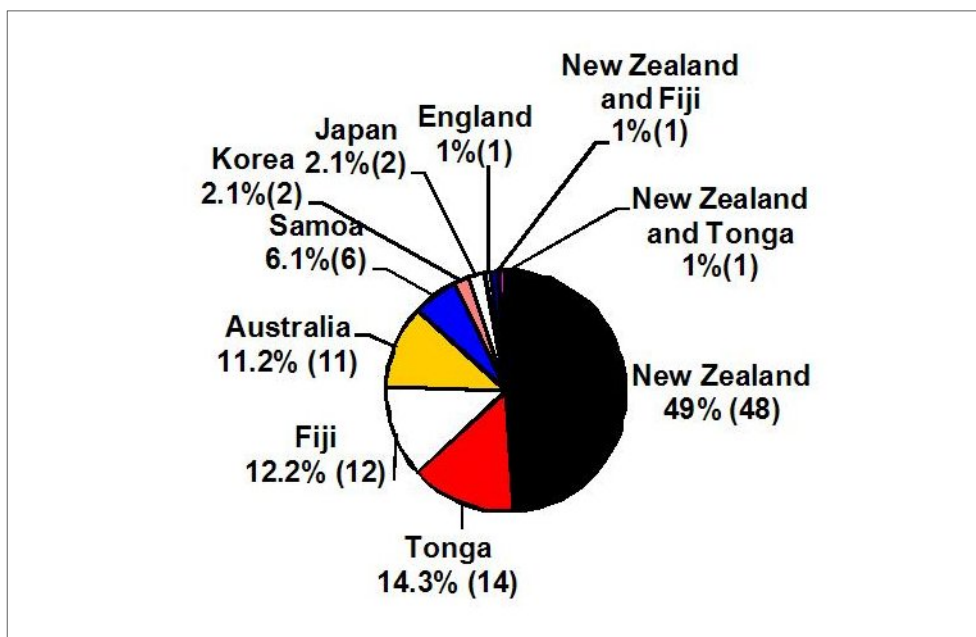
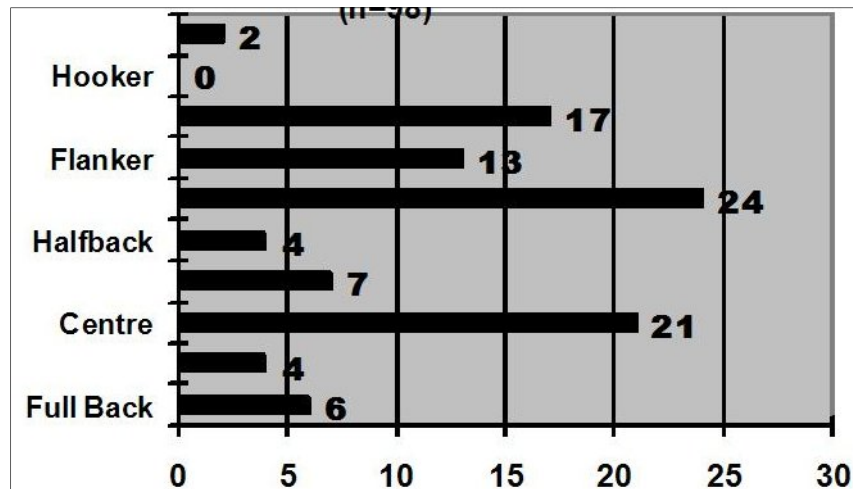


Figure 2: The number of overseas players by playing position in Japanese rugby 2002 (n = 98)



The migratory motives of New Zealand Rugby Players

Most of the players interviewed suggested several reasons for their migration from their homeland. Table 1 outlines the range and frequency of responses in relation to the question ‘what factors attracted you to Japan?’ Following this initial question participants were asked ‘what factor was the *most important* for you in terms of your decision to move to Japan?’

The results indicate that nine players were attracted to profitable contracts that included multi-year deals, new cars, and free or subsidised apartments. Five players indicated that a good contract was *the most important* factor. For example, David explained his reason to go to Japan as follows:

Firstly, financially. That’s very good and most players, well, admit they go just for the money. Initially that was of one of the really strong reasons for considering Japan. I like New Zealand, it’s very top rugby but if you are playing top rugby, you can get injured and dropped from the team. If you have a long term contract in Japan [you have] greater job security, something lacking in New Zealand.

