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Rugby's Rise in the United States: The Impact of Social Media on an Emerging Sport

Benjamin Kocher

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Jared Johnson, Chair  
Clark Callahan  
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## ABSTRACT

Rugby's Rise in the United States: The Impact of Social Media on an Emerging Sport

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In this study, the grounded theory approach was used to conduct a qualitative study about the effects the media has on rugby players in the United States. This study involved in-depth interviews with American-born-and-raised rugby players from the top rugby colleges and universities in the United States. These interviews helped identify the role played by traditional and social media in encouraging new players to begin playing the sport of rugby. Results showed that traditional media did not play a large role in bringing out new players in the United States. However newer, social media played a much larger role. New players also emerged through interpersonal communications with others, usually their friends and family. The media was useful in making rugby more important in the lives of the players once they began playing, and recruiting was bolstered by the use of social media. Other results show that another reason rugby players tend to continue playing is because of the bonds of friendship they build with their teammates.

Keywords: Rugby, United States, media, social media, grounded theory

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Rugby is known by many who play the sport as “a game for hooligans played by gentlemen,” as opposed to its predecessor (soccer) which is said to be “a game for gentlemen played by hooligans” (Richards, 2007, p. 18-19). But what exactly is rugby? According to one official website, rugby is “a Game played by two teams which physically contest for the ball, within the Laws of the Game and in the Spirit of Fair Play, in order to score points” (irrugbyready.com, n.d.). Although there is a great deal of respect and fair play during rugby matches, intimidation is also an important factor in rugby, and legalized violence in the game could land a man in prison if done elsewhere (Richards, 2007). This study deals with the emergence of rugby in the United States in relation to the effectiveness of social media.

### Differences Within Rugby

In order to lessen confusion moving forward, a few points of rugby may need to be explained. There are two different rugby codes. The first is called rugby union, and is the form the original rugby took after. The other code is known as rugby league and is a break-off from rugby union. Although the rules and regulations vary between codes, knowing the difference between the two is not imperative to the success of this study. It should be mentioned that when rugby is talked about in this study, it is referring to rugby union.

There are two main variations of the game of rugby union. The original variation is played with fifteen players on each team, thus making thirty players on the pitch at a time. This is referred to as “fifteens.” Another variation came about in Scotland about

four decades after the initial game of rugby came in to existence in 1823. That variation is played with only seven players per team but on the same sized pitch as fifteens and is known as “sevens.” More on why these two variations are important will be explained later.

### **Media and Rugby in the United States**

Although rugby is a relatively small sport in the United States compared to other sports, such as American football and basketball, it has also become the fastest growing sport in the United States (Schmitz, 2010). The sport of rugby is growing at a rapid rate in many nations throughout the world, and with increasing broadcast coverage in the United States, more and more people are able to be exposed to the sport (Chadwick, Semens, Schwarz, & Zhang, 2010; see also [irb.com](http://irb.com), n.d.). Although there is an increase in media coverage and growth as a whole, the sport of rugby is still relatively small in the United States compared to other sports, such as American football and basketball. This study will identify how social media plays a role in new rugby players picking up the sport, and how social media affects the growth of rugby in the United States. In order to accomplish this, American collegiate rugby players were interviewed to understand how the media played a role in their conversion to rugby, and how it is continuing to play a role in the sport’s development.

Sports can be found in countries throughout the world. Some sports remain relatively unpopular except in their country of origin, (e.g. hurling in Ireland, Australian Rules football in Australia, or American Football in the United States), whereas other sports (e.g. soccer and cricket) are popular throughout the world. As with every sport, there must be people to play it. But what makes athletes chose the sports they play? In



the United States, there are some sports that have a high following from sports fans (United States Census Bureau, 2009). These would be what are known as “popular” sports. Other sports are also played, but remain relatively “unpopular” among sports enthusiasts in the United States. Rugby is one of these sports that appears to be known as one of the more unpopular sports in the United States, with only 1% of the country acting as supporters (Chadwick, Semens, Schwarz, & Zhang, 2010). The purpose of this study is to find out why rugby players in the United States chose to engage in the sport, given the relatively unpopular classification it has in the United States, and how social media played a role in that decision. This study contributes in that individuals can learn to what effect social media plays when a person first begins choosing a sport in which to participate. It will also build understanding of the reasons behind why rugby players in the United States choose to play rugby, despite the low levels of attention it receives. The main research question this study seeks to explore is why American collegiate athletes choose to play rugby over more highly publicized sports. A related question to this is how much the media plays a role in this decision. The reasons discussed will focus more on what brought them to be involved, or rather what motivated them, as opposed to the casual reasons, such as, “Because I like the sport.”

Rugby is growing quickly in the United States, and has become the third fastest growing sport, as well as the fastest growing team sport, in the country (Conway, 2011). Rugby may continue to grow with increased intensity as the 2016 Summer Olympics in Brazil come closer, with sevens rugby making its debut at the games. The last time rugby appeared in the Olympics was in 1924, when the USA took gold (Economist.com, 2011). Some people believe that with the 2016 Olympics fast approaching, USA rugby will see

more crossover from American football to rugby (Pratt, 2011). With successful rugby in its history, USA rugby is once again on the rise, and players are switching over from other sports to try their hand at the game (Clifton, 2012; Pratt, 2011).

There have been some studies in the past that have looked into the reasons behind the decision making process of an athlete when he or she first chooses a sport. However, many of those former studies do not necessarily look at media as a factor in the decision, but focus more on other factors, such as race (Harries, 1994), age (Bollók, Takács, Kalmár, & Dobay, 2011), gender (Giuliano, Popp, & Knight, 2000), people of influence (such as coaches, parents, or friends) and culture (Watts, 2002), and even tourism (Gibson, 1998). Harris (1994) and Watts (2002) mention media as an important part of the influence process, but only briefly.

Because of the many potential reasons as to why rugby players chose that sport, and because there has yet to be much research conducted about this topic, this study will be conducted using qualitative research, using the grounded theory approach. A review of past literature on sports will provide a useful background in knowing how sports have grown and risen in popularity. Rugby is an important topic of study because almost every kid plays a sport at some time in their life, and yet rugby doesn't seem to be even a choice for the vast majority of them. This study is significant in understanding where interest in rugby comes from in a country where it isn't as important as many other sports. Also, although there is *some* rugby media coverage in the USA, it is significant to note that there is still not a *lot* of media coverage.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### The Survival of Sports

Survival of the fittest has been reported as one cause as to why some sports thrive and others do not (Eriksen, 2007). Eriksen looks at the reason some phenomena spread while others do not. In his research, he quotes Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point*, explaining how some things spread widely because they happen to find the right time and circumstances. He proposes three reasons as to why some things flourish worldwide and others do not. The first is the short learning curve. In sports, for example, soccer is relatively easy to understand: a player must kick a round ball into the net in order to score. Hands may not be used. Of course, there are other rules that go along with it, but the concept is relatively simple. Rugby, however, is something different. There are more players, multiple ways to score, various ways to advance the ball up the field, and a wide variety of infringements, both small and large. Rugby also needs a different mindset than that used in American football. For example, there is no blocking in rugby, but there is a lot of blocking in American football. Americans who have grown up watching and/or playing football will have to change the way they think in order to cross over into rugby. Smith (2007) claims that one of rugby's greatest weakness is its over-complex laws. The second reason Eriksen (2007) gives is that they have an "emotional, sensory, or intellectual appeal" (p. 156), which goes beyond the local. Third, some sports are more effectively marketed internationally than others. This study will examine more closely the third reason, that of marketing, in that despite the low-levels of rugby marketing in the United States, more people are still playing the game every year (irb.com, 2011).

## A History of Rugby

The first mention of rugby taking shape was in 1823, when during a game of soccer (football, or association football) at Rugby School, England, William Web Ellis took it into his own hands (quite literally) to change the nature of the game. According to the records, Ellis, “with a fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his time first took the ball in his arms and ran with it, thus originating the distinctive feature of the Rugby game” (Richards, 2007, p. 24). The game of soccer was much different during the time of William Web Ellis than it is now. For example, it was legal to catch a ball with the hands and retreat backwards from the mark where it was caught. The key concept here, however, is that instead of retreating, Ellis ran it forward (Richards, 2007).

Although that famous myth of the beginnings of the game has been taken to be more or less gospel truth by many who play the game (after all, the William Web Ellis Cup is the highest prize a team can win, which is done by winning the Rugby World Cup), it was not the cause for the spread and development of the game. Instead, this story came about much later, in an attempt to bring “comfort to those concerned at the direction rugby had taken” in the late 1800s (Collins, 2009, p. 3). There was, however, another fictional story that did impact the popularity of the game. This was the story called *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* and, although the main purpose was to help young boys understand what goes on in public school, it contained within itself a description of a very close rugby match (Hughes, 1857). This is the first account of any form of media being used to bring others closer to the sport of rugby.

One of the main reasons for rugby’s continued existence is the writing down of rules. Although football was highly played in and around the time of rugby’s first

recorded history, there were many variations that were played throughout the different schools in England. A rulebook was created for the rugby code so that there would be set guidelines to follow, as to avoid lengthy debate as to which code to play prior to games between different schools. This rulebook was not intended to penetrate the masses, but after a short time it had spread into the hands of thousands, allowing for the rugby code of football to become widely popular. As time progressed, changes in the rules emerged. One initial rule that is unheard of today is that a rugby match could last up to five days, with time given in between for sleep. That and many other rules have since been changed and altered to create the game that exists today (Smith, 2007).

As previously noted, the game of rugby had its moment of inception in 1823, and in 1871 the first test match (international match between two different countries) was played. This was also the year that the first governing body of the rugby game was established (Richards, 2007). Many countries fell in line with this new code of football and created their own governing bodies for their own individual countries, each following the same laws as the others. New Zealand made a trip to Australia in 1884 and performed the haka before the match, an ancient Maori war dance ([www.newzealand.com](http://www.newzealand.com), n.d.). Following the match, the “New South Wales team...protest[ed] that it was hardly fair for the visitors to scare them out of their wits before the game began” (Richards, 2007, p. 50). To this day, New Zealand continues to perform the haka before each test match. Rugby in the United States grew. However, by the early 1880s, the United States began altering rules, such as changing the number of players on the field to eleven, and then in 1906 the forward pass was legalized (Richards, 2007).

As the sport grew, rules were changed. When rugby was first introduced to the

world, in order to score a runner would bring the ball over the line and touch it down, thus earning himself a try at goal (this is where the term try comes from, which is much like a touchdown in American football). In rugby's early days, a try was worth no points, but a kick was attempted in which the ball must pass between two tall posts and over a crossbar between those posts (Collins, 2009). In the early days, this was the only way to score. In 1886, it was decided that a try would be worth one point instead of zero, and a conversion worth three. Penalty goals were also introduced. The point system continued to evolve until in 1991 a try was deemed worth five points, which score method remains until this day (Richards, 2007). The number of players on the field for each team could range from twelve-a-side to as many as forty-a-side, but was officially changed in 1892 that there would only be fifteen players for each team on the field at one time (Collins, 2009).

As the years passed, rugby continued to grow. The 1920s saw 231 new clubs in England. The 1927-28 season saw the first radio broadcast of rugby, which came from Twickenham Stadium in London, England. The first televised broadcast was in 1938, with Scotland defeating England at Twickenham. Scotland built a massive stadium in Edinburgh, known as Murrayfield. It held 70,000 people with a "giant grandstand hailed by *The Times* as 'second to none in the world of sporting spectacles'" (Richards, 2007, p. 123). The sport of rugby was growing in its fan base, and not just in Great Britain, although it would seem to be taking longer elsewhere. In the United States, for example, the number of New York rugby clubs grew from 48 to 260 in less than a decade, beginning in 1966, and there were over 400 college teams playing by the end of the 1970s, as well as over a thousand clubs from all across the United States (Richards, 2007).

