

The Newspaper as a Vehicle for Fan Participation in Fiji Rugby Union

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Abstract

Through the analysis of “Letters to the Editor” in The Fiji Times, this study aimed to uncover the opinions of fans on the management of Fiji Rugby Union (FRU). The study found the importance of letter writers’ opinions in advocating visionary-driven strategic and policy postures that are continually being assessed and benchmarked with other unions. Findings also encapsulated matters related to coach and team selection, reward systems, purposeful marketing – particularly of women’s rugby – and a proactive financial environment that are focused towards improved FRU team performances. Rugby Union being the national sport of Fiji, fans consistently demand improved and winning performances from its team. A gold medal at the Rio Olympics was the pinnacle of fans’ aspirations in Rugby sevens. In the fifteens code, with increasing numbers of Fijian professional rugby players, fans also expect higher performances than they do now. The study also found the debate and argument about keeping the Fjian flair of rugby and its cibi, the pre-game war dance, both crucial to giving the team its trademark.

Keywords: Fan participation; Fiji Rugby Union; Vision; Strategic Planning; *Cibi*; Women’s Rugby

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Introduction

Rugby was introduced to Fiji in 1884 by foreign soldiers and policemen (Rika et al., 2016). The church encouraged rugby as a replacement for traditional warfare and the *cibi*, which is performed before the start of international matches, is a reflection of this martial history. 1904 saw the establishment of a union by New Zealanders for white colonists, and the next year a native union was formed – the two were merged in 1945 (Rika et al., 2016). Fiji rugby is often depicted as involving the four Rs of *ratuism*, royalism, religion, and rugby (Rika et al., 2016). *Ratuism* refers to loyalty to the chiefly ranks of the land and royalism is the people's allegiance to the British royal family. Rugby in Fiji is often viewed as the *vaka I taukei* or the indigenous way of life (Stewart-Withers et al., 2017), and for many Fijians rugby is a passion but also a possible pathway for improved livelihood by the pursuing “rugby dream”. There are those who see Pacific Island rugby players in metropolitan clubs as a “muscle trade”, but it should rather be seen as an achievement (Stewart-Withers et al., 2017).

Shank and Beasley (1998) purported that there are two aspects of sports involvement. Sports fans' involvement can be cognitive and affective in domains. Fans display these domains through viewing television, attending sporting events, participating in sports, and reading sporting magazines and newspapers. This study examines Fiji Rugby Union (FRU) fans' involvement in writing letters to *The Fiji Times* editor as an activity that requires cognitive and affective dimensions. Shank and Beasley (1998) reinforced in the US context that, since a quarter of fans read the newspaper on a daily basis, more traditional means of communicating with fans such as the newspaper are still very relevant. Furthermore, Zagnoli and Radicchi (2010) stated that sports fan participation can be direct or indirect. Direct participation involves live spectators who are at a match, while indirect fan participants are engaged via radio, television, mobile phones, or the print media. In Fiji, many fans participate and offer their thoughts about FRU through the print media. Fans are imperative actors to the survival of FRU, as they provide the support base, and the major sport in Fiji forms a significant part of citizens' lives. Sports fans are often neglected stakeholders. As such, this study premises itself on stakeholder theory (Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010), locating fans as important stakeholders to FRU. Fans can affect and are affected by the objectives of FRU, as policies they enact can have an impact on how rugby union is perceived in the country by stakeholders, including fans. Fans, as a too often excluded voice in sporting federations, should have their opinions considered.

Literature Review

Online-based sports discussion forums are increasingly popular today, and challenge print forms of sports fan engagement such as the newspaper. However, both are still very useful platforms for sports fandom to share opinions and interact (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2014). Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2014) stressed that virtual sports communities such as *marca* (a Spanish national sports newspaper) in Spain would receive 800,000 – 1,200,000 comments per month with instant responses to each other. This is not possible in an offline, print newspaper where the debate can be delayed, but fans do have opinions and should be listened to. Orr (2020) analyzed sports fans' opinions from local Israeli newspapers on the tendency to demolish sporting venues to make way for other developments. Fans are not in favour of demolishing sporting venues, as they are legitimate expressions of the country's culture and heritage. This provided an impetus to preserve valuable spaces for sports, and indicates the importance of taking seriously fans' opinions on what happens in sports.

Sport organizations need to have healthy collaborative relationships with fans, and create avenues in which they can express their opinions – such as meetings, congresses, press conferences, web sites, and newspapers – as they can have important opinions regarding strategic and managerial decisions (Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010). Fans, are highly “opinionated” (Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010, p. 6) individuals whose ideas should be taken on board to help influence sporting organizations' strategic choices. It is imperative for sports organizations to track the strategic behaviour and postures of stakeholders, including fans, in order to marshal positive influences on decisions and help shape strategic outcomes (Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010). It is also important for sporting organizations to use the media to cultivate relationships, as maintaining successful relational exchanges with fans benefits the sports organization. Spectator satisfaction can be maintained by soliciting fans' voice, which refers to utilizing input of fans, and choice, which describes whether fans are engaged in decision making (Greenwell et al., 2008). Greenwell et al. (2008) found that choice plays an important role in fan satisfaction, and also suggest that “organizations do not necessarily have to give stakeholders total decision control, but rather involve the group or select representatives, in the decision making process” (p. 76). When the sporting organizations take fan opinion into consideration, it shows the value they have for the concerns of fans in the formulation of policy and practice.

