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The future of rugby in New Zealand
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My friend the distinguished rugby writer Spiro Zavos has a rather cryptic line whenever he is asked "who's going to win?" He says "that's why we're having the match; to find out". It's a bit like that when it comes to predicting the future of the game of rugby. We're indulging in a rather ambitious experiment with commercialism to find out who will win in the end; the market or the game. At this stage, it's probably fair to say the jury's out.

It is of course entirely possible that both could win. With the right kind of management, some fiscal discipline when it comes to professional salaries, more obvious daylight between the amateur and the professional game, some rather more statesmanlike behaviour on the part of the top tier of administrators, and some careful restructuring internationally, rugby could actually become a harmonious blend of amateurism and professionalism with the top tier providing sustenance to the great unwashed below it, rather than- as exists at the moment – the other way round. I'll come back to that shortly.

In order to predict the future, it is of course rather important to understand the past. Rugby has a very unusual provenance. It began as an elitist, public school and university game in Britain but managed to find its feet as a weapon for egalitarianism in colonies like South Africa and New Zealand. It became, for us, and for others, a means of expressing our national unity and our differentness from a class-ridden Britain. It became a national vocation to beat the British at their own game and we have done it with grim pleasure for a century or more. But at the same time we preserved the more subtle essence of this game, the feature of it that those who do not fully understand it have such trouble acknowledging; its ability to unite people of very different backgrounds.

Players have known instinctively that there is another dimension which sets it apart from most, if not all other sports. It is the precious quality of fellowship. It is hard to pin down and it always sounds a bit trite when somebody talks about it. Call it a code of respect, of honour, a working assumption that when the biff and bash on the field is finished, friendship and conviviality immediately take over. The French call it camaraderie and so, too, have generations of Anglo-Saxons, cheerfully mangling the pronunciation of the word in doing so.

Rugby has always been characterised by its essential simplicity and its abrasive, gladiatorial physicality. P G Wodehouse, something of a spokesman for the original values of the game, summed it all up rather nicely more than half a century ago. He said "the main scheme is to work the ball down the field somehow and deposit it over the line at the other end". Exactly. Even the dimwitted Bertie Wooster would have grasped that much. But P G Wodehouse knew at least a little more about it than that; There was, he said, a certain license extended to players of this game, befitting its status as the world's most patently contact sport. "Each side", said P.G., "is entitled to put in a certain amount of assault and battery and do things to its fellow man which, if done elsewhere, would result in fourteen days without option, with some strong remarks from the bench".

In recent times, the game has become a fascinating point of convergence for Maori, Pakeha and Pacifica; one of the few real bridges between this otherwise tentative set of relationships.

The romance, the legends, the folklore of the great matches and the great players are not a Pakeha monopoly. They belong to all. Happily, that spirit of inclusiveness has survived the onset of professionalism. It is now so embedded that the game has reached a stage where it provides a working example of comfortable multiculturalism. In an intriguing way professionalism in sport removes class or race barriers by superimposing

another culture – that of the team – over every other difference. Professional rugby has inherited that massive asset and, if anything, has actually strengthened the imagery here in NZ of three cultures working in visible harmony. The All Blacks as a multicultural model set an example that has no parallel in this respect.

It might be inclusive in a cultural sense but there are grave doubts as to rugby's ability to preserve that precious spirit of egalitarianism. Rugby has changed immeasurably over the last two decades. Its bigger, brighter, faster and more lucrative – at least for some – but the game is seriously out of kilter with its own ethos of egalitarianism. Professional players, leading ever more pampered lives, are treating themselves to an ever greater slice of the financial pie as clubs and provinces learn to live with less and less. A new elitism has been ushered in, causing sadness and cynicism among those who believed in the lasting integrity of the amateur game. Rugby is being savagely decoupled from its history and those running it know this in their hearts but seem powerless to do anything about it.

