

**Facilitating Transitions in Rugby:
An Analysis of Recruitment and Retention of Rugby Players in the United States**

USA Rugby

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Section 1. Introduction and Purpose of this Report

1.1 Background

Beginning in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, there was a concentrated push by USA Rugby and its member organizations to put resources into the youth and high school game in an effort to expand the base of rugby's influence and enlarge the playing population of the United States. The expected result was that growth at the youth and high school levels would facilitate growth at similar levels in the collegiate and senior club levels, with an increased competitiveness at the 'top of the pyramid' for high performance programs.

By 2014, rugby was one of the fastest-growing youth sports in the United States, thanks in large part to extensive grassroots efforts, the increased professionalization of state rugby organizations dedicated to youth rugby, a fully-dedicated department to youth and high school development in the USA Rugby national office, and the funding of outreach programs such as USA Rugby's Rookie Rugby and similar initiatives such as Play Rugby USA.

Unfortunately, the explosive growth at the youth and high school level of the game was not translating into similar growth in the collegiate and senior club levels. Upon initial inquiry, the USA Rugby national office was able to estimate that only around 7-10% of high school players were ever making it into the senior club game, and roughly 25% or less of players were making single-level transitions (high school into college; college into senior club).

Tasked with further investigation into the issue, USA Rugby worked with World Rugby to commission a report by Sport Development Concepts LLC and the Sport+Development Lab at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign to explore the reasoning behind transitional "leakage" and propose solutions to improving the facilitation of transitions between levels.

In 2016, World Rugby sought additional follow-up to the commissioned study in order to coordinate its expected programs and policies.

Finally, in early 2017 USA Rugby finalized its strategic plan through 2020.

1.2 Why does this report matter?

The purpose of this report is to synthesize and condense the data gathered by the Sport Development Concepts-University of Illinois report with additional data from USA Rugby and the strategic initiatives of World Rugby and USA Rugby's current strategic plan. This is so as to align club and organizational priorities with growth-oriented strategies.

It is important to identify and recognize issues with the recruitment and retention of players, both within and between levels of play. As most clubs know, the recruitment and retention of players is vital to the long-term success of clubs both on the pitch and off it.

Notably, this document is not a direct guide for better on-field performance. Rather, this document is a general guide for club-building around the recruiting, retaining, and transitioning of players.

1.3 The Facts

The bulk of the data analyzed for this report was captured from 2005-2012, as this was the data set with the most consistent universally unique identifiers (UUIDs). In this time period, USA Rugby maintained consistent use of the First Sport International (FSI) customer resource management database.

Records from 2005-2012 indicate USA Rugby has an annual retention rate of roughly 50% of its

membership. Overall retention is due to a number of factors, including insurance requirements for participation that make membership registration mandatory for newer players (who may not take to the sport once playing it), and loss of players between transitional levels of play. Remarkably, rugby's growth thus far has been so strong that a 50% loss of players annually has not led to overall organizational loss in a full 12-month competitive cycle. To the contrary, growth remains a trend at all levels, though growth is disproportionately stronger at the lower levels.

Notably, USA Rugby transitioned in 2008 from a January-January registration cycle to an August-August one. Data for 2005-2007 is 12-month in nature; 2008 is only January-August; 2008-2009 begins the August-August cycle used to this day.

1.3(a): Annual Year-to-Year Retention

	2006	2007	2008	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	Avg/Tot
Youth/HS Stay	39.52%	42.12%	37.33%	39.05%	38.72%	40.39%	41.16%	39.83%
Youth/HS to College	4.01%	2.70%	3.65%	4.54%	4.39%	4.12%	4.15%	4.01%
Youth/HS to Senior Club	1.30%	0.89%	1.17%	1.10%	1.15%	1.22%	1.16%	1.15%
Youth/HS Leave	55.17%	54.30%	57.85%	55.31%	55.73%	54.27%	53.52%	55.01%
YOUTH/HIGH SCHOOL	17,297	19,510	21,699	25,138	28,268	32,002	36,549	180,463
College Stay	48.97%	44.00%	38.65%	45.52%	43.65%	43.03%	43.43%	43.89%
College to Senior Club	3.05%	2.61%	4.23%	5.69%	4.59%	5.19%	4.40%	4.25%
College Leave	47.97%	53.39%	57.12%	63.67%	51.76%	51.78%	52.17%	53.98%
COLLEGE	24,852	25,653	17,983	22,895	28,366	30,487	31,847	182,083
Senior Club Stay	57.83%	53.62%	48.61%	57.20%	57.25%	56.38%	56.52%	55.34%
Senior Club Leave	42.17%	46.38%	51.39%	42.80%	42.75%	43.62%	43.48%	44.66%
SENIOR CLUB	19,118	20,101	17,266	18,231	21,468	23,304	24,616	144,104

Source: Recruit and Retain Study, Report to USA Rugby & World Rugby

1.3(b): Long Term Retention / Transition Between Levels

Select Data of Player Participation Within and Across Multiple Levels of Play

	Year	High School Ever	College Ever	Senior Club Ever	High School to College to Senior Club
High School	2005	100.00%	17.55%	9.90%	4.90%
High School	2007	100.00%	18.36%	7.04%	4.00%
College	2005	0.93%	100.00%	21.33%	0.28%
College	2007	6.68%	100.00%	19.92%	1.95%
College	2011-12	15.45%	100.00%	4.53%	1.60%
Senior Club	2010-11	7.68%	25.45%	100.00%	3.17%
Senior Club	2011-12	9.34%	26.82%	100.00%	3.74%

Source: USA Rugby Senior Club and Membership Departments

Looking specifically at long-term retention rates, it would be expected that college players from the 2005 registration cycle (then 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 competitive cycles) would have had the opportunity to play senior club rugby by the 2011-2012 registration/competitive season. Unfortunately only 21.33% of

college players registered in 2005 ever showed up in senior club registration data between 2005 and 2012. Viewing the numbers in reverse, 26.82% of the senior club players in the 2011-2012 registration cycle appeared in college registration data between 2005 and 2012. As players in 2007 had a higher likelihood of still being in college by 2011-2012, the number of players that participated in the senior club level by 2011-2012 had a diminishing rate of transition.

Similarly, looking at High School to College transition rates over time, 18.36% of 2007 High School players made it into the college registration ranks by 2011-2012. This is a little clearer to examine, as it's more common to graduate high school within 4 years than it is to graduate college in a similar 4-year span. Additionally 90%+ of High School/Youth players were unaffected by USA Rugby's registration cycle change, as 90%+ of High School/Youth rugby was happening in the Spring at that time. Players in the 2007 registration cycle (2006-2007 school year, for most), even if freshmen, would have graduated high school by 2011 and had the opportunity to play college rugby by the 2011-2012 season, which is the last data point in the set of consistent UUIDs.

Unfortunately, the opportunity to make it to the senior club data set from 2007 is less likely. Examining the 2005 data set, however, gives a decent examination of the data. Though a high school player from 2005 could still be playing college rugby in 2012 and thus not have had the opportunity to play senior club, this is unlikely for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the majority of 2005 registrations were of ages most commonly associated with juniors and seniors. Secondly, backward-looking senior club data from 2012 suggests a similar figure for 'having ever played high school rugby' as forward-looking high school data from 2005 does for 'having ever played senior club rugby.'

