



Research Article

The Development Challenges of English Sevens Rugby in China: A Multidimensional Analysis Based on the Project's Essential Attributes

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Abstract

Since becoming an official Olympic event in 2009, seven-a-side rugby has achieved unprecedented development opportunities worldwide. As a staunch executor of Olympic strategy, China has invested substantial resources in this sport, with the women's team securing a historic sixth-place finish at the Paris Olympics. However, this achievement has not altered the fundamental landscape of seven-a-side rugby being a "niche sport" in China. This paper constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework—"sporting characteristics-system compatibility-cultural soil"—based on the intrinsic attributes of seven-a-side rugby to systematically examine the deep-seated challenges in its development within China. Research reveals a structural mismatch between the sport's high-intensity, fast-paced, and high-contact nature and China's state-led talent cultivation model in competitive sports. Its Western-originated, physically confrontational cultural DNA also creates a cognitive gap with traditional Chinese body concepts and athletic aesthetics. Additionally, its reliance on campus promotion and grassroots club development conflicts with China's institutional inertia of concentrating sports resources in Olympic-dominant events. The convergence of these three tensions forms the structural root cause behind seven-a-side rugby's "over a decade post-Olympic inclusion yet still struggling for widespread adoption" in China. The study proposes that overcoming this predicament requires transcending the "Olympic-driven" singular development logic, returning to the sport's intrinsic attributes, and establishing a tripartite collaborative development path encompassing "campus promotion-social engagement-elite competition."

Keywords

Sevens Rugby, Project Essential Attributes, National System, Cultural Cognition, Development Dilemma

1. Introduction

In October 2009, the 121st IOC Session voted to include rugby sevens as an official event in the 2016 Rio Olympics. This decision was hailed as a landmark moment by the global rugby community—a "niche sport" originating in 19th-century Britain and long centered around Commonwealth nations, which thus gained a pass to the world's largest sporting stage.

For China, the inclusion of rugby sevens in the Olympics signals a clear message: it is a worthwhile Olympic event to invest in [1-3].

Over the past decade, China has made substantial investments in seven-a-side rugby. The China Rugby Association was established in 1996 and joined the International Rugby

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Board in 1997. The women's seven-a-side team has advanced to the Olympics in Tokyo and Paris, achieving its best-ever performance by securing sixth place in Paris. Meanwhile, the men's team ranked fourth at the 2023 Hangzhou Asian Games and won the bronze medal at the 2025 Asian Series in Hangzhou. From a competitive standpoint, China's seven-a-side rugby appears to be steadily progressing [4-7].

However, there is a significant gap between the "breakthrough" in competitive performance and the "development" of the sport as a whole. In April 2026, Jin Hongwen, Secretary-General of the Chinese Rugby Association, admitted in an exclusive interview with Xinhua News Agency: "The current development of this sport is not optimistic [8]. Although seven-a-side rugby became an Olympic event at the 2016 Rio Games, after several Olympic cycles, it still lacks a broad participation base and high popularity in China." He further pointed out: "The biggest challenge we face now is the extreme difficulty in cultivating reserve talent, leading to a severe shortage of skilled players."

This dilemma is thought-provoking. Why has a sport already in the Olympics for over a decade still struggled to shed its "niche" label in China? Why does a discipline that has achieved breakthroughs on the Olympic stage still suffer from a severe shortage of talent pipelines? This article argues that answering this question cannot merely rest on superficial attributions like "insufficient investment" or "lack of awareness." Instead, it requires a return to the fundamental attributes of seven-a-side rugby-the nature of the sport itself, its essential requirements, and the structural relationships between it and China's sports system and cultural context [9-12].

To this end, this paper constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework of "sport characteristics-system adaptation-cultural soil." The inherent attributes of rugby sevens determine its specific requirements for talent cultivation models, resource allocation methods, and socio-cultural environments. When these requirements clash with the characteristics of China's sports system and the socio-cultural realities, developmental challenges become structural-arising not from a single misstep but as a systemic result of multiple overlapping factors. Understanding this structural dilemma is the prerequisite for finding effective solutions [13].

2. The Essential Attributes of Rugby Sevens

2.1. Competitive Characteristics

Sevens rugby is a variant of English rugby that shares basic rules and grounds with traditional pentathlon rugby - the pitch size is 100 meters long and 70 meters wide. However, the number of participants decreased sharply from 15 to 7, resulting in a qualitative change in the competitive characteristics of the competition.