There is much enthusiastic talk about the “globalization” of rugby, as if this particular mantra, chanted loudly enough, will deliver untold riches. The IRB, after an unconscionably long gestation, has begun to come to grips with the post-professional challenges and much of what it is trying to achieve is in what the IRB sees as the interests of the game as a whole. But is it? The IRB has become steadily more blinded by the need to raise more and more money in its almost obsessive desire to turn the game into a genuinely global one that can compete with soccer. We are seeing the consequences of this massive grab habit now here in NZ as the IRB wrings every last dollar it can get out of the World Cup, losing sight of, or simply ignoring the desire among most rugby fans to have a more relaxed, informal world cup experience in this country. Its obvious to any rational observer that NZ could never really afford to have a world cup on the ground rules that currently apply and there is growing cynicism as to the net return this country will

receive from the vast expeditionary force of fans who are expected here.

A clear hierarchy has emerged when it comes to paying for match tickets. Only a few can afford the princely sums being demanded for play-off matches in this world cup. The vast majority simply won't be there. The catch-cry that for the World Cup NZ is a stadium of 4 million is a nice slogan but it's a cruel misrepresentation of the reality that for most NZers it is simply beyond their means. As the high-flying corporate visitors flood into the stadium lounges, boxes and best seats another nail is driven into the coffin of rugby's -and this country's - traditional egalitarianism.

The evidence of real disenchantment with the exploitative character of world cup rugby is there for all to see. The Adidas jersey fiasco shows how desperately important a return on investment in the All Blacks has become even if it costs the fans an extra hundred dollars. And as for the Telecom abstinence idea, something which beggars belief, the net result has been to make New Zealanders look like compliantly clueless sheep to a world audience. Peter Fitzsimons capitalised cleverly on this farce in saying that if NZers abstained from sex until they won the world cup there is a risk of losing a whole generation.

Rugby in this country is quite clearly sitting on the horns of a very painful dilemma. This isn't the first time rugby has faced a crisis and it probably won't be the last. A generation ago the rugby establishment worldwide had lapsed into a kind of evolutionary coma; frozen solid while the world washed over it, leaving it behind as a fossilised relic of a gentlemanly age that had gone. Yet, within a relatively short time much of what was wrong with the game was more or less put right. It took a great jump-shift forward. It extricated itself from under the rotting carcass of apartheid in South Africa. A more business-like approach was taken to the game's finances and its often appalling public relations. In New Zealand the administration was radically restructured. The large, unwieldy NZRU Council – an ungovernable parliament of all the country's provincial

unions – gave way to a new executive board as the primary decision-making body. Rugby took its first few steps toward becoming a business but few of us realized just how far that would go, or how quickly and destructively. We do now.

The game is once again at a crossroads. It will either continue relentlessly down the path to total, soulless professionalism with the amateur dimension quietly dying in an impoverished ditch, or it will adapt, reinvent itself as the one great international sport that didn't mindlessly succumb to the black magic of the market. A worrying question persistently nags away at rugby's conscience. Is the very soul of the game itself being leached out in pursuit of profit? How safe are all those precious traditions, myths and legends now that money rather than pleasure or companionship is the driver? How sustainable is a game that is ever more bloated at the professional top and slowly starving to death at the amateur bottom?

We must ask ourselves - Can a game that was a foundation stone of our egalitarianism retain its mythical place if it no longer practices egalitarianism itself? The situation is alive with ironies. While the All Blacks haggled with the union over their salary levels in the later 90s, one of their number appeared in a TV ad urging the public to make donations to keep the clubs afloat. It caused such an uproar that the ad was hastily shelved. A lesson was learned. The rugby public would only tolerate so much crass exploitation.

