

A STUDY ON THE INTRODUCTION AND INSTITUCIONALIZATION OF RUGBY IN BRAZIL

UM ESTUDO SOBRE A INTRODUÇÃO E INSTITUCIONALIZAÇÃO DO RUGBY NO BRASIL

Diego Monteiro Gutierrez¹, Victor Sá Ramalho Antonio¹, Thiago Kater² and Marco Antonio Bettine de Almeida¹

¹Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo-SP, Brasil.

²Universidade Federal de Sergipe, Aracaju-SE, Brasil.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo discutir, por meio da pesquisa documental, a introdução e institucionalização do rugby no Brasil englobando especificamente o período de 1891 a 1940. A abordagem histórica envolve a sistematização da pesquisa documental, utilizando como fontes jornais que datam entre as últimas décadas do século XIX até meados do XX e documentos da época. Com o objetivo de construir uma narrativa da modalidade e demonstrar que, apesar da restrita base de participantes e interesse apenas recente da mídia, a modalidade gozava de um grupo engajado, apesar de restrito, de participantes e praticantes no Brasil desde o início do século XX

Palavras-chave: Rugby. História. Sociologia. Rugby Brasileiro.

ABSTRACT

This article aims to discuss, through documentary research, the introduction and institutionalization of rugby in Brazil specifically covering the period from 1891 to 1940. The historical approach involves the systematization of documentary research, using sources such as newspapers dating from the last decades the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth and documents of the time. In order to build a mode narrative and demonstrate that despite the narrow base of participants and only recent media interest, The modality had an interested, although limited, group of participants and practitioners in Brazil since the early twentieth century .

Keywords: Rugby. History. Sociology. Brazilian Rugby.

Introduction

“Rugby, this is going to be big in Brazil”:

“[...] we do not believe that the basketball can keep up with football [...]. However, this is not the case of rugby [...] when the Rugby and Baseball Federation arises in São Paulo with regularly disputed championships, we are prophesying, if not the decline, at least the decrease of part of the football association’s popularity”^{1:1}

The context seems not to have changed. Unknown by the general public in Brazil, rugby has gained more space in the Brazilian media, mainly in the pay television and internet, which have transformed the originally English sport into a spectacle of consumption, while showing, at the same time, a vertiginous growth in the number of active fans. According to the old Brazilian Association of Rugby (ABR, in Portuguese) there were 19 active clubs in 1986, spread in only three states (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Paraná), whereas there are nowadays at least 300 teams, with 11,000 federated athletes and more than 60,000 practitioners, according to the confederation’s data reveals².

The recent expansion of rugby throughout the country, combined with its reintroduction during the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, led to the “discovery” by the mainstream media, which gave the false impression that rugby is a new or exotic practice in Brazil with an obscure past. The idea of a sport without memory is not compatible with the fact that its history has not been properly systematized, which can be corroborated by considering its presence as an old practice with continuous presence in educational institutions, multi-sport clubs in Brazil and even in the media. In this sense, the present article’s main hypothesis is to demonstrate that the practice of rugby and its actions towards the sport’s expansion and development in national territory date further back than the sport’s discovery by the media and the general public.

In order to serve as an introductory study on the first decades of the modality in Brazil, the chosen temporal extent is between 1891 and the advent of the Second World War. This event mobilized great part of the English community in Brazil, the modality’s main organizer, which might have contributed – as perceived based on the sources – to a decrease or even an interruption of the sport practice. However, after the end of the war, the practice of rugby returns once again to the documents, but under different conditions. If it is not possible to say that there was no rugby practice during the Second World War, there is still this “silence” in the analyzed sources, which evidently does not entail that the practices did not take place.

The reduced number of practitioners, as well as the sport’s low expressiveness in the media caused the lack of academic interest in Brazil for the modality. Except for some specific researches, which usually focus upon the recent developments of a specific region or gender-related issues in the sport, no researches on the systematization of the sport’s history could be found. With the exception of brief approaches to the sport, there are no systematic researches on the introduction and diffusion of rugby in Brazil. Most of the papers carried out regional analysis, emphasizing the history of recent teams in Rio Grande do Sul and in the Northeastern region of Brazil, rather than outlining the general development of the sport.

Research method

The basic underlying sources of this paper come from newspapers and magazines from the researched time, which contain citations and articles about rugby, which shall better outline the sport’s spread and its practical nature in the country. The greater volume of documentary sources was gathered in newspapers of the Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira [Brazilian Digital Newspaper Library] of the National Library of Brazil³. This research allowed to verify the practice of rugby in regions where part of the football historiography had been barely analyzed⁴, and also encompass the period between 1891 and 1940. Furthermore, by means of the digital archives⁵ from the newspapers *Jornal do Brasil*, *O Estado de S. Paulo* and *Folha de S. Paulo*, there are twenty-two titles, in which references to rugby were written between 1890 and 1930.