The stakeholder theory is interested in who has input into decision making that would

influence the attainment of organizational goals (Crane & Ruebottom, 2011). Crane and Ruebottom (2011) asserted that the purpose of organizations is to coordinate stakeholder interests, which would be multiple and diverse. Stakeholder management is therefore critical to organizational success. The stakeholder theory is useful and stakeholder management is critical because, if treated well, those who have a stake in the organization have the possibility of contributing in many different ways, including sharing information, buying into a brand and thus benefitting financial situations, establishing loyalty, and increasing and harnessing energy towards organizational goals (Harrison et al., 2015). Stakeholder theory, according to Harrison et al. (2015), “advocates for treating all stakeholders with fairness, honesty, and even generosity” (p. 859). Treating legitimate stakeholders with respect helps create useful synergy. The stakeholder theory comes from business management, but has been applied in other disciplines such as sports, information technology, law, health care, public policy, and more (Harrison et al., 2015). Therefore, it is vital to create value for stakeholders.

Sports fans are often described as tribes, which can be “defined as a network of heterogeneous persons, in terms of gender, age, sex, and income, who are linked by a shared passion or emotion. Its members are not just only consumers but also advocates” (Dionisio et al., 2008, p. 22). Sports fans who follow a team fervently do show some form of cult and tribal behaviour in their involvement, with rituals such as collecting artifacts pertaining to the team, traveling to watch the team play, consuming the brand, and following teams on media platforms (Dionisio et al., 2008). Dionisio et al. (2008) stressed that clubs should “maintain an open channel with supporters” (p. 17), as these followers often religiously keep abreast with everything as a community. Thus, as members of a community, fans are more than simply spectators. The intensity of fans’ devotion to the club are high and are they excessively enthusiastic about their memberships. Ultimately, fans want their team to win, but devoted fans are committed to their team whether they win or not. Any club’s aim is to forge long-term relationships with its fans as brand and tribal communities. It is on the part of club owners to engage cult consumers and tribal brands for its benefit.

Rugby in Fiji

The rugby field could be seen as a historic symbol of imperial space (Dewey, 2010), but since the growth of professionalism in 1995, this space has also been a platform for expression of indigenous uniqueness and aspirations for Fiji and Pacific Islands rugby at the regional and international levels. Fiji gains international recognition and

reputation through its rugby, and many Fijians have overseas contracts, with 500 players in overseas clubs in 2014 (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2014). Fiji has a high player-population ratio in rugby, and its sevens team is among the most successful. In addition, Kanemasu and Molnar (2014) stressed that, in 2006, overseas rugby players made up 11% of worker remittances, totalling approximately F\$19million. A Fijian player at a top metropolitan rugby club could earn more than F\$1million per year, a huge contrast to the average salary in Fiji at around F\$11,000 (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2014).

Kanemasu and Molnar (2014) found that the main employment options many former professional players had were in farming, police, army, navy, prisons, self-employment, other non-rugby involvement, or left unemployed. Thus, what happens to elite rugby players after their career is important. Mannan (2017) estimates that a number of former elite Fiji rugby players are struggling, and it is important that they are mentored and encouraged to invest while playing professional rugby, as their playing years could be just ten years. As a contact sport, once a player is injured, his or her value goes down and his or her career might spiral downwards. Kanemasu and Molnar (2014), however, found that the cultural support system of families, kinship, and the communities helped many rugby players post career. Stewart-Withers et al. (2017) found that, of the 70 Fijian rugby athletes they had interviewed, rugby remittances contributed to the livelihoods of families at home and also in terms of capital accumulation. The impact on households and the community can be considerable, but also there are caveats with high demands from relatives, poor financial management, and lack of business investment, which can stifle sustained benefits (Stewart-Withers et al., 2017).

This study focused only on *The Fiji Times* and not *The Fiji Sun* – the other major newspaper in Fiji – as the letters for the whole year for *The Fiji Times* provided enough data to work with. *The Fiji Times* was established in 1869 and is the oldest newspaper in Fiji written in English (Chand, 2017). Chand (2017) noted that, with about 40,000 papers circulated on Saturdays and 21,000 during other days, it is arguably the largest newspaper in the Pacific Islands. With an online presence, the readership on Saturdays went up in 2010 to about 114,000 (Chand, 2017). Other studies that have analysed *The Fiji Times* include Chand (2017), who studied the paper's coverage on climate change issues, Connell (2007), who focused on features of *The Fiji Times* that covered positive stories of ordinary people who are achieving and valuably contributing to society, and Liligeto (2012), who compared consumer perceptions of advertising on TV and *The Fiji Times*. This is, however, the first study in Fiji to look at letter writers to *The Fiji Times* as the focus of a study on rugby. The

aim is to gauge the views of letter writers on the management of Fiji Rugby Union.

Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature and involves the analysis of letters to the editor to *The Fiji Times* on the national Fiji sevens and fifteens rugby union teams in 2012. A total of two hundred and seventy-six ($n = 276$) letters were collated from January to December of the year 2012 regarding both male and female national Fiji sevens and fifteens rugby union teams. Consequently, this study did not collect letters that concern rugby league, other rugby union leagues and tournaments, national teams at age groups, or touch rugby. This selection is because rugby union is the national sport, despite what Haravanua (2019) described as the growth of rugby league in Fiji as a notable challenge. In the Australian National Rugby League competition of 1986, players of Pacific Island descent made up only 0.7 per cent. By 1996, it was 10 per cent, 20.1 per cent in 2006, and 48 per cent by 2016 (Haravanua, 2019), so rugby league's opportunity for growth in the Pacific Islands is viable.