This tension between the old and the new was illustrated vividly in 2009 when the NZRU warned a number of pubs and restaurants that they couldn't legally use the words "All Blacks" on their advertising boards outside inviting fans in the watch a Bledisloe Cup match on the big screen. "Those words are copyrighted" announced an NZRU brand lawyer sniffily. "Bollocks!" shouted a thousand restaurateurs in unison and tens of thousands of rugby fans echoed this. There erupted a public – and very fractured -debate over who actually "owns" the All Blacks. People began to realize that they might **think** they own their national team but

they sure as hell don't have the law on their side when it comes to using those magic words commercially. People are incensed by this kind of emotional rebuff. If the words "All Blacks" don't belong to them then, presumably, neither does the game. They are of course right to be incensed because, as one pub owner put it, "the NZRU thinks that **it** owns the All Blacks but it doesn't. They belong to all of us". Well, yes and no.

If only somebody from the NZRU had at the time stepped up to admit that ownership of a trade mark doesn't confer exclusive rights to a commodity as emotionally symbolic as rugby. Alas, the moment was missed and yet another gripe was stored away in the collective consciousness. The silver fern is now jealously protected intellectual property. The Rugby Union will sue the pants off anybody who tries to coat-tail on its precious imagery and the reasons for that are not sentimental: they are commercial.

The trade mark issue is illustrative of the way that throughout the rugby world a whole new commercial layer has been superimposed over the existing structure. Two seemingly incompatible cultures are in combat with each other. The culture of the corporate has seized control of the cash flow and little permeates through to the game at the grass roots. Huge sums are siphoned off in player, managerial and support staff salaries and other professional operating costs, while aging grandstands rot in the smaller towns and local clubs resort to bring and buy sales to pay for laundering the players' jerseys. The vast legions of volunteers who once formed the lifeblood of the game around the country are staying home. The only risk to the local turnstiles in the provinces is rust. Rugby is now like the organ grinder's monkey. It dances to the tune of a new owner: the market. And while that has brought glitz and glamour it has turned rugby from a cohesive community into a few haves and a majority of have-nots with their noses pressed resentfully to the window.

Rugby clubs all over the world have been closing down or being forced to amalgamate. Playing numbers are

stagnating except in England and France where heavy television promotion and private sector advertising has been bringing in new audiences from very large, hitherto untapped catchments. But both crowds and television audiences in the southern hemisphere are declining and the baffling complexity of the rules, together with a growing obsession with defence, is stifling imagination and flair. In spite of ever-increasing razzamatazz a sense of impending doom has settled over the game. I am on the trust that runs the Wellington regional stadium (the Cake Tin) and we are constantly trying to think of new ways of attracting patrons whose devotion to instant gratification has become the norm. We have now reconciled ourselves to the reality that rugby will contribute a declining share of the stadium's income in future. It's the same elsewhere in the country. Unless there's more music – and louder music – more provocative dancing girls, more big hits, more instant access to hotdogs and beer, they just won't turn up.

There is a sense of unease among traditional fans that somehow the heritage bit is up for sale. There are nervous rumblings about the compatibility of bright orange boots and the All-Black outfit, the same voices which were raised when the rugby union did a deal with Steinlager to have its logo on the jersey and for the All Blacks to be called the Steinlager All Blacks. Only a public outcry prevented that from happening. Then, of course, along came Adidas.

All of this promotional imagery reinforces rugby's new-found position in show business and there's nothing inherently wrong with players making the most of their new status. Yet, beneath that shallow layer of glitz the bulk of the rugby community is dividing inexorably into the haves and the have-nots. You might say that that is a feature of 21st century society and a price that we all have to pay; but the same unpleasant question is begged; is it sustainable?

With professionalism has come a cloying bureaucracy, a suffocating mass of red tape, the stunting of player lifestyles and a hundred other challenges that threaten to drown rugby in its own politically correct pea soup. Behind

the scenes is an extraordinary array of specialisation. Every professional outfit has a growing cast of characters. There are head coaches, assistant coaches, defence coaches, attack coaches, kicking coaches, scrumming coaches, lineout coaches, conditioning coaches and technical advisers. There are fitness experts, team doctors, dietary specialists, lifestyle advisers, baggage men, physiotherapists, technical analysts, video analysts, communications officers, team managers and operations managers along with the usual cast of lawyers, accountants and voracious agents lurking in the shrubbery. The supporting cast threatens to outnumber the players. Perhaps it already does. Every match now features a posse of waterboys who are on and off the field like whirling dervishes, cluttering up the landscape. A professional franchise is starting to look like a small government. There are now more people employed by the NZRU than by the entire government of Tuvalu. And the bill rises year by year.