Rugby in the Olympics was first introduced in the year 1900 with the fifteens variation, but only lasted through the 1924 Olympics. Although by this time the United States had already started converting rugby to gridiron form, the United States won gold in both 1920 and 1924 Olympics (irb.com, n.d.). Although rugby has been left out of the Olympic Games for nine decades, it will be returning in 2016 in Brazil as the sevens variation makes its Olympic debut (irbsevens.com, 2013).

The first Rugby World Cup was held in 1987, with another being held every four years. The 1995-1996 season saw the emergence of the Tri Nations and Super 12 tournaments in the Southern Hemisphere, which became known as “the perfect rugby product” (Richards, 2007, p.246). In particular, the Super 12 (including clubs from South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand) was, as they said, “made for television” (Richards, 2007, p. 246). That same season also saw the beginning of the Heineken Cup in Europe (the modern competition includes clubs from England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Italy, and France). By this time, professionalism in rugby was now a part of the game. The IRB Sevens tournament began in 1999, which is a multiple-day tournament of the sevens variety. The tournament tours the world, making stops in nine different countries, and it has become what USA Rugby calls “the largest international rugby party” (usasevens.com, n.d.).

## **Media and Sport**

Broadcast media and sport have been together for over nine decades, as the first sports broadcast took place on July 2, 1921. It was a boxing match, broadcast over radio for thousands to hear (Gommery, 2008). As time went on, sports began to benefit from televised broadcasts. American football, for example, was easier for audiences to

understand when the instant replay technique came about. By 1964, weekend sporting events were becoming incredibly valuable for broadcasters (Barnouw, 1970).

There is a wide world out there with many different sports to be enjoyed by millions of Americans, yet only a few favorites are broadcasted. During football season in the United States, the National Football League (NFL) and college football dominates the sporting airwaves. Basketball season is next in line, and that, too, takes over the sports networks with the National Basketball Association (NBA) and college basketball. Baseball is another major sport in the United States, and hockey is played during all these seasons, leaving the National Hockey League (NHL) with the leftover air space, and even auto racing comes in with a popular count (Corso, 2011). These are the sports that most Americans would know about, by virtue of their being a cultural mainstream in sports. It is noted that rugby was not even considered on the list used by Corso. How then did successful American rugby players come to find out about rugby? If there isn't much on the television, perhaps there are other methods that have found success in provoking interest in people.

Television was seemingly made for sports, and in just over three decades, sport and television have come together to the point where they are now absolutely necessary. Rowe (1996) suggests that despite the mutual blending of sports and television, there are still kinks in their relationship. One of these conflicts is that television has taken over sport. Not only that, television has chosen favorites when it comes to sports, such as those that are more "masculine." The media became involved in the reporting of sporting events in the beginning part of the 18th century in the United States and Great Britain, and then slowly spread from there as the literacy rate also climbed. However, Rowe also



claims that it wasn't until the emergence of the television that sports in the media really took off. Despite the worldwide popularity of soccer (and rugby might even be added), however, American marketing has done little in the way of increasing its popularity in the United States through broadcast (Giullianotti, & Robertson, 2004).

The NFL has had a live presence in England since 2007, when Wembley Stadium was used to host two NFL teams. The initial game between the New York Giants and Miami Dolphins brought in an estimated 23 million pounds. With an estimated 2 million NFL fans in Great Britain, Sunday broadcasts of NFL games have increased viewership by 154%, and since 2006, Super Bowl viewership has increased 74% (Pangallo, 2012). This is one example of how a seemingly unpopular sport in one country (NFL in Great Britain) can create interest in millions, which brings up similar questions in regards to the topic of this study. Those questions are how those in Great Britain discovered American football in the first place, and then what made them fans of the sport. If that question is to be answered, it will have to be done in a different study at a different time. However, if such a fan base and income can be had by the NFL (a foreign sport in a country that has little to no ties to it) on the other side of the ocean, then perhaps there is a correlation with the sport of rugby in the United States. Somewhere down the line, someone in Great Britain took an interest in the NFL, and it has since grown. Somewhere in the United States, people are also gaining interest in rugby. The questions, though, are how and why.

Williams (1994) mentions how money will not flow to where there are no markets. From the early years of sports broadcasting, rules of sports have been altered to allowed breaks for televised commercials (Rader, 1990). In the United States, more than half of professional football revenue comes from broadcasting. The sports that bring in the next

greatest amount of money are basketball and baseball, which contribute about one-third. Hockey is next, bringing in much less (Cave, & Crandall, 2001). Because hockey is a sport of continuous action, it is difficult to schedule convenient times for commercial breaks (Rader, 1984). Money is an important factor in American broadcasting. In Europe, however, the government believes that some sporting events are of national interest, and therefore are entitled to be offered to free-to-air broadcasters with fair terms. Sporting events that fall under this category of national interest are the Olympic Games, Soccer World Cup, rugby finals, and tennis competitions (*idem*). These free-to-air sports broadcasts allow sports fans to be more aware of some sports they may not have thought about without aid from those broadcasters.

One way broadcasting companies have been able to increase the number of sports shown on television is through pay-TV. In the United Kingdom, soccer is very popular, and in 1998, free-to-air sports broadcasts show that 77 of 100 sports broadcasts were of soccer. Pay-TV showed that 96 of 100 broadcasts watched were soccer (Cave, & Crandall, 2001). However, pay-TV does not work for viewers all the time. In Australia, rugby league's Super League had funding cut to one of the most celebrated and successful teams in Australian rugby league (Andrews, & Ritzer, 2007). According to Andrews and Ritzer, it is the broadcasting corporations that decide which sports will live and which will die. Cressman & Swenson (2007) suggest also that one of the reasons football came to thrive on television is because it was the first one there. Television is also one way to help sports grow in popularity, such as the case of professional football in its earlier years (Rader, 1984).

Aside from helping sports to grow, sports broadcasts and the hefty sums of money

that seem to accompany them also proved the demise of amateur sports in America. Amateur sports became something that merely supplemented other activities, such as work or school (Rader, 1984). With the drop in amateur sports, those smaller, less “popular” sports might not be in the front of a participant’s mind when he or she goes about deciding on which sport is their sport of choice.

With the emergence of radio, “sport has been one of the mainstays of broadcasting” (Szymanski, 2006, p. 428), and Cressman and Swenson (2007) said that “the history of sports runs parallel to the history of American Broadcasting” (p. 497). The broadcasting of sports plays an important role in how sports are received in the United States, and broadcasting allows for an increase in revenue for sporting leagues, some more than others. Because television can bring in a great amount of revenue to sports, “they have molded, adapted, and changed their rules to meet the desires and needs of television” (Parente, 1977, p. 128). According to Parente, sports authorities “found it easier to change the nature of their sport to appeal to the desires of television rather than to the wants of the live spectator” (p. 129). For example, the duration of halftime for the NFL was changed from 20 to 15 minutes in order to better fit in with network programming schedule. In the NHL, the center line was changed to a broken line, making it more visible to those watching from home (Parente, 1977). On the other end of that spectrum, Parente says that television has come to rely on sports to “fulfill many of its programming needs” (p. 128). Cave and Crandall (2001) said that “no other US sports league relies solely on national rights” as does the National Football League (p. F14). In accordance with that statement, they said that the NFL “derives more than half of its revenues from broadcasting” (p. F12). Other sports, however, receive much less.

Professional basketball and baseball, for example, only generate about one-third of their revenue from broadcasting, and the National Hockey League even less (Cave, & Crandall, 2001). Huggins (2007) makes the point that, compared to other international broadcast companies, “the USA was a state-regulated service, with private ownership of broadcasting facilities, financed through advertising” (p. 491). In Great Britain, the media was a tool in shaping “Britain’s sporting culture and...widened general interest in sport” (Huggins, 2007). In the early days of sports broadcasting, “radio introduced people to sports they had never seen before [and] it helped rugby grow in popularity” (Huggins, 2007, p. 493).

The sport of rugby union in Australia has grown in the last 20 years, and a great deal of this growth has to do with its increased “level of marketability and attractiveness to television and sponsors” (Horton, 2009, p. 972). In the 1970’s, television coverage of rugby union matches grew, enabling games to be viewed more locally as well as around the world. Horton said that it was a combination of “higher level of skill and the improved power of players, combined with the adoption of more expansive playing styles, produced a far more marketable product for television broadcasters and sponsors” (p. 972). Broadcasting has also played an important role with regards to the impact of rugby league in Australia (Phillips, & Hutchins, 1998). In the early years of Australian broadcasting, the networks did not think investing in rugby league was of much importance. During the 1971 season, “not a single match was televised,” but that didn’t hurt the National Rugby League (NRL), because “gate receipts still reigned supreme” (p. 135). As broadcasts became more popular, the league expanded, which helped bring in more money. By bringing in new clubs to the league, it “helped to bolster markets for

regional television” (Phillips, & Hutchins, 1998, p. 138). In the 1980s, television and financial growth were closely related, as the league increased its broadcasting rights and exposure through broadcasts grew. In 1994, the State of Origin match (a rivalry match between the states of New South Wales and Queensland) “was not only the most watched sporting event in Australia, but also the most popular program of any category on television” (p. 141). One reason for its popularity is that it was a “special,” meaning it ran three nights over a five-week period and was heavily promoted throughout that time. Now, as popular as rugby league is in Australia, “the media dictate to the sport like never before” (p. 143).

In the United States, many newspapers and broadcast stations came as a pair, which allowed for more sports coverage more often (Huggins, 2007). This allowed for “more interest [to be] taken in the football and baseball pages than ever before” (Huggins, 2007, p. 495). Attendance at live games is another product of live broadcasting. Huggins (2007) said that the English Rugby Football Union worked on increasing the number of fans joining matches at Twickenham Stadium. According to Huggins, “broadcasting seemed to encourage attendance there” (p. 501). Not only did attendance increase in the English stadium because of broadcasts, but in Scotland as well, where “broadcasts from Murrayfield coincided with increased crowds” (Huggins, 2007, p. 501).

In the United States, sport broadcasts are “dominated by American football, baseball and basketball, and has been for some time” (Brown, 2005, p. 1106-1107). Today, the market of sports broadcasting is quite stable, and the “space became ‘frozen’, with change now nearly impossible” (p. 1107). Despite that claim, however, Brown also makes comment on how baseball and basketball ratings are declining, and NASCAR is

on the rise, albeit at a slow rate. With American football, baseball, basketball, and even NASCAR claiming the most popular rankings in sports in the United States, there is still room for sports fans to learn about other sport, including rugby.

With the lack of both money and broadcasts, it would appear that rugby will struggle to grow in the United States until these factors can be dealt with. According to Dart (2013), there was hope on the horizon as the NFL teams up with American rugby programs to bring both money and broadcasts to Americans potentially as early as 2014. Dart reports that the NFL is in the process of developing a new rugby union league to be broadcast on the NFL network during its offseason, which would then expose NFL fans to the sport of rugby while American football is on a break. Although it did not happen in 2014, the plan is now to start up the league in 2015 (Jahns, 2014).

NBC, an American broadcast company, was the first to claim rights to a Rugby World Cup and broadcast the games in the United States. This was during the 2011 World Cup in New Zealand (Conway, 2011). NBC also has rights to the next Rugby World Cup, which will take place in England in 2015. Carlin Isles, a relatively new member of the USA Eagles national sevens rugby squad, is capturing the attention of millions throughout the world because of his speed in open play. With only 36 100-meter sprinters faster than Isles in America in 2012 (Clifton, 2012), he quickly gained a lot of attention. With a YouTube video of Isles' highlights on the sevens circuit, rugby fans from not only the United States, but around the world, are quickly learning how fast the American rugby game is progressing (Sinkler, 2013; Gaines, 2012). Before crossing over from track to rugby, Isles had seen fifteen a side rugby match on television, and, following up his interest by searching on the Internet, discovered sevens rugby (a

variation of fifteens in which the game is played on the same sized pitch, but with seven players per team instead of fifteen) decided that rugby sevens was the sport for him (Clifton, 2012). Hull (2013) believes that having an American rugby star outmaneuvering top international players on national television can keep the momentum growing for rugby in the United States.

