

W

RUGBY

GRASSROOTS REVIEW // **SEASON 2023**



Welcome to Grassroots

Throughout the last couple of years, we began researching the state of rugby union across the globe to better understand our game at its most important stage; grassroots rugby.

To showcase the current state of grassroots rugby, we've compiled the very first W RUGBY Grassroots Review, analysing data and interviews from over 170 clubs across select rugby playing nations. This report highlights key statistics, trends, and achievements from the past four years (the most recent, full Rugby World Cup cycle). The objective is to provide boots-on-the-ground insight of rugby at its core, the struggles and the wins, with the aim it will support positive decision-making for the future growth and development of our sport at grassroots.

The grassroots game has its challenges that need addressing quickly, but there are also insights into why players love our amazing sport.

Let's power grassroots rugby.

Dovy & Andy
W RUGBY Founders

2023 HIGHLIGHTS

W RUGBY have been compiling data from the most recent full World Cup cycle (Men's RWC 2019-2023).

We focused on trends for participation in grassroots rugby and what factors surround the increase or decrease of player numbers. We analyse;

- How, if at all, clubs recovered from Covid 19 in the middle of the RWC cycle.
- Are players likely to continue playing in the next 4 years?
- What are the key challenges to growing the game?
- What is working well and what needs urgent focus and support.

Remember, these insights and opinions are not from W RUGBY, they're directly from you, the grassroots community, and we thank everyone who took part and helped shape this 2023 grassroots review.

**85% of clubs
above average
facilities**

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**Where are
Unions failing
for grassroots
rugby?**

Page 23



**Will young
players likely
stick around for
the next 4
years?**

Page 17

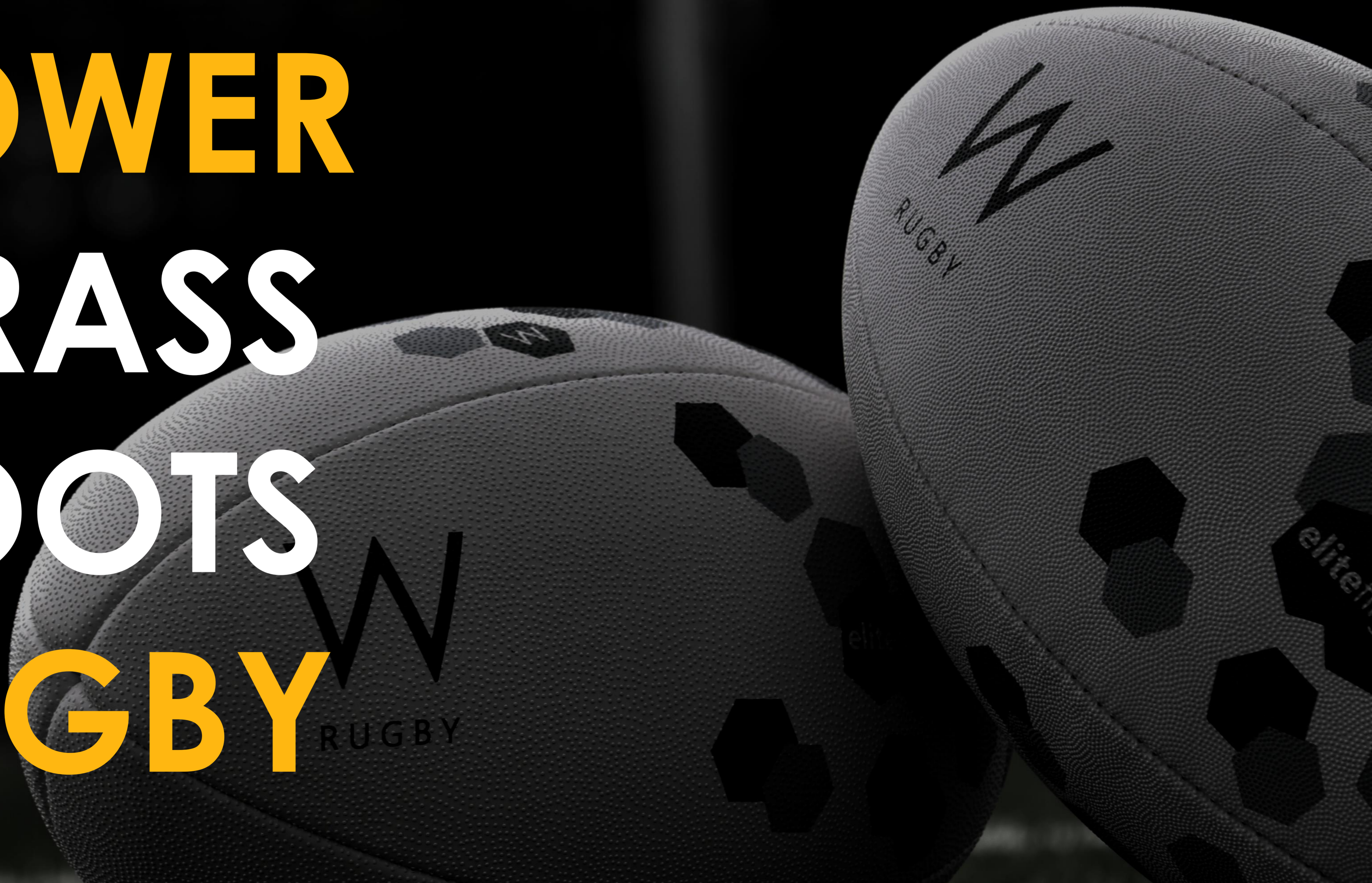


POWER

GRASS

ROOTS

RUGBY



W RUGBY

We've shaped seven standards to power grassroots and thrive. Clubs, Schools, Unions and Staff should aim to implement these standards at the grassroots game to ensure rugby continues to grow successfully.

The Seven Success Standards



Safe // Enjoyable // Accessible // Affordable // Community // Union // Development



1

SAFE

First and foremost, we need to know that the grassroots game is **safe to play**. Parents, guardians and players have to be confident that the sport isn't detrimental to player safety.

Senior squad members need to look after their bodies as **risk of injuries increase** with age.

3

ACCESSIBLE

Accessibility means people from all backgrounds, abilities, and ages have the opportunity to participate in rugby. **Inclusivity promotes diversity** within the sport and helps create a more representative and understanding rugby community.

Rugby must be accessible to **every single player**, from every socioeconomic background.

2

ENJOYABLE

Awesome experiences **encourage more players** to take part in rugby. Increased participation leads to a larger talent pools and a broader base for developing future rugby players.

If we make grassroots rugby enjoyable, players are more likely to stick with it. High retention rates strengthen our sport at every level and helps create a **sustainable rugby community**.

4

AFFORDABLE

Building on Standard 3, if everyone can afford to play rugby, it increases participation and becomes easier to identify and **develop talent** from a very large pool of players, regardless of their economic situation.

