

Saving Cornish Rugby

By John Gay

A pamphlet for discussion on the future of Cornish rugby in the modern era

Foreward

This document has been written in response to the recent debate on the Trelawnys Army Feedback correspondence regarding the pros and cons of the formation of a "Club Cornwall" to take part in the R.F.U. national club leagues. This debate has been stirred by the current R.F.U. indication that the traditional County Championship competition may well be terminated soon. The question inevitably to be posed is how do Cornishmen and women wish to see their own homeland and themselves represented in the rugby they play and watch? The aim of what follows is to make people from all levels of the game in Cornwall really think about what matters to them, and how Cornish rugby might be best served in the future.

The reason why

This is an extremely good question. Why are the R.F.U. going to terminate the County Championship? One does not have to look very far to see why. When Cornwall were last in the C.C. final, against the twenty-odd thousand Cornishmen there were about 300 Gloucestershire supporters. The R.F.U. think (quite rightly probably) that there is no real interest in the competition anymore, and that the cost of putting it on isn't worth it either. I have to say I do not disagree with them. For me the County Championship ceased to become a truly meaningful competition firstly, when it was suggested that international selection was more likely if a player played for one of the "stronger" counties (hence Chris Martin subsequently joining his Bath mates playing for Somerset), and secondly with the creation of the Divisional representative sides. The latter was the nail in the coffin of C.C rugby as international selection was dependent on a player playing for his division (and thus unable to play for his county in the group matches) and more crucially the subsequent prohibiting of a player turning out for both division and county in the same season.

I cannot emphasise enough the effect that this last measure had on Cornish rugby. At a stroke the Cornish team was changed from being a truly fully representative side to being only partly representative. A good example of the same would be if England were told by the I.R.B. that they could not pick certain players to represent their country in a particular season because they had played for the British Lions in the same season. Of course England would never be subject to such a penalty, and yet that is exactly what was imposed on us. The effect of course was to impose on players a choice: play for the division if selected or lose any chance of advancing one's career. For players from other county associations it was less important, but any true Cornishman will tell you what it means to play for Cornwall.

Of course on top of this came the National leagues and the professional game. This has changed two things. Firstly the number of players prohibited from county rugby in the former divisional set-up increased to include all Premiership 1st and 2nd division club players, so we had even fewer top Cornish players to choose from. Secondly to be considered for international selection a player has to play for one of the 1st division clubs to be taken at all seriously. Gone are the days when a player could play for his local club and yet still catch the eye of the selectors through county rugby, and more than this, a Cornish player has to play elsewhere to get noticed. The significance of this will be seen below, but sufficient to say that had he been playing today, "Stack" Stevens would have been unlikely to have become the most capped prop of his generation playing for Penzance! I have nothing against the professional game myself, indeed players deserve a just reward for the amount of work they put into training, but I do object to the way, year on year, the R.F.U. has reduced the number of players available for selection to the point where they feel they can put an end to proper Cornish representative rugby, and if we do not do something to save it, it will become a thing of the past.

So the big question is this: If Cornish representative rugby is to come to an end under the R.F.U. umbrella, with what are we going to replace it?

Let's go clubbing - "Club Cornwall"!

It has been proposed by a number of people on the T.A. website that a "Club Cornwall" should be formed to participate in the R.F.U. national leagues. At first glance it doesn't seem a bad idea, but let's look a bit more closely at it.

The idea of "Club Cornwall" appears to be to gather the best Cornish players together in one team, presumably to create a club strong enough to compete in the Zurich Premiership 1st division, after all there is no point in setting one's sights any lower as Redruth and Penzance are already there. However straight away the principle being discussed is compromised. Unless this team was to start in the 1st division straight away, the best Cornish players would not be playing for it. I cannot see the likes of Phil Vickery, Martin Haag or Andy Reed leaving their present clubs to play for one in a lower division. In addition I cannot see other Cornish clubs giving up their own players to play for this one, particularly if as the R.F.U. have said they have to start in Cornwall 2. The R.F.U. are unlikely to relent on this either as I believe the reformed London Scottish club has had to start at the bottom of their local London league.

Another problem concerning the existing Cornish clubs is whether they themselves would wish their own status undermined. A Cornish town rugby club has tended (reflecting the town) to be a fiercely independent entity with an equally fierce rivalry towards other clubs that I suspect is not seen elsewhere in the R.F.U. Despite this a Redruth supporter for instance will quite happily cheer a Camborne player scoring a try at the Rec. to the rooftops...so long as he has a black and gold jersey on. Our same player, sporting a cherry and white outfit is unlikely to get the same reaction! Why is this? It is because Cornishmen put their rivalries to one side when it comes to the greater good of the representative side called Cornwall. This is not the case elsewhere in the R.F.U. where the clubs have been put first, despite the best efforts of one or two county associations.