### Choosing a Sport

The decision to choose to play and focus on a particular sport can come from a variety of sources. People, such as coaches, family, or other athletes, can play a role in the decision making process. Harris (1994) claimed that the majority of people who take up a sport “have been influenced by others who serve as role models” (p. 40). Family, Harris claims, is important in the early integration of sports. Even in countries where rugby is a highly played sport, it can still take some coaxing from others to play. Hugh Ferns McLeod, for example, is a former Scottish rugby player, but he never played rugby at school, as his peers did. It wasn’t until he had begun an apprenticeship as a plasterer “that he was almost forcibly persuaded by his brother-in-law...to join a local semi-junior club” (Morgan, 1970, p. 19).

Aside from people, “media and local culture may also influence athletes’ decisions” (Watts, 2002, p. 33). Harris (1994) supports this claim by saying that the media influence is crucial. In the case of Carlin Isles, the decision to switch from American football and track to play rugby started with seeing rugby on television. His interest piqued, he proceeded to YouTube, where he saw more video on rugby and other crossover athletes, which motivated him even further toward playing the sport. According to Isles, he also liked the culture attached to rugby (Clifton, 2012). New Zealand native and All American

Brigham Young University Rugby player Paul Lasike came to the university originally to play rugby, but upon receiving an offer from the football head coach to practice and train with the football team, Lasike began his crossover into American football (Steves, 2012). For NBA-star Wilt Chamberlain, he started off as a track-and-field athlete, but his decision to play basketball stemmed from the local popularity of the sport (Cherry, 2004).

Other characteristics can also come into play when choosing a sport. Gibson (1998) shows that many people plan their vacation and leisure time around sports and similar activities, such as golfing trips, fishing trips, and sports-themed cruises. These sports-themed travel destinations don't always mean the tourists know how to play the sports they take up while on their vacation. According to Gibson, there are many travel companies and destinations that specialize in learning "to ski or golf or tennis or sail, or an endless list of activities while on vacation" (p. 161). This suggests that people are "motivated by the novelty and change associated with learning new skills" (p. 161) and sports. Others are "motivated by a sense of accomplishment" (p. 161). Age also plays a part in who plays sports. Gibson also reported that people play more sports when they are younger, and taper off as they get older.

Gender is another factor involved in choosing sport. Gibson (1998) suggests that not all sports are designed for female athletes, especially those that "require aggressive physical activity" (p. 163). One study also found that (in regards to youth), girls will generally choose sports in which they can participate with friends and have fun, whereas boys tend to choose sports which focus on physicality, competition, and achieving success over others (Bollók, Takács, Kalmár, & Dobay, 2011). Another study found that the influence for women to play sports at a later age can be traced back to whether or not



they played with more masculine toys and games as children. If they did, then the likelihood of them playing varsity sports was higher. The same applied to women if, as children, they played with mostly boys or in mixed-gender groups (Giuliano, Popp, & Knight, 2000).

Although Gibson (1998) believes that social class can also play a large role in who plays what sport, he also believes that race is even more important in determining what leisure activities a person pursues. Gibson states that it is more difficult for those of lower social class and financial stability to utilize the best facilities and coaching opportunities, since those tend to be found in the more educated and richer areas, schools, and clubs. That being said, it is also notable that what used to be the sport of upper-class white males has grown to include the middle and working-class as well, and may also include female and non-white athletes (idem). Harris (1994) believes that family support is important and a large factor in the participation of African Americans in playing sports. Harris also claims that black society, like most societies, teach their children to work on achieving the highest achievable goal, and since “there are few visible black role models of success outside of sport and other forms of entertainment, sport becomes an easily identifiable area of potential achievement for many African American males” (p. 41). Sometimes, Harris reported, teachers and other people of influence in an adolescent African American’s life push black males to play sports more than white males because they believe that blacks “are more athletically gifted than white” (p. 48) due to genetic differences.

### **Traditional vs. Social Media**

Traditional media is what is commonly thought of as media that pre-dates the

Internet, such as newspaper, magazines, and broadcast media, including radio and television (Kaye, & Johnson, 2003). Social media differs in that it is an online experience in which individuals are able to connect with others by sharing, creating, discussing, and interacting with other user-generated content (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Weblogs, or “blogs,” are one form of social media outlet where individuals can write down their own thoughts and then post them online for anyone to see. Social networking sites, such as Facebook or MySpace, allow users to connect with friends, family, and others, and share media with them, such as pictures, video, or messages. Content communities such as YouTube allow users to create and upload videos to the Internet. Flickr is similar, only instead of video, users upload their photos (Kaplan, & Haenlein, 2010).

In 2012, social media site Facebook surpassed 1 billion members. These are all real, active users. Considering this as Facebook’s population, this would make Facebook the third largest country in the world, falling only behind China and India, with their 1.34 billion and 1.2 billion population, respectively (Williams, 2012). With traditional media, those who take part in what it has to offer must rely on others to receive the information (such as set times for news broadcasts, newspaper to be printed, radio hosts to broadcast at certain times, etc.). With social media, however, individuals are able to access the information they want whenever, and wherever, they want. Aside from that, social media users are also able to create content themselves and share it with anyone who has access to the medium, which, as shown by Facebook, could be over a billion individuals.

Social media has taken aspects of traditional media and created ways for individual users to take part in the creative and sharing process. This allows for a variety

of media to be created and shared through various different sites and applications. The emergence of these social media platforms has made emerging ideas, including sports, find a voice in an otherwise too-crowded environment. In regards to rugby, this can only help it to be noticed. Traditional media has been saturated with sports like American football, basketball, and baseball, for many decades. For an emerging sport like rugby, this could have been the beginning of the end, since there is no room for it on traditional outlets. With the growth of social media, however, various websites have sprung up that allow for much easier access to all things rugby.

### **Social Mediated Communications**

Although social media is helping spread the fame of certain players, such as Carlin Isles, other forms of media, such as the more traditional form of broadcast media, may not be the most effective strategy in getting the word out in countries where rugby takes up a much smaller market than other sports. Instead, having those who have already played, or who have a knowledge of the sport, can possibly be an asset in growing the sport. Those people who know about or who have played rugby can encourage others to play and get involved in rugby in different ways than traditional media has to offer.

Interpersonal communication is an area in which social interactions between people are studied. These interactions may be used to learn about the effects of both verbal and non-verbal actions. One of the many effects of interpersonal communication involves “informing, persuading and providing emotional support to others” (Berger, 2009). In regards to interpersonal communication influencing others, Cappella (1987) believes that interpersonal communication takes place when one person’s actions affect the actions and behavior of someone else following their interactions. Berger (2009) claims also that

interpersonal communications affect relationships with others.

Word of mouth is one area of interpersonal communication that involves person-to-person communication, the receiver and communicator exchanging thoughts and ideas with each other (Swanson, Gwinner, Larson, & Janda, 2003). According to Berger and Iyengar (2013), there have been a number of studies conducted that claim “that word of mouth affects choice” (p. 568). For example, they mentioned that people are more likely to buy movies that are recommended by their friends. Likewise, doctors have been found to be more likely to prescribe a certain prescription drug if they know of other doctors who have prescribed the same one. Similarly, when it comes to word of mouth by consumers, it has been argued that people will be more apt to generate word of mouth marketing for companies if the product is interesting. Berger and Iyengar say further that “things can be interesting because they are novel, exciting, or surprising or because they violate expectations in some way” (p. 568).

When it comes to product marketing, word of mouth is hugely important in influencing a certain product (Silverman, 1997). Silverman believes that word of mouth can influence a product’s credibility in a positive way because of who was referring the product, such as a friend, who would review the product as an unbiased party. In a related area of sports marketing, word of mouth is also of much use when deciding to attend a certain sporting event, since they are “more difficult to evaluate prior to purchase and consumption” (Swanson, et al., 2003, p. 152). Shank (1999) believes that the more friends a person has that will be attending a particular sporting event, the greater the likelihood of that person attending more games in the future. Further along in this study it will be shown how verbal, person-to-person interpersonal communication can be an asset

in not only guiding people out to watch sports, but how it can be (and is) used to bring people out to *play* a sport.

An extension of face-to-face interaction is through use of social media sites. These sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, are another facet of interpersonal communication and strengthen a team or athlete's fan base (Bakalar, 2013). Social media sites allow users to connect with others, both locally and globally, and in turn share information with each other. This information can be anything from messages, to photos and videos. YouTube is another popular social media website where users are able to upload video content for anyone to view (Kaplan, & Haenlein, 2010). In regards to sports, social media is being used more and more by athletes, teams, and organizations to promote themselves and interact with fans. Sport organizations and athletes use social media sites such as Facebook to promote games and events, upload images and video, and provide information to their followers (Witkemper, C., Lim, C., & Waldburger, A., 2012). Witkemper, et al. explain further how YouTube is also used to upload videos with fans. Twitter is also used to relay information quickly, since that medium allows for a maximum of 140 characters per post (idem). Witkemper et al. (2012), found in their study that Twitter can help sport organizations "achieve higher levels of efficiency than more traditional communication tools" (p. 180).

### **What Other Sports Teach Rugby**

The British sport of soccer found its way to North America, but it had yet to grow into the widely popular sport it was in England. Toward the latter end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, soccer was being played in the Canadian maritime province of Nova Scotia, but its popularity tended to remain with those in the military, mining, and naval communities

(Amis, 1996). Amis said that one reason for its lack of popularity among civilians was that “it was struggling to compete with rugby, cricket, ice hockey...and horse racing, for participants, spectators, and media prominence” (p. 147). From the beginning, it would appear that even before television broadcasts, certain sports have always had competition with other sports, be it through spectator or media support.

Soccer has a history in the United States, but it is not as glorious as in other countries. In fact, “the United States is the only industrialized nation that has not embraced soccer as a dominant element of its sporting ethos” (Brown, 2005, p. 1106). Soccer in the United States has suffered failure after failure, but has repeatedly rebounded, despite previous failed attempts at popularizing the sport (Apostolov, 2012). Although the popularity of soccer in the United States declined in the 1950s and 1960s, the World Cup held in 1966 in England “recorded surprisingly high TV ratings in the USA” (Apostolov, 2012, p. 114). In the late 1960s, two new soccer leagues were formed. Professional soccer was becoming popular yet again in the United States. This did not last, however, and by the mid-1980s, professional soccer was again put on hold. In 1994, the United States was to host the FIFA World Cup. This became “the most successful World Cup ever in terms of revenue and attendance” (p. 115), and the president of the USSF declared “that the tournament was the greatest World Cup ever” (Armstrong, & Rosbrook-Thompson, 2010, p. 260). Two years after the World Cup, professional soccer emerged yet again in the USA as Major League Soccer (MLS) was formed, starting with 10 teams. Famous international players were imported to the MLS to boost popularity, but by the turn of the century, huge losses were reported from the league in sums of about \$300 million and more than a 50% decline in attendance. When it came to television

ratings, MLS was still far behind in popularity compared with the more popular broadcast sports of American football, basketball, baseball, and hockey (Apostolov, 2012). Brown (2005) suggests that because there are so many foreign players in American soccer, the sport has become less American, which turns away American spectators who are looking for more American sports. During its early years, “MLS had to pay ESPN and ABC the airtime and had to cover the production and cost of its matches” (p. 115).

The example of Major League Soccer’s beginnings in the USA helps promoters of American rugby see tactics that may want to be avoided if rugby were to make a professional appearance in the United States. For example, George Robertson and Michael Clements of RugbyLaw believe the slow growth of the MLS made it difficult for the sport to continue growing. They believe that in order for rugby to thrive in the United States, it needs to be a high-grade, credible league from the start, rather than having to wait many years for it to become credible. However, they also believe that, like in the MLS, bringing in big rugby stars from around the globe could help bring popularity to the game (Dart, 2013).