I mentioned before P G Wodehouse's rather droll reference to the assault and battery of rugby attracting some strong words from the bench. Rugby's grandiose modern judiciary is a case of a bench running wild. A machete needs to be taken to rugby's judicial system. While we weren't watching, the administrators of the game turned it from a sport with its own forms of justice - in which the referee decided what to do about anyone who transgressed - into the equivalent of a corrections ministry with its own court, battalions of lawyers, citing commissioners and even its own judiciary. This ridiculous legal overlay illustrates all that is worst about the ballooning out of the game's administration; and its overblown sense of proportion and propriety. We've slavishly borrowed from the worst of American sports systems, assuming rugby needed all this.

All over the world the same complaint can be heard. We can't take any more. There's too much. Test matches have ceased to have any enduring meaning. Lesser matches are now ignored unless they feature local, tribal rivalries. But the broadcasting deals impose more, not less. Rugby has

been obliged to stretch its season to the point where summer, the time when the game used to take a welcome breather, has been more or less abolished. Rugby isn't a winter game any more. It's played in spring and autumn and during the last World Cup in France it was played in high summer – not because the players wanted it that way, but because that's the way the broadcasters insisted on having it.

The sponsors want it all faster, fiercer and more full-on. The advertisements feature increasing doses of biff and bash. Watching a Terminator movie promo and an ad for an upcoming rugby test is much the same. Surreal images, forbidding figures, absurd analogies. Overstatement is piled on hyperbole. You want violence, big hits and high drama? Rugby will deliver. The ads will tell you.

In Europe, professional rugby has become a kind of oligarchy, run by private sector interests with precious little sympathy for anything much beyond the success of the club-business, and with a good deal more money than sense. The national rugby unions seem powerless in the face of this challenge and the relations between the private owners and the games authorities is an uneasy one. The movement of personnel from the new world to the old has turned into a Tsunami as young players and old abandon their own game for the riches of Europe, or, if you want a more leisurely twilight to a professional career, Japan.

The IRB had fixed its mind on income generation, creating new tournaments and opening up new frontiers, seemingly unable to resolve the more fundamental problems besetting the game. Ironically, we may see the perverse result of a thriving game in Kenya or Georgia and a slow decline in countries like NZ.

That risk is real not just here but among our traditional rivals – Australia, Wales and South Africa. In South Africa it isn't so much the costs of professionalism that threaten. It's the very game itself at the national level. The tortuous business of getting a rugby team that better reflects the

racial make-up of South Africa is going to take a lot longer than people first imagined. Quotas, whether formalised by law or informally imposed by an increasingly impatient government could quite easily destroy the game.

In spite of everything rugby remains, by and large, the emotional property of the Afrikaners. There may be no more black players in the Springbok team than there were ten years ago but South Africa has otherwise been good at cultural compromise. When they couldn't agree on a new anthem they just cobbled together the old and the new. They have done the same thing with the jersey. Nobody could agree whether it should have a protea or a springbok on it; so they did the obvious. They put both on it.

But what lies ahead? If South Africa can remain relatively stable politically then rugby may just be sustainable. If it can't then the economy will suffer, sponsorship will evaporate, investment in black advancement will falter, The Afrikaner community will be culturally decimated and rugby will be doomed, once again a political football in a game where nobody will be playing fair. If, however, and this is a big if - South Africa can overcome its awful problems of inequality and lack of opportunity then rugby may just prosper. The transformation of the Springboks - from white to brownish, and maybe, eventually, to predominantly black - must be part of that and if it actually works, with genuine harmony, then it's a fair bet that no team on earth will be able to stay with the Springboks. In the meantime it is in the rugby world's interest to concentrate not so much on beating them but helping them find their way home.