On a field of the same size, 7 players need to cover much

more space than the 15 player system. Due to the fact that only 7 players are playing on an open field, the players move very quickly during the game, and the competition is intense. Only the team with the fastest speed, strongest strength, and best technical and tactical skills can win, and any flaws will be quickly exposed during the game. The game is divided into two halves of 7 minutes each, with a break of no more than 2 minutes. During the 14 minute net playing time, players need to repeatedly perform high-intensity sprints, changes of direction, collisions, and decision-making. This means that seven-a-side rugby places extremely high demands on athletes' physical fitness, technical and tactical abilities, and psychological resilience [14].

From a technical and tactical perspective, seven-a-side rugby emphasizes space utilization, rapid offensive and defensive transitions, and instant decision-making abilities. Each team consists of three forwards and four defenders, and all players must have both offense and defense. Compared to the fifteen player system, the seven player system has a faster pace of competition and higher scoring efficiency. This 'symphony of speed and strength' requires athletes to switch from defensive to offensive roles in a very short amount of time, which places extremely high demands on the players' comprehensiveness.

2.2. Development Law

The competitive characteristics of seven-a-side rugby determine that its talent cultivation and development model follows specific rules.

Firstly, this is a sport that heavily relies on "starting from a child". The spatial perception, quick decision-making, and physical confrontation abilities required for seven-a-side rugby need to be developed through systematic training and competition during adolescence. As Australian Olympic gold medalist Alicia Lucas said, "Technical ability is not formed unconsciously during the growth process like in Australia, New Zealand, and England." This means that the level of seven-a-side rugby in a country fundamentally depends on the popularity of campus rugby and the completeness of its youth training system [15].

Secondly, this is a movement that requires grassroots network support. The talent pyramid of seven-a-side rugby requires a complete supply chain from schools, community clubs to professional teams. Japan has over 3000 rugby clubs, while the total number of rugby players in China is only about 1000. This magnitude difference reflects the fundamental lag in grassroots network construction.

Thirdly, this is a sport that requires long-term accumulation. The technical and tactical system, referee standards, and coach training of seven-a-side rugby require time accumulation. The problems faced by Chinese flag rugby, such as the lack of a standardized system for coaches, referees, competitions, and training, and some key standards still in the blank and development stage, are also applicable to seven-a-side rugby. The

blank of the standard system means that there is a lack of replicable and promotable standardized paths for talent cultivation.

2.3. The Dual Effect of Olympic Project Identity

The entry of seven-a-side rugby into the Olympics has had a dual effect on the development of the sport in China.

On the positive side, Olympic identity gives it legitimacy and resource allocation within the system. The Chinese Football Association was able to receive funding support within the framework of Olympic preparation, allowing the national team to be formed and participate in international competitions. The women's rugby sevens team's sixth place finish at the Paris Olympics was achieved within this framework.

On the negative side, the identity of the "Olympic event" has also incorporated the development of rugby sevens into the resource allocation logic of Chinese competitive sports centered around the Olympics. Under this logic, resources are highly concentrated on a few projects that have the potential to win medals, while seven-a-side rugby - as a project that China does not have traditional advantages and has little hope of winning medals - is on the edge of resource allocation. More importantly, the Olympic driven model naturally tends towards a "short-term sprint" - concentrating resources to ensure the performance of the national team, rather than a "long-term cultivation" - investing in campus popularization and grassroots construction. When the Olympic cycle comes to an end and the transition between old and new approaches, the fragility of this model is exposed.

There is an inherent tension between the essential attributes of seven-a-side rugby - high-intensity competition requires long-term cultivation, widespread popularity requires campus foundation, and sustainable development requires grassroots networks - and the short-term logic of "Olympic driven".

3. Institutional Dilemma

3.1. Gold Medal Oriented Resource Allocation Logic

China's competitive sports have long adhered to the "national system", which is characterized by a centralized resource allocation model centered on the Olympics and aiming for gold medals. This model has achieved great success in table tennis, diving, gymnastics and other traditional advantageous events, but there is a structural mismatch between its internal logic and the project attributes of seven-year rugby.

Wang Yun, Chairman of the Chinese Football Association, pointed out that Chinese rugby is currently in a critical period of development, with both the preparation task of the seven-a-side national rugby team and the new challenge of the flag raising rugby event entering the Los Angeles Olympics. How

to allocate resources under this dual task? From the actual situation, resources mainly flow towards the Olympic preparation at the national team level - forming the national team, hiring foreign teachers, and participating in international events - while the money used for campus popularization, grassroots construction, and youth training system is far from enough.

