

'Future of Rugby' report uncovers rugby's social impact around the world

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Ahead of the first match of the Rugby World Cup 2023 (RWC23) this weekend, a new report released today by Mastercard and the University of Bath reveals how rugby is set for a significant growth in global followers by 2025.

['The Future of Rugby' report](#)—authored by sports scientists from the University's Department for Health—identifies key ways through which [rugby](#) is positively impacting society around the globe, acting as a 'force for good' through inclusivity, health, education, the fan experience and sustainability.

Coinciding with the 200th anniversary of the sport and across these themes, the [report](#) features exclusive interviews conducted by University of Bath researchers with rugby legends and Mastercard ambassadors Dan Carter, Sébastien Chabal, Maggie Alphonsi, Safi N'Diaye, Bryan Habana and Portia Woodman-Wickliffe, plus a host of personal stories of innovators from around the world doing remarkable work to drive the game forward.

Drawing on data from World Rugby and from Nielsen, it forecasts a 10% growth in global followers and fans of rugby by 2025, along with a 17% increase in participation in this World Cup year. For each social impact trend identified, the report suggests a focus for the future, led by the current examples making a difference today.

Highlights:

- **Inclusivity:** By 2027, the report predicts the top ten ranked rugby nations will all hold national festivals or competitions focused on the participation of individuals with disabilities. Female participation levels are also at an all-time high, totaling 2.7 million players globally, a +28% increase in registered female players since 2017 . Elsewhere, growth in participation is also being seen in wheelchair rugby, with the sport now played in around 40 countries across the world since its inception less than 50 years ago.
- **Health:** Player associations and rugby-based charities are leading the charge in destigmatizing mental health through rugby,

particularly among men—using the sport as a vehicle to promote better physical and [mental health](#). Rugby is starting to be viewed as a safer sport than it was in 2021, with a 10% increase in fans in emerging markets believing the sport has been made safer.

- **Education:** Across the world, rugby is being used as a force for good to drive better educational outcomes and empowerment, in particular for [young people](#). The report suggests that even more should be done to champion small-scale projects already making a difference, such as the [UmRio](#) in Brazil, or the [VUSA Rugby Academy](#) in South Africa.
- **Fan Experience:** World Rugby's commitments to growing the game's global influence among fans has led to a 32% increase in interest in emerging rugby nations—two-thirds also see the game as more exciting . The report presents ideas for growing the game's influence among fans, such as through in-stadia live analytics, the roll-out of VR technology and player holograms.
- **Sustainability:** Rugby can play a positive role in responding to [climate change](#), with World Rugby leading by example being one of the first international federations to sign the [UN Sports for Climate Action Framework](#) and launching its own [World Rugby Environmental Sustainability Plan 2030](#). The report predicts that by 2027, 50% of clubs in elite competitions around the world will be signatories to the UN Sports for Climate Action Framework, each pledging ambitious actions.

To bring to life the five key areas identified as driving the growth in the game, Mastercard has assembled a team of remarkable individuals who are shaping the future of the sport: the Future XV. This squad of pioneers, selected with assistance from the University of Bath and international stars of the game, each embody the [positive changes](#) being made for rugby's future growth, championing activity at all levels of the game, from grassroots to professional, in countries from all around the world.

Commenting on the report, lead author and rugby science specialist at the University of Bath Professor Keith Stokes, said, "The report and the Future XV squad uncover extraordinary people and organizations working hard to create positive change at all levels of the game.

"On rugby's 200th anniversary, now is the time to celebrate these innovators as well as all that rugby has achieved, but also to build on that to propel the sport forwards into the decades ahead. That means rugby continuing to innovate to attract more people into the sport, demonstrating its positive influence in society, and taking a lead on key issues."

"Guided by rugby's core principles of solidarity and respect, we hope this report can act as a springboard that helps to drive lasting and impactful change, which in turn will help ensure rugby continues to be a force for good in the years ahead."

For more than a decade, Stokes and his team at the University of Bath have been pioneering [interventions to make the game safer for millions of players](#) who enjoy the sport week in, week out. He was behind interventions such as 'crouch, bind, set' for the scrum and 'Activate, which have subsequently been rolled out globally by World Rugby to reduce injuries in players.

Raja Rajamannar, Chief Marketing and Communications Officer of Mastercard, added, "This year, we celebrate 200 years of rugby. And while it's a chance to look back, it's more importantly an opportunity to look ahead to the next 200 years of the game. As sponsor of the men's and women's Rugby World Cups, and programs like Women in Rugby, we've seen the incredible passion rugby evokes among players and fans alike. Mastercard is proud to be part of the legacy of this great sport—and to invest in rugby's bright future."

Alan Gilpin, World Rugby Chief Executive said, "This year, we are celebrating 200 years of rugby, and it is an important moment to reflect, challenge and harness the pioneering spirit of our beginnings to shape a bright future for our sport. From promoting inclusion and diversity to fostering a sense of community, rugby has the power to bring people together and create positive social change."

"This fascinating Mastercard 'Future of Rugby' report does more than simply bring this to life, but it demonstrates that we have the passion and expertise to continue to move forward to shape a better game and set a positive example."

More information: Report: www.bath.ac.uk/publications/the-future-of-rugby/

Provided by University of Bath

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