Parents need to be encouraged to let their children try rugby, but often the biggest barrier is cost.

5

COMMUNITY

By involving the **local community**, clubs will see an increase in support ranging from extra fans and crowds, right through to sponsorship opportunities to help grow the club through **increased revenue** streams.

7

DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS

Talent ID and development pathways provide a structured framework for **identifying and nurturing talent**. Talented athletes should receive the appropriate coaching, resources, and opportunities to progress and reach their full potential at every level.

Clear pathways offer players a sense of direction and purpose, motivating them to improve, and advance through the various stages of their sports careers. This encourages continuous skill development and personal growth.

Development pathways need to exist for **players as well as coaches**.

6

UNION SUPPORT

Every club, big or small needs support from their governing Union. Unions absolutely need to ensure they are providing **support to clubs** (not just financial) but in terms of coaching, information, marketing, infrastructure and clear-cut **pathways to development**.

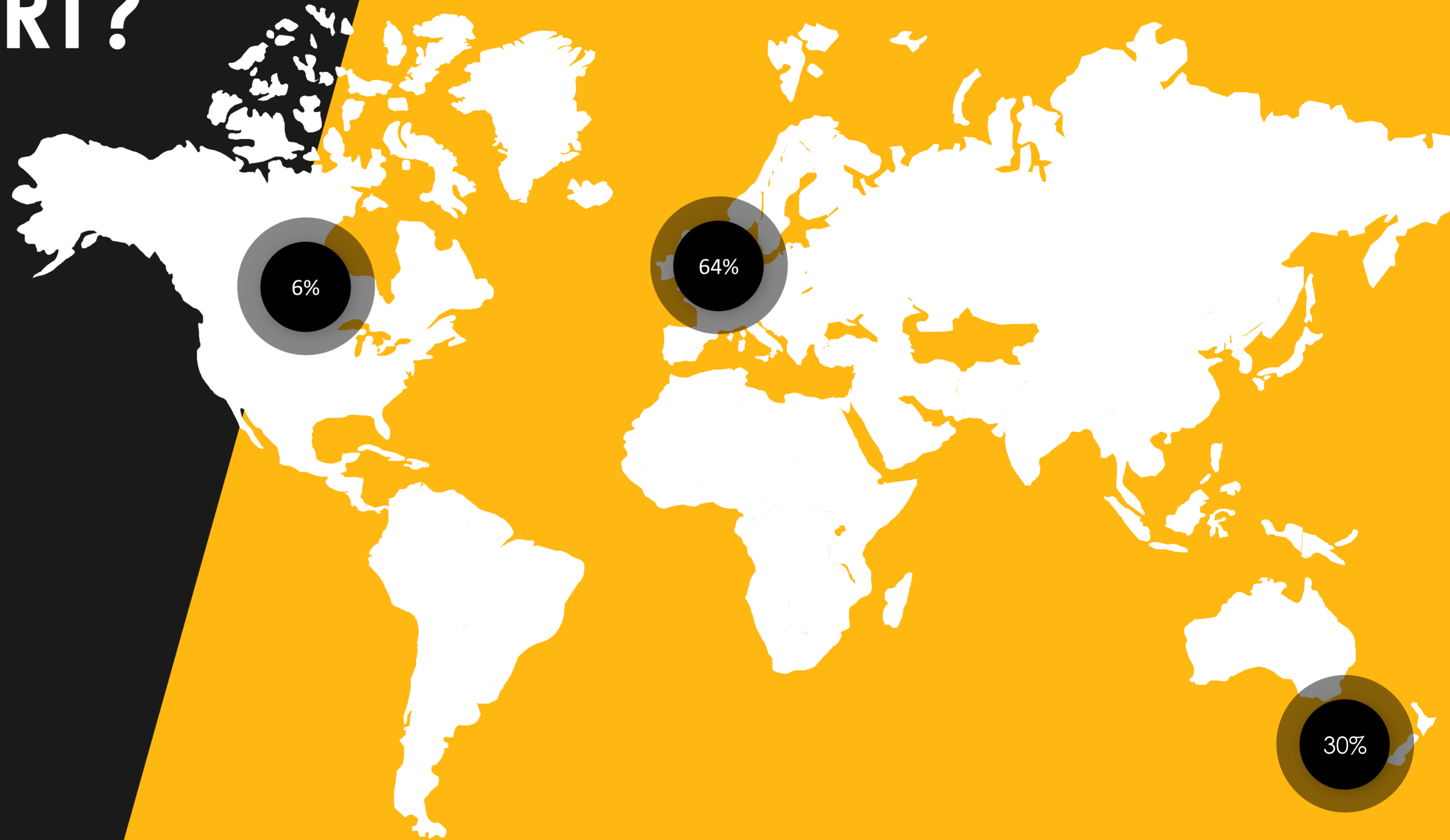




YOUR VOICE

WHO TOOK PART?

Over **170+** clubs took part in our interviews, surveys and research from select rugby playing nations. We spoke to grassroots clubs in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, UK, and USA to get their insights and points of view.