Jin Hongwen admitted, "Abroad, it is a mature and professional development, and we are still dominated by professional teams from various provinces. The number of matches is not enough, the team base is relatively small, and the high-level competition level is not high, so there is a gap in the overall growth environment." The "provincial professional team dominated" model is a typical manifestation of the national system in non-advantageous projects - relying on a few professional teams to support the selection of national teams, rather than relying on a broad mass base and campus popularity.

3.2. The Disconnect Between the Provincial Team Model and Campus Foundation

The talent cultivation of Chinese seven-a-side rugby heavily relies on the professional team system of each province. The association has launched the "Three Ones" talent layout - about 10 key provinces, about 100 sports schools, and about 1000 traditional and characteristic schools in primary and secondary schools. The goal of this layout is to 'lay out this chain' during the Los Angeles Olympic cycle.

However, this layout itself precisely reveals the crux of the problem: when the association needs to "layout" 1000 primary and secondary school hours from scratch, it shows that the popularization of rugby in primary and secondary schools was almost blank before. Compared to the base of over 3000 clubs in Japan and nearly 100000 rugby players in South Korea, the talent pyramid of Chinese seven-a-side rugby lacks a solid foundation.

More importantly, there is a path dependent conflict between the "provincial team model" and the "campus model". In regions such as Hong Kong and Japan where rugby is well developed, the "campus model" is mainstream - players come from schools, and training and competitions run parallel to their studies. The professional team model in China requires athletes to break away from the conventional education system and enter professional training channels. This model is naturally narrow in terms of material selection - it can only select materials from a small number of teenagers who have entered the professional system, but cannot reach the broader campus population.

3.3. The Institutional Fragility of the Transition from Old to New

Olympic events under the national system generally face cyclical pains of "new old alternation", especially rugby sevens.

After the 2024 Paris Olympics, the Chinese women's rugby sevens team underwent a thorough transition from old to new. At present, there is only one female player in the lineup who has participated in the Paris Olympics, and the proportion of new players is very high. The men's team also underwent significant adjustments after last year's National Games, coinciding with the transition period between old and new players, and absorbed many young athletes into the team. The average age of the whole team is about 22 years old.

The alternation between old and new is a normal phenomenon in competitive sports, but the dilemma of seven-a-side rugby is that due to the lack of a wide reserve of young talents, every alternation between old and new means a cliff like decline in level. Jin Hongwen candidly stated, "After the transition of the women's team from old to new, there will definitely be a gap in the overall level of the team." "From the first three World Series matches this year, it can be seen that the team lacks experience in major competitions and encounters the world's strongest opponents. The gap is immediately apparent.

The institutional root of this cyclical pain lies in the fact that the professional team model under the national system can concentrate resources to cultivate a national team, but cannot continuously supply high-quality reserve talents to the national team. When a group of athletes retire, the quality of the next group of athletes depends on the output of the previous youth training system - and the youth training system is precisely the weakest link in seven-a-side rugby in China.

4. Cultural Dilemma

4.1. The Body Culture Gene of Rugby

Rugby is not just a sport, but also a carrier of physical culture. A study has pointed out that "English rugby is based on intense physical confrontation, gradually forming a culture of hand to hand combat, teamwork, and transcendent physical fitness". The core of this body culture is "confrontation" - players compete for space and possession of the ball through legal physical collisions, and confrontation is not only a means of the game, but also one of the purposes of the game.

This body culture has a profound historical and social foundation. In the birthplace of rugby, England, rugby is closely linked to the tradition of public school education and is seen as an important way to cultivate "masculinity" and "team spirit". In rugby powerhouses such as Australia and New Zealand, rugby is an important part of national culture, and children internalize the physical rules and values of this sport from an early age through exposure and participation.

4.2. Traditional Chinese Body Concept and Cultural Psychology

There is a significant tension between traditional Chinese body concepts and the body culture of rugby.

The body view in traditional Chinese culture emphasizes "self-cultivation" and "internal and external cultivation", and adopts a cautious attitude towards physical confrontation. A study has pointed out that 'caution' and 'bravery' in traditional Chinese culture are mainstream, while the confrontational and even highly aggressive American football culture is itself a different set of systems'. Although the intensity of competition in English rugby is lower than that in American rugby, there is still a significant gap between its core feature of "body collision" and traditional Chinese body concepts.

This cultural difference directly affects the acceptance of rugby in China. The report pointed out that "rugby is still extremely 'niche' in China", and "in addition to the low popularity caused by cultural differences, the requirement for athletes' body shape in rugby has always been considered an important factor that is not suitable for Chinese people". In public perception, rugby is often equated with a sport that is "barbaric," "dangerous," and "not suitable for Chinese people."