Then there's the Pacific Islands. There are two interconnected issues at the centre of the Pacific problem. The first is the unavailability of Pacific islanders to play for their country. This has been driven by professional franchises elsewhere offering the best players deals to which they simply can't say no. When the well-being of a large extended family is on the line nobody can blame those players for going where the wallets are fattest. Pacific players are the remittance men of the 21st century.

The Pacific Island countries need to be bolstered by more genuine international competition and competition that yields genuine cashflow. One thing we do know and that is they can't make ends meet on the basis of gate takings from home internationals in the Islands. In Apia or Nukualofa the grounds are so decrepit that half the crowd simply climb the fence and watch it for free. The Chinese have stepped in, recognising how much kudos there is to be gained by providing rugby stadiums, and are busily granting Samoa and Tonga rather better facilities than they ever had before. This however is only a palliative in terms of the need for real revenue generation. We in New Zealand have been hounding the northern hemisphere unions for years over revenue sharing. Why shouldn't Fiji, Tonga or Samoa be entitled to a similar deal from us on a regular basis? Their case is a rather more compelling one. Our future in rugby is inextricably entwined with theirs but you wouldn't know it when you look at the way they are treated. It has become the norm elsewhere in the rugby world to think in terms of what the islanders can do for you rather than what you can do for the islanders. Having ransacked Fiji, Samoa and Tonga for a decade or more you would have thought that the rest of us owe them a better deal.

Its often been said that if and when rugby takes off in the United States then we're all done for. If rugby can gain a secure foothold in the United States who knows what that would do to the game world-wide? The merciless market forces that dominate big team sports there would gobble up talent from all over the world and the going rate for professionals would be hoisted even higher. And we all know what that would mean for a country like NZ.

The local objective in the U.S. isn't more test matches for the national team, the Eagles, because Americans aren't very interested in watching team sports against other countries. The secret, they say, lies in establishing a domestic competition and selling it to the consumers. The franchise concept was invented in America but, ironically,

that seems to be the biggest stumbling block for American rugby.

Could the Americans conceivably host the World Cup sometime in the future? The pre-conditions may not be in place just yet but if professionalism can be successfully injected domestically, who knows what might happen. And with the great persuader Kevin Roberts in the engine room, anything is possible.

But the geographical expansion of the game is complemented by expansion in other ways. It is now played extensively by women and a women's World Cup is up and running. The IRB announcement that the next but one women's rugby world cup might take place in Kazakhstan must have come as a bit of a shock to many. Apparently Kazakhstan is up against Samoa and New Zealand and fancies its chances. I didn't even know they played the game in Kazakhstan. Maybe its **only** the women who play. Let's hope Borat doesn't get wind of this. Progress has been so spectacular that the Women's Game is on a catch-up curve with that of the men. Played by over 200,000 registered players worldwide across six global regions and 116 Member Unions, women's rugby is growing like a triffid with excessive testosterone.

There is now a Women's Strategic Plan to ensure that their game grows as fast as possible all over the world. It won't be long before the women are refereeing the men's test matches; and why not? Given their proven capacity to keep an eye on several things at once, to multitask, they might turn out to make a better job of it.

There has always been a certain squeamishness among males who see women playing rugby for the first time. To many, it just doesn't seem right. We can't quite put our finger on precisely what isn't right about it but that doesn't diminish the squeamishness. Wasn't this designed to be the ultimate man's game? Wasn't it an accepted wisdom that the kind of nasty collisions that rugby invokes should never be inflicted on women? The spectacle of women

belting each other with crash tackles, smashing their way up the field in rolling mauls and rucking each other on the ground also causes quite a few less bombastic women some pause for thought as to just what the limits to feminine physicality might be. Maybe there aren't any. We don't know yet. Is it just possible to imagine that one day men and women might play in the same teams? Now there's a challenge for Jennifer Curtin.