From his comments, it is evident that David attached great importance to getting a secure contract with good conditions. He referred to the differences between New Zealand and Japan contracts with specific reference to injuries and compensation. Based on his experience when a player has an injury in New Zealand, he does not get paid because of his absence from the game. On the other hand, the same player will get paid in Japan. In another case, Jason suggested his reasons for going to Japan:

The reason I went was because of the money. Before I went to Japan I was thinking I would have to retire because my knee was bad. But you know, I got offered the money and I went. But, once I got there it was more than just money. I just enjoyed living in Japan. I enjoyed, you know, the company, they looked after me. They gave me a car to drive, you know, a new car. They gave me my own apartment which I never had before. They gave me a good salary along with three months holiday every year so I could have ninety days of holiday back in New Zealand every year.

Table 1: Migratory motives of rugby player to come to Japan

| Name | What factors attracted you to come to Japan? |
|---------|--|
| Tom | 1. to get a good contract 2. It is easier on his body to play rugby in Japan than in New Zealand. 2. to experience a totally different culture in Japan |
| John | 1. to get a good contract 2. to experience a new challenge 2. to experience a totally different culture (learn new language) |
| James | 1. to experience a different culture 2. to get a good contract 2. to consider other offers from overseas rugby teams |
| David | 1. to get a multi-year contract (financial reason) 2. to secure security in case of injury in Japan thus prolonging his career. |
| Anthony | 1. to experience a different culture 2. to take on a new challenge and to strengthen a weak team. |
| Robert | 1. because Japanese corporate team has a good environment (place, friends, company support) 2. to get a multi-year contracts 2. to experience a new challenge 2. to experience a different culture |
| Clerk | 1. to get a good contract to support his family 2. because his wife is Japanese 2. to experience a different culture |
| Richard | 1. to take on a new challenge 2. to play rugby in a different country as a full time player 2. to have an opportunity to visit Japan 2. because he has friends from New Zealand on the team. 2. to get a good contract to support his family |
| Mike | 1. to experience a different culture 2. to get a good contract |
| Jason | 1. to get a good contracts (indicated he could earn the equivalent of 10 years salary compared to New Zealand) |

In this table, No.1 means the most important reason and No.2 indicates the second reasons.

Thus, while Jason admits that his main reason for coming to Japan was to get a higher salary he also enjoyed a range of other benefits including material, cultural and social. Given the significant salary disparity between New Zealand and Japan it is not surprising that players would find the Japanese option very attractive. As Jason notes his one year salary in Japan was equivalent to ten years salary for ordinary workers in New Zealand. In light of this and the fact that a very favourable currency exchange would enable players to return to New Zealand with enormous buying power and sense of future security Japan is a very attractive option.

Despite clear financial advantages not everyone cited salary as their priority for moving to Japan. Seven players indicated that they were attracted by the opportunity to experience a distinctive culture with three players noting it was the most important factor. For example, James states that the:

I received many offers to go to Europe, and to play in England, Scotland, and France, and other countries. But the main reason we decided to come to Japan, was that my wife and I wanted to experience a different culture. Maybe it's a little bit harder than living in English speaking countries but it was worth it. Financially it was very good coming to Japan. But the main factor coming to Japan was experiencing a different lifestyle, just experiencing a different culture.

From his comments, it is evident that James attached importance in experiencing a different culture. Notably, he belonged to an Italian rugby team in his youth and emphasised that 'rugby is a vehicle to go to places.' Thus, his early sport and travel experiences may have influenced his views of the advantages and rewards of experiencing a different culture.

One of the interesting findings that emerged from the study's interviews was that some players said it was easier on their body to play rugby in Japan compared to New Zealand. Within the contemporary professional sporting era New Zealand rugby players involved in the Super 12/All Blacks have to train and play almost year round. As noted by some of the players interviewed they felt anxious because of the fear of injury and how this might impact on their future ability to play and ultimately earn a living. By comparison, there are a range of factors that reduce the risk of injury for players in Japan including: fewer games in the season and in conjunction with this three months' annual vacation, as well as playing against relatively less skilled and physically smaller opponents. Furthermore, in case they are injured players have a greater sense of security in Japan because they are less likely to lose their salary. Thus, safety and career longevity are key reasons for migrating to Japan.

Nevertheless, Richard mentioned that 'it wasn't one main reason. It was just many small reasons.' His reasons to go to Japan were to get his wife's approval and to play rugby in a different country as a full time player.

On the other hand, Robert selected Japan because he viewed it has having a positive environment within the team in large part because he had several friends from New Zealand on the team to support him. Thus, while he had two offers from other Japanese companies that were better financially, he actually chose the lowest paying contract.