64%

**UNITED KINGDOM &
IRELAND**

30%

**AUSTRALIA &
NEW ZEALAND**

6%

**UNITED STATES &
CANADA**

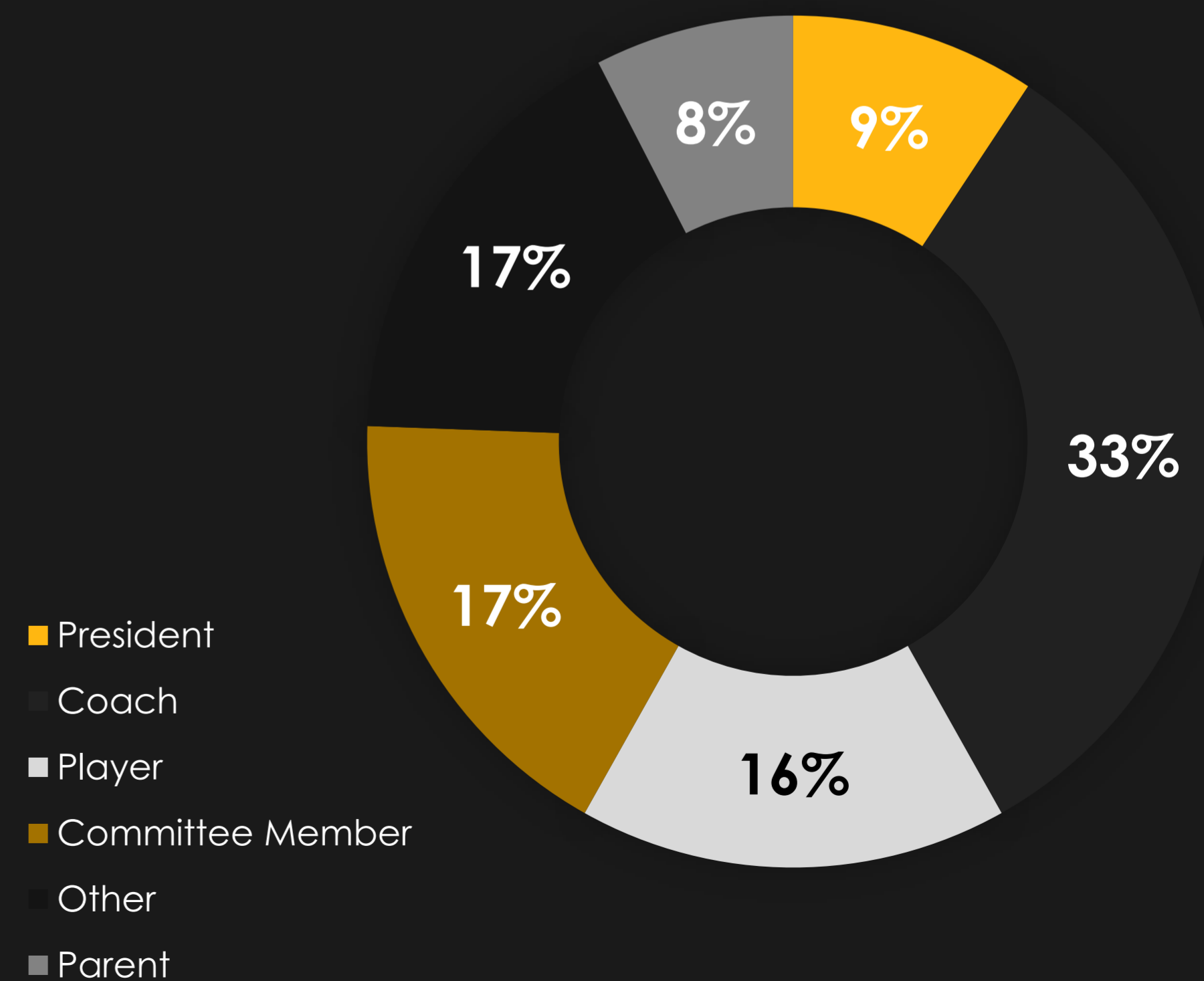
30%



CLUB ROLES

Making grassroots rugby successful is a **joint effort** from many different people at a club. We wanted to talk to a diverse set of roles at each team to get a varied and more accurate view of grassroots. From presidents to parents, each answer provided a different point of view.

One third of our data came from rugby coaches, followed by committee members and club presidents.



PATHWAYS TO RUGBY

We wanted to know just how accessible is rugby to players and what types of rugby do clubs provide. 15s is what we know and love, but the rugby community needs to offer alternative entry paths into rugby, it shouldn't be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

There's a growing trend in clubs providing different types of rugby to players, outside the traditional First XV. By creating alternative pathways and entries into rugby, especially early on in a player's career, it increases participation and retention rates, and players are more likely to switch to 15s as there's a lower barrier to entry.

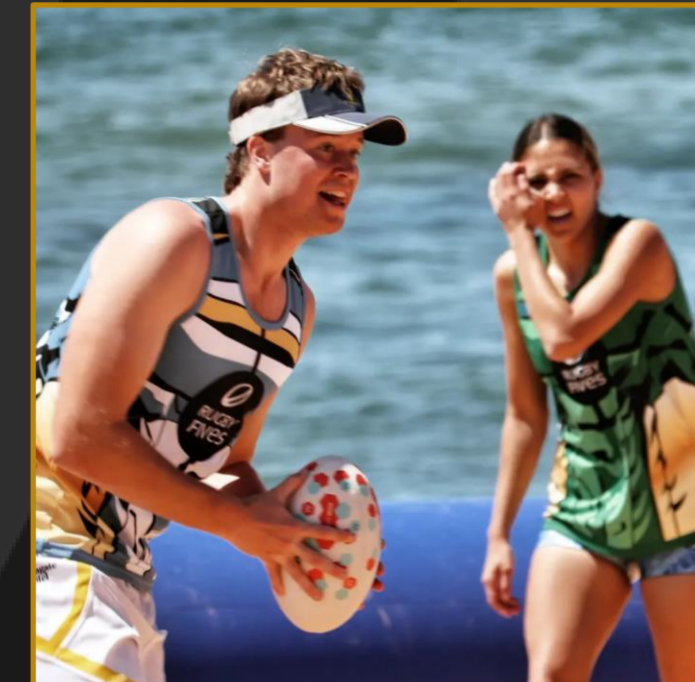
Creating alternative game types increases confidence in potential players to try rugby which is less daunting. Simpler rules, less physicality and fun flavours of rugby invites different demographics to our game and increases the talent pool.

Out of the 170+ clubs asked, here's what was available for players.

**Beach
Rugby**
1 Club



Sevens
35 Clubs



Veterans
7 Clubs



**Touch &
Tag**
85 Clubs



**Juniors &
Minis**
20 Clubs

**Rugby
10s**
6 Clubs

**Special
Events**
4 Clubs

**Mixed
Ability**
9 Clubs



**Walking
Rugby**
19 Clubs

*40 clubs didn't offer any alternatives from XV's rugby.
'Special Events' are gala days, rugby camps, community days etc.

WE ASKED...

How has **participation** in your club changed from the last Men's World Cup in 2019 to today in 2023?

It's no secret that Rugby Union participation at Grassroots level is falling, and struggling to recover from the aftermath of Covid 19. Clubs are scrambling for players and the game is suffering as a result.

Rugby Unions around the world target increased participation levels year on year, however **78% of clubs** are reporting that participation is either decreasing or staying the same.

A significant factor on this lack of growth has been COVID, with **1 in 3** of responders citing COVID and related complications following the global pandemic being a factor in their club's lack of participation.