Data Analysis

The study incorporates Evans' (2002) method of analysing qualitative data, which involves coding and categorization. Coding requires sorting data with commonalities to categories, which are conceptual aspects of theories. Evans also states that the guidelines used to construct categories should: a) reflect research purpose, b) be exhaustive, c) originate from a single classification principle, and d) be mutually exclusive. Exclusive means that a particular data or statement clearly belongs to one category and would not fit into the other categories at all. Since this is a qualitative study, Kumar (2011) states that it should be concerned with identification of themes from the data, rather than frequencies and statistical procedures that involve numbers. However, Vogt et al. (2012) stated that quantitative data can still be categorized and recorded as qualitative. This study decides not to involve numbers and frequencies in its qualitative studies, but relies instead on themes. For example, letters about women's elite rugby made up only two of 276 in *The Fiji Times* for the whole of 2012, but these address a significant theme of gender equality and women's sports and are thus worth mentioning. The initials that accompany each quoted letter in the findings are the acronyms of the writer's first and surnames.

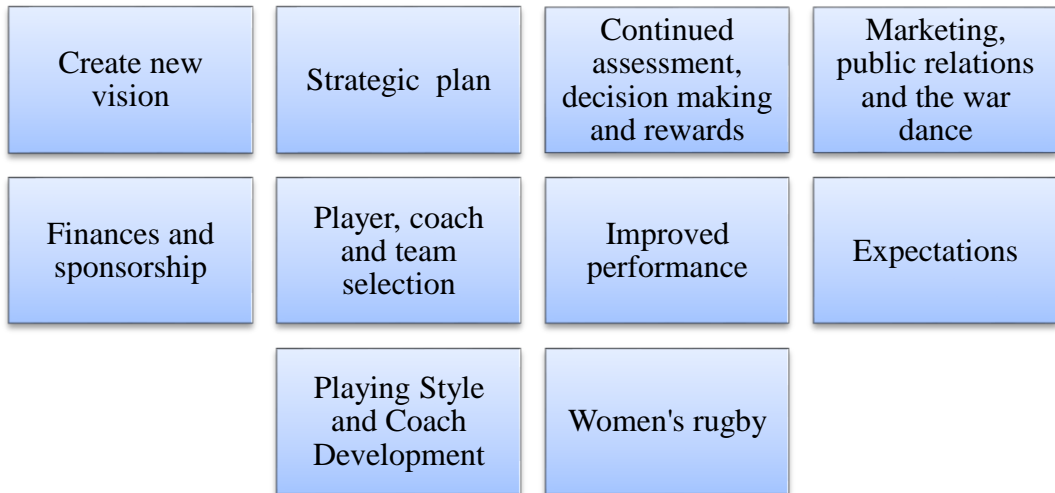
As suggested by Evans (2002) the letters to the editor were analysed using the following steps:

- (i) The first level of coding involved compilation of lists from the raw data. This is a simple, straightforward, and superficial initial analysis. For example, a list of

important materials extracted from the interviews totalling 90 was constructed. The list is without any particular order and included in this long list, for instance, are “Marketing of women’s rugby union”, “Attracting tier one nation tests locally”, “Short team assembly prior to test due to financial constraints”, “Debates on the war dance”, “Appreciation for management and sponsors”, “Strategies to support vision”, or “A trainer for each level of national teams”.

- (ii) Next, this large list was further refined and reduced by sorting its contents into categories. Items that fit into these categories were used to provide explanation and meaning. The categories can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Categories of information directed at the FRU by letter writers to The Fiji Times editor.



A skill that was used to establish these categories was what Evans (2003) calls “systematic comparative pairing”, conducted to ensure elimination of overlaps. This is implemented by comparing each category to each other. For example, if six categories were generated, A, B, C, D, E, and F, compare A with B, C, D, E, F. Category B is compared to C, D, E, and F, while C with D, E, F, and so forth. In this study, there are sixteen categories whose contents were systematically compared to avoid overlapping. In other words, this approach ensured that a content of a category would not fit in the other categories at all. For example, “Policy to focus on local players” is more appropriately listed under “Policy and decision-making” rather than the other categories.

Findings

This study investigated what letter writers were voicing in the management of FRU to *The Fiji Times* for each category.

New Vision

Many letter writers to *The Fiji Times* saw the importance of creating a new vision for FRU. Below are some examples:

Allow the CEO to assume office and work with the FRU board to create a new vision with the strategies to support such visions.... this must be communicated to as many people as possible dealing with rugby in Fiji. (AN, January 3, 2012, p. 9)

Fresh from the humiliation, the FRU relooked at the vision about our local players and appointed our own trained coach. This makes a lot of sense as it builds progressive career paths for our local ruggers as well as opportunity to compare the state of rugby development in Fiji alongside top rugby nations, let alone the coaching ability which held its own very well. (AM, 24 March, 2012)

These letter writers stressed the importance of the need to continually relook and create a new vision for the FRU. These recommendations were made since Fiji did not do too well in the 2011 World Cup. Fletcher and Arnold (2011) defined “vision” as the organization’s ultimate aspiration, while Aaltio-Marjosola and Takala (2000) defined a vision as an idealized goal that proposes a future better than the status quo. Reaching ultimate aspirations and better performances rather than the status quo needs a clear vision to guide change efforts and to redirect members of large and complex organizations towards a new set of activities (Moore et al., 2010). A clear vision statement for a sports organization may be a brief and simple slogan or statement, and must clearly explain, represent, or symbolize the shared purpose within the organization (Gordon, 2007). Creating such a shared vision, empowering members and stakeholders, and providing sufficient drive to mobilize others are imperative to fulfilling the vision (Folta et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2010). In order that there is a shared vision, open communication is a critical mechanism to help align members’ actions with the change goals (Moore et al., 2010) and helps to align, motivate, and inspire relevant people towards achieving that vision (Aaltio-Marjosola & Takala, 2000; Gordon, 2007).