The newspapers provided important facts, once they pointed out, although not very precisely, such as the locations where the sport was practiced, and the frequency in which the events took place. The absences and empty spaces in the promotion are undoubtedly relevant, due to the fact that they suggest either the practice’s inexistence or, at least, the lack of media exposure. Besides the documentation, the line-ups are frequently mentioned, revealing the nationality (or ascendancy) of the practitioners. This fact may contribute as a first step to identify the practitioner’s social origins.

In the academic area, mainly in historical researches on sports, the media plays a significant role. Given the fact that the sport and the analysis of modalities occupied a

secondary position in the Brazilian academic studies, the use of media is thus fundamental for the reconstruction of everyday aspects of these modalities without memory, such as rugby.

“the condition of legitimate receptacle of fragmented information in the urban everyday life made the newspaper a priceless support for a thorough reconstitution of big social events, among which are those regarding the sport itself”^{6,15}

However, as Maria Lígio Prado and Maria Helena Capelato highlight the documentary condition of the press: “that perspective that considers [press] as a mere ‘vehicle of information’, impartial and neutral transmitter of events, a level isolated from the political-social reality in which it is found, is refuted”⁷. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that the events discussed in this paper, based on journalistic sources, ought to be observed from these sources’ nature, whose veracity can be consequently discussed, as well as the interpretations of the events.

In this perspective, by attributing centrality to the journalistic sources, the starting point for the central condition of the document lies on the fact that “the content itself must not be decoupled from the place occupied by the publication in the media history, primary task and essential step of the researchs with periodic sources”, as Tânia Regina Luca⁸ points out.

This article intends to compose a first enchainment of historical facts of rugby in Brazil by outlining the history of events. However, this shall be done without falling back on methodical analyses of the objects and without neglecting the social dimensions of the studied period. It is not our goal to carry out an analysis of the period or reify the facts, but to promote an initial discussion on the modality in the period by means of the practice places, the main subjects and conflicts.

Data assessment

The establishment of rugby in Brazil: 1891-1924

The phenomenon of the modern sport is linked to the transformations of the English society during the 17th and 18th centuries due to the sportivization of popular games since the Middle Ages⁹. In this sense, the sports practice becomes a relevant element of the emerging bourgeois identity in England⁹. Given its role as colonial power, the British Empire disseminated these new ideals throughout the world, wielding deep influence over the local elites in different places. Such influence led to the adoption of new customs and behaviors, which were regarded as more modern and civilized. An example of this influence lies in the sports practice¹⁰.

The dissemination of the rugby practice throughout the world happens in this context and was present in all continents prior to the end of the 19th century¹¹. However, differently from football, which achieved global popularity, rugby was still restricted to the British islands and colonies as modality of the masses and does not receive proper attention outside these areas. However, there are three important exceptions where the modality became one of the main sport practices: Argentina, due to England’s cultural and economical influence in the end of the 19th century, making the South American country an informal colony¹²; in the south of France, where the sport finds acceptance in the farming communities; and in Japan, where the modality was promoted by Prince Chichibu, the second son of Emperor Taishō. The prince had the first contact with the sport in England, which was a key element for its popularization in the country¹¹. As previously mentioned, the expansion of rugby faces strong difficulty outside these regions and ends up concentrated on British expatriate communities.

It is worth mentioning that despite few bibliographical references in Portuguese due to lack of popularity, there is a relevant academic production on rugby in international contexts.

Most studies approach the modality's history and its social and political implications, specially in countries where the sport played a significative role in the society's sportivization, such as in England¹³, France¹⁴, New Zealand¹⁵, South Africa¹⁶, Australia¹⁷, among others.

In Brazil, the practice of rugby emerged at the same time as the football's. Reports on the modality's practice sprang up in a similar manner during the 19th century. An example is Paulo Várzea's comment on the foundation of the Clube Brasileiro de Futebol Rugby (Brazilian Football Rugby Club) in Rio de Janeiro in 1901. This was basically the first formalization of the modality, i.e. even prior to the establishment of the football team São Paulo Athletic Club by Charles Miller, in 1894. According to Toás Mazzoni,

The second club that arose in Rio de Janeiro was the Brazilian Football Rugby Club, the first one to cultivate this sport in Brazil. Founded on September 12th 1891 by the gentlemen Alfredo Amaral Fontoura, Virgílio Leite, Oscar Vieira de Castro, Edwin Ral, Sidney Cox, Augusto Amaral and Luiz Leonel Moura, this young Brazilian man who recently came from England, where he received his education in the 'Elizabeth College' of the Guernsey Island. There, he came to know 'rugby' and the 'soccer' football. It was his initiative to introduce the 'rugby' in Rio, which soon gained fans, whereas the 'association' football, which was attempted by the gentlemen from the Brazilian Cricket Club and reedited by Moura between 92 and 93, sank into oblivion^{18:19}.