28%

Reported it
STAYED THE SAME

22%

Reported an
INCREASE

50%

Reported a
DECREASE

PARTICIPATION

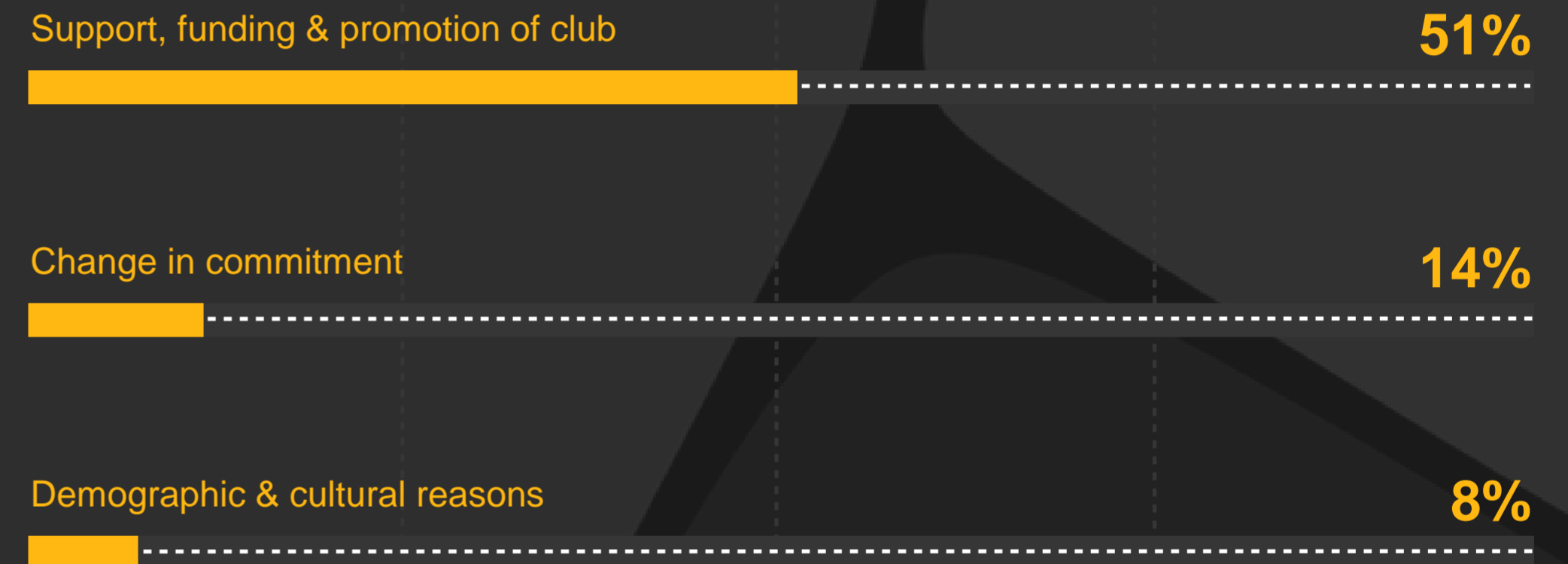
Why The Decrease?

Covid aside, other issues contribute significantly to the decrease in player participation. **51%** of clubs attributed the decline to insufficient support, funding, and promotion.

Encouragingly, waning enthusiasm for the game does not dominate responses.

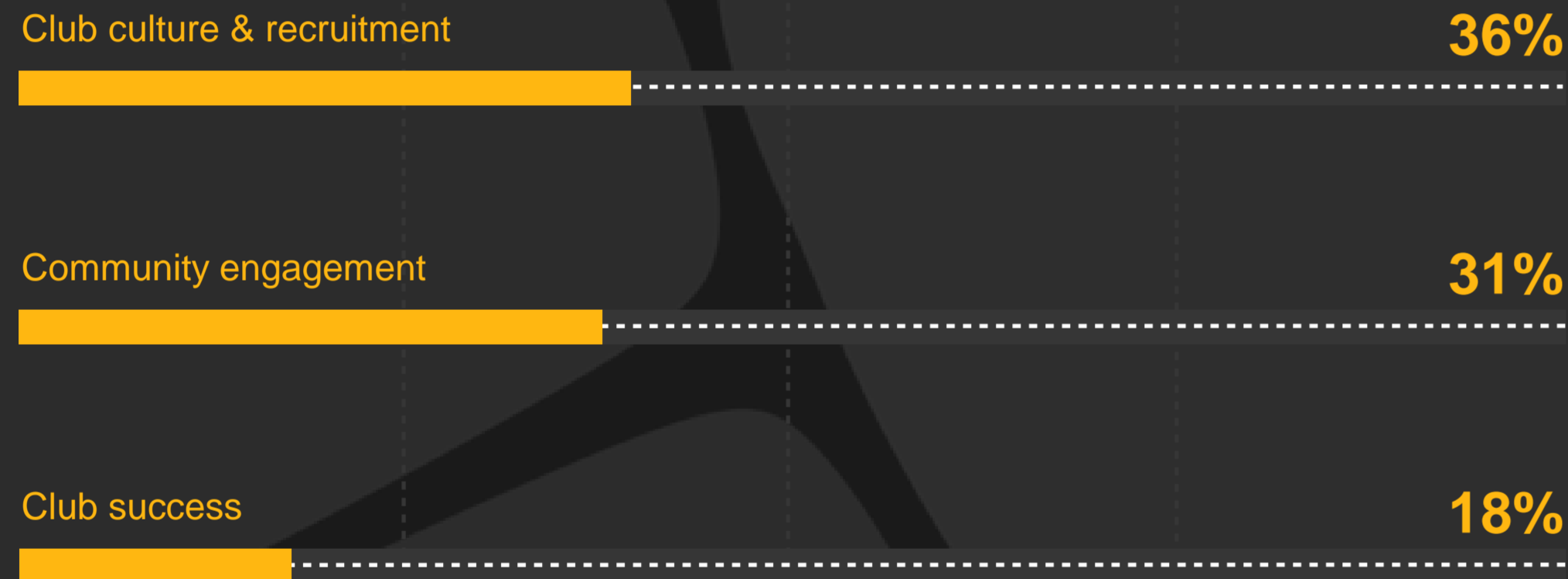
Only **14%** indicated a change in commitments and interests as a primary reason for reduced participation. However, it's evident that the sport is grappling with systemic issues. Lack of support from governing bodies, inadequate media exposure, and funding shortfalls are causing widespread problems across the global rugby unions.

Interestingly, demographic and cultural reasons account for only **8%** of the responses, suggesting that the challenges faced by grassroots rugby transcend geographic and cultural boundaries. The problems run deeper, signifying an urgent need for a comprehensive, systemic solution to rejuvenate the sport at the grassroots level.



PARTICIPATION

Why The Increase?



Positive club culture and active recruitment strategies are leading the surge in grassroots rugby participation, cited by a combined **36%** of respondents. These encompass board activities, club vision, and targeted player acquisition.

The inherent appeal of rugby and club performance are factors too, contributing to another **18%** of responses. The sport's attractiveness, amplified by international tournaments, along with club successes and reputation, are key attractions for new participants.

Community engagement, along with support and volunteerism, contributes to an impressive **31%** of responses. The renewed interest in contact sports post-Covid, community events around games, and the hard work of volunteers are driving an increase in participation.

