

Women's Sport in Lockdown: Rugby's Next Phase

Article By:

Sports & Entertainment - Squire Patton Boggs

Unlike the men's competition, which is set to restart in August following a COVID-19 enforced suspension, the top tier of English women's rugby, the Tyrells Premier 15s ("**Premier 15s**"), was [declared](#) null and void back in March. [Regulation 22.9](#) of the Rugby Football Union ("**RFU**") Regulations brought the season to a premature end:

"The Tyrells Premier 15s season shall be deemed concluded on 16 March 2020, there shall be no playoffs, and there shall be no winner of that competition."

With the Premier 15s competition being a closed league, there were no knock-on effects of promotion and relegation to navigate. At the same time as the abandonment of the Premier 15s was announced, all women's competitions at level 2 and below were also curtailed, with promotion and relegation retained throughout the pyramid in accordance with a [weighted points per game](#) calculation of final league position.

It is not just the domestic game, which has suffered as a result of COVID-19. The 2020 Women's Six Nations Championship continues to be suspended; six out of 15 matches remain to be played with no timeline set as yet for the tournament's resumption. The postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics means that the popular rugby sevens tournament will not get a chance to shine this year either.

The promising platform for women's rugby in 2020 has no doubt been severely impacted by the global pandemic. This piece considers some of the upcoming changes and opportunities in the women's game, which will hopefully coincide with a resurgence in interest and a raising of its profile in 2021.

The Domestic Game

The top tier of the women's game in England is coming to the end of a 3-year cycle, which commenced in 2017 with the league's relaunch, restructure, and a landmark 3-year title sponsor agreement with the snack brand Tyrells worth a [reported](#) £2.4million.

At the earlier than planned conclusion of this cycle (given the curtailment of this season), the Premier 15s undoubtedly still has a way to go. Although viewing figures and attendance numbers have

increased over the seasons, the average crowd attendance was just 345 in the 2018/2019 season, with the 'Game Changer' event at Harlequins in 2019 representing a record attendance at a women's club game of 4,837. This season's edition of the 'Game Changer' was set to be held following the close of the Six Nations; it is difficult to know if the record 10,974 crowd watching England beat Wales 66-7 at the Stoop in March 2020 would translate to an increase in attendance at the same ground for Harlequins Women v Wasps FC Ladies.

Not long after the Premier 15s season was curtailed this March, the RFU [announced](#) that Tyrells would not be renewing its title sponsor of Premier 15s, leaving the league in search of a new partner. The timing might not appear to be the best as finding a new title sponsor could well prove more difficult in these uncertain economic and sporting times. However, with the Premier 15s set to start a new 3-year journey, combined with the excitement of the upcoming big international tournaments in 2021, the timing may well prove attractive to potential commercial partners. Securing the investment of a new sponsor will be crucial in continuing the push towards long-term sustainability for the league. No doubt the backing of an engaged sponsor will help to raise the league's profile; to encourage participation at grass roots level; and ultimately to assist in the league's slow steps towards professionalism.

From next season, several changes are being introduced to the Premier 15s. The league will continue to be locked and maintain its 10-team structure until at least the end of the 2022/23 season, with no sides relegated to level 2 (the two amateur Women's Championship leagues, North 1 and South 1).

The RFU announced a new [process](#) last August whereby the 10 teams currently competing in the Premier 15s would be independently audited at the start of the 2019/20 season to assess their suitability to remain in the league. The teams would be ranked from 1 to 10 *"based on a combination of their ability to deliver the competition's Minimum Operating Standards and their on pitch performance"*. The top six teams were invited to join the league for the new three-year cycle. The remaining four teams were invited to tender for a place in the competition, with the tender also open to all RFU Member Clubs, universities and colleges. Ultimately, two new teams, Sale Sharks and Exeter Chiefs, were successful in their application to join the league, with Richmond and Firwood Waterloo effectively relegated to the Championship.

The introduction of Sale Sharks and Exeter Chiefs to the league signals a shift towards teams being aligned to men's Premiership clubs, in a similar pattern to that experienced in women's football in recent years. The introduction of new teams aligned to men's Premiership clubs will certainly offer new impetus and opportunities for the league, for example, lucrative and profile-raising double-header events. The financial backing and commercial reach of these clubs may also prove important as the league and the women's game grows.

Another new move for the Premier 15s is the introduction of a salary cap, with clubs needing to stay within a £60,000 cap per squad. Currently, not all clubs pay their players but some pay retainers, match fees and/or other benefits. Notably, 28 England players also receive an annual salary through central full-time professional RFU contracts. The objective of the salary cap is to increase competition in the Premier 15s, with the international players, who will command a salary, likely to be more evenly distributed throughout the clubs.

It has been [reported](#) that the majority of Premier 15 clubs operate on budgets of £100,000 a year, with the RFU investing £75,000 into the clubs annually. This budget was not just to cover one team but two, as each club also ran an 'A' team, competing in the Premier 15s Development League.

The Development League will be scrapped from next season and squad sizes will reduce from 60 to 40. This will allow the clubs to be more focused and potentially lead to a closing of the gap between the Premiership and the Championship, as a number of the Development players will be likely to move to those teams.

The World Stage

On a global level, women's rugby has experienced unprecedented growth in recent times. In 2019, there were a [reported](#) 2.7 million players globally (growth of 28% since 2017), representing over 25% of the global playing population. The same survey found that 40% of rugby union's fan base are female.

World Rugby have voiced their continued commitment to the women's game – in 2019 the 'Women in Rugby' brand and global campaign 'Try and Stop Us' was launched and *"aimed at driving increased participation and engagement among fans, audiences, players and investors in the women's game"*. Just last month, in response to concerns raised in some quarters about the impact of COVID-19 on the women's game, World Rugby [said](#) that women's rugby was among its *"top three priorities"*. The governing body has also launched the new World Rugby Women Coaching Rugby Toolkit, aimed at increasing the number of female coaches.

The delay to the Tokyo Olympics as a result of COVID-19 may also present an unintended opportunity for women's rugby by bringing closer together two flagship events, the Olympics rugby sevens and the 2021 Rugby World Cup. With the Olympics confirmed as running to 8 August 2021 and the World Cup in New Zealand set to start on 18 September 2021, it might make for a difficult choice (or a grueling schedule) for those players who compete in both 15s and 7s. However, this will undoubtedly be an exciting time for fans and players alike and provide an excellent platform for women's rugby. Hopefully these showpiece events will go some way towards making up for lost time during the 2020 lockdown.

*This article was written by Trainee Solicitor **Katie Smith**.*

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