Regarding Miller, the most reliable reference on the practice of rugby in São Paulo Athletic Club (SPAC), which was organized by Miller, can be found in two distinct sources. The first one is in *The Rio News*, a newspaper edited by and for the English community, more specifically, the one that lived in Rio de Janeiro. In this newspaper, the first documented rugby match in Brazilian soil was announced. The match was disputed between SPAC and São Paulo Railway, including Charles Miller's presence: "Rugby Football. S. Paulo Athletic Club v. S. Paulo Railway. These clubs met or a friendly game played at Chácara Dulley on July 24th"¹⁹

The second reference is a letter from Hans Nobling, founder of Sport Club Germânia, in which he announces the holding of an annual rugby match between the English clubs:

As far as I could verify, only two football matches were held annually in the English community in São Paulo, between the teams São Paulo [Athletic] Club and, if I am not mistaken, São Paulo Railway Cricket Club, being one association football match and one rugby football match. I remember that I attended, together with some members from the English community, one of these matches, the rugby one, which took place, if I am not mistaken, in September 1897, on a field in Bom Retiro that probably belonged to SPRCC^{20:38}.

In the same year, a match is held between Rio Cricket Club and an American team. New announcements are brought to the public, describing matches between Brazilian teams, which were, in fact, basically constituted by English expatriates and descendants, between teams from berthed ships and an interstate match between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in 1911, documented by *Jornal do Brasil*²¹.

Goal of this research is to expand the investigated geographical area in order to avoid generalizations based on nationalities. Due to the central presence of the axis Rio-São Paulo, local phenomena can be taken into account by means of the historiography as representative for all Brazilians. Once again, because we are aware that the research is limited to information found in newspapers from the time, it is still necessary that it subsequently unfolds a critical analysis of the sources.

At least in Porto Alegre, Recife, Belém and in the country side of São Paulo (besides São Paulo and Rio, previously mentioned), the practice of rugby had already been evinced. Despite each region's specific context, all of them underwent urbanization, industrialization and modernization processes in the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, which reached the Brazilian cities in different ways²². It is worth mentioning that, in these cities, the modality was practiced in an isolated manner, without any indication that it had been institutionalized or continued. In the consulted newspapers, the practice was only occasionally reported.

Such as the case in Belém,

The rugby football has been solemnly introduced in the Amazon. This alarming news will upset the enemies of football: the supposed mercilessness of our climate, to which they clung to condemn the 'association's' game, was overcome in this sport, which is why it has been gaining much more enthusiasm and being now called "rugby" football, also fearfully known as "killing football". In the last fortnight, in the neighbor capital, and therefore inside the Amazon region, a formidable encounter of "rugby", the most violent of the known sports, was successfully held. The newspapers from Pará say that this match was a vociferous event. Do not judge, however, that it is about a hoard of imbeciles against a mob of brainless people, no! This memorial match, which introduced the rugby, had the honour to be played by the "elite" of sportsmen from Pará, many of which had even been distant from the sport, graduates, doctors, engineers, high members from the commerce etc., among which the following gentlemen [...] However, it is not reported if there might have been a distribution of ice-cream and refreshments after the matches^{23:3}.

And Recife, where two other references were found:

On the 23rd of the current month, at 4:30pm, in Derby, the first football rugby match will take place between XV of Sport Clube Recife and the English team organized by Mr. N. Oliver. Great enthusiasm is expected for this match, which promises to be a great dispute [...]. Sport Clube's board of directors, who has not spared efforts for the success of this match, asks us to report that there will be reserved seats for the families^{24:9}.