PLAYER RECRUITMENT

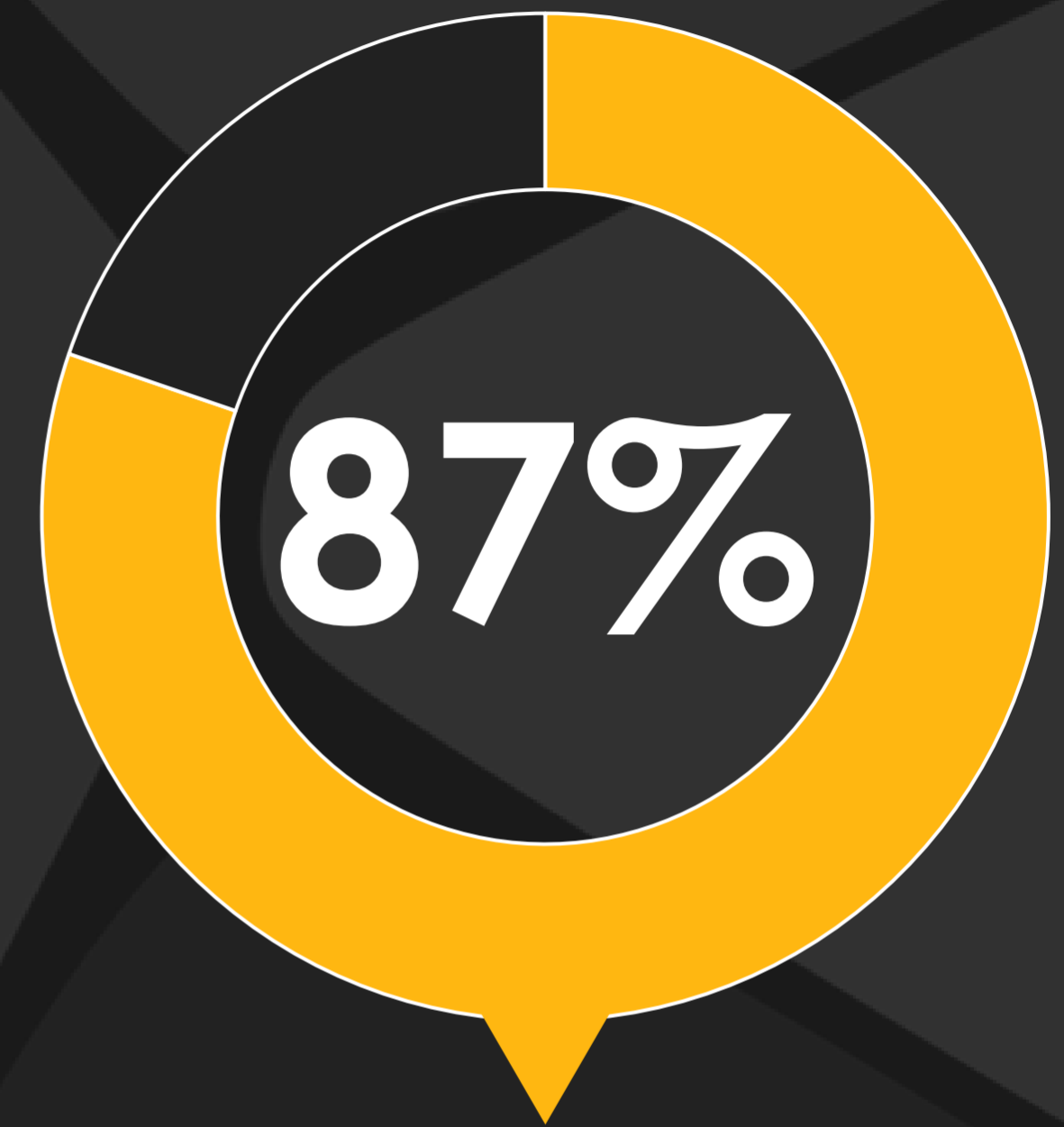
One clear challenge reported is the intense competition from other local clubs, with one club in particular citing **20 clubs within a 7-mile radius**, all vying for the same pool of players. Pressure from professional clubs to redirect promising youth players to feeder clubs further adds to the competition. Additionally, some smaller clubs struggle to stand out against larger, more established clubs, leading to recruitment difficulties.

A recurring theme, with nearly **a quarter** of responses, is a lack of support given to clubs. Insufficient involvement from schools, and the absence of Development Officers, hinder the introduction of rugby to young players. Limited funding and inadequate advertising contribute to the underrepresentation of the sport, leading to difficulties in attracting new recruits.

Rugby faces stiff competition from other *similar* sports, particularly in countries like Australia and the United States. Alluring sports like Aussie Rules Football (AFL), Rugby League and American Football draws potential rugby players away from Union. The unfamiliarity of rugby, combined with the dominance of other sports in these regions, makes it tough to draw in players.

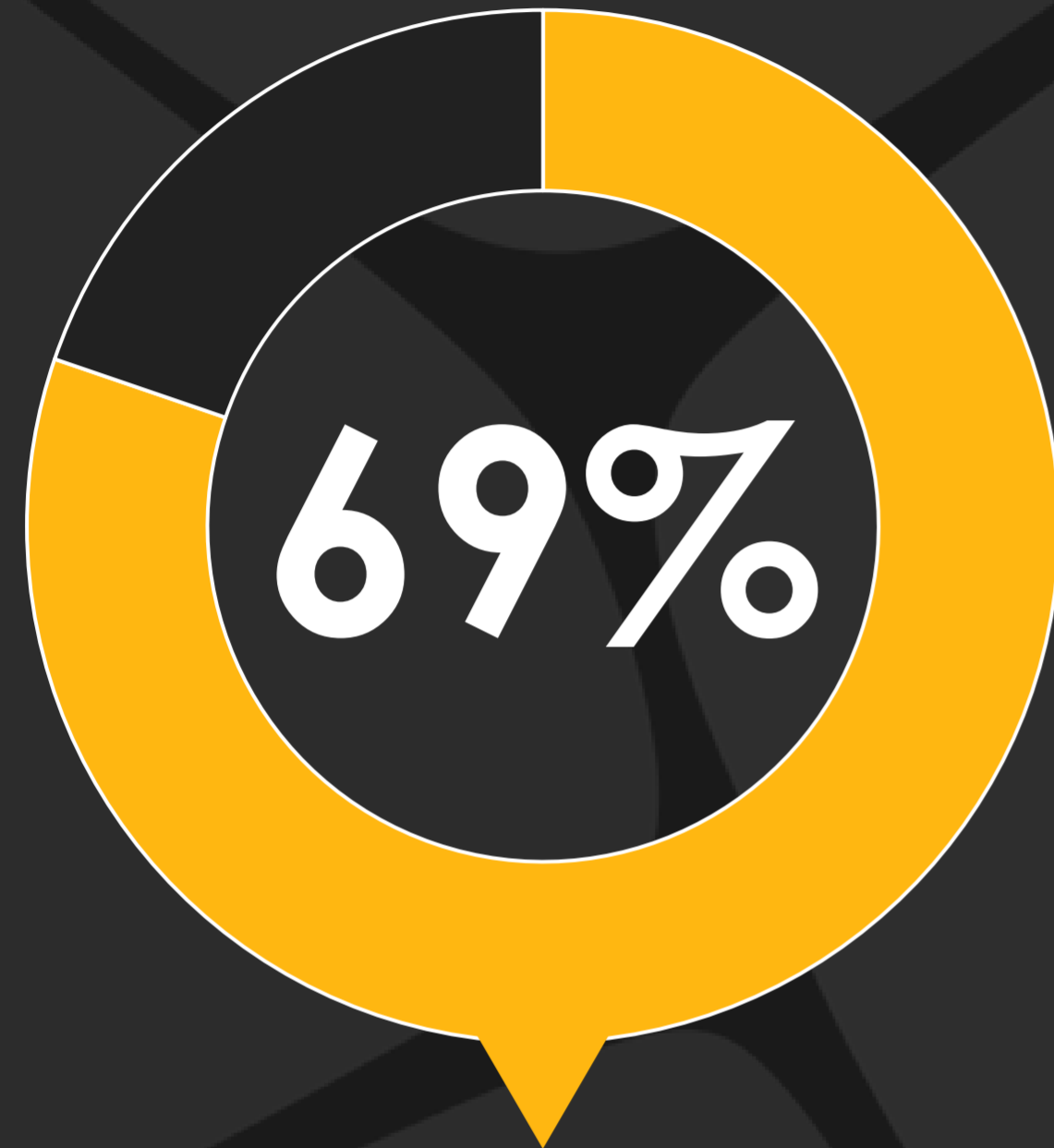
Retaining players, especially in smaller clubs, proves to be a significant challenge. With **18%** of responses citing difficulties in player retention. Factors such as work commitments, competing sports, and a lack of consistent game opportunities contribute to players losing interest altogether. Some clubs also struggle with player retention after the age-grade level, which impacts the long-term growth of the club and the sport.