So would the leading clubs in Cornwall be willing to sacrifice the future of their club in order to promote a new one that when all is said and done is just another club? I do not think so and I don't think their supporters will either.

Another problem is where will they play? Some people have suggested the building of a new stadium somewhere. I think this is an excellent idea. We here in Cornwall must be about the only well populated area in Britain that doesn't have an even modest-sized modern sports arena. Unfortunately in "Club Cornwall" terms this may present a problem as regards location. It must be remembered that for "Club Cornwall" to challenge the higher echelons of the national leagues they would require a budget equal to the task. If, as I presume they are thinking, they attract supporters from all over Cornwall, where will they build the stadium? No matter where they put it they are asking supporters once a fortnight to travel perhaps quite a few miles to see their team. That is, they are asking for a financial commitment (travel and entry) to see some 13 home league games in a season, when Cornish supporters have already complained about the cost of attending just seven County Championship fixtures (albeit consecutive weeks). This is an important point. Any club that wishes to prosper must have a stable fanbase or it will not be able to achieve its objective. Players will play well when there are a dozen supporters watching them. They will play better if there are 300 or so. Stick even an ordinary player into a Cornish jersey in front of 5000 cheering fans and he will play like he has never played in his life. It has always been so over the years, a mixture of the talented with the ordinary. Could "Club Cornwall" count on such support? Would "Club Cornwall" put fire in the bellies of its players?

"What are the patient's chances, Doctor?"

If the R.F.U. pull the plug on the County Championship and thus deny true representative rugby to Cornwall, there are three options open:

Firstly, we do nothing and allow the clubs to continue playing in the national leagues, with no meaningful representative rugby except the Tamar cup.

Secondly, there is the "Club Cornwall" solution above.

Thirdly, if the R.F.U. no longer wish us to play proper representative rugby even in the watered-down version we have at the moment under their umbrella, then we could pull out of the R.F.U. and go our own way.

You will notice that I have not even mentioned the "franchise" alternative where a club is bought out and then perhaps merges with others etc. (e.g. Bristol and London Scottish). I find this solution so odious not to mention expensive, that it is not worth talking about. In any case one just ends up with a club, not a representative side.

The first solution means the effective death of Cornish representative rugby though the clubs would continue as they are now.

The problems with the second have been outlined above.

But what of the third alternative? At first sight this too looks a ridiculous solution, but I hope to show that an independent Cornwall international XV is not only possible but even

desirable, in international terms, in terms of our Cornish club structure, and the development and training of Cornish players, besides the hunger and enthusiasm of our supporters for truly representative Cornish Rugby.

"What did the Romans (R.F.U.!) ever do for us? !"

The R.F.U. is an organisation made of various county unions and associations which are affiliated to it. The Cornish R.F.U. is one of these. The very fact that it is affiliated means that it is possible to disaffiliate itself if it wishes. It is like any member of a club or organisation, if one doesn't like the other members, if one doesn't like the way it is run, if one feels one is being unfairly treated, one can leave. When all is said and done it is as simple as that.

Unfortunately despite the R.F.U. being organised the way it is, it is also a very dictatorial body. What it says goes and if you don't like it, tough! We have seen how in recent years the R.F.U. have been trying to call the shots with the clubs to keep them in line. They used to do this with the county unions too. Kenneth Pelmeur in his excellent history of Cornish rugby up to 1969 gives a fine example of how the C.R.F.U. were threatened with expulsion from the R.F.U. in the Thirties because they had dared to liven the Cornish game up a bit by creating a previously unheard of "merit table" of Cornish clubs. The fact that in the late Sixties the R.F.U. started exactly such a merit table for the leading clubs seems somewhat ironic! I remember also going to Camborne to watch a match in the early Seventies organised by the C.R.F.U. themselves, against the Comité du Lyonnais. I believe the C.R.F.U. were subsequently admonished by the R.F.U. for daring to arrange a fixture without R.F.U. approval. Perhaps someone can confirm this for me, but I note that no other fixture of this nature took place.

