

**Jeff Gage**, *Rugby's Blazered Buffoons*. Kairos Press, 1997. pp. 156. £8.95.

The period since the International Board decision, in 1995, to allow 'open' professionalism in Rugby Union, has featured widespread re-organisation and upheaval within the game on a global scale. Central to these changes have been the acceleration of commercial and media priorities which have exerted powerful forces on the game's traditional ethos, loyalties, power structures and practices. The English game in particular has been characterised by tumultuous power struggles in the aftermath of the 'open' vote. Specifically, this era has seen the traditional governing body, the Rugby Football Union (RFU), long viewed as a bastion of the 'establishment', struggling to maintain its hegemony within the game. With the RFU pitted against the elite clubs, pursuing their own commercial self-interests, internecine struggles have characterised English Rugby Union throughout the late 1990s.

In *Rugby's Blazered Buffoons* Jeff Gage offers a fierce and thought provoking critique of the administration and governance of English Rugby Union during the professional era. Information at the outset of the book reveals that Gage has experienced the game, as a player, coach and administrator, in many different locations, giving him an impressive platform from which to view and critique the game. These comparative experiences spawned *Rugby's Blazered Buffoons*. Gage's criticism of "the absurdities and inefficiencies of the English system" (p5) permeate the book, demonstrating the authors unhappiness with the administration of the game in a globalising era.

Divided into two sections, the opening chapters consider 'The Track Record'. Gage opens by railing against the administration of English Rugby Union, arguing it has historically been characterised by a lack of foresight, hypocrisy over amateurism, insularity, ineffective playing structures, political power struggles and regional biases. These themes are developed in subsequent chapters, and related back to Gage's central argument, that an ineffective playing structure serves to retard the development of the English game, reflected in the performances of the national team. The playing structure which has resulted from the RFU's vested interests and elite clubs' commercial priorities, Gage argues is: unhealthy, inefficient, unnecessary, unfair and ineffective (p45). With great detail he documents the deficiencies of the English playing system labelling it "a complete and shambolic mess" (p29). The recurrent theme

Gage uses to judge the English situation are the Southern Hemisphere structures, particularly New Zealand.

Further chapters document the tensions and internal wrangles inherent in attempts to create a domestic representative playing stage (Ch. 2 & 3); the role of elite clubs in scuppering this stage (Ch. 4); and, the inconsistencies surrounding the sacking of the former England captain, Will Carling. At great length Gage documents the litany of excuses made in relation to persistent losses to Southern Hemisphere teams, which he suggests, serve to mask structural deficiencies (Ch. 6). Further critique of the RFU and elite clubs follows, outlining their hypocrisy over, on-field violence (Ch. 7), money (Ch. 8), and the failure to nurture young playing talent (Ch. 9). In each case Gage meticulously documents the evidence to mould a persuasive argument.

The second section, 'The Crystal Ball', considers the future of the English game. Giving further comparative consideration to the playing system of the major Rugby Union nations (Ch. 10), Gage argues that domestic playing structures, have served to underdevelop the English game. Additionally documented are the contradictions which have permeated RFU policy during the professional era, attending to the self-interest of a small clique of powerful clubs to appease threats of an elite breakaway (Ch. 11). Such appeasement receives scathing criticism, as a 'gross dereliction of duty' (p132). Gage concludes that commercial priorities have seen the elite clubs, who have dominated RFU policies, detached from the 'grassroots' of the game. Finally, outlining the options for the progress of the English game, Gage makes his own suggestions for future development, notably a domestic representative stage which he argues is pivotal to national team success.

Gage presents a thought provoking analysis of the structural deficiencies of English Rugby Union, a situation exacerbated by the exigencies of the professional era. The title *Rugby's Blazered Buffoons* leaves the reader in little doubt as to the author's stance regarding the administration of the game. Chapter headings including 'Kingdom of the Farts', 'Groping in the Dark', 'Excuses, Excuses' and 'Filthy Lucre' illustrate Gage's abrasive stance. Despite this, his engaging style affords a compelling critique of the effects of the power struggles which have dominated the English game.

A particular strength of the book is the comparative outlook used to consider the structural impacts of commercialism. Also, of welcome

appearance is the documentation of RFU hypocrisy over amateurism, and the discrimination against Rugby League players, both topics which have been conspicuously lacking from many academic commentaries. Additionally, Gage's commentary does not shirk from highlighting the actions of influential decision makers within the unfolding situation, usefully demonstrating the pivotal role of key individuals.

An evident weakness of Gage's approach is his one-sided representation of the issues, which at times, detracts from the persuasiveness of his argument. Furthermore, the lack of accurate documentation of the sources of the author's examples, symptomatic of the book's journalistic style, will frustrate academics wishing to ascertain the validity of some of his arguments. Finally whilst the comparative elements of the book are a strength, the failure in turn to acknowledge the weaknesses of the Southern Hemisphere structures, which Gage lauds, is noticeable. Readers should thus consider his commentary critically.

*Rugby's Blazered Buffoons* will appeal to those with an interest in the impacts of professionalisation and commercialisation upon Rugby Union. More broadly it illustrates the changing priorities associated with the transition of an ostensibly amateur game to professional status, the acceleration of commercial pressures, and the impacts of media demands. As a populist account *Rugby's Blazered Buffoons* does not attain the depth of analysis which many academics will be seeking. Nevertheless it represents a useful foundation to a fuller critique of the effects of professionalisation and the inherent commercialisation and power struggles currently evident in world Rugby Union.

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