1.3(c) Investigation of Senior Club Participation Rates

Number of Games Played	Number of Players	Percent of Players on Rosters	Percent of Total Senior Players
15+	82	0.42%	0.26%
11+	1,004	5.14%	3.24%
7+	5,200	26.60%	16.77%
5+	8,628	44.14%	27.83%
3+	12,615	64.54%	40.69%
1+	17,862	91.38%	57.62%
0+ (Rostered)	19,547	100.0%	63.05%

After a discussion with an RFU official regarding what constitutes an 'active player,' USA Rugby decided to investigate how many matches players participate in on an annual basis.

On July 27, 2017, the USA Rugby national office was provided with data from the USA Rugby Competition Management System (CMS), located at usarugbystats.com, regarding senior club participation rates. The CMS is required for all competitive senior matches in the United States, and it's estimated that 90% of players are registered to teams that have competitive sides in the system.

Preliminary findings suggest that more than 5/6 of senior players participate in fewer than 7 games per year, and more than 35% of registered players never even make a roster in a competitive match.

Further investigation is required, but several factors have been theorized to contribute to those figures:

- a. Players with multiple roles (coaches, administrators, referees, etc.) who are past the playing age who continue to have a role as a senior player

- b. Less-than-full compliance with the competition management system; 95% of matches have data entered, but it is unknown how many matches properly have rosters for both teams and all substitutes entered
- c. The 'gym membership effect': the potential that players register with the intent to play, spend money to register, and then never participate

More research on participation rates will be carried out as further data becomes available.

Section 2. Why do we play? Why do we stop playing?

2.1 Variables known to affect athlete retention

In order to properly know how to recruit and retain players to your club, it's important to first grasp why it is that players participate. By understanding the motivations for participation, your club can be best positioned to provide an environment that well suits player development, growth, and quality of life.

There were eleven variables measured that are known to affect athlete retention, and the *Recruit and Retain Study Report to USA Rugby & World Rugby* measured players' responses to these variables as they pertain to participation in rugby.

- Perceived competence
- Constraints on participation (intrapersonal, interpersonal, structural)
- Sense of community
- Social ties to rugby (friend influence/participation; family influence/participation)
- Identity
- Motivation to play rugby (intellectual, social, mastery, escape)
- Club commitment
- Subcultural fit
- Social infrastructure
- Interest in alternative game forms
- Satisfaction with competition structures

Most notably, the four identifiable areas of motivation (intellectual, social, mastery, and escape) were measured individually for each demographic.

Overall, each variable was measured across all levels of participation, with some noticeable trends emerging as either common across levels or unique to a specific section of the game.

2.2 Why do we play?

So, why do we play? This question is at the root of all activities surrounding the recruitment, retention, and transition of players participating in rugby at all levels. While some variations occur at or between levels, several trends become very obvious upon examination of the subject.

2.2(a) The sport itself

A large portion of the reason people play is the sport itself. Players enjoy the physical nature of rugby, the idea that 'everyone has a role,' and that rugby accepts 'players of shapes and sizes.' This unique combination of factors also breeds a unique subculture and 'rugby identity' that players particularly enjoy, and that feeds into their social sense of self.

Additionally, participation in a sport brings several motivations unique to the sport itself. Some pick up the game out of intellectual curiosity; others may be seeking a new athletic endeavor to master, or a method of escape from their non-sporting life.

2.2(b) Social ties and sense of community

Overwhelmingly, among interpersonal characteristics, players place high emphasis on the importance of social infrastructure, commitment to their club, fit with the 'rugby subculture,' the sense of community rugby brings, and the time spent with other rugby players. Most notably, the 'time spent with other rugby players' is consistently rated as the most important aspect of players' social infrastructure – far ahead of other social items such as drinking, a 'party atmosphere,' or a clubhouse. In many instances, this element is also a key indicator of whether a player stays or leaves the sport. Those that stay place a high

importance on the time spent with other players; those that leave often value this element to a lower degree, perhaps indicating a less-comfortable fit with their club. For the purpose of this topic, this highlights both an issue and an opportunity, in that players' social bonds is the easiest method to recruit, retain, and transition them between levels.

2.2(c) Friend or family influence

The majority of players first pick up rugby because a friend or family member encourages them to do so – even if they themselves don't play.

At the youth and high school level, the importance of family influence cannot be overstated, and many players who participate do so because their parents have bought into the idea of participation. To emphasize an important point: *the parents themselves do not have to be 'rugby people' to influence a child's participation.*

At the adult levels (college and senior club), friends play a larger role in the recruitment and retention of athletes. Most players pick up the sport based on interaction with a friend or acquaintance, and players within clubs often become players' primary social networks.

2.2(d) Other motivations

While players primarily play initially due to a draw to the sport itself, social ties, or friend/family influence, there are other motivations to participation, some of which are better highlighted in examination of players who successfully transition between levels and those that don't.

2.3 Why do we stop playing?

With the exception of players who sample the sport (participate for one year and leave), most players leave due to a combination of factors. In fact, aside from a career-ending injury, most reasons for quitting are due to an insurmountable (to the individual) combination of work, family, and time constraints.

Notably, cost is not a major consideration for those that stop playing, nor do many seem to take issue with the sport of rugby itself.

2.3 (a) Other time commitments and life priorities

Players who leave rugby noticeably cite other time commitments and life priorities as a major constraint on their participation. This is a challenge both between levels and within them.

At the college level, for example, even current players report being overwhelmed and not wishing to play the following year – but they also remain open to playing again someday.

Time commitments are particularly noticeable as players transition between levels, and many players may need low-commitment forms of involvement during life transitions. When provided, these opportunities may make it possible for them to eventually play again more constantly, or for them to contribute to the development of others within the sport. This is examined further in Section 4 of this document, which addresses strategies for recruiting, retaining, and transitioning players.

2.3(b) Injury

Career-ending injuries are an obvious departure point for many. However, the 'piling up' of injuries over time also contributes to an eventual exit from the sport, and injuries and recovery are often cited as a reason for leaving along with work, family, and time constraints.

Additionally, at the adult levels, the potential impact of injuries also weighs on players a perceived constraint, as the ability to maintain their employment may rely upon their ability to be physically active in a way that an injury would prohibit. This factor also contributes to family constraints, as injured players are unable to contribute their ‘fair share’ to raising children, supporting their spouse, and/or maintaining their home.

2.3(c) Non-fit with the subculture

In some instances, players leave due to not fitting with the ‘subculture’ of rugby. This occurs when players are not properly socially integrated, or they are not a fit with the sport/club.

At some levels, the players that stop playing aren’t necessarily players that some clubs may desire to include. Players that leave the sport often value the ‘party atmosphere’ and drinking more heavily than players who ‘stay’ and continue to play do. In fact, for some, there is a disconnect between the actual experience of rugby and rugby’s popular image in the media. In the *Recruit and Retain Study, Report to USA Rugby & World Rugby*, this was particularly notable at the high school level, where players who ‘left’ seemingly valued the so-called ‘party atmosphere’ far more than those who stayed. Players who stay, in contrast, consistently place their value on the time spent with others in a non-party context.