Differences in Rugby Football Culture between New Zealand and Japan

The players indicated that there is a general difference in the structure of rugby teams between New Zealand and Japan. While rugby in New Zealand is supported by the club system at grass roots, teams develop elite rugby players in high school, universities and companies in Japan. There are also the differences in training systems. For example, while coaches in New Zealand attach importance to the quality of training, Japanese coaches emphasise the quantity of training. For example, Japanese players generally practice more than two hours at each session whereas New Zealand players tend to train in ninety minute slots. As a result, some New Zealand players complained about the length of the Japanese training sessions. Culturally, Japanese workers tend to think that hard work over the course of a long day contributes to high achievement in the company. Many Japanese coaches and players also share this philosophy with respect to training for sport. Thus, rugby training in top-level Japanese high schools and universities tends to be more than two hours a day, six days a week over an eleven month season (Light, 1999).

Another important difference in training methods was that in Japan practices include full body contact before games. However, in New Zealand there is a tendency to avoid body contact directly before a big game in order to prevent injury and save energy. A further cultural difference between the two systems of rugby relates to the relationships of the players after the game. New Zealand rugby players have traditionally gone to the clubhouse or bar to drink beer and socialise with their opponents after the game. However, Japanese players generally do not fraternise with their opponents after the game.

There are also differences in playing style. Japanese players are generally smaller than New Zealand players. The New Zealand players indicated that Japanese rugby looks like 'sevens style' rugby, because Japanese players rely on speed. When the players were asked about differences in coaching styles between New Zealand and Japan, they pointed out that the difference lies in the power relationship between a coach and a player. There are also differences in communication. For example, the youngest Japanese player generally cannot express his opinions to the coaches of the rugby teams. In Japan, players have to obey the coaches' orders. However, in New Zealand players tend to have more open communication with their coaches. Furthermore, those interviewed

also indicated a difference in how players are valued. In New Zealand, individual players are very important. On the other hand, the team and the company are much more important than individual players in Japan.

Richard Light (1999; 2000) observed the distinctive characteristics of Japanese rugby at the high school and university level. For example, he suggests that some Japanese players have difficulty making decisions in the game because the system of training demands the repetition of simple drills and exercises. Players in this study were asked about Light's observations. Many players of the players interviewed agreed with Light's insights into Japanese rugby. However, some players noted that because of the increasing influence of foreign-born coaches in Japan, training methods and systems were increasingly beginning to resemble those in New Zealand.

Conclusion

To conclude, let us summarise the players' reasons for coming to Japan. Five players indicated that they decided to sign overseas contracts with Japan because of financial reasons as a priority. Three players chose to play in Japan mainly to experience a distinctive culture. One player had a range of reasons for moving to Japan and the final player interviewed chose Japan because he perceived it to offer a good environment particularly in relation to be able to play with some of his New Zealand friends. From the results of these interviews, we see that players generally perceived the working conditions to be better in Japan than in New Zealand. On the other hand this study confirms that from a player's perspective there are major differences in the rugby cultures of New Zealand and Japan. These include a difference in the structure of teams; a difference in the power relationships between coaches and players; and a difference in training methods.

Notably, it is unlikely that most of what the players said would surprise the executives of the New Zealand Rugby Union. Each time a prominent player leaves New Zealand's shores for a lucrative overseas contract, whether it be in Japan, the UK or France there is a flurry of media reports highlighting the issue. Indeed, one of the most contentious issues in New Zealand rugby is an existing policy that prohibits players who head overseas to be selected for the All Blacks. Although in the past this rule may have helped retain the very top players in New Zealand it is likely that it has also contributed to the exodus of those players, despite their real potential, who perceived that they would not be given the opportunity to be selected for top teams. Thus, the challenge to reduce the effects of the rugby player 'drain' from New Zealand remains.

Clearly the demands of global rugby are having an impact. In 2005, the NZRU began developing new policies and contracts that would enable top players to receive higher salaries and be given a retainer so that there was less financial insecurity if they were not selected for the top teams, and in particular the All Blacks. Arguably, the NZRU faces an enormous challenge with respect

to competing financially in the global marketplace of professional rugby. Nevertheless there are signs of improvement. For example, recent initiatives have seen New Zealand rugby clubs establishing partnerships with Japanese corporations and team in order to share and effectively sell resources, including players, coaches and information.

Notes

1. This study was subsidised by a New Zealand Rugby Football Union Research Grant (2003).
2. The data resources of rugby players are based on the ' 1992 Year Book : Player directory of corporate rugby teams in 1992 ' and ' 2002 Year Book: Player directory of corporate rugby teams in 2002 ' which *Rugby Magazine* (October in 1992 and 2002) produces every season.

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