How the R.F.U. ran roughshod over the county game has already been covered above. Of course, the greatest irony ever to befall the R.F.U. was in 1908. The R.F.U. decided that the team to be sent to the 1908 Olympic Games to represent Great Britain would be that year's County Champions, doubtless expecting the very strong County Durham team of the time to be the winners. I presume that neither the Scottish nor Welsh R.F.U.s had any say in this decision! What a turn up then that it was the "other celtic nation" that ended up going to the games and losing in the final to Australia.

Going thy way

The third alternative is a complete withdrawal from the R.F.U.

The C.R.F.U. is its own union and is there to serve the the best interests of the Cornish game. Up to now this has been deemed to be under the auspices of the R.F.U. but what has been written above shows that this is no longer the case.

The C.R.F.U. can withdraw from the R.F.U. and set itself up as an international union in its own right, in the same way as the Scots and Welsh unions are. There is no difference between the three except that historically Cornwall chose to affiliate with the R.F.U. But as the R.F.U. would deny us our representative rugby, we should go our own way.

What's in it for us?

An independent C.R.F.U. would look for membership of the I.R.B. and F.I.R.A. (Fédération Inter-européenne de Rugby Associations). To find out what sort of countries are affiliated to the I.R.B. have a look at www.irb.org (click IRB worldwide). which will give a list of all the unions affiliated to the I.R.B. The European ones, except I believe the Home nations, are affiliated to the FIRA. All these nations are entitled to qualify for I.R.B. and F.I.R.A. tournaments, including the World cup, sevens tournaments etc. If a Cornish team couldn't beat some of these it would be a pretty poor do!

The I.R.B. has declared an intention to develop rugby worldwide and I could see Cornwall doing its part in the European game. I believe that there has been some talk of a "six nations" second division, including teams such as Romania, Spain, Portugal, Russia, Holland etc. Why not Cornwall? Cornwall would be perfectly placed in terms of rugby strength to bridge the gap between the "six nations" teams and those nations trying to catch up below this level. And believe me we could field a much stronger side than we do at present if we were able to field players playing at the top level currently unavailable to us not to mention taking a leaf out of the Scots and Welsh book and picking some Cousin Jacks from down under! The C.R.F.U. would really be able to select a fully representative side for the first time for a number of years. In addition to this there would surely be other interesting matches. What better way for a touring Southern Hemisphere side to warm up with than a game against Cornwall? Perhaps the Barbarians might fancy an annual fixture. This is not fanciful stuff. It can be achieved.

Ringing the changes

Of course pulling out of the R.F.U. would not only mean a change at representative level. Its impact would be felt at every level of the game, and would in fact require a complete revision of the Cornish domestic game. The major changes I foresee, along with some suggestions, are outlined below.

Starting anew

The setting up of a new Cornish domestic game will require a lot of thought and co-operation from the C.R.F.U. and the clubs, at all levels of the game. The aim to be achieved is to provide the best players we can for the Cornish national team. If in so doing we can create a strong domestic season for the clubs that keeps the interest of players and supporters alike then so much the better.

The club scene

The R.F.U. would almost certainly expel our clubs from the national leagues. I do not believe that this need be a bad thing if our domestic game was reorganised on a sensible basis that provided our clubs with a competitive league of our own and with enough "windows" in the calendar to play competitive friendlies as well.

In general terms I believe the domestic organisation should follow the example of the Argentinian R.F.U., which, at the advent of professional rugby decided to keep their domestic game pretty well on an amateur basis. Those players who wished to play professionally could do so, but they had to go abroad to do it. I would suggest that either an amateur or at most semi-professional basis for our clubs would suit our domestic game too. After all our clubs even now will never be likely to match the wages paid by the Zurich Premier clubs, so why bankrupt ourselves trying? Better that our clubs pay a smaller match fee (if any) and, along with the considerable savings on travelling expenses incurred at the moment, spend the money instead on better coaching, facilities etc. Any player with talent will be snapped up by a top club anyway just as at present, so there will be no change there.

I would remind you incidentally that on this basis the Argentinians still made it to the quarter-finals of the 1999 World Cup, so they must be doing something right! Note also the Romanians, in a desperate financial situation with only 54 clubs and about 1,500 adult players to choose from, also qualified for the finals.

In Cornwall, with 29 clubs, I would suggest 3 divisions (10, 10, and 9) to create the strong competition required to make the season an interesting one all through. For promotion and relegation, at least top replacing bottom, and perhaps a 9th versus 2nd play-off to make things really interesting! Other competitions might include a cup competition for each division besides the County Cup competition. Also a space would need to be kept perhaps by our top clubs for the two European competitions (well, why not?)