2.3(d) Expectations of participation

For many American athletes, it is perfectly ‘normal’ to quit playing sports after certain life transitions (graduating high school; graduating college; etc.), as this is common in other sports.

To this end, some players quit simply because they don’t know there is an opportunity at the next level, or they are not sold on their ability to participate at that level. This is a considerable opportunity for clubs looking to transition players ‘upward’ after they conclude participating at another level.

Per the *Recruit and Retain Study, Report to USA Rugby & World Rugby*,

“The second potentially leverageable finding is the high number of players who leave rugby simply because they graduate from university. This suggests that players may not be fully aware of the pathway from university rugby to club rugby. These players do not report any dissatisfaction with rugby; nor do they seem to recognize the constraints to continued participation listed by others. In fact, the only reason they provide is that they have graduated or are no longer eligible to play university rugby. It should not be difficult to retain these players. ”

2.4 Constraints to Participation

2.4(a) Perceived constraints to participation

Notably, in examination of the data, several prominent trends emerge in terms of player constraints to participation.

Overall, there four major perceived constraints that are consistent with every level:

- a. Fear of injury
- b. ‘Too many other things to do’
- c. ‘Team takes up too much time’
- d. Recovery time

Additionally, the perceived constraints of a ‘club not being convenient’ and ‘too much travel’ tend to score higher than other perceived constraints, though their measured perception score is not statistically significant compared to the four major perceived constraints above.

2.4(b) Fear of injury

For four different groups of active players (Youth players, High School players, High School players who've transitioned to Senior Club directly, and College players), 'fear of injury' is the largest perceived constraint to participation.

'Fear of injury' is additionally a notably-perceived constraint for three other groups of players (High School players who've transitioned to College, College players who've transitioned to Senior Club, and Senior Club players), though 'too many other things to do' tends to score higher due to the many lifestyle changes that adult players go through in their early 20s.

2.4(c) 'Too many other things to do' and 'team takes up too much time'

Among those that leave rugby (e.g. quit and don't transition to another level), the largest perceived constraint is that the 'team takes too much time' and there are 'too many other things to do.' This is especially pronounced at the lower levels of the game (Youth / High School), but having too many other things to do and the team taking up too much time are major barriers to participation (for both current and leaving players) at all levels of the game.

2.4(d) Is cost to play a major perceived constraint?

Cost to play, surprisingly, is not a major constraint for those leaving the game, though it is a factor for those staying/playing. The data consistently shows that cost to play is a larger perceived constraint for those still playing than those that have left the sport. **In other words, 'cost to play' is not a statistically-significant major factor for why people leave.**

2.4(e) Differences by sex

Current women's senior club players perceive 'cost to play' as a higher constraint than other levels of current players. This may be due to the cost of travel, and is likely related to club density. Players at this level seem to enjoy the travel but not the cost associated with it.

2.4(f) General differences between players who stay and players that leave

Where do we see major differences between those who stay to play and those that leave?

- Players who stay are more likely to say their friends play
- At higher levels, 'fear of injury' is a bigger concern for those leaving than those staying
- 'Cost to play' is a bigger concern for those that stay than those that leave
- There are four perceived constraints (fear of injury, recovery time, team takes up too much time, too many other things to do) that tend to be larger for those that leave than those that stay; additionally, for women, clubs not being convenient and travel also tend to become concerns – particularly at the adult level

Section 3. Challenges to the Recruitment, Retention, and Transition of Rugby Players

With proper context of the rates that players participate and/or transition, and the general motivations to participate (or quit), it next becomes important to examine what rugby's challenges, strengths, and opportunities are in relation to recruiting, retaining, and transitioning players.

3.1 Overall challenges to transitioning players

What are the challenges transitioning players?

- Traditional players who transition through the levels, and those that stop playing, sometimes have different preferences, motivations, and perceived constraints
- Players have different motivations and perceived constraints at different levels
- There are connectivity issues between levels
- Variation of club cultures
- The game is changing and some aren't reacting
- We are forgetting, or failing to execute, the simple basics of recruiting
- Player development opportunities
- Physical preparedness and player welfare

3.1(a) Traditional players who transition through the levels, and those that stop playing, sometimes have different preferences, motivations, and perceived constraints

In examination of the overall challenges to transitioning players between levels, several key trends emerge. The first such challenge is that players who successfully transition sometimes have different motivations and perceived constraints than those that don't. Motivations and attitudes towards participations are covered in Section 3 of this document, but a notable example across many levels is that those that leave (e.g. don't transition) are more inclined to factor the time it takes to participate or how many other things they have to do. Those that successfully transition often don't consider these items to be as strong of a constraint as those that leave.

One remarkable example of differing preferences was among high school players. Per the *Recruit and Retain Study Report to USA Rugby & World Rugby*,

“An examination of playing formats offers intriguing suggestions for player retention. The most common playing format experienced was 15s leagues. Stayers also indicated 15s league as their favorite playing format. This is not the case for Leavers. **Not a single Leaver preferred the 15s league format. Instead, Leavers chose a variety of 7s formats as their favorite, even when they had never played in that format.**” [emphasis added]

3.1(b) Players have different preferences, motivations, and perceived constraints at different levels

Similar to players that stay and players that leave having different reasons for staying or leaving, players at different levels also have different motivations, preferences, and perceived constraints. For example, ‘recovery time’ between matches becomes a more significant factor at the senior club level than it does at the youth, high school, and collegiate levels, as players are often older and the impact on their bodies is perceived to be greater.

Example table, recovery time constraint and escape motivation

Variable	HS ‘Stayers’	HS ‘Leavers’	College ‘Stayers’	Senior Club (Club-Only)
Motivation ¹				
Escape	1.13	0.02	1.26	1.69
Perceived Constraints	How often a concern? ²		How important in decision to quit? ³	
Recovery time	0.92	1.33	1.16	1.56

¹Scale: -3 = strongly disagree; 0 = neutral; 3 = strongly agree

²Scale: 0=never; 1=rarely; 2=occasionally; 3=somewhat often; 4=often; 5=very often; 6=always

³Scale: 0=not at all important; 3= neither important nor unimportant; 6=extremely important

Source: *Recruit and Retain Study Report to USA Rugby & World Rugby*

3.1(c) There are connectivity issues between levels

One of the more obvious issues to transitioning players between levels (in particular), and in organizationally recruiting/retaining players overall (additionally), is the lack of connectivity between levels.

Often, rugby programs – particularly youth programs – are started by players or ‘old boys/girls’ actively affiliated with another program. However, it is anecdotally thought that many programs at different levels tend to be linked at a very artificial level and do not actively integrate connectivity opportunities into their calendars. Further, catalyst organizations tend to move individuals into roles (e.g. starting a youth program, or becoming a youth coach) that are already stretched for time commitments, and their individual interactions with their origin program tend to dissipate over time.