These findings emphasise the need for collaborative efforts between clubs, schools, governing bodies, and local communities to address these challenges and create better environments for recruiting and retaining rugby players at the grassroots level.



Percentage of clubs who find it difficult to recruit new rugby players.

YOUNG PLAYERS



Percentage of clubs who say that young players are likely to keep playing for the next 4 years

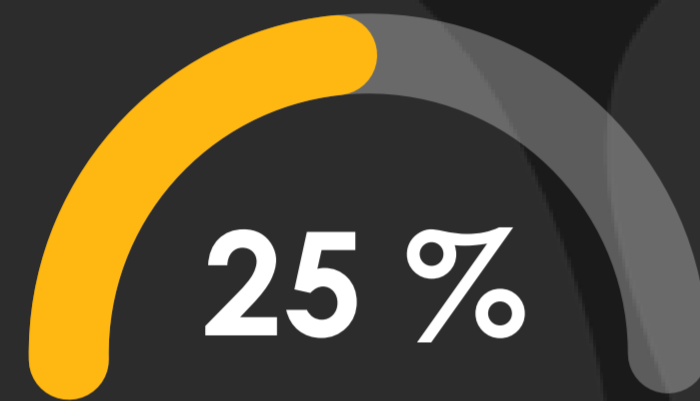
One of the significant factors influencing player retention is the enjoyment and positive experience players derive from playing rugby. According to the survey responses, players expressed a high level of enthusiasm and love for the game. They highlighted the good atmosphere, team spirit, and club ethos as contributing to their positive experience. An impressive **88%** of clubs reported that their players love playing rugby and find it *fun*. This indicates a strong foundation for player retention, as players are more likely to stay when they enjoy the sport and the overall experience.

Continuity and progression within the club play a vital role in retaining players. The survey revealed that a number of players are younger siblings of existing players, indicating a family tradition of participation. Additionally, many clubs reported that players stay for several years before moving on to bigger clubs, emphasizing the positive player development environment provided by grassroots clubs. Continuity can be disrupted temporarily due to university or personal commitments, but these players often return to the club. It is essential for clubs to recognise and support these transitional phases to maintain player retention.

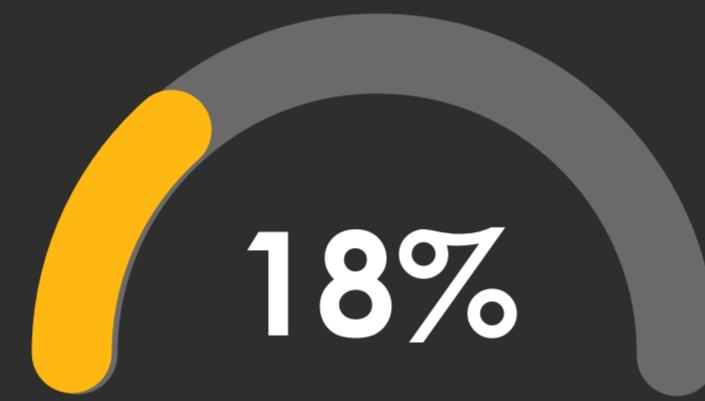
Positive club support and a nurturing environment are key factors in player retention. Clubs that provide good facilities, coaching, and support for youth players create an environment conducive to player development and growth. The inclusive, diverse, and welcoming club culture reported by **75%** of clubs plays a crucial role in retaining players. A positive club reputation and successful senior teams also contribute to player retention by providing aspirational role models for young players. Likewise, clubs that offer progression opportunities from youth to adult rugby provide a clear pathway for players, reinforcing their commitment to the club.

This all highlights the importance of fostering a positive and inclusive club culture, providing opportunities for personal and skill development, and maintaining strong connections within the local community. We hope that clubs can continue to retain and nurture their younger players to ensure the long-term growth and sustainability of grassroots rugby.

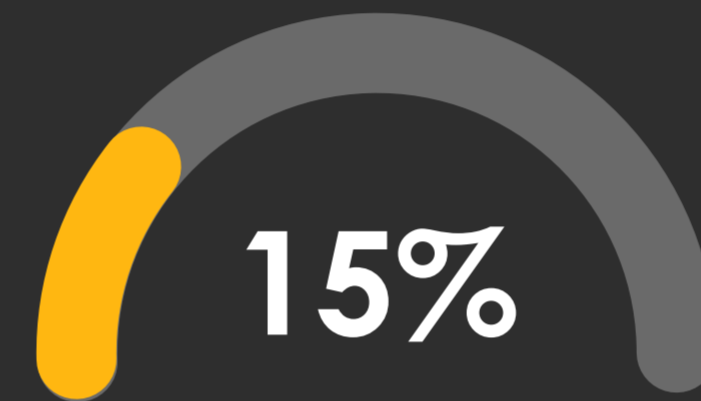
WHY PLAYERS LEAVE



Lack of support, coaching and club culture.



Limited progression to Senior rugby.



Moving to different sports and losing interest.



Insufficient club facilities.

The survey responses shed light on the factors contributing to player attrition within rugby clubs. The findings reveal that a lack of support, coaching, and culture is a significant reason for players leaving (**25%** of respondents). Transition challenges and limited progression opportunities to senior rugby also play a role (**18%**). Decreased interest in rugby and the appeal of other sports further contribute to retention difficulties (**15%**). External commitments such as work, university, and relocation, impact players' decisions to leave (**12%**). Insufficient facilities and funding present additional obstacles to player retention (**10%**).