There are one or two other benefits to an amateur or semi-professional game in Cornwall. Firstly, I would foresee an increase in the number of people actually getting involved in the game. There are usually two incentives to a player to put in the training necessary to attain the top level of rugby. Either the financial rewards or the honour of playing for one's country. I think if the latter means proper international rugby in front of their own supporters, players will try that much harder, and youngsters will want to emulate their "stars", which means more junior talent at training perhaps rather than sitting at home watching T.V. Those unsung heroes who work on committees and behind the scenes at clubs will perhaps find that extra bit of enthusiasm if their club is involved in a competitive match with more local rivals, and if they can see that their players are advancing in the game.

The other thing is that this system will redress the balance of power somewhat in the Cornish club game. For instance what are Falmouth, a once great club with good facilities who have contributed so many great players to Cornish and English rugby over the years, doing floundering around in the depths of Cornwall 1? This club and others like it (St Ives, Penryn, etc) have much to offer but presumably not the finance to compete with their current more wealthy neighbours at Redruth and Penzance. And all this for what? The honour of competing in the R.F.U. National League 3 South!

Driving the bus

For this transition to be a real success, our game has to put an important emphasis on the coaching of players. An excellent example of successful coaching principles is the French soccer game (even if they do play with an odd-shaped ball!).

Their principle is simple. From the bottom level to the very top their coaching is geared to towards teaching good technical skills so that they turn out competent players (and coaches) as they work their way up the ladder to learn new skills as they progress. Because the top French league clubs have only limited finances, they accept that their best players will go abroad to ply their trade. What their system ensures is that each time a new generation of players file up the ranks to replace those who go abroad. These new young players are not only good for the clubs of course, but are future prospects for the French national team! In addition the clubs and supporters accept this principle for the health of the national side. It is this sort of principle we need to establish in the Cornish domestic game, to produce technically good players who go "abroad" if they wish to play professionally while being replaced by others coming through the ranks with a high technical skill level. It is technically skilful players who will ensure that a Cornish XV will always give the opposition a difficult game. Passion will get you only so far, well coached players get you further.

In this regard I would expect the C.R.F.U. to take the lead in appointing one or two full time technical directors to work directly with clubs, schools etc. to establish training courses with existing coaches and prospective coaches to ensure good back-up and that everyone is singing from the same hymn-book. Money spent by either the C.R.F.U. or by a club on coaching is never wasted, and in my opinion better spent on this than trying to keep up with the Jones's in the wages department.

I would also hope that suitable support be given to the training of referees. They are an extremely important part of the game, and I am sure that the possibility of being selected for international duty (even if not six nations duty, someone has to referee Denmark v. Bulgaria) as a Cornishman would be a strong incentive for them to develop their skills to the maximum.

Money makes the world go around

I have touched a little on finance, and others more knowledgeable than me will no doubt tell me why this "vision" cannot be achieved. However here are three things to think on.

1. As a homeland, nation, Duchy, call Cornwall what you will, there is no other sport or activity (except the aroma of a fresh homemade pasty perhaps!) that stirs the Cornish heart like rugby does. If the likes of Romania can find the money to finance an international XV and a club structure, surely we can.
2. No matter whether we leave things as they are (Cornwall XV R.I.P.), form "Club Cornwall" or adopt the ideas above, we need to build a new stadium (capacity 20-25,000) so the financing of that will go ahead anyway. On second thoughts, if we leave things as they are perhaps we don't need one.

3. When it comes to finance, if one really wants to do something one can find the money for it. If we are talking of a Cornish international XV then surely appropriate sponsorship etc. can be found to help offset the costs. The C.R.F.U. and the clubs used to manage before the advent of the professional era, so if our game is not fully professional why can't they do it now? They didn't even have sponsors names written on their shirts in those days!

The end is nigh!

So what conclusions are we to draw from all this? As I said at the beginning, my aim is to make people really think about what they want from their Cornish team. It is too simple to say we should withdraw from the R.F.U. without explaining how the Cornish game would realistically function on its own and I have endeavoured to explain that in this pamphlet. I do not claim to know all the questions, never mind all the answers, but that which has been laid before you above I believe to be a sound basis on which to base OUR modern game in the 21st century.

The end is nigh. If the R.F.U. cease the County Championship and we do nothing, the end of Cornish representative rugby is fairly well assured.

The other two alternatives are up for discussion. Discuss!

John Gay