Although soccer did receive some sense of popularity, its history shows that once baseball and American football grew in popularity, soccer in the United States was overshadowed (Armstrong, & Rosbrook-Thompson, 2010). Then came basketball and hockey, and suddenly there was no more room for soccer (Apostolov, 2012). Apostolov suggests that baseball and American football became a hindrance to soccer by taking over the airwaves. The latter end of the 1960s saw regular broadcasts of baseball and American football, especially with the emergence of the Super Bowl. These broadcasts generated “huge revenues for the leagues,” whereas “soccer matches were not

broadcasted and, therefore, not watched by the average American” (p. 119). In the 1920s, baseball scores – and sometimes entire games – were broadcasted via radio. These broadcasts allowed teams to bring in a much larger income than would have otherwise come. Soccer, however, did not receive such broadcasts, and by 1927, only three radio stations picked up soccer as part of their broadcasts, and none of the soccer-themed radio shows lasted more than 15 minutes (Apostolov, 2012).

One factor as to why baseball received massive amounts of broadcast time and soccer very little is the ease in announcing baseball as opposed to the relative difficulty in announcing soccer. Apostolov (2012) said that the slow pace of baseball makes it easier to describe the actions of the players, whereas for the fast-paced soccer matches, “it requires a lot of skill to vividly describe action on the soccer pitch” (p. 125). Another reason soccer broadcasts struggled is because of the absence of breaks in play, which allows for more commercials to be aired during stoppages (Armstrong, & Rosbrook-Thompson, 2010). It would appear that without television contracts, professional soccer in the United States would suffer. And yet, despite the relative continuous nature of hockey, it is still hugely popular as a televised sport in Canada (newswire.ca, 2011). This may suggest that it is more of a cultural phenomenon than strictly dealing with the nature of the game. According to Apostolov (2012), professional soccer in the United States suffered greatly from lack of television coverage. Today, the “MLS benefits from decent media coverage, especially on television” (p. 18). What Apostolov found, then, is that attendance is an important factor in professional sports, but “TV ratings are, however, crucial” (p. 127). In order for rugby to succeed in the United States, it will most likely need to be supported by television contracts. The NFL has reason to back it, and if it did,



it would be the boost needed for rugby to break through to the public (Reed, 2013).

This study's main research question explores how social media affects an American athlete's decision to play rugby rather than more highly publicized sports. To understand this may better aid in understanding what helps a sport grow. This study may identify reasons as to why rugby players decide to play rugby, and how social media was part of that decision. There must be some reason why people play, and this study will help discover that. Of course, the game must be enjoyable or people would not play it, but other factors must be taken into consideration before an athlete begins to play. Based on the literature reviewed, the following research question emerge:

(RQ 1) Why do American athletes choose to play rugby rather than more highly publicized sports?

(RQ 2) What role does social media play in this decision?

## Chapter 3: Method

### Research Strategy

This study is based on qualitative research and the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Qualitative research techniques are used for new discovery. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define qualitative research as “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (p. 17). There are two assumptions when it comes to discovering findings not arrived at by statistical means. The first is that many things influence behavior, such as social, physical, and psychological environment. The second is that whatever behavior is observed can go even deeper than what is noted on the outside (Krefting, 1991). The present study will use this same method to build interview questions that will delve into the decisions as to why collegiate rugby players chose to play rugby. Since there has been very little done with this topic, the qualitative method is effective for providing a foundation for future research into this area of study, as well as discovering motives for playing (Hungelmann, Kenkel-Rossi, Klassen, & Stollenwerk, 1985). Rylee Dionigi (2006) conducted a study in which she attempted to understand why those who are aging put a greater importance on being active in a sport. Her participants were from the ages of 60-90, and so she used purposive sampling in order to consciously select appropriate participants that were relevant to her study. Similarly, this study will use purposive sampling to ensure those being interviewed are relevant to the study. Using qualitative methods will allow the researcher to start a foundation in the study (Human, & Provan, 1997).

## Participants

This study consists of nine qualitative in-depth interviews of collegiate rugby players in the United States. Nine were conducted because following that, the answers to the interview questions tended to be very similar to the others, signifying that saturation had been reached. Saturation is reached when no new insight comes through in the data. This is one of the main ways of verifying the worth of a study (Suddaby, 2006). Saturation was recognized when, after the first few interviews, responses about media use and effectiveness, among other topics, became nearly identical.

Because this is a study on rugby in the United States, participant selection only included athletes from the United States. In order to make sure the participants are American, purposive sampling was used. Participants who did not grow up with rugby in their cultural background were selected for interviews. Since rugby has higher levels of popularity in other countries (Chadwick, Semens, Schwarz, & Zhang, 2010), it is important to interview only American-born players in order to eliminate any bias toward the sport that may carry over from another country and culture, and therefore learn the reasons why Americans choose to play rugby rather than other sports. Those interviewed shared similarities related to the research questions, and purposive sampling allowed greater depth within the data (DiCicco-Bloom, & Crabtree, 2006). Participants that are relevant to the study are American-born rugby players from selected schools (identified further on). It is important to interview American-born players in order to better understand what influences these players' decisions in playing rugby. There is more of a commitment to collegiate rugby players than high school or city club teams, which makes

the selection of collegiate athletes important in this study. Since there is more of a commitment, there must be some deeper form of motivation behind the decision to play.

The schools from which participants were selected were gathered from the schools that make up the newly developed collegiate rugby post-season championship, known as the Varsity Cup Championship (VC). The schools belonging to this championship (and therefore are from which the players were pulled and interviewed) are Brigham Young University, University of California – Berkley, Central Washington University, United States Air Force Academy, Clemson, Dartmouth College, United States Naval Academy, University of Notre Dame, the University of California – Los Angeles, University of Texas, and the University of Utah. These schools were chosen because they are the highest ranked rugby schools in the United States and compete on a very high level, and they are located in various parts of the country, making the sample more heterogeneous. Because of these schools' ranking in the sport, the players must be dedicated and have most likely had experience prior to playing for their school. This is important because it means that to these players, rugby is an important part of their life, and these are the types of people that can contribute to this study. Using these athletes from these schools is also important because, since these locations are scattered throughout the United States, the backgrounds of the players would be different. For example, some states (such as Utah and California) are more known for their rugby than other states. These differences in location could show different effects as to why the athletes chose to play rugby. Each of the interviews was conducted over the phone, and the conversations were recorded. Verbal confirmation from each player was also acquired

prior to starting the interview. The interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes, depending on the length of the responses given.

The author of this study has played rugby for a number of years, is a certified rugby referee, and has an extensive knowledge of the sport, which was an asset during the interviewing process and allowed him to provide insightful responses during interviews as well as engage with the participants. A bias arises in this study in that the author believes that media does play a role in the process of growing rugby, and that plays a factor in more American athletes choosing to play rugby.

Since these are all collegiate teams, the process to be able to interview the chosen candidates involved getting permission from the appropriate athletic department. Collegiate sports teams, coaches, and players have dealt with local and other media attention and have procedures in place to allow for players to be interviewed. These outlets were contacted prior to interviewing so as not to breach any policy. Because these schools are all club teams at their individual schools, the coach was contacted before anyone else and was given the purpose of the study, along with the requirements for players to be interviewed (the notable exception is Eastern Washington University, whose rugby team is no longer on club level, but became part of the NCAA after the rugby team was initially contacted for use in this study). The coach was then instrumental in helping decide which players would be best to talk to, in following the criteria as mentioned above. After receiving permission from the coach, the selected players were contacted, interview times and dates were scheduled, and then conducted.

## Interview Questions

For the present study, the interview questions focus on participants' history with rugby, including how they learned about it, why they started playing, and why they kept playing. The questions were also open ended and were flexible, allowing changes to be made to them during the interview, such as follow-up questions, as well as after an interview is over, such as revising a question to fit more closely with the emerging data (Arora, & Stoner, 2009, 274). This allowed for the interviewer to build on new themes emerging, as well as make connections with other themes from past interviews (Strauss, & Corbin, 1990). By being able to steer the interview in certain directions, unnecessary information can be left behind, while the more important topics that came forward could be pursued. The question this study is looking into is as to why collegiate rugby players in the United States chose to play rugby rather than other sports. The following are the interview questions that were asked to participants from the schools selected and that guided the study initially.

1. How did you learn about rugby?
  - a. Did the media have any involvement in that?
2. What got you started playing rugby?
  - a. What made you keep playing?
3. Why did you choose to focus on rugby as opposed to other sports?
4. How much rugby did you watch in the media when you were making the decision to play?
5. What is your impression of media coverage of rugby in the USA?

a. Did that affect your choice in playing rugby?

These questions are important in understanding the deeper motive behind the respondents' desires to play rugby at a collegiate level. These questions were designed to build off each other to go further into the decision-making process of each rugby player. Put together, these questions give a broader understanding of the decision-making process rugby players go through before ultimately choosing to play rugby as their sport of focus. The interviews ranged in time from about fifteen minutes to twenty-five minutes, depending on the length of the responses given. Following each interview, the researcher categorized the main themes and combined and compared them with the themes from the other interviews. These themes were analyzed until saturation was reached, at which point the interview process came to a stop (Glaser, & Strauss, 1967; Adams, McIlvain, Lacy, Magsi, Crabtre, Yenny, & Sitorius, 2002).

### Analysis

Constant comparative analysis was used to compare themes found throughout the interviews (Boeije, 2002). Some themes that were thought to be present involve how the players first learned about rugby, the method in which the players first became involved in the sport of rugby, and the involvement of the media in their decision to play. These themes did in fact arise, and were used to guide the questions throughout the subsequent interviews. Other themes arose as the data was analyzed, to which the interview questions were tailored to fit. Throughout the interviews, notes were taken when new, repeated, or otherwise important information was given. Notes are a good way for the researcher to keep track of categories, growing hypotheses, as well as other questions that arise during

the study, which can allow the researcher to more easily develop the theory as the study progresses. As the theory grows, so will the memos. These notes were compared with previous interview notes and transcripts, thus allowing the researcher to find common themes, as well as even isolating themes that were not common, but likewise important. Through this process, hypotheses were constructed and revisited until they remained constant based on all gathered data. It is also important to constantly compare notes and data in order to create the most effective interview questions for the study, as well as being aware during the interview for important themes to follow-up on.

The data was analyzed using the grounded theory approach and constant comparative analysis. These methods are useful in this study because since there has not been much done with this topic, it allows for a starting point for this area of research. These methods also allowed for a greater depth of research, including uncovering new insights and relationships to the topic.

Grounded theory is used to discover more than just conditions to a situation, “but also to determine how the actors respond to changing condition and to the consequences of their actions. It is the researcher’s responsibility to catch this interplay” (Corbin, & Strauss, 1990, p. 5). It is a useful method to use when attempting to “make knowledge claims about how individuals interpret reality” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 634). Similarly, the present study used grounded theory to understand how rugby players in the United States feel about their role as rugby players, and how they came to the decision to make that an important part of their lives. As mentioned by Corbin and Strauss (1990), the researcher of this study used the data from the interviews to understand how the participants



responded, and through that gained further understanding on why they chose the actions they did.

With grounded theory, there is already an idea or question inside the researcher's mind when the research begins, which that researcher would like to investigate further. This allows the researcher to select the group or community that represents that idea for the study. For this particular study, since the researcher wants to understand American rugby players, he decided to go to where there are American rugby players. Once in the location of the desired study sample, surrounding incidents, events, and other circumstances that play a part in the subjects' activities could be sampled as well (Arora, & Stoner, 2009). In order to get the most out of the subjects, the researcher has the option to visit them in different settings, such as in a location that is more or less stressful than where they usually are. This can help uncover specific phenomenon. The aim of grounded theory is not necessarily to focus on the people themselves, but on the concepts and identifying phenomena in regards to how they come about, the consequences of them, and other factors having to do more with the concept rather than the person. This study simply used a quiet location conducive to interviews, where distractions are minimal. Because these interviews were conducted over the telephone, the interviewee was also able to be in a place that was comfortable for him, such as his home.