3.1(d) Variation of club cultures

Players looking to transition often look for a club that was very similar in culture, philosophy, and competitiveness to their previous one. This is a particular issue in the women’s game (where fewer club options exist) and the adult levels, where players are often looking for a club like the one they just left.

This is also the obvious area where the transition from high school directly to senior club can be challenging, as 18 year-olds often have different values and interests than 26 year-olds (the median age for senior club rugby players in 2016-2017 was 26).

3.1(e) The game is changing and some aren’t reacting

Increasingly, players are looking for opportunities that were afforded to them at their previous club, or options that may not currently exist.

Interest in non-contact rugby tends to be higher at some levels than others, and is particularly of more interest to those that quit playing than to those that don’t.

Similarly, players at the youth/high school and college levels of the game have increasingly moved towards playing more competitive 7s, while the senior club game has not offered 7s at the same rate of participation.

3.1(f) We are forgetting, or failing to execute, the simple basics of recruiting

This is covered more in Sections 4 and 5 of this document, but the simple basics of recruiting - both in attracting new players and in encouraging players to transition between levels. Recruitment of players is most successful with a human element, and direct interaction with potential recruits is not always the priority it should be with programs.

3.1(g) Player development opportunities

Players are looking to develop their skill sets, competitions, and social interactions through a variety of means. For many new or transitioning players, the experience of participation often involves playing social friendlies, “b sides,” and/or only getting a handful of minutes with a team’s first side. Prudent clubs would be wise to include multiple opportunities for players to participate such as 7s and 15s; social and non-social; competitive and non-competitive. The senior club level of rugby has been successfully in growing larger clubs through offering multiple competitive sides of play (e.g. having a team in both Division 2 and Division 3), which suggests that players have been more motivated to participate when their opportunities to do so are for ‘real’ competition points and not just social friendlies.

Similarly, players have a desire for ‘meaningful’ training sessions and not just the same drills executed continuously. It has been noted that players’ perceived value of their trainings has a correlation to their enthusiasm for participation. Those that are able to perceive increased skill acquisition or intellectual differentiation are more likely to participate.

3.1(h) Physical preparedness and player welfare

Players are not always physically prepared to transition between levels, as each level comes with a higher median of age for participants. This is particularly true for boys/men transitioning between the high school and adult levels (college and senior club), as boys tend to physically mature slower than girls do, though differentiation in physical preparedness affects many girls/women as well. As youth rugby continues to expand, this will also become a larger issue with high school rugby, as teenagers also have very different levels of development (mostly by age).

Just as clubs need to offer different player development opportunities in terms of level of play, seriousness, and competition level, organizing bodies and clubs need to make a concentrated effort to offer levels of participation for those not physically prepared to play meaningful competition at the level they’ve transitioned to. This can be addressed by the introduction of U20 programs at the college and club level, as well as additional age-based levels through youth and high school rugby.

Player welfare also includes a need for the development of sound practices regarding wear and tear on players’ bodies (in relation to injury and recovery time). Periodization of participation opportunities – including mandatory rest periods – will greatly assist in prolonging player wellness. Additionally, players should increasingly seek to limit the amount they participate in condensed periods of time. To this end, the minutes-played player caps instituted at the youth and high school level of the game should be celebrated as a success. Adult organizations should consider investigating and instituting similar policies, or consider alternative practices to assist with player rest and recovery.

3.2 Overall Challenges, Strengths and Opportunities for Rugby in the United States

The following are challenges and strengths identified by the *Recruit and Retain Study, Report to USA Rugby & World Rugby* by Sport Development Concepts LLC and the Sport+Development Lab at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign:

Overall Challenges for Rugby in the U.S.A.	Overall Strengths of Rugby in the U.S.A.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Injuries & safety concerns• Reputation (drinking/sexist/rowdy)• Lack of cooperation between levels• Personnel• Coaches (training)• Referees (quantity and quality)• Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Culture of belonging/social group/camaraderie• Opportunities for all physique/skill levels• Gender equal• All ages/levels/commitment• Adaptability of game type• Low cost resources required / affordable

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of facilities (fields & clubhouses) • Other sports competing for players/sponsors/facilities • Other life commitments • Travel/time commitment required • Lack of family/friend support • Lack of visibility in the mainstream media • Attitude of “old boys” • Lack of competitive opportunities/structure • Variance in commitment levels of player • Lack of communication (especially at transitions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization/championships/programs are in place nationally • Can enter sport at anytime • International game • High level of fitness provided & transferable skills to other sports • Accommodates multisport athletes • Unique, novel sport in the US • Attractive athlete image
Overall Opportunities for Rugby in the U.S.A.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rugby World Cups and the Olympics • Parents spending too much on youth sport (\$/time) • Project Play initiative • ADM/LTAD/physical literacy/appropriate development • Other sports in same position • Need to improve physical opportunities for youth/teams/adults • Loss of personal social interaction • For-profit sport clubs in most cities • Municipal/State Youth Sport Summits • Football is killing itself (concussions) • International support – World Rugby • People want to belong to groups • For support • For friendship • Networking 	

These challenges, strengths, and opportunities largely speak for themselves, but they are important reminders for organizations, clubs, and individuals as they build strategic plans for addressing their long-term growth strategies around recruitment, retention, and transition of players.

3.3 Themes, Successes, and Obstacles

The following are important themes, successes, and obstacles gathered from the synthesis of all available data and reports:

Important Themes

- USA Rugby has an overall retention issue, in that over 50% of registered members do not return to the organization the following year
 - An indeterminate percentage of this turnover is due to insurance requirements to participate in the United States (e.g. players must be registered to participate even once)
- Youth and Adult rugby players have different influences and experiences
- Players rarely quit due to not liking rugby
- Injuries and other life choices are the largest reasons players quit playing, often in combination with one another

Successes

- Multi-side initiative at the senior club level
- Youth and high school minutes-played caps
- Cost is not as serious a concern as some think
- Many solutions are low-cost and/or not time-intensive to implement

Obstacles

- Player welfare challenges (multi-match weekends; short windows between matches)
- Opportunities for non-collegiate adult athletes
- The 'usual suspects': Seasonality, Eligibility, Scheduling, Coaching/Admin availability
- Club density to reduce travel/cost, particularly for women

Section 4. Strategies for attracting/recruiting/retaining players

At each level of recruiting and retaining players, it is important to understand the motivations for players to participate, the perceived constraints against participation, and the life circumstances of the players participating at each level.

Notably, some strategies are more specifically targeted at recruiting/transitioning existing players, while others are more focused on retaining existing members and/or transitioning players who might not otherwise transition between levels.

4.1 Fundamentals of recruiting/retaining/transitioning players

What are the fundamentals for recruiting, retaining, and transitioning players?

- Nail the basics of recruiting
- Offer multiple divisions and/or competitive types of play
- Offer multiple types of play
- Foster an inclusive culture
- Spread out time commitments
- Assist with life transitions

4.1(a) Nail the basics

In many instances, ‘nailing the basics’ will enable a club to prosper through execution of the fundamentals of recruiting. In other instances, clubs will need to facilitate transitions by actively targeting existing players leaving another level of participation.