4.3. Cognitive Bias and Communication Dilemma

Cultural differences further transform into communication difficulties. Some studies have pointed out that English rugby is not highly valued in China, and there are problems such as low social recognition, incomplete socialization mechanisms, and a need to improve the value evaluation system.

Low social recognition means that parents are unwilling to let their children participate in this "dangerous" sport; The school is unwilling to introduce this 'niche' project; The media is unwilling to invest resources in reporting on this 'incomprehensible' competition. This vicious cycle of cognition makes it difficult for seven-a-side rugby to break through the "circle" - it always spreads within a small range of enthusiasts, professional teams, and specific schools, and cannot enter the discourse system of mainstream sports culture.

The Chinese Rugby Football Association has also recognized this issue and has made "increasing project promotion efforts and promoting the popularization of rugby in schools and among the public" a key task. However, the change in cultural cognition is a long process and cannot be achieved overnight through short-term promotional campaigns. When there is a tension between the cultural genes of a sport and the deep cultural psychology of society, the difficulty of popularization increases exponentially.

5. Path Dilemma

5.1. Narrow Selection Criteria and Shortage of Reserve Talents

The shortage of reserve talents is the core dilemma of seven-a-side rugby in China, and there are multiple reasons for the narrow selection of talents. Firstly, the participating

population base is too small. According to reports, there are only 100 male rugby players and less than 50 female players in China. Compared to over 3000 clubs in Japan and nearly 100000 rugby players in South Korea, the difference is of the order of magnitude. Secondly, the selection channels are single. At present, it mainly relies on the professional teams and sports school systems of various provinces, and this system itself is shrinking. Thirdly, although there have been explorations in cross item selection, a mature mechanism and scale have not yet been formed.

The shortage of reserve talents has directly led to two consequences: the head coach of the men's team is a foreign teacher from New Zealand, and the assistant coach is also newly hired. However, after about three and a half months of training, the team still struggles in tactical coordination and on-site response; the second issue is the discontinuity during the transition between old and new players. When veteran players retire, young players play too little in major competitions and lack sufficient experience in international competitions.

5.2. The Competition System is not Sound

The lack of high-level competitions is another key factor restricting the development of seven-a-side rugby. Chinese seven-a-side rugby faces the challenge of a lack of high-level events, with insufficient number of matches, a small team base, and low levels of high-level competition, resulting in a gap in the overall growth environment. The lack of competition system means that young players lack opportunities to accumulate experience through competitions; The coach lacks a platform to test the effectiveness of training through practical experience; There is a lack of scenes where referees can improve their level through officiating.

Compared with mature rugby countries, China's seven-a-side rugby tournament system has a clear "funnel" structure - with high-level events such as the National Games and Asian Games at the top, but there is a serious shortage of leagues, regional events, and youth events at the middle and grassroots levels. In 2025, the National U-Series Sevens Rugby Points Series will have two sub tournaments and one final, with over 500 young athletes participating. Although this number has increased, there is a significant gap compared to the scale of youth events such as basketball and football.

5.3. Blank Standard System

The lack of a standard system is the underlying institutional reason for the lagging development of seven-a-side rugby in China.

The challenges faced by Chinese flag rugby, such as the lack of a standardized system for coaches, referees, competitions, and training, and some key standards still in the blank and development stage, are also a true reflection of seven-a-side rugby. The blank of the standard system means that there

are no rules to follow in coach training: there is no unified coach training outline and certification system, and the quality of coaches is uneven. There is no unified standard for referee judgment: the referee standards for different competitions are inconsistent, which affects the fairness and viewing of the game. Lack of scientific and standardized training methods: Lack of a systematic training system based on the characteristics of Chinese athletes, resulting in low training efficiency. There is no standardized process for organizing sports events: the standardization and market-oriented operation of sports events lack institutional foundations. The construction of a standard system is a crucial step for projects to move from amateur to professional and from decentralized to standardized. However, the establishment of a standard system requires time, talent, and funding - which are precisely the most scarce resources for seven-a-side rugby in China.

6. Crack Path

6.1. From 'Olympic Drive' to 'Campus Foundation Building'

To solve the development dilemma of seven-a-side rugby in China, the first step is to adjust the development logic - from the short-term sprint driven by the Olympics to the long-term cultivation of campus infrastructure.

The campus is the base of the talent pyramid for seven-a-side rugby. Without widespread campus popularization, there can be no sustainable talent delivery; without sustainable talent supply, the level of the national team will always fluctuate in the cycle of new and old alternation. The layout of the Chinese Football Association: The direction of 10 key provinces, 100 sports schools, and 1000 primary and secondary schools is correct, and the key lies in implementation and time accumulation.

