Rugby's Revolution:
Data, Diversification and the Fight for the Future

TIAKI

An authentic, data-driven, fan centric shift is the path to success

Rugby Union faces a critical juncture. The allure of a breakaway league, promising financial windfalls and global domination, may seem tempting. However, a more sustainable and impactful path lies in a different direction: **an authentic data-driven, fan-centric revolution.**

This isn't about flashy moves or short-term gains. It's about building a robust foundation for the future, one that resonates with the next generation of fans: Gen Z and Alpha. This requires a fundamental pivot in focus, moving away from the pursuit of fleeting glory and towards a long-term strategy built on secure data-at-scale, diversification, and genuine fan engagement.

The Data Dilemma: A Lost Opportunity

Rugby Union, like many traditional sports, is lagging behind in the digital age. While other leagues have embraced data-driven strategies, leveraging technology to understand and engage fans, rugby remains largely reliant on traditional marketing tactics. This complacency poses a significant threat.

Streaming technology giants like Amazon and Netflix are amassing vast troves of consumer 1st party data, creating a detailed picture of individual viewing habits and preferences. This data is invaluable, allowing these platforms to tailor content, deliver hyper-personalized experiences, and ultimately, dictate the terms of engagement.

Rugby clubs, by failing to prioritize data collection and analysis, are inadvertently relinquishing control in the value chain over their own fan base. They are becoming mere content providers, their value reduced to simply filling the streaming platforms' schedules with inventory.

A SASE Strategy: Securing the Future

To regain control and thrive in this evolving landscape, rugby clubs must adopt a Secure Access Service Edge (SASE) strategy. This integrated approach to network security and connectivity will enable them to:

1. **Centralize data security:** Protect sensitive fan data from cyber threats, ensuring compliance with privacy regulations and maintaining trust.

2. **Enhance fan experiences:** Deliver seamless and secure connectivity across all platforms, from stadiums and training grounds to online platforms and mobile devices.

3. **Optimize operations:** Streamline data flow across the organization, improving efficiency and enabling data-driven decision-making.

Data-Driven Fan Engagement: The Key to Growth

A SASE strategy is just the beginning. True success hinges on leveraging data to understand and engage fans on a deeper level. This requires:

1. **Personalized experiences:** Tailoring content, offers, and experiences to individual fan preferences, from personalized matchday notifications to exclusive behind-the-scenes content.

2. **Interactive platforms:** Creating dynamic online communities where fans can connect with each other, engage with players, and participate in interactive experiences.

3. **Grassroots development:** Investing in data-driven initiatives to identify and nurture young talent, ensuring the long-term sustainability of the sport.

Live Pre-game Content: Engaging the Next Generation

In today's fast-paced digital world, capturing the attention of Gen Z and Alpha demands dynamic and engaging content. Live pre-game content presents a unique opportunity to connect with these young fans. This trend is already hitting mass adoption in the North American NFL, NBA, MLB and NHL leagues and emerging as a popular fan engagement tool in Europe in Premier League football and in The Hundred cricket. The leading franchises and clubs are distributing this innovative, creative content via TikTok and YouTube.
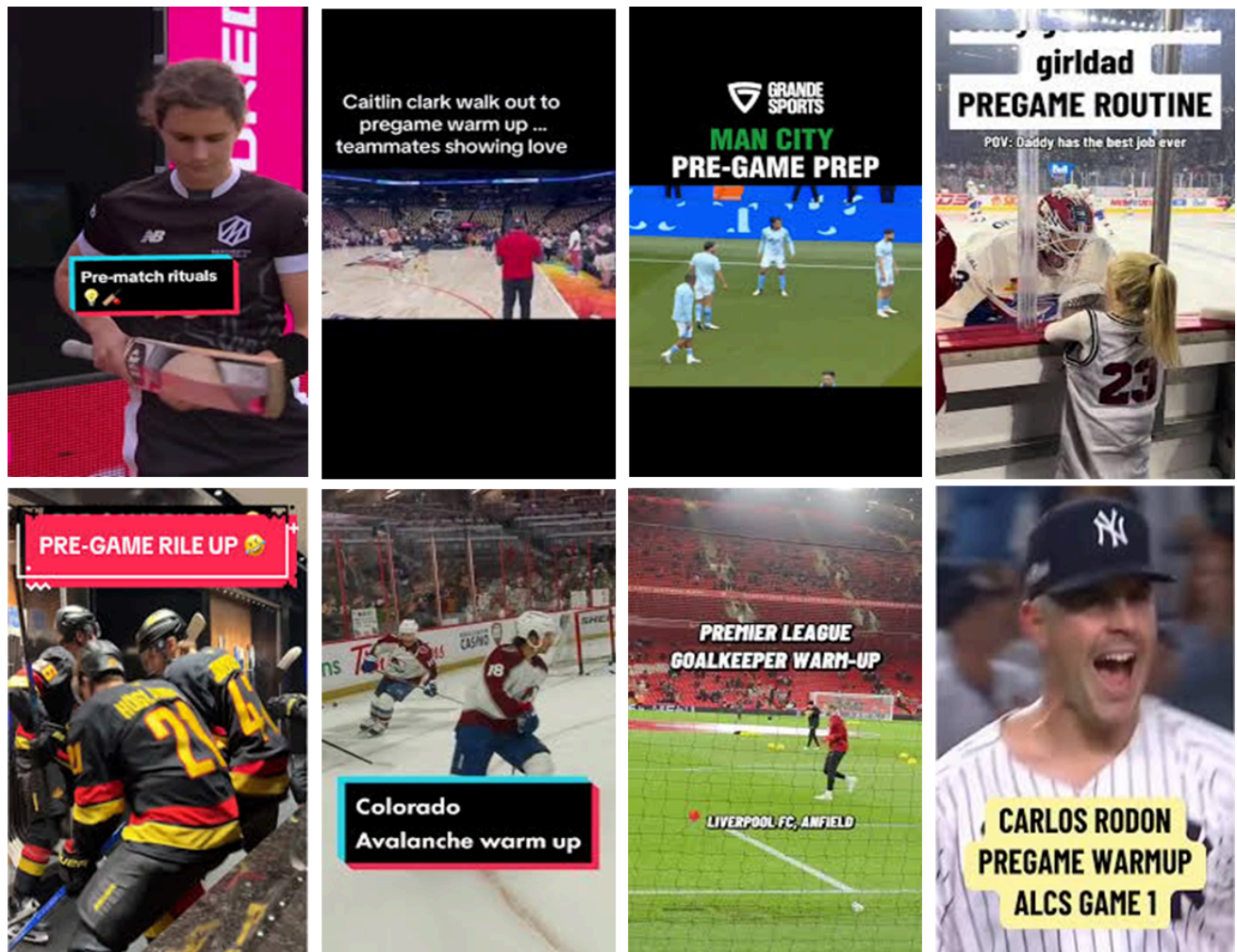
Pre-game live content video fees on TikTok is now shifting towards mainstream' on TikTok and YouTube for multiple sporting codes.