Memos are a critical part of grounded theory research. Memos allow the researcher to keep track of categories, hypotheses, as well as other questions that arose during the study. Memos also allow the researcher to easily develop the theory as the study progresses. This makes the memos a very important part of grounded theory, and

they are more than just ideas. Memo writing should occur at the very first instance, and continue until the work is done (Corbin, & Strauss, 1990).

Coding is another important aspect of grounded theory. There are three main types, which have become widely accepted: open, axial, and selective (LaRossa, 2005). The present study will use both open and axial coding, as was found effective by Ledford, Willett, and Kreps (2012). Open coding is important in comparing events, interactions, and other similar happenings “with others for similarities and differences” (Corbin, & Strauss, 1990, p. 12). They are labeled and put into different categories. Open coding allows the researcher to create more of a guide for the next time he or she goes back to the field for study. In other words, open coding gives names to the phenomena and categorizes them (Andronikidis, & Lambrianidou, 2006). This study used open coding in order to generate more questions based on the emerging themes, as well as amending and eliminating questions that do not fit in with those themes. Axial coding is different from open coding in that “categories are related to their subcategories, and the relationships tested against data” (Corbin, & Strauss, 1990, p. 13). Data should be examined in the relationship as to how it came about. Data not only needs to be collected, but analyzed as it comes as well, or else the theory will be full of holes. Similar to the study by Ledford, et al. (2012; see also Corbin, & Strauss, 1990), the present study used that of open coding with each interview, pulling out themes as they emerge in the data. Next, axial coding was conducted, and the different categories and subcategories were compared with each other. These methods of coding were chosen to more effectively find emerging themes in the data, as well as to be able to determine the greater meaning behind those themes.

Throughout the research, hypotheses are constructed and revised, continually being checked “until they hold true for all of the evidence concerning the phenomena under study, as gathered in repeated interviews, observations or documents” (Corbin, & Strauss, 1990, p. 11). This is known as constant comparative analysis. Constant comparison is when “data are collected and analyzed simultaneously” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 634). Comparison is the main tool in developing a theory (Boeije, 2002). In regards to this study, important themes from the very first interview were recorded, and those themes were then used as the base for other questions for future interviews. Throughout the study, questions were revisited and revised in order to find commonalities among the participants. Themes repeatedly found among interviews will be specifically noted as important, as well as those themes that are significantly absent.

In order to make sure the researcher does not miss anything important, the first data collected must be analyzed, also known as coding, looking for cues among the results (Strauss, & Corbin, 1990). Anything that is relevant from the first interview must then be brought in to subsequent interviews, thus building on the one previous (Corbin, & Strauss, 1990). This core principle behind the grounded theory approach is constant comparison. Throughout the study, issues, incidents, and other events are noted, and then “they are compared against other examples for similarities or differences” (Kennedy, & Lingard, 2006, p. 104). Grounded theory came into play from the beginning of the interviewing process through to the end of this study. During the first interview, notes were made concerning categories and other useful information given by the person being interviewed. From there on out, notes were taken during interviews and similar concepts and data were grouped together, and other information was grouped in categories

appropriate for the topic (Adams, et al., 2002). Follow-up questions were also asked during the interview to help bring forth the deeper topics that emerged at the surface. Following the interviews, the interview questions were examined and revised (if needed) to more properly fit the themes emerging from the interviews (Boeije, 2002). When a concept first arises in an interview, it does not make its way fully into the theory until it can prove it belongs. This is not done by the one interview alone, but “by repeatedly being present in interviews...or by being significantly absent” (Corbin, & Strauss, 1990, p. 7). If it is not proven useful or relevant throughout the process of interviews and investigation, it must not be allowed to remain as a useful part of the study.

In order to make proper connections, the researcher must label each phenomenon as it comes, and then subsequently give the same label to other incidents that fall under the same category. As categories grow, they may be able to be grouped under an even more abstract category heading. This grouping of concepts allows researchers to keep similar activities close together. As groups continue to develop more abstract headings, categories can be developed, which then continue to grow, until finally, “over time, categories can become related to one another to form a theory” (Corbin, & Strauss, 1990, p. 8). This coding is not done according to the interview questions themselves, but instead from the meaning gathered from the responses given by the respondents. Thus, grounded theory “is a theory building tool, rather than a theory-confirming tool” (Arora, & Stoner, 2009, p. 274; See also Kennedy, & Lingard, 2006).

When it comes to this study, important themes from the very first interview were taken and recorded, and those themes were then used as the base for other questions for future interviews. Throughout the study, questions were revisited and revised in order to

find commonalities among the participants. Themes repeatedly found among interviews were specifically noted as important, as well as those themes that are significantly absent.

In order to create transcripts of each interview, an audio recording should be made of each interview (Adams, et al., 2002). For this study, the telephone audio was recorded onto a computer using a microphone and an audio recording program (Adobe Audition). These recordings were then transcribed by using the Express Scribe transcription software. The real names of each player interviewed will not be used. Instead, each player interviewed was given a pseudonym. Once all the interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were imported into NVivo, a computer program designed to aid researchers in pulling out common themes from interviews and textual analyses (NVivo qualitative data analysis software, 2010). First, themes were grouped from the interviews that were found using constant comparative analysis (Dionigi, 2006). Minor themes that did not relate to the topic were rejected for use. Once themes from the interviews were collected, they were analyzed and compared to each other to learn more about why these athletes chose to pursue rugby as their collegiate sport.

## Chapter 4: Results

The data collected from the interviewed rugby players could help explain why people choose to play rugby, and why they keep playing once they started. These results will be separated into three sections. The first section will answer the first research question, and the second section will answer the second research question. A third section will be added to include gathered information that does not necessarily relate to either question, but provides information that can still be viewed as useful. All names of those interviewed have been replaced with pseudonyms. The following table will show how each form of media is used by players, teams, and recruits. This table will be referenced throughout the rest of the study.

Table 1: Findings

Reasons for Playing Rugby	Players	Teams	Recruits
Traditional Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimal use in deciding to play rugby</li> <li>• Limited availability in USA</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collegiate Rugby Championships</li> <li>• Varsity Cup</li> </ul>
Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High amounts of usage while playing</li> <li>• Increased desire to improve</li> <li>• Entertainment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promotes games</li> <li>• Promotes awareness about team</li> <li>• Recruits players</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective</li> <li>• Sparks initial interest</li> <li>• YouTube (clips, live streams)</li> </ul>
Person-to-Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physicality</li> <li>• Mental</li> <li>• Accomplishment</li> <li>• Teamwork</li> <li>• Leadership</li> </ul>		

The results of the interviews showed similar responses by the individuals interviewed. A number of them, without being prompted, spoke on the social aspect of rugby and how that was not only an important part of their rugby life, but personal life as well. Responses involving their use of the media before and after they began playing were also similar in content. Considering that those interviewed ranged from the West Coast of the United States to the East Coast, this helps show the similarity of the rugby culture throughout the country.

### **Research Question 1: Why do American athletes choose to play rugby rather than more publicized sports?**

The first research question asked in this study is why American athletes choose to play rugby rather than more highly publicized sports. In answer to this question, there is more than one way discussed in the results of the interviews. The following information can be useful in answering the first research question.

#### **Interest In Rugby Through Media**

The overall general consensus that emerged from the interviews conducted is that traditional media played a minimal role in the athlete's decision to play rugby. One of the reasons media does not seem to be a large influence on American athletes may be due to the limited amounts shown on traditional media, such as television broadcasts. There were, however, a couple of notable exceptions. It appeared that those who did have at least a little bit of media influence before playing rugby found that that influence helped increase their interest in the sport before playing. This made them more active in pursuing rugby for themselves.

One interviewee, Fred, commented that he had watched a DVD of the New Zealand All Blacks playing before he picked up the sport. The All Blacks are the national rugby team for the small nation of New Zealand, and are, according to the team themselves as well as other national teams, probably the best and most successful sports team ever (espnscrum.com, 2013). Fred said that watching those games of the All Blacks, being the professionals that they are, helped him fall in love with the sport, as well as better understanding his role as a player once he began to play himself.

Another interviewee, Roger, had friends growing up that were rugby fans and they would watch rugby games together at his friends' houses. He noted that they would frequent the Internet video site YouTube and find highlights of biggest hits and tackles. According to him, watching these videos helped in his decision to play.

Excerpt 1:

I think I had a lot of respect just from watching the film at the guys' and how physical the sport was and I thought it would be pretty cool if I could be able to just try the same thing.

Although Roger said he and his friends didn't watch rugby clips all the time, but rather "here and there," it still helped him realize that rugby was the sport that he wanted to get into. By seeing it played before he got into it, he was able to have a greater respect for it, knowing a bit about it beforehand. This respect he had towards the physicality of the sport started him thinking about playing it himself.



Some people needed a bit of encouragement before beginning their foray into the sport of rugby. It is possible to have heard of the sport and get interested through others (as will be delved into in more detail further on) but still use the media to increase in knowledge of rugby before actually playing. In the case of Michael, his first bit of exposure to rugby came as he entered high school, where he was approached by the coach of the rugby team during a sports fair the school was holding. Although there was media involved in the recruiting area, Michael said it was the interactions he had with the coach that helped convince him to play. Following his encounter with the coach, Michael did look up rugby on the Internet. The coach was vital in piquing his interest in the game, and following that meeting, he decided to “[learn] more through the media, but...[the] original part was through [the coach].”

#### **Interest in Rugby Through Social Interactions**

Another way people tend to get interested in a sport (and therefore begin playing) is through the help of others. In fact, it appeared that the media could only play so much of a role until the interpersonal communications with others began taking over and playing the much larger role in an athlete’s decision process to play. Of all those interviewed, only three mentioned anything about going to the media before choosing to play rugby.

The rest of those interviewed said that media did not play a role in getting them out to play rugby. Rather, it was the social interactions with others that brought them out to play the sport. Even those who did have media as a catalyst found the social interactions of others helped sway their decision to play rugby. For example, Fred (as mentioned above) had media experience watching professional rugby and highlights on

YouTube. However, he also said that while he was in middle school, his older brother started playing rugby in high school. Fred went to all of his brother's games and that, he said, was how he was first introduced to rugby. When Fred entered high school he started playing because, according to him, "that was the first chance [he] was able to play."

Roger also had media as an influence before he started playing rugby, but he also had a lot of friends that played rugby during his high school years. And, without his rugby friends there to show him highlights and clips on YouTube, the decision for Roger to play rugby might have been much more difficult. Again, Roger claims that it was the media that helped him choose to play, however it was his friends that introduced him to rugby through the media.

Friends and family appeared to be a hot topic when it came to picking out what eventually made a lot of these people play rugby. The media was not an important factor for most, if not all, of those interviewed. Although for some the media helped, for the rest the media did not come into play until after they had actually started playing, so it could not have had an effect on whether or not those players chose to get involved. As an example, a look at where the other players got their interest from can be helpful in understanding why these Americans chose the way they did.

Robert was different than those previously mentioned. Instead of finding an interest through the media, he found it through his friends and family that played. For him, there was no media involved. Johnny decided to play because he had a few older brothers that all played rugby. Sid also had a similar experience in getting interested in rugby. According to Sid, his father played, so as Sid was growing up he would go watch him play, and then he started playing himself in youth leagues. Thus it was his father who

helped him gain an interest in the sport, and once he started playing, he decided to keep going at it. Sid also said that his father's teammates were coaches of youth teams, so he would talk with them and that, Sid says, is how he initially started to get involved in rugby.