Most opportunities to recruit and transition players involve clubs understanding and executing several basic recruiting principles that are often both low-cost and over-looked. These include:

- Flyers
- Fairs
- Interest Forms
- Direct Contact

Most players who enter the game do so due to direct contact with an influencer, or basic introduction to the sport through structures such as fairs.

Direct contact, in particular, should never be overlooked. Many clubs are content to passively post website recruitment pages or send emails to ‘gatekeepers’ who may or may not pass their message along to their members. As such, it is important that clubs looking to recruit do so by *direct contact* with those they are seeking to recruit. If you’re recruiting within your level, this often means physically attending fairs, hosting interest meetings, involving yourself with opportunities to speak before large groups, and/or actively targeting groups of friends via key social influencers. If you’re recruiting players transitioning across levels, direct contact also often means physically going to the trainings, matches, social events, and tournaments of teams from the level below you. It is not simply enough to send an email to a team’s coach, or have an old boy placed on a team’s coaching staff to ‘pass the word.’ Clubs looking to actively recruit should do so by physically appearing to interact with potential recruits.

Notably, it is not generally advisable to play against those you are seeking to recruit. This may work at some levels if a club is sponsoring a team (or a club includes a team) participating at a lower level, but it’s usually not a good idea for senior club teams to play college teams as a means of recruiting. Additionally, college teams should never play high school teams.

Instead of playing against a group a club is targeting to recruit from, a club is better served using other tactics – such as curtain raisers or joint social events – to bring in recruits.

Per the *Recruit and Retain Study, Report to USA Rugby & World Rugby*,

“Players recruited while at university report a wide range of recruitment experiences. What is most interesting about this list is the low cost nature of these successful recruitment efforts, and the seemingly incidental nature of many of them. The vast majority of these recruitment efforts fall into three categories: (1) campus-wide events designed to introduce students to student organizations and activities (e.g., Club Fest, Club Fair, Orientation, Quad Day); (2) flyers and signs around campus and student housing areas; and (3) interactions with current players.”

“Interactions with players include personal recruitment by a player, conversations with classmates, fraternity interactions, and even the random act of walking past the team’s training session. Most of these efforts are either cost free or of minimal cost other than students’ time. In fact, the types of recruitment activities mentioned require little effort and were, in all likelihood, implemented haphazardly. Yet, between 16 and 22 percent of players reported being successfully recruited in this way.”

4.1(b) Offer multiple divisions and/or competitive types of play

Players tend to participate when they have achievable or desirable outcomes for their contribution to the club. In many instances, this means having significant playing time and actually participating in the sport. In other instances, it means participating for a team “like my own” (for transitioning players), playing a particular code of rugby they enjoy, or participating at a skill level appropriate to their individual skill set.

Offering multiple divisions and/or competitive types of play is a generally good platform for recruiting new players, retaining existing players, and providing opportunities for transitioning players.

For new players, meaningful matches in a platform suited to a player’s skill set will often motivate players to continue participating. In order to facilitate this, in most instances, it involves a club entering a second/third/etc. team into a lower division of competition within their region, where standings and regular fixtures will motivate players to improve their skills and continually attend trainings and events. Too often, new players – who generally lack the skills of existing players – do not find value in attending trainings or matches if their ability to have meaningful participation time isn’t addressed.

Similar to offering a lower division within a type of play, clubs would be well served to offer additional codes of play, such as 7s. For senior clubs, competitive 7s participation tends to pale to the rate of 7s participation that college and high school players are increasingly experiencing (less than 10% of senior clubs play 7s competitively; approximately half play 7s socially). In some cases, this may mean that a player does not transition to a club simply because it is not offering a type of rugby that the player would like to participate in. Notably, however, a focus on 7s should not come at the expense of 15s or the existing player base. In fact, 75% of players consistently state that 15s is their favorite code for playing rugby.

For clubs that have age-specific components (mostly youth/high school and to a lesser degree, college), offering multiple divisions and/or competitive types of play may also benefit clubs in their ability to socially integrate new players, as they would likely have more teammates ‘like them’ who have similar skills and/or life experiences.

4.1(c) Offer multiple types of play

In addition to the importance attached to offering multiple divisions and/or competitive types of play, generally offering multiple types of play – including non-contact – can benefit clubs’ overall health and ability to recruit/retain/transition players.

Interestingly, professed interest in non-contact versions of rugby tends to be higher among players that quit than players who stay. It also tends to be higher among younger players and/or players who've made fewer transitions, and not – as expected – among older players who may want to wind down their more-physical participation in the sport.

As such, the implementation of non-contact rugby programs should be seen as an opportunity to attract new players or capture players otherwise leaving, as opposed to one that primarily provides value to existing players. In fact, the separation of existing players from other players for non-contact rugby may also provide benefit to the health of non-contact programs, as players with lower skills may lower their perceived competence against regular participants in the game. Non-contact programs can also offer the benefit providing ways to participate with a lowered time commitment (compared to competitive contact rugby programs).

4.1(d) Foster an inclusive culture

Players in transition often look for a club “like mine” – meaning their previous club. New players often aren't sure what they're looking for, as some are looking for a recreational activity while others are seeking highly-competitive sport. Existing players often have their roles change as they join a club, become a core member, and slowly back away from regular participation.

By fostering an inclusive culture, clubs will be best aligned to dynamically meet the desires of new and existing members. The more variety your club is able to have, the more likely it is that you will be able to recruit and retain a wide variety of members for a wide variety of roles.

To some degree, this is best addressed by offering multiple types of play and/or multiple types of competitiveness. Beyond that, however, inclusiveness is also a mentality.

One of the better aspects of rugby is its social infrastructure and subculture. Clubs that position themselves to welcome all interested parties – regardless of demographic, ability, interest, or time availability – will also be the clubs best positioned to sustain themselves in the long-term.

As such, it is incumbent upon club leaders to find a role for all members in their club, just as rugby teams similarly find a role for all players on the field. As long as expectations are clearly communicated, it's okay for clubs (in some instances) to have different standards for different members. In fact, a well-positioned club – one that offers many opportunities for participation and/or inclusion – will actually benefit from such an approach. Particularly for players encountering life transitions, the offering of roles requiring lower time commitments – such as participation in a lower side, or a low-time-commitment administrative or assistant coaching role, may provide the opportunity to entrench players into your culture. Over time, these players may also develop more availability to increase their participation with the club, especially if membership with the club becomes a regular fixture of their social experience.

A common mistake made by ‘catch all’ clubs that offer multiple divisions or types of play is to ‘split up’ teams at practice. There's certainly a performance argument that this may make your individual team/side better (this document is not a direct guide for better on-field performance; it is a guide for club-building around recruiting/retaining/transitioning), but splitting teams/sides at training hurts team camaraderie. As noted in ‘why we play,’ social inclusion and time spent with other rugby players is a major factor for why players participate. Extremely high-performing clubs that absolutely desire separation at training for focus are better off training an additional day of the week than splitting off from their teammates during regular training hours.