The following letters emphasize the need to have all who have an interest in Fiji rugby to know its vision and aspirations communicated to them:

It would greatly help if each FRU employee understands the strategic function of their job and how they can bring value to the overall objectives of CEO and the coaches. (AM, 20 January, 2012)

Ensure that a good team with track record of change management are in place to drive the change... (AM, January, 12, 2012)

In realizing the team's vision, letter writers are recommending the salience of components of the FRU understanding their roles and also the awareness of others' roles. Fletcher and Arnold (2011) support this idea by emphasizing the need to recognize boundaries and value the contribution each person can create in a team culture. The FRU does have ultimate aspirations as an organization, but can also have opportunity to be open to shifting changes in the rugby union landscape, its fans' desires, and contextual realities. As noted from the quotations above, letter writers stressed keeping track of changes and managing those changes. For additional discussions on visions, these may not necessarily be about the rugby union organization itself, but the team as well. In a rugby union example, two high-profile rugby union national coaches, Rob Macqueen for Australia in 1999, and Sir Clive Woodward for England in 2003, both with business backgrounds, coached their respective teams and won world cups. Contributing to these victories were that both coaches mapped out their vision and mission statements as well as the ways in which they would engage both administrative and playing personnel (Gordon, 2007). Gordon (2007) also advocates that it is essential to write mission statements for units within the team, such as for half backs, backs, and forwards. Each statement should be a realistic and current assessment of what is possible with the players available, and should add value to the overall vision (Gordon, 2007).

Player, Coach and Team Management Selection

Letter writers, of course, have many opinions about who should be in the team or who should play. For example:

Having watched the Wellington and Las Vegas tournaments, I urgently suggest these changes: Niko Verekaita for Kolinisau, Mataiasi Savou for Rawaqa, Nakaidawa or Samu Bola for Brown and Matawalu for Vucago. This is because Niko is a speedster and a ball hunter. Mataiasi Savou is a line breaker and a speedster. Nakaidawa and Bola are both aggressive and faster than Brown, also they're ball hunters. Matawalu, a utility back and most of all always clears the ball quickly from set pieces. He is good on attack and in defence. (LS, 18 February, 2012)

Last Saturday, we had the names for those to attend the fitness test and the trials ... I would like to let the selectors know that we have a very good prop in Viliame Seuseu, who plays club rugby in NZ. (MW, 25 January, 2012)

Letters to the editor are dominated by whom fans feel should be included and whom should not, and they often have explanations as to why they think so. The reasons they offer are multiple, and, in the quotations above, letter writers cited speed, being more aggressive, being a ball hunter, someone who is good in set pieces, or fitness, as the logic behind their suggestions. Fans often have educated reasons for their suggestions, as letter writers would be knowledgeable about the game. Athlete selection, according to Fletcher and Arnold (2011) needs to be relevant and objective throughout the process. Moreover, Fletcher and Arnold state that selection processes can be relevant if there are regular reviews of the selection policies to monitor their appropriateness to the current milieu and goals.

Furthermore, there must be regular evaluation of the organization, its sporting teams, and the formal and informal evaluation of staff to ensure that they address the organisation's vision strongly (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). Such concerns are addressed in the following:

Players who should be picked must have the heart for Fiji, strength and pride for our nation. (RP, 9 January, 2012)

I would like to stress that the Fiji sense team is not there for the development of players from one provincial side only but Fiji as a whole. (11 December, 2012)

Just a mention to the powers that be, if we could be consistent in our pool of players. Last week only four players were the remainder of the first leg and only three were in the starting line up. (LW, 9 February, 2012)

I shake my head in bewilderment as there doesn't seem to be any improvement by chopping and changing the players each time throughout this sevens series. (DC, 3 December, 2012)

Letter writers demand players who give fully into games and want consistency in both team selection and performances. It can be noted from one of the quotations that letter writers may sometimes voice concern about the composition of the team being dominantly from a provincial side only. Bradbury and Forsyth (2012) stressed that athlete selection is a complex undertaking and the diversity of performance platforms unsurprisingly indicates that there is not a single "list" of criteria.

However, as an example, John Mitchell, the coach of the New Zealand All Blacks in the 2001 and 2003 period, identified ten player selection criteria: physical qualities, present form, past form, set play skills, second phase skills, versatility, team fit on and off the field, defensive skills, mental strength, and special qualities (Bradbury & Forsyth, 2012). In order to avoid the growth in selection disputes, it is imperative to put in place clearly defined procedures and criteria, including the avoidance of ambiguous wording in selection procedural documents. This is crucial, as many selection controversies emanate from unclear and unspecified selection procedures (Bradbury & Forsyth, 2012). As seen with letter writers in this study, player selection is an area of debate in sporting teams, and having explicit criteria for the selection of teams is important. However, even with thorough criteria, different stakeholders have different viewpoints on team composition, making a certain level of debate inevitable, and fans obviously will not have a short supply of opinions.