Similarly, Martin had his middle school physical education teacher to thank in part for his getting involved in rugby. Upon learning that Martin was going to a high school that had rugby, his physical education teacher suggested that that was something Martin might want to take a look at. Martin also had a couple of friends in middle school who played rugby, so he was exposed to the sport from a relatively early age. Not only that, but some of his high school friends played as well, and, according to Martin, they were always heckling him about joining and coming out to play rugby. He said that, "in all honesty, I would say it was just my friends that brought me out to [rugby]."

Martin went on to say how he has been an influence in others in coming to play rugby. One method in particular he mentioned was simply being vocal about it to one of his friends for two years. Finally, Martin was able to convince his friend to come out to practice, and according to Martin, "he's been having the time of his life."

This method of Martin's was also effective in bringing Julian out to play rugby. Julian was a freshman in high school when he got into rugby, and it was because of social interactions with those with whom he shared a carpool to school. Julian recounts that the oldest person in his carpool played rugby, and he jokingly threatened to give Julian a beating if he didn't show up. So Julian, on the first day of school, "figured it was in [his] best interest to go ahead and come out and learn how to play rugby." Since then he has continued playing, and currently plays for his collegiate club rugby team.

The final interviewee, Matthew, claimed that he got into rugby because his father used to play rugby back when he was in college. Matthew said that his father promoted rugby, and so that is how he got started playing it himself. He also said that his community was older compared to most others, as well as having a relatively large number of coaches who were also interested in promoting the game. According to Matthew, it was because of “their interest in rugby [that] really made [him] continue to want to play.

### **Rugby and the Interpersonal**

Although media has played a role in bringing new players out to rugby, as well as helping their desire to play increase, it is not based on that facet alone. In fact, the role the media has played in bringing rugby out into the public eye is far less compared to that of interpersonal relations with others. Those interpersonal relationships might include parents, siblings, friends, and coaches, as well as those mediate forms of communication, such as social media sites.

Robert recognized that media really did not play a very big role, if at all, in bringing him out to play rugby. Instead, it was his older brother, along with the older brothers of his friends that brought out in him the desire to play. Once out, however, there was more to the game than just the rugby itself. The people he played with turned out to be something of a “brotherhood” to him. This theme on brotherhood was found in subsequent interviews with others as well, without having to be prodded to use that word or term. About his teammates, Robert felt very close to them, not just as players, but as brothers:

Excerpt 2:

...All my friends play as well so you know it's become as social for me as it is competitive. I mean, obviously it's still very competitive but I mean all the guys...the guys are kind of like brothers to me now. They're my entire social circle.

These thoughts and feelings were a reoccurring theme throughout the interview process. Fred was the same way. His older brother joined his high school rugby team, so when Fred entered high school, he decided to join the team as well. Here, again, we see the influence that family can have on younger players in influencing them to try out a new sport. But that wasn't the only reason he kept playing. Like Robert, he grew close to those he played with:

Excerpt 3:

[Social interactions with the team] were extremely important. It ends up being like a brotherhood basically, playing with these guys, because you have to know that they always have your back and you always have their back on and off the pitch. So it's extremely important to have that relationship with your teammates.

Johnny also discovered rugby through his older brothers who played before him during their high school years. And, in keeping with the theme of being in something that's more than just a team, Johnny said that he and his teammates have become really close because of being on the same team, and all the work and practice they do together.

According to Johnny, those social interactions are essential in keeping him out on the pitch and playing rugby with his team. Again, Johnny felt that his team was more than just a team. In fact, he said that “you definitely get brought into this brotherhood.”

The friendship factor of rugby appeared to be a popular topic from those interviewed. Not only of friends, but of the deeper relationships that being on the team brought into their lives. Roger was brought into rugby through the passion of his friends. Were it not for them, he said, he probably would not have started playing rugby. He also believes that the friendships made on the team are one of the biggest reasons that he, and other players on other teams, keep playing:

Excerpt 4:

The guys I played with were my best friends. I still play with a few of them now on [my college] team. I played with a couple on the USA team. So, I think it's...even the friendships you make as well, I think are part of if you decide if you don't get out and play it.

The important relationships do not always have to come from people on his own team, either. Of course, the relationship these players have with their team is of utmost importance to them, but there are relationships built outside of their teams that become important as well. Not only does Roger feel his relationship with his team is important, but also others he plays with (or against) on other teams creates important bonds that last, sometimes over great distances:

Excerpt 5:

...It's kind of like a family, a brotherhood, in that rugby community, so it doesn't really matter which team you play, whether we're playing Cal-Berkley or Arizona, you know it's pretty cool that you can travel basically anywhere and you know...three or four guys in the team you've played against or played with a lot of those guys as well.

When people play a game together that requires all of them to be where they are supposed to be when they are supposed to be there, each person doing his job on the field, there comes a strength in unity to that team within the individual players. This is one reason why the social interactions within rugby become so solid and so important. Sid gave insight as to why he thinks he is so close with his teammates. According to him, the reason teammates become so close with each other is because of everything they go through together:

Excerpt 6:

I think through rugby you create strong bonds because players you play with,...it's in the face of adversity together. So you, I think you have tight knit bonds if you've been playing with a guy next to you for the three full years, like you know him pretty well....I think it's tighter relationships in general....

The actual playing of rugby strengthens friendships and brings people closer together. Facing challenges together creates opportunities for the teammates to

communicate with each other and work together to overcome those obstacles in order to succeed. Another testament to the brotherhood of rugby comes from Martin. He thinks that it might be other things, such as the reputation of the game, that initially got people coming out to play, but he believes that it is the people that makes them want to stay on the team:

Excerpt 7:

The guys that you end up...being on the team with, like they're definitely your brothers for life. And so I know that when I'm back in [my hometown]...for summer break, I can always hang out with the guys that I played high school rugby with, and here...I mean, that's practically my fraternity here.

Martin went on to say that his team is "a brotherhood, that's just really...helped [him] out a lot," and that his teammates were "a major contributing factor of what kept [him] coming back." The bonds that come through playing with each other hold the team tightly, and have apparently become an important part to not only the team's success, but to the desire of the individual players to keep playing. Julian went even further to describe why he thinks the bonds within a rugby team are strong:

Excerpt 8:

Everything you go through on the field, whether it's what you do in practice, whether it's going through a game, I mean each...contest is a single battle where



you really see...the true definition of each person, and it just brings out the best in them, and so...I feel like as people it naturally draws us to each other.

Both Michael and Matthew agree that it is because of social interactions with those on their teams that they kept coming back for more. It would appear, then, from all the interviews conducted, that social interactions with others are a key component in keeping a person playing the sport. For these rugby players, it is more than just a game. It's a brotherhood.

The answer to the first research question, then, must be found within the interpersonal communication with others. These interviews have shown that person-to-person interactions are a key factor in helping American athletes choose to play rugby, a sport that has yet to penetrate the media market on a large scale. In each case, it was people that brought these athletes out to begin playing a new sport, one with which they were unfamiliar. Without the social interactions with others, it could be safe to say that rugby would be growing much more slowly than it is currently.

### **Mediated Interpersonal**

Face-to-face communication with friends and family can be effective in bringing people to rugby, but sometimes that face-to-face communication needs to be extended to other platforms, such as social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. In his interview, Matthew explained how he was involved in promoting rugby through use of media. Along with that, he said that pointing people to their Facebook and Twitter pages has been effective in promoting their team's games.

By simply posting rugby clips on Facebook, Michael has found that “a lot of people definitely check them out and want to see what’s going on,” and those people have told him that the clips they watched “look pretty cool.” Michael also recognized that now, he is seeing rugby a lot more in the media, especially on Facebook.

Social networking sites like Facebook allow for rugby information to flow steadily to the screens of those online. Sid mentioned that even though he doesn’t actively search out rugby posts and clips more than about once a week, he still sees it every day. This is due to him allowing Facebook to do all the work for him. The groups he follows post about rugby daily, which in turn makes it easy for him to share those pieces on his own account.

Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites have made it easier for teams to promote their games and increase game attendance. Many of those talked about how they used Facebook and Twitter to promote their home games, and that because of those promotions, they have seen increased attendance at their games. Social media is used quite often for individual players and those looking into playing, but teams as a whole are also delving into the realm of social media. According to the interviews, social media is being used not only to promote games and raise awareness, but to help in the recruiting process as well (see Table 1).

### **Other Reasons for Playing**

Analyzing the interviews will also show that there are still more reasons for playing than just the social aspect of it all, as well as the minimal amounts the media provides. Various other reasons for playing and continuing to play were mentioned by those interviewed. One of the more popular reasons was because of the non-stop action of

the game and the continual action by being on defense one moment, and then switching to offense the next. The physicality of rugby was also a part of the game that made a number of these players fall in love with rugby.

Personal achievement is another reason why some of these players enjoy the game. People may use hard work and effort to feel good about themselves, which will in turn keep them coming back for more. Johnny feels that one of the reasons he likes the game of rugby so much is that he gets to push himself:

Excerpt 9:

I enjoy the...competition with myself every single time I'm on the pitch, and you get eighty minutes to push yourself as hard as you possibly can, and you know when you're going as hard as you can and you know when you're not, and that challenge is what really appeals to me and why I love taking the pitch every Saturday, testing myself.

There are more ways to push oneself other than just the physical. There is a mental drive as well that comes into play that can give a person a certain enjoyment. Martin also finds rugby a good way to test himself, not just physically, but mentally as well:

Excerpt 10:

I play scrum half, so I get to think a lot on the field, and I can beat people with my feet, with my body, or with my out-thinking them. And just...that whole dynamic just makes it so much fun for me.

As people push themselves, they begin to find greater success, and with that success comes a feeling of accomplishment. Another important reason for a lot of these players to play is, of course, finding success through rugby. As important as success is, however, there is also an importance found in not being the one that ruins it for the team. Fred likes to succeed, but to him it's more than that. It's also about not being the one that makes the mistake to concede any points:

Excerpt 11:

Well, besides succeeding, because I like to succeed, it's more of a like, not failing and not letting your teammates down. So there's just not a worse feeling than standing under the posts after the other team scores,...especially if it's your fault.

Playing with a team requires all players to do their part, and when one person doesn't, then the whole team could be on the losing end. There is a factor of teamwork that has become important to these players. That team aspect of rugby comes up again with Sid. To him, it's all about playing as one with the team:

Excerpt 12:

You can't be anything without your teammates. It's a fifteen-man sport, and you need every one of those fifteen players. The intriguing thing about rugby to me is that, you know if football, the quarterback can carry the team down the field and in basketball you can have one all star and you'll be able to make playoffs....One outstanding player won't...take you to win a game or championship. It takes a collection of the whole working together to excel, it creates those victories.

Teamwork plays an important role in many (if not all) of these players. Even deeper meanings emerge as one player thought about one of the reasons that rugby was so important to him. Of course, putting in the effort and managing to win the games is important, but to Julian it feels that to him, rugby is so much more than getting results on the pitch:

Excerpt 13:

My position is...captain right now, and just trying to lead a group of guys and...which directly like correlates to what we'll be doing once we graduate the Academy as...officers and just...trying to motivate a group of guys towards a common goal when it's the last thing we want to do when it's fifteen degrees outside and be conditioning.

There are many different ways a player can feel successful from playing rugby. Whether it is through winning collectively as a team, not being the one to make the crucial mistake, or learning the skills needed to succeed off the pitch and in life, these

players find a sense of joy and accomplishment out of what they do during their games and practices. According to those interviewed, there are many reasons as to why people will come out to play rugby. Social interactions seem paramount in that decision, with media playing a minor role. Once out, however, there is a wider range of reasons for keeping players coming back. Again, social interactions with their teammates are an important part of this.