To address these issues and enhance player retention, rugby clubs should focus on fostering a supportive and inclusive culture, improving coaching quality, and establishing clear pathways for player progression. Strengthening partnerships with local schools and promoting the enjoyment and benefits of rugby can also help retain players. Additionally, addressing cost concerns and highlighting the long-term advantages of rugby participation may alleviate retention challenges.

A photograph of three women on a green rugby field. The woman in the foreground is wearing a black sleeveless top and has her back to the camera, holding a white rugby ball with black spots. Two other women in light blue shirts are visible in the background, one of whom is also holding a rugby ball. The field is surrounded by a fence and trees in the distance under a clear sky.

KEEPING PLAYERS

“We provide players with **career advice** that will help them longer term and that helps to keep them at the club. We also get players **involved in youth coaching.**”

- London Welsh RFC

HOW TO KEEP PLAYERS

What is Working:

1. **Club Culture:** A positive and inclusive environment where players feel valued and supported.
2. **Quality Coaching and Support:** Excellent facilities, coaching, and support for youth players.
3. **Continuity and Progression:** Clear pathways for player development and advancement within the club.
4. **Family and Friendship Bonds:** Strong connections built amongst players and their families.

Tips for Clubs:

1. **Enhance Player Experience:** Make rugby enjoyable with engaging training sessions and a focus on skill development.
2. **Involve Parents:** Maintain open communication and involve parents in club initiatives.
3. **Establish Community Connections:** Engage with the local community through events and school programs.
4. **Personalise Player Development:** Cater to individual needs and goals, and involve players in decision-making.
5. **Support Transition Periods:** Provide support and maintain communication during temporary disruptions.
6. **Promote Lifelong Participation:** Highlight opportunities for continued involvement in rugby beyond youth levels.



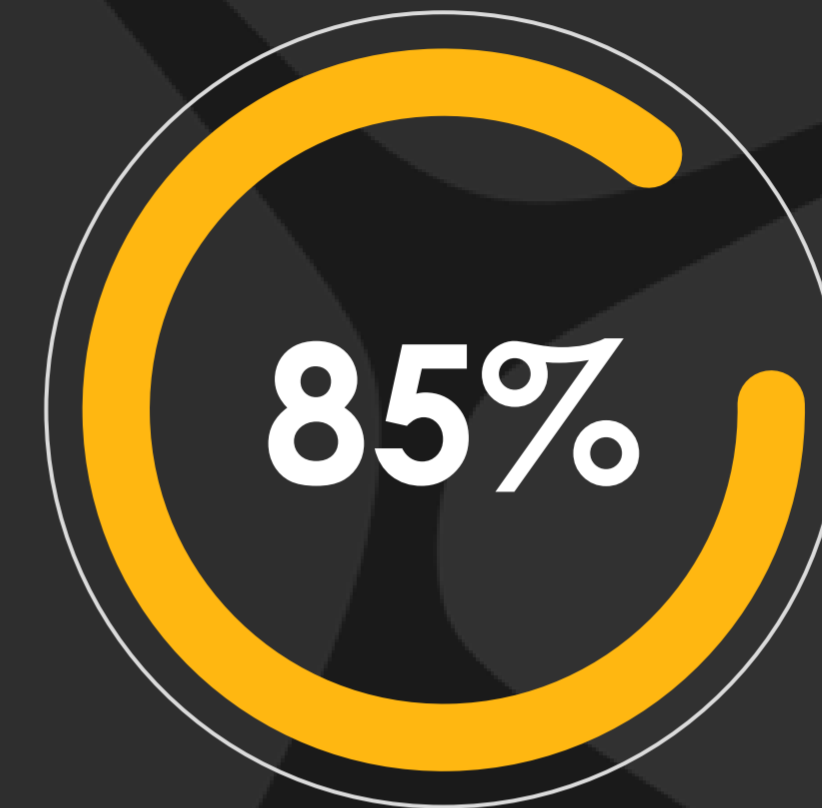
CLUB FACILITIES

Lots of **positive** aspects were brought to the fore by rugby clubs. The clubhouses are often well-maintained, acting as inviting social spaces for members and their families. Several clubs boast recently renovated clubhouses and top-quality playing surfaces. Facilities are also equipped with floodlit pitches, enabling night games, and multi-purpose field spaces, showcasing the adaptability of these clubs. The existence of clean changing rooms, with some clubs providing female-specific rooms, signals a step towards inclusivity. Clubs with gym facilities and easy accessibility were praised, reflecting a wholesome and convenient environment for everyone.

However, amidst these commendations, several clubs raised important issues that require collective action. Limited investment and funding for maintenance and upgrades were key concerns. Some clubs shared facilities or rented them from external organisations (e.g. Local Councils), causing constraints in customisation and flexibility. Others highlighted the issue of outdated facilities, including changing rooms and showers. Quality of pitches and field conditions, crucial for training and gameplay, were also a concern. Space constraints, council or government restrictions, and a lack of control over resources compounded these challenges.

Despite these obstacles, a narrative of resilience and proactive engagement emerges. Clubs have taken the time to collaborate with local authorities, formulate strategic plans, and even organise fundraising efforts for better facilities. This commitment to improve, to create an environment that is inclusive and inviting, is the driving force that upholds the spirit of rugby.

It's crucial to view these challenges not as detriments but as opportunities to innovate and grow. With concerted funding efforts, strategic partnerships, and collaboration with local authorities, these clubs can overcome constraints and update their facilities. It will be the spirit of volunteerism and the wider rugby community's engagement that will see these initiatives through to success.



of club facilities
rated as "Average"
and above.

of these responses
are listed as "Great"
or "Excellent"



WHAT WORKS, WHAT DOESN'T

Use this list to compare your club against what players, coaches and members say works well within their club, and what doesn't work. A list of ideas to help improve facilities and retain players.

GOOD

Excellent clubhouses // **Social spaces** // Well maintained club // **Quality playing surfaces** // Pitches with draining // **Great bar** // Good food selection // **Pitch availability** // Floodlit pitches // **Great Changing rooms** // Separate female changing rooms // **Gym facilities** // Clubhouse expansion // **Equipment storage**

Limited funds for facility updates and maintenance // Struggles with planning permission // **Reliance on rented or shared pitches** // Lack of designated training fields // **Waterlogged pitches** // Outdated or aged clubhouses, changing rooms, and showers // **Inadequate toilets or poor bathroom facilities** // Poor equipment and outdated kit // **No spectator space** // No space for social gatherings // **Competition for resources with other clubs and sports**

BAD

IS YOUR UNION DOING ENOUGH?

We thought that we would let the players and coaches answer the question; Are you getting the support you need? Is your local Union doing enough for Grassroots rugby in your area?

“

"No, the RFU seems to have forgotten rugby clubs under the Championship, most clubs are finding finances difficult and recruiting difficult and the RFU seems not to care."