Strategic Planning

Besides athlete selection, administrative and technical staff need to work together to ensure the team is strategically competitive and letter writers do pose their opinions as well:

The FRU/team management needs to nurture its captain (s) and not change captains every now and then. This is evident in DJ Forbes and the NZ 7s team. (TN, 17 February, 2012)

I believe if the FRU is in need of an expert I would suggest Paul Feeney come on board rather than the Auckland NPC coach. (AD, 20 January, 2012)

Fiji Rugby Union needs to think of moving Fiji rugby forward by getting an overseas coach, overseas trainer, getting a sponsor for the test match, better incentives, and selecting inform players. (NN, 21 November, 2012)

Letters writers often put forward their opinions on captaincy, coaching, sponsorship, and technical staff of the team, elements different from the general playing members of the team. Undoubtedly, nations want significant improvements and the highest performance for their teams, but the manner to do so does not have to be a copy of what happens elsewhere. Letter writers to *The Fiji Times* are frequently demanding of the coaches and team management for improved and peak performance in order to better world rankings, vigorously bridge the gap between Fiji and tier one nations, win the Rugby Sevens series, and to keep improving:

People in Fiji look at the Fiji sevens team with lot of pride and the expectations are always high. (SS, 11 December, 2012)

I appreciate what our Fiji 7s team achieved in Wellington, especially when they pulled up their socks after they were knocked down by our neighbours Tonga in the pool play. JK, 8 February, 2012)

Rugby spectators and fans could not have asked for a better match than the finals of the 2012 Hong Kong 7. (FL, 27 March, 2012)

Guys, you're half way there. It's not over yet, remember that. So go out and play to your very best. It's important to keep in mind a few things: keep your set pieces, mark your man, and most importantly, believe in yourself. (LN, 10 February, 2012)

I love the cohesion and synchronicity the most about this team. (AS, 27 March, 2012)

With the recent heartbreaking dismal performances of our 15s a side rugby team, one would think twice about waking up early in the wee hours of the morning. However, I will be 1 per cent because I am a diehard Fiji fan! (TK, 20 November, 2012)

Continued Assessment, decision making and a reward culture

Fiji rugby followers are ardent fans, so they do not expect less from their team. They want their sevens and fifteens teams to do well. In order to meet these expectations of fans and the country, this study noted that letter writers to *The Fiji Times* recommended the need for the FRU to intensely focus on the formation of a strategic plan that is feasible and can be financially supported. Letter writers recommended that these strategies need to support the visions of FRU and that they should provide clarity with managers and rugby unions. Gordon (2007) agrees with these sentiments by stating that it is important for sports leaders to develop strategies that will deliver outcomes for their aspirations. According to Berlin et al. (2007), it is important to work with stakeholders, not only to formulate a strategic plan, but to also establish a strategic sustainability plan to ensure long term viability. The following letters express these concerns:

I thank the FRU for conducting its strategic planning. This is vitally important if the FRU is to achieve its strategic, tactical and operational goals. In this day and age, the success of any organization rests on good planning. (SV, 16 July,

2012)

I believe it's not right to blame the players only. Either it's the chairman or CEO or the coach or the technical team of FRU, the captain or the players. It's all about decision-making from the top hierarchy to the bottom grassroots. (VG, 23 November, 2012)

Times are changing, we have to adapt to change and not rely on old technique. Complaining is a loser's style. (AL, 2 December, 2012)

These letter writers, among others, advocate strategic planning, informed decision making, and continually adapting to change as a consequence of constantly evolving foci; not to be caretakers of the status quo, and to be able to not only manage expectations but also overcome unnecessary resistance from stakeholders. Letter writers are suggesting consistently stimulating creativity and finding unique approaches to addressing old problems. Moreover, this study found that letter writers to *The Fiji Times* want the FRU to assess its current practices, policies and procedures, marketing, operations, benefits, allowances and compare them with current market practices elsewhere:

FRU will need to maintain momentum in implementing these changes and mould its reward system and corporate culture to boost the new direction. (AM, 12 January, 2012)

I hope that we will continue to activate our 'checks and balances' in our systems and procedures to ensure that the administrative weaknesses that reared its ugly head in the lead up to the last Rugby World Cup, by the previous administration, is never given an opportunity to resurface. (SV, 16 July, 2012)

It is imperative that we continue to conduct periodic assessments of our entire operations to ensure that our journey is taking us to our desired destination including the fulfilment of all our planned outcomes. (SV, 16 July, 2012)

This can be described as benchmarking. Böhlke and Robinson (2009) identified five steps to benchmarking in elite sports: problem identification; identification of comparison partner(s); data collection; data analysis and comparison; change and evaluation; and review. In problem identification, the processes that need to be improved are identified. In terms of what letter writers to *The Fiji Times* wrote, they indicated policies and procedures, marketing, operations, and benefits and allowances as areas and processes that need to be benchmarked. In other words, these

are objectives that letter writers want the FRU to put through benchmarking. The second step entails identifying and approaching comparison partner(s) or the benchmarking subject(s). The third step involves data collection and its purpose is to gather a comprehensive understanding of the processes by which benchmarking subjects or partners achieved their performances. Fourth, data analysis and comparisons need to occur in order to develop recommendations for the improvement of the processes that are under investigation. At this stage, due to the differing contexts of the initiating organization and partner(s), it is important to judge the technical transferability of the identified practices to verify relevance. In the final step, changes need to begin at the initiating organization to incorporate the learning that took place in the benchmarking process. These changes need to subsequently be evaluated and reviewed (Böhlke & Robinson, 2009).