Notably, for some clubs, casting a ‘wide net’ may not be the best strategy. This is not to say they should be discriminatory of a member's demographic indicators, however. Rather, some clubs – particularly in

large metropolitan areas – may be choose to focus on only creating a high-performing elite team. In contrast, others may believe their club is best suited as a social-first side. In larger areas, this is more feasible than in mid-range to lower-populated areas. Overall, however, the ‘niche’ approach is generally not recommended as a broader strategy for the successful recruitment, retention, and transition of players throughout the American rugby system.

4.1(e) Spread out time commitments

Interpersonally, players struggle with time commitments. This is particularly true of players going through life transitions, or for older players who struggle to take on additional responsibilities that were previously handled by either administrators at another level or more veteran members of their existing club.

As such, clubs that desire to be well-positioned for attracting new players or retaining existing ones would be well-served to acknowledge that life commitments often get in the way of player participation. Clubs that demand a high time commitment and/or fail to offer understanding of players otherwise swamped by outside responsibilities are more likely to lose newer players to the club. Similarly, veteran players may struggle with the idea that they aren’t a ‘good teammate’ by not being as available as they were previously.

Providing roles for players that can’t commit to full time commitments is therefore a good method to building long-term club loyalty.

4.1(f) Assist with life transitions.

For new players, or for those transitioning between levels, it often takes 1-3 years to fully integrate into a club’s organization and culture. Similarly, roles for players within clubs change over time.

Whether players are new to the level of the club they’re joining, transitioning from a previous club, or looking to return to their current club, life transitions (family, work, relationships, relocation, physical changes, aging) often play a prominent role in players’ ability to commit to a club. It is important to be mindful of the experiences players and club members are having outside of rugby, and to anticipate the types of changes individuals typically experience at different points in their life.

4.2 Organizational structuring for the fostering of recruitment and transition

4.2(a) Nail the basics

The basics of recruiting are simple, but having an organizational action plan is key to ensuring clubs actually execute the basics. In a 2015 survey by USA Rugby, over 70% of senior clubs insisted they made regular, direct contact with high school and college programs, despite direct contact being defined as a physical presence at trainings or matches at least once a month. As many would speculate this is inaccurate based on transition data, it thus becomes important to clearly define how direct contact could best occur.

It would benefit organizations to have defined short-term and long-term goals for direct contact with clubs and players from other levels, as well as potential new recruits outside existing rugby structures. This entails the identification of opportunities to physically be in front of groups of people, a strategy for how to pitch one’s club, materials that may accompany such a pitch (t-shirts, flyers, etc.), and opportunities to follow up with recruits. Additionally, a direct contact strategy also involves a volunteer plan among club members to actually make such contact, as well as an oversight coordinator to verify such contact is occurring.

Recruitment in particular is an awesome opportunity to involve former players, who have often have vast networks outside a club's physical space. For example, for colleges looking to recruit and transition high school players, a plan that trains 'old boys/girls' on recruitment pitches and activates them in their area can save immensely on travel costs and exponentially increase the geographic footprint of one's recruiting area.

For intra-level recruiting of new players (not transitions), a 'nail the basics' strategy could involve identifying individuals who are key influencers in target demographics (e.g. a fitness buff who works at the university gym, or a player who will be attending a football tryout) and/or the offering of low-time-commitment involvement for players who may not otherwise have time to be an officer. To that end, well-organized clubs will have already identified opportunities for recruiting, and should send recruiters out with a defined plan to fairs and other in-person opportunities.

A final piece of 'nailing the basics' from an organizational perspective is having media updated, modern, and current. In 2017, programs can create easy-to-manage websites and social media accounts free of charge, and the cost to keep these items updated is largely just time. This does not mean that putting up recruiting/training information on a website suffices as an alternative to direct contact. To the contrary, updated media information is *complementary* to more traditional recruiting practices, as it provides a place for those a club has made contact with to get follow-up details.

4.2(b) Foster linkages between clubs within and across levels

Creating linkages between clubs both within and across levels sounds simple enough on paper. However, in order to create sustainable and effective relationships, clubs need to encourage and actively work connections with other clubs.

Forward-thinking clubs that are serious about community impact and sustainability would be wise to partner with clubs of the opposite sex, as well as with clubs across levels of participation – or even clubs from other sports. To that end, it is simply not enough to have an alumni helping coach another rugby team. Over time, alumni grow further from their origin club, and there's also no guarantee than even an active alumni will be robustly selling the merits of the home club.

Productive partnerships between organizations should be formally acknowledge in writing, but also actively enacted in cross-organizational activities. These items can include events such as field-sharing (if allowed), curtain raisers, joint social events (not parties), cross-club non-contact, joint community and philanthropic events, and/or shared or sponsored workshops/camps/trainings. For community-based clubs (particularly youth and senior clubs), the events that take place away from the field are just as important as the events that occur on them. Strong clubs are often the ones that are best able to promote a family or community culture, and player motivations show a strong desire for spending time with other rugby players. Formal linkages between organizations also provide opportunities for club-to-club mentorship and leadership training, which goes a long way towards sustainably cementing relationships.

4.2(c) Form partnerships to assist with player life transitions and factor life transitions into the club's operating mentality

In covering why players quit, time and/or other life commitments overwhelmingly play a factor in the loss of individual rugby participation. As such, forward-thinking clubs will form partnerships to assist with player life transitions.

When recruiting new players, or facilitating the transition of a player from another level, it is important to provide them assistance in making the adjustment to a new location, a new school or career, and/or other family/life commitments. This can be as simple as organizationally emphasizing a player 'big

brother/sister' type mentorship program, or as complex as formal affiliations with organizations to assist with common areas of need (such as an employer, a social network, or even things like daycares).

For players that a club is seeking to retain, it is critical that the club has an operating mentality that life transitions are an important part of an individual's journey. This doesn't mean that players who miss trainings should be entitled to starting positions, but it does mean that clubs should have a positive culture that checks in on players with outside commitments to see how they can be assisted.

Strategies to assist with life transitions can also be centered around long-term recruitment, transition, and retention strategies, including a specific plan to follow up with members who are experiencing difficulties.

4.2(d) Create a dynamic, multi-role organization

The more opportunities a club is able to provide for potential members, the more dynamic a club will be in recruiting, transitioning, and retaining players. As the time, work, family, and physical demands of playing become too much for players, a well-organized club will provide other avenues for involvement such as coaching, refereeing, and administration.

It is not always feasible to immediately enact programs involving multiple types or competitive levels of play, as some clubs are struggling just to field a full team on a given weekend. However, the long-term benefits of proactively identifying roles outside of large team commitments can, and should, provide the organizational structure necessary to eventually accomplish other organizational priorities. A commitment to such roles should also assist members or potential members with time and life commitments outside rugby, as they provide differing levels of necessary commitment.

A dynamic, multi-role organization would ideally include multiple opportunities for participation (competitive second sides, a 7s team, a non-contact meet-up, age-specific sides such as U20s, etc.), but it should also include low-commitment roles off the pitch as well. In fact, offering low-commitment roles off the pitch is a sensational opportunity to attract or keep a lot of additional members to a club.

Low-commitment roles can be as simple as asking for a scoreboard operator twice a year, or as complex as asking for someone to help run trainings the first and third Tuesday of every month in-season. They can also include tie-ins to additional opportunities such as coaching or officiating, though it's organizationally prudent to keep those that leave your immediate network involved through social opportunities.