### **Research Question 2: What role does the media play in this decision?**

In trying to understand more fully how American rugby players got into the sport, the thought that the media might play a large role in that decision emerged. Throughout the course of the interviews, it became apparent that although the media does play a role in the lives of these players now, it certainly did not play much of a role during the beginning when they were first being introduced to rugby. As noted above, there were small instances here and there that brought the media to the forefront during the decision process, however it was quickly found that the media did not, in fact, play a very large role as a determining factor in the athlete's decision to play. Despite that, however, the use of social media to bring others out is continuing to increase.

### **Media Affecting Decision**

First and foremost, in order to answer the second research question involving the media acting as a catalyst in a player's decision to play rugby, it must be noted that traditional media did not play a large role in the actual decision process. It would appear that traditional media is of very little use when it comes to piquing an interest in Americans to play. This might be because of the relative lack of rugby available in the media in the United States, without having to search for it personally.

Many of those interviewed had no knowledge of rugby before they started playing. As mentioned previously, they began playing mostly because of friends and family. When this happened, they did not have much background with the sport, and were therefore fairly underprepared when they began playing. For example, when Robert played his first rugby match, he did not know much about the sport at all. In fact, he had never even seen a rugby match before playing it himself, and he “had no idea what it looked like.”

A common reoccurrence amongst interviewees showed that the great majority of them had never seen a rugby match on any form of media prior to playing themselves. There was one instance found in the interviews of a player, Fred, watching a DVD of an international rugby match involving New Zealand before he played. There was one other instance where media gave its limited amount of reassurance in the case of Roger, who would watch games at his friends’ houses. Aside from that, none of those interviewed had viewed rugby in the media before making the decision to play.

Although media wasn’t heavily involved in these interviewees’ decision to play rugby, the usage of rugby in the media is still increasing. Martin mentioned in his interview that he was the recruiting officer for his team, which led to the discussion about how they go about recruiting and promoting for rugby. During the recruiting process, such as at booths or tables on campus, Martin said that they will have YouTube videos playing and showing clips from their games or other rugby highlights. They also invite those interested in joining the rugby team to look at the team’s Facebook and Twitter profiles. As shown in Table 1 (above), Martin believes that strategy is effective, especially with the YouTube clips, because with those the new recruits can actually see

what gameplay is like, what they would be doing on the pitch, and give them a visual that simply talking about it can't give as well.

Martin has also seen an increase in new recruits becoming interested in rugby through the Collegiate Rugby Championship (see Table 1), which is broadcast by the National Broadcast Company (NBC) throughout the United States. Martin feels that the Collegiate Rugby Championship is the best-publicized rugby event in the United States, and through that event, more people are coming to Martin's team asking how they can be a part of that, simply because they have been exposed to it from on the television.

As mentioned previously (and shown in Table 1), media such as YouTube helped others such as Michael go from interested in rugby to actively participating in rugby. Although the media didn't have a major impact in the interviewees' decision to play rugby, once they started playing, media became a more important part of their life, including increasing their desire to improve at their sport.

### **Uninformed and Unimportant in the Media**

When asked how he would like it if there was more rugby shown on television, Robert got noticeably more excited in his tone as he exclaimed that he most certainly would like that, and that he would definitely watch more rugby if it were more readily available. He finds it difficult to find much rugby coverage in the United States. Even finding a decent live stream online, he said, is rather difficult to accomplish. The word he used to describe the coverage of rugby in the United States was "horrible." Others also expressed a greater interest in having rugby more accessible for watching, especially on television.



Although the coverage of rugby in the United States is growing, there is still much to be had in terms of quality and overall knowledge of the sport. Martin believes that it is very uninformed, at least as far as the broadcasting and announcers are concerned. During games, he said, the commentators will make sure to explain everything that is going on:

Excerpt 14:

Every single time I watch a game, or see a sevens tournament, the broadcasting is very much directed towards a lay audience, so they're always explaining what a knock on is, what a scrum is, what a lineout is; they're explaining the rules to the game as they're commentating it. And I understand why, I mean they're trying to appeal to the broadest audience possible, but...it's a little bit tiring to hear after a while because you know what's going on.

Julian sees the sports broadcasting networks as slighting talented rugby players in that although they are performing at a high level and producing what would make for great highlights, "you don't see anything about it on ESPN." He feels that the lack of media "is really detrimental to the sport," and that it makes it appear as if the level of American rugby is far below that of American football. As high as the level of rugby in the media is in the United States, Matthew believes that "it's definitely not to the level where it is in foreign countries or where it definitely will be in the future."

### Importance of Media for Current Players

Without even having it brought up during the interviews, the Collegiate Rugby Championship was mentioned by most of those interviewed, and how its being broadcast nationally on NBC was a very important thing for rugby in the United States. The Varsity Cup final was also televised this year, of which a number of the players interviewed also made mention, considering that to be a big step towards the growth of rugby in the United States. It is also impressive in that this is only the second year of the existence of the Varsity Cup, so to have a broadcast deal this early in the competition's history is no small matter. Watching rugby in the United States is slowly becoming more feasible, and this becomes more apparent the more the interviewees spoke. Before, in order to find rugby on television, a person had to subscribe to a soccer or rugby channel. Now, however, rugby is becoming more accessible through tournaments such as the Collegiate Rugby Championship and Varsity Cup (see Table 1), along with other international sevens tournaments broadcasted throughout the year. The coverage is improving, according to Robert, "slow but steady."

Being a part of a team that plays at a nationally broadcasted event can be an impressive thing for players. "Awesome" is the word Johnny used to describe being invited to play for the Collegiate Rugby Championship. By having that opportunity to play sevens rugby at such a high level, Johnny found himself watching more sevens rugby, such as the international event IRB Sevens World Series, which is also occasionally broadcasted on NBC. As his rugby career has continued, Johnny has made it a point to search out rugby on the Internet, such as articles or write-ups on games, or watching games on Universal Sport (partnered with NBC) or NBC. Johnny also

mentioned how ESPN (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network) is getting into rugby by adding a section to their website called [espnscrum.com](http://espnscrum.com). Johnny is impressed with the improved coverage of the sport since he started playing rugby, which was, according to him, “nothing in the media to now if you look for it, it’s pretty easy to find. It’s pretty cool.”

Sid agrees that rugby in the media is growing, and not just on television, but social media sites as well. Not only is the Collegiate Rugby Championship broadcast on NBC, but it is also live-streamed on YouTube, and then replayed later as well. The Collegiate Rugby Championship has been hailed by Martin as an important part of their recruiting for their team. Being the team’s recruiting officer, he is aware of where their recruits come from, and he believes that the Collegiate Rugby Championship has an important part in bringing others out to the sport, because they see it on television and become interested (see Table 1).

The interviewees mentioned different websites and social media sites they use to keep up with their rugby, and how those sites are also used to help others keep up with rugby. YouTube seemed to be the main source for those interviewed in watching rugby (with Rugby Dump another website on which to watch rugby footage), be it clips, training videos, highlights, or other such rugby-related videos. Those interviewed also seemed to frequent rugby websites that posted articles about the sport, such as [rugbymag.com](http://rugbymag.com). One way they find material from those sources is through social media sites like Facebook. Sid mentioned that although he checks things on Rugby Dump, Rugby Mag, Serevi Rugby and other sites, he still goes to those articles through links posted by those groups on their Facebook pages. In fact, he will find rugby news and

articles on Facebook without looking for them more than he will go out and actively look for articles and other such posts.

Social media is also being used to promote the game to others. Martin, the recruiting officer for his team, mentioned the importance of YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter during the recruiting process. Posts about upcoming games and other helpful recruiting information are posted on Facebook and Twitter, thus making their team more accessible to the public eye. Julian has seen social media bring others to rugby. He claims that as people post about rugby on their social media profiles, more of their friends are exposed to the sport. Julian mentioned how his parents post information about his (Julian's) rugby, which in turn "gets neighbors excited about the sport," and then more neighborhood youth get interested and try out the game for themselves. Because people are on Facebook so many times a day, Julian believes that is one way people get more interested in his team's sport, because, he said, when they see his and his teammate's posts a handful of times a day, they're more apt to come out and support the team when they play.

Michael has also found social media to be beneficial to others learning about rugby. He said that he has found that most people will click on links about rugby if posted on one's Facebook or Twitter. He said they "check them out and want to see what's going on, and I've talked to people outside of rugby who say they've watched some of the clips and it looks pretty cool." Others that were interviewed also mentioned that posting rugby clips and articles to Facebook is one way they grow interest in their team and grow fans of not just their school team, but also of the sport of rugby itself.

Sid believes that he has become more interested in rugby because of his media consumption. His reasoning is that “the more you know about something, the more you become invested in it, and the more interested you become.” Michael said that he finds himself watching more rugby, mostly on YouTube, now that he is in more of the upper levels of the game, rather than before during his early years of playing rugby. He does not only just watch games, however, but also instructional videos, which can be of use to develop certain skills and knowledge of the game.

Matthew had a different take towards the media and how it helps him grow in his sport. As a player at a university that plays in the national-broadcasted Collegiate Rugby Championship, he claims that it invigorates him to push himself harder and to try harder, not for want of winning necessarily, but because “there’s a lot more at stake because [he] could be playing on national television.” That possibility of being shown playing on national television has changed his workout and training habits both on and off the pitch. Along those same lines, Fred claimed that watching professional rugby on DVD made a difference in the way he himself played the game. The first time he watched a professional game, he said it was “kind of mind blowing because you realize what you’re supposed to be doing compared to what you thought you were supposed to be doing.”

The second research question asks what role the media played in the decision of those interviewed to play rugby. By looking at the responses, it is clear to see that traditional media played a small role in bringing new players out to the sport. In fact, there were only two instances where the media was even a slight factor in helping these players make their decision. The media did, however, play an important role for all of these players once they got into the sport. They used the media to help improve their

skills and desire to play. They also used various forms of media to help recruit others to play rugby. So, it would appear that although the media did not play a large role in getting those interviewed into the sport, it appears that as time moves forward, the rising generation of rugby players in the United States are finding ways to use the media to help encourage others to play. It is true that the media was barely noticeable in the deciding factor for these players, but as social media continues to permeate more and more households, it is becoming a larger part of what is bringing others to play the game themselves.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The initial research question of this study asks why American athletes choose to play rugby rather than more highly publicized sports. According to all the interviews gathered, the main reason for choosing to play rugby, rather than other, more publicized sports in the United States, is largely because of their interpersonal communications with others, including what is shared on social media sites like YouTube and Facebook. In every instance recorded, the invitations from others, the constant talking about rugby by friends, family, and others, and with a growing number of available resources online, led them to gain an interest in rugby, enough to even join a team and start playing.

The second research question asks what role the media plays in the decision to play rugby, rather than a more highly publicized sport. According to those interviewed, the media did not initially play a large role. In fact, the role traditional media played in getting new players to start playing rugby was very minimal. There were a couple instances in which the media became involved in a person's decision to play, and although that occurrence was rare, it did seem to help spark a deeper interest in at least learning more about the game. It remains apparent, however, that the current traditional media outlets play a very small role in taking Americans away from other sports that surround them and onto the rugby pitch.

Communication on a social level would appear to be of paramount importance when it comes to redirecting Americans from the sports they already know and follow, and integrate them into another, less known sport. Perhaps this is because rugby in the media is still considerably small, especially when compared to other sports broadcasts, such as American football, baseball, and basketball. Regardless of the reason, the data

shows that social communications with friends, family, and others (through both face-to-face communications and the extension thereof through social media) can have the desired effect to encourage a person enough to make the steps necessary to pick up a new, foreign sport.

As described in the above literature review, interpersonal communication can influence, persuade, and affect relationships with those in whom the interpersonal communication was taking place. This study has likewise shown that it was interpersonal communication with friends, family, and others that not only influenced these players to start playing rugby, but was actually an important part in the persuasion to act on that influence. Relationships were also affected due to these interpersonal communications. Those interviewed mentioned over and over again how important their relationships with their teammates were. More notably was the term they used to describe their relationship with their teammates, which was referred to multiple times as “brothers” or being part of a “brotherhood.”