The future depends crucially on its attraction to television. Rugby is of course now a complete hostage to those who broadcast it. To News Ltd, and all the other commercial broadcasters of sport around the world it isn't actually sport they are purveying, it is "product" and the rugby union's responsibility is to supply that product, on time, and in pristine condition. In 2009, in spite of all the signals from the rugby public that enlargement wasn't wanted, it was decided to expand both the Super 14 and the Tri nations. This begs the obvious question: What are the options next time round? Further enlargement simply won't be realistic. Unless we add another month to the year or abolish summer, or both, there isn't any room left to manoeuvre. More is less but less is commercially unthinkable. The rugby union is in effect a wholesaler dealing with an aggressive, monopolist retailer. Withhold any of your best products and the wholesale price naturally goes down. That is why we have more and not less rugby. News Ltd has no particular taste for refining or down-sizing the Super 15 or the Tri-nations series. Devaluing the asset isn't the broadcaster's problem. News Ltd will simply move on to something new.

And so we come back to the basic principles of marketing. If your product isn't selling, refresh it; repackage it; change the advertising jingle; call it green. Call it anything to get the customers interested again. The decision to allow Argentina into the Sanzar mix was one way of assuaging the broadcaster's relentless drive for more, and fresher "product". So was the idea of having the Super 15 based on the conference system with more local derbies and a bit less travel. Will that do the trick? If not, what then?

Much as the fans in all three SANZAR countries want to see longer tours it seems unlikely that News Ltd will smile upon these as a substitute for the Super 15 or the Tri-nations. These are, in television terms, proven money spinners and it is money spinners that broadcasters favour, not the idle whims of traditionalist fans. There is little interest in all those piddling little midweek games which hardly anybody will watch live on TV, particularly on the other side of the world in the middle of the night. News Ltd will only be persuaded that change is desirable if and when audiences for its established products started falling away. But hasn't that already happened? Have television audiences peaked for rugby? They certainly seem to have in New Zealand and South Africa in spite of the cost of a 42 inch high definition TV having more than halved over the last five years.

So, what does the future actually hold? One thing is certain. There is obviously no going back now that the game's foot is enmeshed in the voracious machinery of the market. It's far too late for that. The trick is to find a way of enabling the professional game to nurture the amateur side rather than simply ransack it. Perhaps galvanised by the current recession the game's masters have realised that adaptation is now unavoidable but they remain frozen in the headlights, unsure which way to jump. But jump they must.

One obviously shining light on the horizon is the game of sevens. There are some killjoys in rugby who maintain that sevens is just an irritating nuisance; a watered down diversion which plucks away at the hem of the real game and which threatens to devalue it as a genuine contact sport. Happily those few who find sevens a nuisance are rapidly disappearing as this truncated form of the game goes steadily more global and leads the charge in terms of entertainment value. Sevens is to rugby what 20:20 is to cricket, the showtime end of the game. Soon it will be in the Olympics with all the attendant hoopla that this provides.

But it's more than just the froth on the top. Sevens is now seriously challenging the traditional game for attention, sponsorship and airtime. It also appears to be leading the charge when it comes to innovation and inclusion. The cleavage between sevens and fifteen-a-side is perhaps sharpest in South Africa. The sevens squad has changed dramatically in the space of three or four years. Now it is demonstrably black whereas the Springboks are still predominantly white. What's going on here? Can it be that sevens has become the leading edge in the emancipation of South African rugby?