4.2(e) Build a financial plan

Nobody is suggesting that a club squeeze every last resource from its players, but measures of perceived constraints to participation have demonstrated that cost of participation is not a serious factor compared to other issues in player motivations/constraints. As such, clubs should not hesitate to seriously ask themselves what it costs to run and/or improve their club, and create a financial plan accordingly. Having the resources to operate beyond a 'just enough to get by' level better positions clubs to attract better sponsors and organizational relationships, and also provides additional opportunities for value-add to its members. Players that see value in their return on investment are more likely to feel attached to their club than those paying so little that they don't actively see benefits. If a club's financial plan is only enough to cover referees, field rental, and basic equipment, some players may not see the value of investment in their dues.

4.2(f) Partner with local organizations and competitions to foster multiple participation opportunities

Structurally, in order to offer multiple participation opportunities, clubs need to work well with their local organizations and competitions. For example, a positive relationship with a local union (for a senior club)

will often assist a club's ability to run a second competitive side without adversely affecting the player pool for its first side. Similarly, a community club interested in creating opportunities for non-collegiate athletes through U20 or U23 programs must first develop a relationship with local community colleges (not just high school teams), as community college is a common catchment area for younger people not attending a four-year school.

For programs such as non-contact, a club may be better served partnering with an existing adult activities league, intramurals department, or physical education program instead of trying to launch and operate a program entirely on its own.

4.2(g) Take player welfare seriously

Injury and 'fear of injury' are major factors for why players quit. To minimize these perceived constraints within a club, it's important that clubs take player welfare seriously.

In order to effectively minimize injuries and/or the risk of injuries, basic welfare guidelines such as gameday, weekend, or minute caps on players should be heavily considered. Fatigue is a major contributor towards player injury, and clubs and competitions should not put players at risk any more than is absolutely necessary.

Examples of player welfare protections:

- Clubs should have trainers present at all matches (preferably at training as well), monitor the minutes/games played by their members, and minimize interaction with competitions that cannot effectively limit fatigue
- Pre-season health assessments greatly benefit trainers' ability to assess risk for participants
- For sevens tournaments, players should ideally rest at least 2 hours between matches, and absolutely rest at least one hour between
- Knowledge of, and adherence to, all published World Rugby welfare guidelines; this includes *not* using the so-called 'brain bin' (HIA) which is *not* approved for community rugby and is sometimes not even used for international tests
- Recognizing and enforcing period of mandatory rest for players who play multiple codes of play. Players should not play more than 26 match days (1 day of 7s play equals 1 match day) in a calendar year. Most players also benefit immensely from down-time away from rugby and should avoid playing more than 6-8 months consecutively

4.2(h) Don't forget to sell yourself!

Sometimes, clubs get so caught up in selling rugby that they forget to sell themselves. Organizationally, playing up your strengths will increase your reputation and make your club more attractive for players as well as sponsors and community organizations.

Organizationally, prudent clubs will sell their success of the field even more than their success on it. If club members have gone on to have considerable non-rugby success, this should always be celebrated. Similarly, clubs should never forget to publicize their philanthropic involvement, as this markets the club as something more valuable to the community than just being an athletic activity. If a club is school-based, academic achievement should also be celebrated – particularly to the degree that it exceeds average student performance or involvement.

In terms of recruitment across levels (facilitating transitions), clubs would be wise to also always sell future players on the uniqueness of the club, its affiliated organizations, or its location. Remember, life circumstances will often exceed desired athletic participation when players moving across levels are considering serious life choices. For college programs, the success of the school should be advertised as much as the team is. Aware that the school is a top-10 school for a specific program? Highlight this in your cross-level promotional materials! For senior clubs, the lifestyle of living in a specific location will

almost-always exceed the unique traits your club possesses, such as ability to offer employment – sell that!

4.2(i) Develop a positive rugby culture

Positive rugby cultures foster positive social interactions and increase the value of time spent with other rugby players. As these are positive motivations for why people play, they are also critical components of effectively structuring a club to meet player needs.

Success should be celebrated outside of wins and losses, and positive identifications with outside-rugby activities should be highlighted as important to a club.

Additionally, clubs should always strive to maintain a positive and attractive rugby culture by selling the merits of being involved with rugby. Acquired rugby qualities such as dedication, teamwork, and being a role-player are transmissible qualities into positive life experiences, and should be celebrated.

4.2(j) Make rugby experiences meaningful

A contributing factor to players quitting is that participation takes too much time and there are too many other things to do. In some instances, it is difficult to state definitively if this is the outcome of general life transitions interfering with participation, or if there are issues with the perceived value of participation.

Overall, it is important to make rugby experiences meaningful. The ‘team takes too much time’ is less cited by players who believe that training sessions are skill-acquisition-oriented, and that skills are mastered in practice. Training sessions that are repetitive don’t just have the outcome of boring those in attendance – they can similarly communicate to a less-enthusiastic participant that there isn’t value in what they’re doing and that they’d be better served doing other things. Trainings should never be structured around simply maintaining skills – they should be focused on improving skills and celebrating the acquisition of new abilities.

4.3 Retention of existing players

For the most part, the many strategies for recruiting and transitioning players apply for the retention of existing players, but there are special areas of emphasis to note/focus for those players a club is seeking to retain.

4.3(a) Recognize differences between existing players and new/transitioning players

There is a lot of talk in recruiting new players about offering multiple types of play. In fact, in the *Recruit and Retain Study, Report to USA Rugby & World Rugby* it was noted that players who quit playing high school rugby favored 7s to 15s even if they had never played 7s before. To that end, it’s also important to note in that same document that ~75% of existing players (those that stay with the sport) cite 15s as their favorite code of play. As such, the offering of 7s opportunities may help drive new players to a club, but those opportunities should largely not be at the expense of an existing 15s program or the welfare of a core player in your club. Existing players are also more ambivalent towards non-contact rugby than players who’ve quit or left. Accordingly, non-contact rugby should serve as a complimentary piece to an overall rugby platform, not a substitute for an existing rugby opportunity.

4.3(b) Create and maintain an active operational plan

Having an effective operational plan will guide a club’s ability to space out time and labor commitments from existing members. Clubs should proactively anticipate all trainings, matches, social events, and other club activities prior to a season beginning, and identify opportunities for members to assist at a level equal to their ability to commit. Some members may not mind painting the field for every home match; others may only be able to do so once, and only if they know weeks in advance. By targeting and

identifying most roles necessary for the successful operation of the club far in advance of the roles being activated, a proactive club will be able to properly assist players with helping the club in a manner consistent with their lifestyle and time commitments.

4.3(c) Identify non-playing and/or less time-consuming roles

In addition to having non-playing and less time-consuming roles as a general operational strategy, imaginative leadership should focus on identifying transitional roles for specific individuals as their ability to participate changes. Often, players who begin to change their playing levels have not thoroughly thought out their next phase of participation, and a proactive approach to identifying roles for such individuals provides an opportunity for a club to both retain a member and fill an organizational need.