Improved Performance

Thus, the FRU is a major sporting organization in Fiji and has the potential for continued development and advancement through benchmarking and applying contextually relevant outcomes to such a process. An area there was demand for from letter writers is to utilize more local players, possibly due to the performances of the 2011 World Cup team:

The move by the FRU heads to mould local players is definitely a progress strategy. (AD, 29 February, 2012)

To once again cement itself as a force to be reckoned with in world rugby, credit has to go to those in leadership at Rugby House for implementing changes that will benefit the local game. (ON, 29 June, 2012)

Can FRU take a gamble and select the next Flying Fijians squad from local home-grown players only. Our national team might then be able to really fly. (BB, 13 November, 2012)

Letter writers to *The Fiji Times* mostly agreed on FRU's policy to focus more on local players and coaches. Letter writers perceive this as opportunity to improve the local game and help build progressive career paths for local rugby players and coaches. However, this is true of the sevens team, where representatives are purposely Fiji-based. The fifteens team is different, and by the 2019 rugby world cup at Japan, only seven of the squad of 32 are Fiji-based players when compared to the 1987 world cup, where only two were overseas-based players but the majority were local players (Sport 24, 2019). This also shows that, since the professional era, an

increasing number of Fiji rugby players have been recruited into clubs overseas. For example, Dewey (2010) illustrated that a significant feature of the professional era of rugby is the increase in players of Pacific Island origins in professional competitions. In Super Rugby, for instance, Pasifika players doubled from 25 in 1997, to 50 in 2007. Or 42 Pacific Islanders can be found in the top two divisions of French rugby, and some 70 in lower leagues (Dewey, 2010). Recruitment policies into national teams are important but Harris et al. (2009) cautioned that it is critical to policy delivery that there is clear communication with sporting organizations so that they understand and commit to the new policy objectives and targets, because they are central to the delivery of policies. Furthermore, Harris et al. (2009) stressed that sporting clubs within the country are well versed with policy objectives, as they have crucial roles in elevating recruitment and maintenance of new sports participants.

Playing style and Coach Development

Another area fans, as letter writers, want to be contextual, is the debate on the Fijian flair:

Fiji Rugby finds itself playing someone else's rugby, which has defence systems already in playbooks to counter them. No, don't totally disregard the IRB manuals, just add a pinch of salt while going through it.... Formulate our own brand and style of rugby that will compliment our strengths and address our weaknesses. (UE, 16 July, 2012)

We are leading the HSBC Sevens World Series after the first leg, we have won the first tournament of the series, we have a new brand of rugby this season and it's slowly bearing the fruit. (NK, 23 January, 2012)

Our sevens team and management kicked start the 2011-2012 7s series in the Gold Coast by winning and displaying our rugby flair and support play that rugby pundits and commentators commended on. As we progressed to the next two legs, again our players tried to mix physicality and individuality which not only created injuries but losing out points in the finals. (JS, 16 February, 2012)

The coaches have asserted from the beginning that Fiji's winning ways is in its traditional flair. (SR, 29 March, 2012)

Overseas rugby involves more structure and though not deliberate, it systematically chokes the Fijian flair to almost non-existence in the contracted

Fijian player. (UE, 16 July, 2012)

Letter writers to *The Fiji Times* acknowledge the FRU for many of the positive activities it implements, such as initiating valuable policy changes, protecting the image of the FRU, making correct coach and player selections, marketing talents overseas, increasing national team ratings, and for keeping the Fiji flair of playing rugby union. This does not mean disregarding the IRB manual. It means working on the strengths of the Fijian rugby athlete and keeping its flair. Fiji rugby since 1913 was managed by Europeans until independence in 1970 (Dewey, 2010). Dewey (2010) argued that the initial segregation of rugby in Fiji, and in the absence of structured coaching, may have developed the unique open style of play of Fijian rugby. In the FRU, colonial executives, for instance, in a Management Committee Meeting record of April 7, 1962 complained about the unorthodoxy that “No matter what you try to teach the Fijians as soon as they get on the field they play their own type of game” (Dewey, 2010, p. 159). This has been the comment since then, even from today’s commentators. However, authors believe it is not unorthodox but a style in itself. It does not have to be the metropolitan countries’ way of playing rugby to be the “proper style”. Tikoisuva (2013) also expressed that the modern rugby should not take away the Fijian style of rugby, and it is important that it maintains its natural running and passing game accompanied by close support.

Expectations

Since these data were collected before the 2016 Olympics, letter writers to *The Fiji Times*, as part of policy and planning priorities of the FRU, stressed the pertinence of a clear roadmap forged towards a Rio 2016 gold medal in rugby sevens. When Iliesa Delana won a gold medal in the 2012 London Paralympic Games in the F42 high jump competition, he became the first Fiji and Pacific Island athlete to win gold in the Paralympics (Devi, 2012):

When I read the headline ‘USA Sevens on quest for Olympic gold’ in the recent IRB HSBC Sevens World Series news website I thought this should be a warning as well as an inspiration to us in Fiji to strategically plan and set key goals now for the 2016 Olympics or else we will not have any chance to be able to compete with the bigger and wealthier sporting nations. (IK, 9 February, 2012)

The main aim is to win the Olympic Games. There is a need to select four sevens squads made up of young players and set a clear training roadmap for the next four years. (DN, 6 June, 2012)

The Fiji rugby sevens team won gold at the Rio Olympics (Ewart, 2016), the first gold medal at the Olympics for Fiji and in the Pacific Islands region. They overwhelmed Great Britain 43-7 to achieve gold. A day was declared a public holiday to celebrate this historic event. This sends an important message to small island nations, as Bosscher et al. (2009) emphasized, that smaller countries need to be more systematic in their talent identification and development than larger ones. They emphasize also that it may be advisable to target fewer priority sports that have real chances of success, than spread elite sport resources too widely (Bosscher et al., 2009). In light of this argument, rugby sevens should remain a high priority for the FRU and the Fiji Sports Authorities towards further Olympic glory. It would need committed and sustained funding to realize it.