Campus promotion needs to address two core issues: one is "getting in" - how to make schools willing to introduce rugby programs; The second is 'can stay' - how to make rugby take root in school instead of just a gust of wind. The former needs to address practical barriers such as venue, faculty, and safety; the latter requires establishing a competition system, opening up pathways for further education, and creating a cultural atmosphere. Some areas have already started beneficial explorations, such as Yuhang District launching the "Asian Games Project into Campus (English Rugby)" activity, and Xianlin Primary School rugby club team expanding from U8 to U12, with 60 members in the team. These cases demonstrate that when rugby truly enters the campus and continues to operate, it can take root and sprout.

6.2. From the 'Provincial Team Model' to 'Diversified Co Construction'

The diversification of talent cultivation models is the key to

breaking the narrow selection criteria.

The Chinese Rugby Football Association has been promoting diversified team building, jointly establishing the National English Rugby Youth Team with Inner Mongolia, adhering to the principle of combining team delivery with cross disciplinary selection, and synchronously promoting characteristic training and specialized improvement; Collaborate with Chongqing to establish a national rugby youth team, relying on universities. These explorations indicate that the association is attempting to break through the single path of the provincial team model.

The core of diversified co construction is to introduce more entities - universities, social clubs, and enterprises - to participate in talent cultivation. Universities can serve as a platform for combining learning and training, allowing athletes to receive professional training while receiving higher education; Social clubs can serve as carriers for grassroots popularization and interest cultivation; Enterprises can provide financial support through sponsorship and naming. Only when the channels for talent cultivation change from a narrow path to multiple wide paths, can the selection of talents truly broaden.

6.3. From 'Priority of Competition' to 'Cultural Immersion'

The solution to the cultural dilemma requires going beyond the "competition first" mindset and promoting rugby sevens as a "sports culture" rather than just a "competitive event".

This means that the focus of promotion should not only be on "cultivating more athletes" or "striving for better results", but also on allowing more people to understand, appreciate, and participate in this sport. Touch Rugby can serve as an important "entry point" - it retains the running, passing, and tactical coordination of rugby, but eliminates body collisions, making it more suitable for promotion in schools and communities. Only when people experience the fun and charm of touch rugby can they further engage and participate in the competitive seven-a-side rugby.

Cultural infiltration also requires the participation of the media and the creation of competitions. The Hong Kong International Rugby Sevens is renowned worldwide for its carnival like atmosphere and has become a model for the dissemination of rugby culture. China can also explore the creation of a seven player rugby tournament brand with local characteristics, gradually changing the public's stereotypical impression of rugby through cultural packaging and dissemination of the tournament.

7. Conclusion

The development dilemma of rugby sevens in China is not simply a problem of "insufficient investment", but a structural dilemma - the inherent nature of rugby sevens and the multiple tensions between the institutional logic of Chinese competitive sports and the cultural psychology of Chinese society.

At the institutional level, the high-intensity, fast-paced, and highly competitive characteristics of seven-a-side rugby require long-term campus popularization and grassroots construction to support it. However, the "national system" of Chinese competitive sports is guided by Olympic gold medals and tends to concentrate resources to ensure the short-term performance of the national team, rather than investing in long-term grassroots construction. This mismatch has plunged seven-a-side rugby into a rootless predicament - the national team's performance is unsustainable, and the shortage of reserve talent becomes a cyclical pain.

At the cultural level, seven-a-side rugby originated from the Western cultural gene centered on physical confrontation, and there is a cognitive gap between it and traditional Chinese body concepts and sports aesthetics. The low level of social recognition, poor communication channels, and insufficient willingness to participate make it difficult for this sport to break through the niche circle and enter the mainstream sports culture.

At the path level, the narrow selection criteria, incomplete competition system, and blank standard system constitute the triple shackles that constrain the development of seven-a-side rugby. The common root cause of these problems is the long-term reliance on a single path driven by the Olympics for project development, neglecting fundamental work such as campus popularization, grassroots construction, and cultural cultivation.

To solve this dilemma, it is necessary to return to the essential attributes of seven-a-side rugby and construct a development path of "campus popularization - social participation - elite competition". This is not an immediate path, but it is the only sustainable path. Time is the most essential resource for seven-a-side rugby to truly take root in China.

Abbreviations

IOC International Olympic Committee

Author Contributions

Tianle Chen: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Xinze Li: Writing – original draft

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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