Section 5. Level-Specific Themes and Solutions

Youth and High School	College	Senior Club
Nail down the basics of recruiting (interest forms, club fairs, flyers, direct contact)	Nail down the basics of recruiting (interest forms, club fairs, flyers, direct contact)	Nail down the basics of recruiting (interest forms, club fairs, flyers, direct contact)
Use existing players/personnel as influencers (multi-school) -find out where existing players come from; recruit there	Use existing players/personnel as influencers -find out where existing players come from; recruit there	Use existing players/personnel as influencers -find out where existing players come from; recruit there
Resources into coaching and education	Resources into coaching and education	Resources into coaching and education
Offer multiple types of play -non-competitive and competitive -15s and 7s -non-contact	Offer multiple types of play -non-competitive and competitive -15s and 7s -non-contact	Offer multiple types of play -non-competitive and competitive -15s and 7s -non-contact
Offer multiple divisions of play	Offer multiple divisions of play	Offer multiple divisions of play
Active alumni engagement facilitates more roles for all	Active alumni engagement facilitates more roles for all	Active alumni engagement facilitates more roles for all
Focus on mastery of skills over wins & losses	Focus on mastery of skills over wins & losses	Focus on mastery of skills over wins & losses
Relentlessly promote rugby's values and positive imagery of the game	Relentlessly promote rugby's values and positive imagery of the game	Relentlessly promote rugby's values and positive imagery of the game
Incorporate activities to socialize players into rugby values	Incorporate activities to socialize players into rugby values	Incorporate activities to socialize players into rugby values
Youth and High School Level-Specific Strategies	College Level-Specific Strategies	Senior Club Level-Specific Strategies
Physical presence at youth events -tournaments (RCTs, States) -training and matches	Physical presence at HS events -tournaments (States, RCTs) -training and matches	Physical presence at Collegiate events -tournaments (Conf. POs; 7s) -training and matches
Non-contact rugby at P.E. and in local camps/organizations	Non-contact rugby as part of intramurals/sports clubs	Non-contact rugby as part of local meet-up group/league
Flyers: -recreation centers -schools	Flyers: -student recreation area -dormitories	Flyers: -local gyms -local recreation centers
Strategies should focus on selling parents and faculty on benefits of playing	Strategies should focus on selling faculty, parents, and alumni on benefits of playing	Strategies should focus on selling employers and families on benefits of playing
Actively work with student-athletes about grades and life choices; engage school and team regarding successes	Actively work with student-athletes about grades and life choices; engage school and team regarding successes	Actively work with players regarding normal life transitions in their 20s and 30s; celebrate successes as a club
Engage parents -key to enrollment and learning about sport and its subculture	Engage friendship networks	Engage friendship networks
Create an alumni/supporter culture	Create an alumni/supporter culture	Create a supporter/old boys/old girls culture

Host curtain-raisers for youth programs; do not play against youth programs	Host curtain-raisers for high schools; do not play against high schools	Host curtain-raisers for colleges and high schools; do not play against colleges or high schools
Actively ‘push’ players to college or senior club rugby	Actively ‘push’ players to senior club rugby	
	Facilitate assistance with life transition from HS to College	Facilitate assistance with life transition from College to being a working professional
	Start a U20 team -critical to development of younger players	Start a U20 team -U23 team, if necessary**
		Use 7s as a pathway to connect with college players and their social networks during the summer Club 7s season
		Create a family culture
		Use media recruitment, which is more important than at other levels

5.1 Youth and High School

Specific strategies related to youth and high school rugby are largely variations in how/where high school programs facilitate transitions as opposed to college and senior club programs. For example, high school programs would coordinate a physical presence at middle school events, or attempt to include non-contact rugby through physical education classes or local camps and organizations. Similarly, recruiting flyers for youth and high school programs would be placed in different venues than for college or senior club programs. For single-school programs, the direct contact of recruiting is primarily aimed at reminding players at lower levels of the value in continuing to participate and/or capturing athletes from other sports or activities. For multi-school programs, there may value in casting a wider net, but that’s largely dependent upon the geographic provisions instituted by state rugby organizations.

One key difference between youth and high school versus college and club in recruiting, retaining, and transitioning of players is parent buy-in as opposed to friend buy-in. While friends are definitely key influencers for youth players, they are not as important to participation as they are at the adult levels. Instead, parents are key influencers, and can be drivers in assisting with the influence of school officials as well.

Youth and high school programs are additionally a key source in the chain of facilitating transitions between levels. By creating linkages between clubs and organizations, youth and high school players should be actively pushed to continue participation at the college or senior club levels.

5.2 College

College is the key level for facilitating assistance with life transitions begins to become important. College is an overwhelming process for many young people, and rugby players are no different.

Forward-thinking college programs will take advantage of their often-long histories on campus to build strong alumni networks that can assist with the recruitment of players from lower levels, as well as provide resources to assist with the recruitment and retention of players on campus. Often, alumni of college programs are spread out across the country and can be key points of influence for programs looking to cast a wide net for recruiting.

In order to facilitate the transition of high school players into college programs, a college club should look for opportunities to have direct contact with players by having a physical presence at youth and high school events, such as trainings, matches, state tournaments, and regional cup tournaments. It's also advisable for college programs to adapt U20 rugby to assist with the increased physicality that transitioning players will encounter, as freshman- and sophomore-aged athletes are not always physically prepared for college rugby and may still be enduring the final years of their physical maturation.

College programs are a key source of linkage in facilitating transitions between levels of play. As such, college programs should seek to both actively 'pull' players from high school rugby and 'push' players into continuing participation at the senior club level.

5.3 Senior Club

When it comes to facilitating transitions, the senior club level of rugby is largely about 'pulling' players from other levels.

It would be sensible for senior clubs to take advantage of shifting competition formats commonly experienced at lower levels, such as the offering of 7s – which is also a key time for capturing graduated high school players or college-age players who are home for the summer.

One other notable item specific to senior clubs is that media recruitment becomes more important than it is at the youth and college levels. There is not a school setting that has an active, captive audience, so senior clubs must have a broader emphasis on the use of media to assist in recruiting players. As insight from college players has gathered, some college players don't play senior club rugby simply because they don't know they have the option.

Much like with college programs, it's advisable for senior clubs to consider the adaptation of U20 rugby to assist with players transitioning between physicality levels of the sport. To the degree necessary, senior clubs could also consider adopting other age-grade level teams, though it's important to note that the median age for senior club rugby in 2017 is 26 years of age. Largely, players that are 21 and above are fully capable of playing senior club adult rugby. The primary value of considering alternative age-grade programs (such as U23) is in creating a linkage to a community college or other such program, or in providing a competition platform for younger players to only play against their peers.

In order to best capture players seeking to participate at the senior club level, programs must develop structures and organizational emphasis that are focused around supporting life transitions. This is the key to recruiting and retaining players at this level, as well as capturing and keeping players in transition.

Senior clubs are also the anchor(s) of local community rugby, and often the driving force for starting or developing many youth and high school programs. As such, senior club programs would be wise to create a family culture, which may also assist players going through life transitions. At the senior club level, players often quit because life gets in the way, so the adaptation of policies that emphasize coordination around life struggles will assist in creating stronger senior clubs.