Professional and collegiate sports teams, along with individual athletes, have likewise turned their attention to social media, even though their sports are well integrated into traditional broadcast media. The reasoning behind this addition is to bring the information to where the fans are, and social media continues to bring in millions of people daily, giving them ample time to receive this information. This information can include news reports, scores, team updates, pictures, and videos (Bakalar, 2013).

The growth of rugby in the United States may be attributed to the increased usage of social media. While broadcast media does not show a lot of rugby, social media has provided a way for an emerging sport like rugby to find its voice and come into more



homes than would be possible if just relying on broadcast or traditional media. While broadcast media is already full of various sports, social media such as Facebook and YouTube are able to bring rugby into homes without having to compete directly with the big sports that monopolize the airwaves, such as American football and basketball.

As noted in the interviews, these athletes have found social media platforms that best suit their needs. Rugby Dump is one website mentioned multiple times to which these athletes visited in order to easily find and watch clips of hits, players scoring, and other aspects relating to rugby. YouTube was also an important part of these athlete's mediated social life. For them, finding training videos, game highlights, or even live streams of matches being played, were important to them as they kept up with their sport and continued to train and work to improve. These media outlets may be what rugby needs to become more deeply entrenched into the American culture.

Although traditional media may not have been a huge catalyst for introducing and encouraging people to start playing rugby, it did appear, however, that rugby in social media was a relatively large factor in what *kept* people coming out and sticking with playing rugby. Once a person was integrated into the sport, the next place they went was to the Internet, to look for videos and articles about the sport that they now play. These online news articles, write-ups, videos, and highlight reels have allowed them to learn more about their new sport, and have also helped them gain a stronger desire to keep practicing and improving.

Not to be left out, social interactions with others, most importantly teammates, have also produced the same effect for new players coming back and sticking with the game. The friends these players have made on their teams have been a large reason for

their success at the sport. According to the interviews, these players became very close with their teammates, insomuch that they began referring to them not only as friends, but as “brothers.” By referring to their teammates as brothers, it is inferred that the bond they have with each other is something stronger than just friendship. Their bonds have come to define who they are as a player and as a team.

In the end, traditional media did not play as large a role as social media and communications played in helping bring those unassociated to rugby to play the sport. Instead, the media helped keep players in their team, continually improving and learning about the sport once they started playing. And, since they stayed on the team, their friendship with their teammates grew until it became the binding force behind their team’s unity. Traditional media is minimally important in helping grow the sport of rugby, but social media and interactions with others is vital in the initial stage of introducing a new sport that might seem foreign to those learning about it.

### **Disruptive Innovations**

If rugby is to have a fighting chance in the United States, it will need to utilize new media in order to find a voice. Disruptive Innovations Theory suggests that that new ideas or innovations created for new customers or users can come in and harm already successful companies (Christensen, 1997). An early example of this might be the light bulb industry emerging to disrupt the candle industry (Thomond, & Lettice, 2002). With electric light bulbs, candles suddenly became not as useful, and the industry diminished. Thomond & Lettice further explain a more current trend of disruptive innovation in the DVD industry, which has effectively come in and made the VHS industry obsolete.

Social media has emerged as a possible disruptive innovation, which can allow

for smaller, emerging entities, such as rugby, to push through the already established traditional media and find room to grow and develop in a nation that might not have otherwise had room for it. With YouTube available for easy access to rugby videos and clips on demand, people are able to find what they want, when they want it, without having to wait for traditional media to give them what they want. Likewise, social networking sites such as Facebook allow users to post rugby videos to their profiles, thus allowing for more people to see it that might not have gone searching in the first place. Disruptive Innovations theory may be what rugby needs to emerge as a leading sport in the United States.

### **Growing the Game**

Growing the game of rugby in the United States can be done, as has been shown by this study. If those involved in rugby want their sport to become more widely recognized in the United States, they will most likely have to be proactive in their portrayal of the sport. Waiting for traditional media to take hold will, it would seem, take far too long to reach a much broader audience. It would appear then that the responsibility for the growth of rugby lies in each individual player and fan of the sport, and the increased use of social media to promote the sport. All players interviewed in this study were brought into the sport of rugby through others, be it friends, family, or even coaches recruiting. In some cases there was media assistance, but it is still difficult to say if those influenced by media would have made those initial steps to rugby had it not been for the encouragement of their friends. As it stands, rugby is a growing sport in the United States. And, the more it grows, the more noticeable it will be.

Introducing rugby to people at a young age can help grow the sport within a community. The interviews suggested that those who played rugby in high school played because their friends would talk to them about it. Once they started playing themselves, they, too, would be open with their other friends about their participation on the rugby team. This seemed to help spread at least an underlying knowledge to those in the social circle of these high school players.

Starting these players off on rugby at a young age also seemed to make them more dedicated to the sport. Those who began playing in college definitely appeared to enjoy their time playing, as well as the new social setting and interactions that came with it. However, those who began playing rugby from an earlier age, such as high school, appeared to be more dedicated in their love for the game itself. The main way these youth began playing before college was because of the communication others gave them about the sport. Friends and family made rugby seem appealing to them, and they picked it up and never looked back. If rugby is to become a sport with more devoted fans and players in the United States, then it would seem that players need to get involved in the game at an earlier age, and this can be done by personally exposing them to the sport, rather than waiting for the media to take its hold.

### **The Effects of College Teams**

For most college teams, rugby is a club sport, and is not as well advertised or even known about on many college campuses. For college rugby teams trying to spread the word about their team, it would appear that one of the most important ways to do this would be to go through people. The media has been seen to be growing in regards to the promotion of rugby, and that can only work to increase its support throughout the

country. But before rugby can grow at a faster rate, there will have to be much more interpersonal communication between players, coaches, students, and the general public, in order for their team to be more recognized.

With regards to recruiting, college teams will most likely need to be out and about in and among the student population, talking and interacting with those they meet, in order to grow their numbers. Going to high schools, city sports clubs, and other locations where youth participate in a myriad of sports may also be helpful in recruiting new, young talent. In order to promote rugby, players and coaches will need to be more active in the recruiting process. Relying on the media to bring in new players might recruit one or two new players once in a while, but going out and physically being with people and talking about it will surely be a faster method. Bakalar (2013) suggests using kiosks at events to help fans get on Facebook and the team's other pages. This use of face-to-face interaction can help grow the mediated communication for the team.

### **Building Professional Rugby in the United States.**

As talk and actions continue about building a professional rugby league in the United States (Dart, 2013; Hardy, 2014), it will be important to get as many people on board as quickly as possible. As mentioned in the literature review, broadcast revenue is important in keeping sports alive, and without an audience, that could be the difference between a successful beginning of a new professional sporting league in the United States and the beginning of the end. Soccer in the United States had many failures before the now successful Major League Soccer managed to get its head above the water. For professional rugby in the United States to be successful, there needs to be support, and not just from rugby players and fans, but from people in the country who may have never

seen a game before. Just like helping people make the decision to play, helping people make the decision to watch will also need to be done in an effective way. Perhaps an effective marketing strategy could be to bring players out in the open, among crowds and in busy places, to showcase what they will be starting in this country. This study has shown that traditional media can only do so much to promote playing a sport. Perhaps it can only do so much in viewing a sport as well. This study also showed the importance of interpersonal communication in bringing others to playing rugby. These face-to-face interactions have been important in growing rugby thus far in the United States, and it is likely that face-to-face interactions will be a driving point for the success of a professional rugby competition in the United States of America. Furthermore, mediated communication through social networking sites and social media may be an effective way of promoting a new professional league.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Sports have been around for a very long time, and as broadcast media find their way into the realm of sports, some sports can be left in the dark. Broadcast media has helped grow sports, while at the same time, ignoring others. Although some sports are regional (like the NFL), they can still find a successful fan base in other countries (such as the NFL penetrating the market in Great Britain). As is seen throughout the literature review, there are a number of popular sports in the United States. Of course, since there are many professional football, baseball, and basketball teams, there is a well of players to choose from. But when it comes to rugby in the United States, it is apparent that it is still a growing sport, and therefore lacking a professional base within the country. Be that as it may, there are still rugby players scattered throughout the country, and a number of universities in the United States are finding success with their school rugby teams. Somewhere along the line, these players had to decide to play rugby. This study has examined reasons for which people have decided to gain an interest in rugby, and then begin playing it as well.

Those who picked up the sport of rugby came from various parts of the United States and therefore have different life backgrounds. And yet, they all had similar stories when it came to making the decision to play rugby. Before even deciding to play, friends and family had talked to these people about rugby, from which communications sprouted a developing interest in the sport. This growing interest led in turn to the person being drawn into the sport of rugby, until he eventually began playing it himself. Social interactions with others has emerged as being one of the key motivating factors in bringing out new athletes in beginning to participate in the sport of rugby. Without the

interpersonal communications with others, the growth of rugby in the United States may very well have become stagnant. Interpersonal communication is essential in bringing others out to this underdeveloped sport in the United States.

Although it would appear that rugby is an emerging sport in the media in the United States, traditional media itself have yet to make an effective effort in actually motivating new players to gain an interest in and begin playing rugby. The media does, however, play a role in keeping those who made the decision to play rugby remain playing rugby. By being in contact with rugby in the media, their desire to not only play, but also to improve, grows and strengthens. By using the media to better learn their roles as a player, as well as see how the game can really be played, is an important aspect in keeping those already playing in coming back for more.

The social interactions with their teammates is also a large factor in retaining new rugby players. Relationships with teammates grow and become stronger as they play and practice together, until they have a bond stronger than friendship; a bond that they describe as making them brothers. For most of the players interviewed, these relationships were key in helping them continue to play rugby. Rugby is more than just a sport. To these players, it is a lifestyle, a social setting, and a place where they can prove their worth not just to their friends and teammates, but to themselves as well.

Rugby is a growing sport in the United States, and in order to continue, and even accelerate its growth, more may be done to facilitate this. Of course, the media can reach a much broader audience than individual effort, but despite that ability, it is still less effective than being personally involved with the sport. With news about a new professional rugby league in the United States, this ability to connect with the public



could prove to be an important factor of the success of the new league. As with college and high school teams, the most effective way of promoting rugby has seemingly been by people directly to people.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Because this study involved players from each time zone of the continental United States, it was not feasible to communicate with each player face to face. Instead, phone conversations were had in place of face-to-face interviews. By using only telephone for communication, the researcher was unable to identify certain non-verbal forms of communication during the conversations. This could be rectified in future studies by finding a more local group of subjects who would be willing to sit down and talk, rather than calling a host of others spread throughout the country.

Furthermore, another limitation of this study was the ability to get in contact with certain rugby teams' coaches. For the most part, the coaches were very easy to work with and helpful, but there were a few that struggled to make timely communications, or even made no attempt at communication at all. Again, this problem could be solved by choosing a more local rugby team and personally visiting the coach, making sure he understands what is going on with the study and the importance thereof. Other methods to make this more effective could include receiving support from USA Rugby itself as a backer of the research project, or otherwise higher-up organizations involved in the development of rugby within the United States.

Similar areas of research might be conducted in relation to this study. For example, further investigation could be undertaken to understand more fully how the perceptions of rugby have changed because of media coverage. Also, this study could be repeated with

another sport, such as American football, or basketball, which would allow researchers to see if the media plays more of a role in a person's decision to play a sport if it is covered more prominently, instead of sports like rugby, that are lacking a major fan base in the United States. This study may also be repeated in other nations where rugby is more prominent in the media, determining again if it is the media coverage in the nation that plays a role in a sports development and/or increase in attention by upcoming sports fans and athletes.

Future research might also include focusing more on rugby found in social media among a certain population, and using those results to further the investigation involving the growth of social media with the growth of rugby. Furthermore, this study could be taken to the next level, and instead of interviewing collegiate players, the researcher could talk with members of the USA national rugby team to find their involvement with rugby and social media.

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