"RFU concentrate far too much on the elite, Premiership, Division 1 teams. They don't consider the reality of life for people and clubs in lower leagues."

"The RFU could be doing more, they have recently dismissed the community coaches and this has had a big impact on exposure to rugby at the local schools."

"USA Rugby is doing nothing for grassroots growth. It is all done locally."

"The community game is starved of positive support and given lip service, and PR spin, while being loaded up with ever more bureaucracy."

"The league system needs a complete overhaul with fixtures being regularly postponed at short notice due to inability to field a team."

"Our Union seems to have forgotten rugby clubs under the Championship, most clubs are finding finances difficult, recruiting difficult, and the RFU seems not to care."

”

IS YOUR UNION DOING ENOUGH?

A **staggering** majority of the responses express dissatisfaction with the efforts of their local rugby unions at the level of support given to grassroots clubs. It isn't weighted to any specific Union either. Disappointingly, the same negative sentiment spreads across all regions and countries. The common themes that emerge from these responses include too many rule changes, lack of funding, poor communication, and a perceived focus on only the elite and professional levels of the game.

The respondents criticise the unions for not doing enough to prioritise grassroots development and support local clubs. There are concerns about the downsizing of community coaches and development officers, which has had a negative impact on rugby exposure to potential players. Funding and support appear to be lacking, hindering recruitment efforts and the ability to provide basic amenities and upgrades for clubs. There is a perceived imbalance in resource allocation, with more attention and funding directed towards the top levels of the game.

The discontent also extends to issues such as limited engagement with schools, lack of development opportunities for coaches, and challenges in retaining players. Many respondents believe that the Unions should take a more proactive role in promoting and growing the sport, especially among younger age groups and non-traditional demographics. While there are a few positive remarks acknowledging the efforts made by some unions, the overwhelming negativity suggests that more needs to be done to address the concerns and frustrations of the grassroots rugby community.

Rugby Unions need to listen to these voices, reevaluate their priorities, and allocate resources more effectively to support the growth and development of grassroots rugby. By addressing these concerns head-on, Unions can regain the trust and confidence of the rugby community, fostering a stronger and more sustainable foundation for the sport's future.

1

The number of responses that reported their Union in a "truly positive" manner.

89%

of respondents felt that their union was not doing enough for grassroots rugby .

*Truly positive counting as a "Yes" that does not have a preceding "But" or other negative counterpoint

CLUB BUDGETS

53%

Over half of the respondents either did not know their club's budget, or had a budget ranging from 0-1K per season.

45% of respondents reported a budget of between 1K-5K per season.

The responses indicate a significant lack of budget at the grassroots level of rugby, with **98% of clubs** working with a budget below £5000. The limited finances pose various challenges for these clubs as they struggle to meet the expenses associated with rugby gear, equipment, facilities, and other operational needs. The lack of sufficient funding often forces them to rely on alternative means such as seeking grants, donations, or purchasing items as needed and as they can afford. This restricts their ability to invest in essential resources and initiatives that could enhance the quality of training, player development, and overall club experience. The data highlights the **critical need for increased financial support** and investment in grassroots rugby to alleviate these budget limitations and foster the growth and sustainability of the sport at the grassroots level.

*All currencies have been converted to GBP (£)



RECOMMENDATIONS



Based on our research and some reoccurring themes and challenges, we have identified and recommended key activities to help grow the grassroots game, all mapped to W RUGBY's Seven Success Standards.



DEVELOPMENT OFFICERS UNION

Most Rugby Unions employ Development and Community officers to help bridge the gap between grassroots and the professional game, offering support, ideas and activities (such as elite player visits to clubs). Track down your local development officers on the Union's website or search for Union employees through LinkedIn. If your Union doesn't have Development Officers, hold them accountable and demand the support.

FOCUS ON VOLUNTEERS COMMUNITY

Involving local communities almost guarantees more support both financially and bums-on-seats to increase the buzz around the club. Clubs can't survive on their own and it takes community support and outreach from both sides to ensure growth at club level

COACHING CLINICS DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS

Coaching clinics can be a highly effective way for rugby clubs to upskill both players and coaches in grassroots rugby. These clinics provide opportunities for learning, development, and engagement, helping to improve the overall standard of rugby within the club and retaining talent. Encourage peer learning, hold Q&A sessions and establish objectives and follow-ups for participants.

RECRUITMENT ACTIVITIES ENJOYABLE + ACCESSIBLE

The time has come to think outside the box for player recruitment. To increase rugby player participation at the grassroots level, it's essential to think creatively. Start collaborating with schools, harnessing social media, holding BBQs and parties and putting on activities outside of 'just playing rugby' to reduce the barrier to entry. Our website has lots of ideas to help. Just head to w-rugby.com or google 'How to Recruit Rugby Players'.

SUMMARY

The 2023 W RUGBY Grassroots Review findings give us a solid overview of what's going on in grassroots rugby, showing the challenges and concerns faced by clubs and teams at this level. The responses point out that lack of support, both financial and in terms of promotion and exposure, is a major issue. Those involved in the game expressed frustration about players not showing up consistently, uncertain fixtures, and the headaches of managing long travel distances, especially in rural areas.

Admin red tape, poor communication, and lack of accountability were mentioned as obstacles within the clubs and governing bodies. On top of constant rule changes and competition restructures, clubs are losing faith in their Unions.

Recruiting and keeping players, especially in smaller clubs or areas with limited interest, turned out to be a big challenge. Bigger, more successful clubs and other popular sports are luring players away from grassroots rugby. There are also worries about coaching consistency, quality, and getting opportunities for development.

Financial struggles, such as initial budgets and difficulty attracting sponsors, are holding back grassroots clubs from doing more. Plus, there's a shortage of good training and playing facilities, and weather-related issues add to the hardships. The lack of communication, media coverage, and support for women's rugby and age-grade rugby are also problematic.

The time commitment needed, balancing rugby with work and personal life, is tough for many involved in grassroots rugby. Persistent struggles in getting volunteers involved and engaged is always an issue, which can lead to overworking a small number of individuals and risking burnout.

The data makes it clear that grassroots rugby needs to take action to tackle these challenges to support its growth. Recommendations include reducing travel for fixtures, improving communication and visibility at Union level, investing in facilities and coaching, increasing financial support, enhancing media coverage and promotion, and giving better support to volunteers, referees, and coach development. By addressing these issues and taking targeted steps, we can build a stronger and more sustainable environment for grassroots rugby, encouraging more participation, talent development, and community engagement.



ABOUT W RUGBY

We were born to make grassroots rugby better, on and off the field.

W RUGBY are a premium rugby ball manufacturer - our core mission is to **power grassroots** rugby and elevate its quality through innovation, inclusivity, and inspiring the next generation.

One way we're doing that is through our very own **Project: Won for Won™**, where for every rugby ball we sell, we donate another to grassroots clubs, schools and communities across the globe.

Learn more at w-rugby.com/wonforwon

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