Women's Rugby

In addition, in terms of being systematic and targeting few sports with real chances, Green and Oakley (2001) highlighted Australia's strategy of targeting "softer" medals for the Sydney Olympic Games, particularly in some women's sports and, as such, they focused on women's rowing, judo, and weightlifting with success. A focus on certain women's sport for elite performance can be extremely cost effective because many countries neglect women's sport (Green & Oakley, 2001). In this regard, Fiji women's Rugby sevens should be a viable venue for prioritization and development towards Olympic Games medals. There is potential in developing Fiji women's rugby sevens to being a medal prospect at the Olympics. Letter writers to *The Fiji Times* call on the FRU to market and promote women's rugby much more rigorously. Letter writers mentioned the delight of watching women's rugby and want more of the public to attend games. In this study, of the 276 letters that concern national Rugby Union teams in Fiji, only two were written on women's Rugby Union. This is indicative of the current status of women's rugby as a developing area:

Did anyone watch the women's seven-a-side games in the Hong Kong 7s. What a delight. (AL, 26 March, 2012)

Congratulations to the Fiji Women's Sevens team Fijiana for winning the Asian Women's Sevens championships beating China 15-0 in the final. With a good game plan and right mental attitude, Fijiana could hit the top come the world cup next year. (SV, 9 October, 2012)

Cava (2013) stated that attitudes of society and parents are obstacles to women's rugby union in Fiji. Some parents do not know that their girls are playing rugby union, as they were not allowed to do so but opted to participate without their parents

knowing. Furthermore, many girls in Fiji who participate in rugby are stereotyped as tomboys or lesbians (Cava, 2013). These sentiments are also similar in Wales, where there is continued maleness of rugby union and may view the female player as something of a contested ideological terrain, whose participation results in their femininity and sexuality being questioned. Participation of women in Rugby Union in Wales remains lower than other sports, remains hidden and largely ignored (Harris, 2007). In the United States, Chase (2006) also found that many players demonstrate a confrontational attitude toward the stigma of being a female rugby player and proposes that women's rugby should be an active site of resistance to the multiple, competing and often contradictory discourses of the female rugby body (Chase, 2006). The Fiji women's rugby sevens team known as the Fijiana, qualified for the Rio Olympics and were placed 8 out of 11 teams and out of medal placing, but this should be a realistic focus of investment by Fiji. According to Besnier and Brownell (2016), the Fijiana would need far more support than it is currently receiving and that the FRU should not "treat them as a distant second to the men's team". Besnier and Brownell explained the difference in sponsorship and financial support by stating that, leading to the Rio Olympics, while the men's rugby sevens team were accommodated at a luxury hotel, the Fijiana lodged at a Christian camp nearby with five players to a room with basic amenities.

Marketing/Public Relations and the war dance

In terms of the letter writers' suggestion of a vibrant website, the FRU does have a website that is maintained and provides updated news. It is a channel for the promotion of the FRU and its activities to its followers. Scherer (2006) stressed that the All Blacks web site is a hugely important marketing and communications tool that needs to be compelling to fans. The All Blacks web site is also imperative from a global perspective, since more than 75 per cent of the traffic originates from overseas (Scherer, 2006). The All Blacks is the core asset of the NZRU. It is the team, product, and brand that generate a major portion of the revenues. This brand comes with values that the team subscribes to, such as performance off and on the field, heritage surrounding the All Blacks, being authentic to fans, humility, and respect (Scherer, 2006).

The All Blacks has been synonymous with New Zealand identity, psyche, and heritage for over a century. Pre-match performance of the *haka* continues to captivate audiences around the world. The *haka* associated with the All Blacks is a cultural symbol and is a component of the attraction to the team (Scherer, 2006). The equivalent of the *haka* in Fiji is the *cibi*, but in 2015 there was an experiment to

change it. The letter writers debated on the Fiji war dance with those supporting the introduction of the *ibole* and those that want the *cibi* to remain. The *cibi* was the normal war cry at the beginning of FRU matches, but it was changed during certain matches of 2012:

Congratulations to FRU for finally doing away with the almost century old lacklustre crouch stance ‘cibi-teivovo’ with the new explosive war cry *ibole*. This is the kind of stuff we have been waiting for, for a long time to spark off and ignite the body, mind and soul into the battle field as our players face our foes in test matches in any of our sports. (MB, 20 June, 2012)