1. **Interactive Experiences:**
   - ★ **Live Q&As:** Host live Q&A sessions with players, coaches, and club legends, allowing fans to interact directly and ask questions.
   - ★ **Behind-the-scenes access**: Offer exclusive live streams showcasing pre-match preparations, team talks, and player warm-ups.
   - ★ **Fan challenges:** Organize interactive challenges, such as skills competitions or trivia games, involving fans both in-stadium and online.

2. **Personalized Content:**
   - ★ **DTC Feeds:** Leverage direct-to-consumer channels to deliver personalized pre-game content. Utilize fan data to curate unique content streams featuring their favorite players, teams, and storylines.
   - ★ **TikTok and YouTube:** Embrace platforms like TikTok and YouTube to reach young audiences with short-form, engaging live content. Utilize trending formats, such as live streams, vlogs, and short-form documentaries.

3. **Accessibility:**
   - ★ **Easy Access:** Ensure easy access to live pre-game content across multiple devices and platforms, including mobile, desktop, and smart TVs.
   - ★ Affordable Options: Offer affordable or free access to live pre-game content to attract a wider audience.

By investing in high-quality, interactive, and personalized live pre-game content, rugby clubs can create a compelling and engaging experience for young fans, building stronger relationships and fostering long-term loyalty.

Diversification: Expanding Beyond the Pitch

The focus should not solely be on on-field performance. Diversification is crucial for long-term success. This includes:

1. **Expanding global reach:** Exploring new markets and engaging with diverse fan bases through localized content and culturally relevant initiatives.

2. **Developing new revenue streams:** Exploring opportunities in areas such as esports, merchandise, and hospitality, leveraging data to identify new avenues for growth.

3. **Building strong communities:** Fostering a sense of belonging among fans, creating a vibrant and inclusive ecosystem that extends beyond the boundaries of the stadium.

The Role of Franchise Clubs

Franchise clubs play a pivotal role in this transformation. They must:

1. **Prioritize data ownership:** Establish clear data ownership policies and invest in the necessary infrastructure to collect, analyze, and utilize fan data effectively.

2. **Empower C-suite executives:** Equip C-suite leaders with the necessary data literacy and analytical skills to make informed decisions based on data-driven insights.

3. **Cultivate a data-driven culture**: Encourage a data-driven mindset across the organization, from marketing and sales to coaching and player development.

Conclusion

The future of rugby union depends on its ability to adapt and innovate. While the allure of a breakaway league may seem enticing, a more sustainable and impactful path lies in embracing a data-driven, fan-centric approach.

By prioritizing data security, leveraging technology to enhance fan experiences, and diversifying revenue streams, rugby clubs can not only survive but thrive in the digital age. This is not just about winning matches; it's about building a strong foundation for the future, one that resonates with the next generation of fans and ensures the long-term sustainability of the sport.

The time for complacency is over. The battle for fan engagement has begun, and rugby union must embrace data, diversification, and a SASE strategy to compete, otherwise young fans will continue to leak to other sporting codes that meet their Gen Z and Alpha personalised, immersive expectations.

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David is the Founder & Managing Partner at TIAKI, where he collaborates with bold and determined leaders in the sports ecosystem to define their data, AI and cybersecurity strategies to deliver sustainable value.

TIAKI is a niche consulting practice helping executive leadership in sport make confident, informed decisions on their risks, investments and business outcomes powered by secure 'data-at-scale'.

TIAKI empowers CEOs, management teams, broadcasters and investors in the global sports industry with strategic advisory frameworks to deliver secure, pioneering digital fan experiences and new ecosystem business models to achieve breakthrough returns.

David has over 20 years of strategy and technology enabled business transformation experience, providing consulting expertise in cloud native technologies, data strategy, digital business enablement and cybersecurity strategy. He is passionate about helping talented leadership teams succeed in securely growing their differentiated business models in the data-driven, digital sports economy.

Based in Stockholm, David previously worked for IBM Consulting, EY, Accenture Strategy and Orange Business. He studied Chemistry at Durham University and holds an MBA from Trinity College, Dublin Business School.