Questions are regularly asked as to whether it will eventually siphon off support for fifteen-a-side. The answer to that is hard to predict. On the one hand sevens should enhance the core attractiveness of rugby by its sheer exuberance. It can be relied upon to deliver entertainment. In theory at least sevens should grow the bigger game by getting newer countries on rugby's escalator. On the other hand its very lightness might actually undermine tolerance of the more complex aspects of the traditional game. In other words fifteen-a-side might be upstaged by this new, consumer friendly version and suffer from a shift of attention.

Is it possible that the two games are going their own way and will eventually be so different that players will be forced to opt for one medium or the other. But does it really matter? When you think about it rugby satisfies all the criteria set out in the Olympic Charter for inclusion in the programme of the Olympic Games as well as any sport and rather better than most. Rugby stands for, even if it doesn't always practice, the original ideals of Olympism, thanks to its long-standing ethos of fair play and friendship. Sevens is now an official sport at the Inter-American games. It is being heavily promoted in the West Indies and Africa where teams like Kenya are slowly but surely closing the gap on the established heavyweights. Rugby Sevens will reach out to a new and younger audience. It does not need new purpose built stadiums, and it will extend the number of potential medal-winning nations. Countries like

Fiji or Samoa will have genuine chances of winning gold medals, something they simply can't do otherwise in a world in which medals cost megabucks.

But there are other attractions as well. In many countries, rugby will enjoy increased funding and access to facilities from National Olympic Committees as an Olympic sport and various other state-provided forms of support.

Having trundled along clinging to the coat-tails of the bigger game, sevens may turn out to be the saving grace of rugby. It isn't hard to imagine a future in which sevens steps up alongside fifteen-a-side, with its own international administration and a year-round programme culminating at the Olympics every four years. Who knows, perhaps it could someday even replace fifteen-a-side rugby as the dominant form of the game. If entertainment continues to become the determining factor, that prospect is wholly credible.

How is rugby destined to deal with its unruly sibling, rugby league in future? There has been constant convergence between the two codes in recent years. Will we eventually see a merger? The only certainty is that if, and when the trigger is pulled on integration it won't be pulled by the administrators of either game. It will be pulled by those who really call the shots, the media managers.

But to expand the imagination even further, is it too fanciful to imagine, one day, a unified, hybridized, rebel game emerging to ambush rugby and league the way the initially hated one-day format ambushed cricket, prompted by media interests? Neither code can be complacent about the future. Nothing is sacrosanct when profit is the driver.

In the short run the most important issue is – as it is with all professional sport – curbing the voracious financial appetite of the players. Rugby desperately needs an international accord with globally imposed salary caps. If that can't be achieved then the game as we know it is doomed because player costs will simply eat up an ever

greater proportion of the game's resources and the amateur dimension will just as simply, die. New Zealand is at a huge disadvantage here. We are the raw material producers and the European clubs, a law unto themselves, are the beneficiaries. Those clubs many of which are or soon will be technically insolvent are propped up by that strangest of beasts the billionaire sports wannabe. If the current wage gap continues to widen we face a catastrophe – and so do the Pacific Islands.

Another urgent imperative is to separate the amateur from the professional. To turn the NPC into a purely amateur competition and relieve the provincial unions of the awful burden of player salaries. At the moment provincial rugby, the most precious asset of the game here, subsists in a twilight world of semi-professionalism. It can't survive that.

We also need a bottom-up, all embracing simplification of the rules. If we accept that rugby is now an item on the entertainment menu we can't afford a complex, convoluted law book that is longer than the book of Kells and a good deal less readable.

If these objectives can be achieved, rugby's viability can be protected. Have the game's leaders got the wit or the determination to get to grips with the core issues? What difference will a win in the world cup make? Will it generate a self-satisfied complacency that simply postpones the inevitable? What happens if we lose? Will that provoke an instant call to arms? Will there be revolution in the air?

As Spiro Zavos said, we're having the games to find that out. And in doing so I hope we'll find out if the essential spirit of the game embodied in the clubs, the provinces and the minds and memories of rugby enthusiasts can be preserved and flourish again, alongside the professional dimension. It's a goal well worth fighting for.