The Fiji Rugby Union is not going to perform the ai cibi nivalu war dance then they should traditionally return the war dance from whence it originated from, the Chiefly island of Bau. According to the FRU website, when the Fiji rugby team was preparing for its first ever tour of New Zealand in 1939, the captain of the team thought they should have a war dance similar to the New Zealand Maori haka. The captain was Fiji’s first governor general and the Vunivalu of Bau, the Late Ratu Sir George Kadavulevu Cakobau. He approached Ratu Bola, the high chief of the warrior clan of Navusaradave in Bau, for a cibi. As for the current war dance, it is to me, more Polynesian then it is Melanesian or Fijian. LB, 25 June, 2012)

Letter writers who agreed on the change to the *ibole* saw it as being more explosive and more likely to set the platform for confrontation. Letter writers that do not see the war cry change as a positive change argued that it looks like a Polynesian war dance rather than a Fijian one. They also argued the need to base decisions on the traditional and historical setting and origins of the war dance. The national team has reverted to the *cibi* instead of the *ibole*. Connell (2018) noted that the captain of Fiji rugby’s first tour of New Zealand in 1939, Ratu Sir George Cakobau, made the team perform the *cibi* as its pre-match challenge to counter the *haka* (Connell, 2018). With this historical attachment, it is important the *cibi* was maintained.

Finances & Sponsorship

Just as other countries, Fiji has to also embrace globalization. In the New Zealand scenario, for instance, Scherer (2006) noted that the All Blacks inevitably has to embrace globalization to ensure competitiveness on and off the field. A radical transformation into professionalism occurred in 1995 when the New Zealand, South Africa, and Australian Rugby Unions signed a 10-year \$US555 million broadcasting rights with Rupert Murdoch’s News Limited. Critical also was that the New Zealand

Rugby Union (NZRU) secured additional sponsorship agreements with various commercial partners including its principal sponsor Adidas. Adidas, being a global organization, helps to provide a wider reach for the All Blacks (Scherer, 2006). Letter writers had these to say:

I believe Watisoni Votu departed for greener pastures to support him or his family financially. If the rugby house can afford to offer glowing salary to contracted players, I guess no one will want to leave. (AD, 29 February, 2012)

A fantastic weekend for the Fiji rugby fans around the globe. It was a tremendous effort by the team as winning at the Happy Valley is always cherished by Fiji supporters. (BK, 27 March, 2012)

You have proved that Fiji a small island is not to be messed with. You guys showed the world that no matter if other teams are king of 7s rugby but we are the masters. (RP, 28 March, 2012)

It's good to see most of the teams have Fijians like the United States, England, and the NZ team and it looks like by the end of the season, we will see two Fijian teams that is one from Fiji and one from NZ. (KM, 28 March, 2012)

Fiji Rugby has put in a lot of effort to put Fiji's name on the world map and they have achieved huge success. Rugby has drained out their finances to help aspiring players get overseas contracts in developing their career and at the same time bringing world-class teams to play here. (AC, 20 June, 2012)

The signing of the core of last season's Fiji sevens teams to overseas clubs will definitely dent the efforts of the FRU. These players will surely be missed. Fiji fans would like to wish these players well as they ply their trade overseas to earn a living. (14 July, 2012)

Professionals overseas are faced with the dilemma of having to choose to between honouring the call of national duties and confirming their allegiances to their respective clubs as this means their bread and butter. (FR, 11 November, 2012)

Fiji is no exception, as countries have to deal with a globalized rugby union platform as well as protect its national interests and policy directions. Fiji players are in rugby clubs at all levels throughout the rugby-playing nations overseas. Many also end up playing for other countries and for those that play for Fiji, they often face the dilemma of representative rugby and club allegiance. But there is no doubt that the

remittances rugby players send home are considerable. The main destinations for FRU players are New Zealand, Australia, France, England, Japan, and other Asian countries such as Malaysia. Contracted Fiji players in overseas clubs provide an avenue for significant income for players: when playing at New Zealand professional clubs, they can earn up to NZD\$200,000, or at France EUR300,000. These Fiji rugby players send in millions of dollars in remittances to the country (Molnar & Kanemasu, 2013). Countries would need to display desire and capacity to manage the impact of global sports and set new agendas to protect its national interest through the redefinition of policy instruments and the renewal of policy capacity (Tan & Bairner, 2011).

Conclusion

Fans are an important stakeholder and a means through which they communicate their opinion is through the newspaper. Therefore, it is imperative to incorporate fan's opinions on FRU. Fiji is one of few countries that refer to rugby union as its national sport. When the Fiji Rugby Sevens team plays, the whole country follows it enthusiastically, from the remote islands to Suva, the capital city. With the inclusion of rugby sevens at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, Fiji won its first gold medal. This is a major achievement. The women's sevens team too can achieve highly if the highest of sporting platforms and major financial inputs before the next Olympics are required. Many countries, particularly Western nations, have embarked on policy development and strategies for the systematic and scientific pursuit of victory in international sport. In the same token, planning and positive management are crucial and the FRU would be required to continually improve the technical and administrative capacities to produce high performance athletes.

One limitation of this study has been in choosing 2012 as the year to collect the letters to the editor, as these is some years behind current events, even though the reason was for a pre-Olympic year when Fiji would compete at the Rio Olympics. This study was more focused on the managerial opinions of the letter writers, but authors also noted a wide use of metaphors to describe rugby, which might provide ground for further research. For instance, there was a metaphor used of rugby being like having sex, as one has to be in the correct mindset to perform, players were referred to as magnificent warriors, hitting the nail on the head with a comment one agreed on, or having a set of tricks that can be weapons in the armoury. The other area worth studying in the future is the popularity of God, and religion, particularly Christianity and the Bible in the letters.

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