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Why private schools are turning away from rugby and learning to love football

Football has capitalised on the numerous issues facing rival sport, with rugby struggling to maintain its superiority

By Sam Dean

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For decades, the playing fields of England's private schools have served as the country's rugby union production line, producing almost half of the men's team's captains in the last 25 years, and countless more of its biggest stars.

Yet the independent sector is now confronting an uncomfortable truth: fewer and fewer parents are willing to let their children play rugby. So great is the threat facing the sport that a major report last year found that a smaller number of boys play rugby in independent schools than at any time in recent history.

Inevitably, given its supremacy in almost all other areas of British sporting life, it is football that is gaining the most ground as rugby loses momentum. The numbers are startling: five years ago, the Independent Schools Football Association (ISFA) boasted around 250 member schools, providing around 6,500 teams. Now, there are around 350 members, providing around 12,000 teams.

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“Within football it is one of the few areas of the game that is really growing, and at some speed,” says Ian Bent, head of football operations at the ISFA. “We are seeing more schools playing football, and those schools who do play football are now playing more football. It is real, huge growth.”



The Independent Schools Football Association now boasts around 350 members | CREDIT: RWT

Football’s increasing popularity within private schools - a source of anguish for rugby-loving traditionalists across the land - is not entirely the result of the challenges facing rugby. There are also societal trends to consider, and the changing nature of football as a

global industry. But it is clear that football has capitalised on the numerous issues facing its rival sport, and that rugby is struggling to maintain its superiority.

At Rossall School in Lancashire, they have seen these changes up close and reacted accordingly. Historically a rugby-playing school, they decided four years ago to launch a football programme. In the first year, there were three children on that programme - now there are 110. "We are now one of the main football forces in the country," says Jack Cropper, the school's director of sport.

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Rossall's pivot towards football helps to paint a picture of the wider changes in the sporting landscape of independent schools. Providing football has made them more appealing to foreign families, increased the variety of their offering and eased the minds of anxious parents.

It was not a decision made solely because of the problems facing rugby, but those issues were clearly relevant: Cropper says more and more families are now raising concerns about the safety of rugby. "For parents, football is an easier option," he tells Telegraph Sport.

Last year, Neil Rollings, the chairman of the Professional Association of Directors of Sport in Independent Schools (Padsis), published a report which detailed the "incremental pressure on [rugby] building over the last 10 to 15 years". It is an exhaustive piece of work, examining the scale of the threat and the reasons for the sport's decline within these schools, and the issue of safety is cited as one of the key concerns.

Among the more eye-catching points raised in his report is the influence of the professional game. "Professional rugby is not a good shop window for the school game," Rollings writes. "A focus on 'big hits', macho confrontation and a celebration of abnormal size and power of players detracts from the historical claim that it is a game for all shapes and sizes."

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Rollings also references the polarisation of the sport within schools due to the impact of professionalism. As the leading teenage players, with ambitions of playing rugby at a high level, have become better and stronger, a significant and potentially dangerous gap has opened up between them and the rest.

“The contrast between the best athletes and the others is stark, making the game less attractive to the latter,” writes Rollings. “House matches have become unworkable on safety grounds. The exodus of players has not been amongst the marquee performers: it is the boys of average size, ability and commitment who are no longer finding the game as attractive as previously.”

All of which, evidently, has opened the door to football. “There are a number of parents who are very conscious about playing rugby within school, and football is another mass participation sport that can be offered which is a lot safer,” says Bent. “A lot of the new schools joining the ISFA were big rugby schools not so long ago.”



A smaller number of boys are playing rugby in independent schools than ever | CREDIT: ALAMY

It helps football’s cause that it is widely regarded to be more socially acceptable now, as a pursuit and a passion. Its position within society has altered, and the sport faces less sneers than it did in the not-too-distant past. “A lot of independent schools would look down their noses at football 30 years ago,” says Bent. “That view is hardly there any more.”

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There is also a rising number of high-profile players within the professional game who have come through private schools, including the likes of Tyrone Mings, Patrick Bamford

and Calum Chambers, which serves as a welcome advert to families with talented children. And with more tournaments and competitions to enter, and possibly win, there are more incentives for schools to offer scholarships to gifted young players.

These changes are not entirely detached from the professional game. Rossall's football course is in partnership with nearby Fleetwood Town, for example, and last year the League One side signed two players who were identified on the programme. Rossall's football team has beaten Championship under-18 sides this summer, furthering their belief that their football coaching is strong enough to rival many professional academies.

It is also a sign of the shifting attitude towards football that some leading teams are now forging links with independent schools. In Manchester, the start of this school year marked the 10-year anniversary of Manchester City's partnership with St Bede's College. Around 70 young players from City's academy attend the school, following a modified timetable that allows them more time on the training pitches (although they do not play for the school teams). England internationals Phil Foden and Jadon Sancho both benefited from the agreement.



Phil Foden (left) and Jadon Sancho (right) are both beneficiaries | CREDIT: AP

Formal ties, in terms of providing players with a defined pathway from independent schools to the professional game, remain rare. There are a growing number of connections, though. Whitgift School, in Croydon, says it has “strong relationships” with

the likes of Chelsea, Fulham and Crystal Palace. Chelsea winger Callum Hudson-Odoi came through Whitgift, as did Bayern Munich's Jamal Musiala (formerly of Chelsea's academy) and Palace academy graduate Victor Moses.

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“Professional clubs are aware of how much stronger the independent schools are becoming,” says Jim Colston, the football academy director at Claremont Independent School in East Sussex. “This has been happening over a period of two or three years. I know because of the amount of enquiries we are now getting about our boys.”

The route from an independent school to the professional game has never been particularly easy, but in a changing world it is becoming increasingly possible and plausible for talented players.

“Times have changed,” says Colston. “The clubs have wised up and started to understand they can't ignore the independent schools. I know for a fact that scouts go to matches that involve independent schools in the latter rounds of the major cups.”

As football has strengthened its hold within independent schools, not everyone has responded enthusiastically to the changes. Cropper is in no doubt, though, that Rossall - which does still play rugby - is moving in the right direction.

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“Just because something has always been done in the past does not mean it is correct,” he says. “Independent schools have to get with the times. I believe we are ahead of the trend. Football will become more popular in the coming years.”

For the traditionalists, and those who believe in rugby's long-held primacy at these institutions, the changes will no doubt be a source of concern. For those involved in football at this level, however, these are thrilling times.

“If you go back 20 years, football was literally banned in some schools,” says Bent. “It really was not allowed to be played. It has seen huge growth over the past five years and it will continue in the years to come. It is fascinating that the whole sector has just woken up to how brilliant it is.”

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