The first rugby match between Sport Club and Mr. Oliver's team took place yestery in Derby. Although the weather was not good, there was a numerous attendance of distinguished ladies and gentlemen from our best society. At 4:30pm, the match started on the side of Sport [Club] and remained there until the end, given the inferiority and, mainly, the player's lack of exercise. While the English team made splendid passes and combinations with their good forwards and excellent $\frac{3}{4}$, the Sport was limited to defend their goal, which was still impotent before the rush of forwards and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Brits, who, in the end of the match, scored 13 points against 6. Oliver, Paterson and Pickwood are three players who know perfectly the secrets of rugby and were always successfully helped by their forwards, conducted by Newton. On the side of Sport Club, R.H. Bradford, Callande and Hughman played distinctly, but they could not do anything due to lack of assistance. The choice of referee did not seem to us the most adequate, because he, right on the first try, confirmed it although having whistled an off-side against the Englishmen. Sport's defeat because of lack of players is remediable and for that they only need more practice. We know that another match was arranged and it shall take place as soon as the Sport's team has more exercise^{25:2}.

The modernization of the Brazilian cities in the end of the 19th century and the adoption of new bourgeoisie ideals by the urban elites, in opposition to the practices tied to the old rural elites¹⁰, contributed for the diffusion of the most diverse sport practices. However, rugby could not find conditions to establish itself, being practiced only sporadically and with a festive character, according to the found reports.

Only in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro was the modality able to gain a foothold, mainly due to the biggest English community, which was present in these two places, considered the biggest and the most internationalized cities in Brazil.

The first attempts of institutionalization: 1924-1940

Until the 1920s, Rugby was only practiced sporadically, without any organization or the objective of consolidating the practice. From this moment on the modality started to definitively strike roots through the foundation of the first rugby associations. In Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, this represents a watershed, because the clubs make the modality stronger and eventually expand them beyond the British community, being accepted by segments of the Brazilian elite and, consequently, allowing a subsequent consolidation of the modality on a national level.

According to the version of official sources, such as the old newspaper of the Associação Brasileira de Rugby²⁶ (Brazilian Rugby Association), the milestone for the organization of rugby in Brazil is the arrival of the Scotsman Jimmy McIntyre in 1924, who organizes in the following year the first rugby team in São Paulo, together with the English-born Brazilian pilot Gordon Fox Rule, who is in turn regarded by the newspaper as the sport's pioneer.

In this way, São Paulo RFC came to existence as a constitution of Englishmen, particularly. In McIntyre's own words, however, "we can not forget the contribution given by some Syrians, Germans and Frenchmen, who were also part of the team". The club did not have any connections with Miller's SPAC and started their activities in a rented field behind the Ipiranga Monument. The subsequent emergence of Britannia FC, also founded by McIntyre and Rule, led to the local opposition to São Paulo RFC, and their matches were held in Parque Antártica (Palestra Itália Stadium) and in São Paulo Railway's field, in Pirituba.

In Rio de Janeiro, the reorganization of rugby also took place in the 1920s with the foundation of The Club in 1925, which was incorporated to Rio Cricket and Athletic Association, in Niterói. There, the sport was practiced continuously until 1975 (except during the period between 1940-1945 due to the Second World War), as well as in Santos in Santos Athletic Club, where the practice quickly came to a halt, not being reported in the analyzed sources after 1927.

The admission of rugby in a club of the English community in Rio de Janeiro took place at the same time as in a club of São Paulo's elite, the Associação Atlética das Palmeiras²⁷, whose field was located in Chácara da Floresta (in Ponte Grande, where was later occupied by the Clube de Regatas Tietê, whose attendance was mostly of Englishmen), incorporating the SPRFC right in the beginning of its activities.

The first official match recognized by the ABR took place in 1926, thus resuming the activities in São Paulo after a supposed hiatus. On May 16th²⁸, a match was held between the teams from São Paulo and Santos, followed by another on May 23rd²⁹ between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. From 1927 on, these matches inaugurated a series of annual confrontations between the two states in order to obtain the Sir Beilby Alston Cup³⁰, which was donated by the British ambassador and therefore named after him. After 1926, the practice of rugby was

constantly documented, except during the Second World War, when no rugby matches were reported.

In 1927, the presence of rugby in Club Athletico Paulistano was announced³¹ due to their match against AA das Palmeiras for the Wilson Cup of the following year³². However, AA das Palmeiras' relation with the sport did not last long, being dissolved due to the club's own decomposition during the football's professionalization in the 1930s. This led the team to adopt its old name: São Paulo RFC. On the other side, S. C. Germânia opened new a new section of the sport in 1934³³. In 1933, the statute of the Federação Brasileira de Futebol (FBF, Brazilian Football Federation, which existed between 1915 and was subsequently incorporated by the CBD, Confederação Brasileira de Desportos, Brazilian Sports Confederation) considered rugby as part of its scope: "Article 1 – The Brazilian Football Federation [...] is the supreme manager of amateur and professional football, and is constituted by all the Leagues or Associations in Brazilian territory that control de facto and efficiently the association football or rugby".

The direct and effective operation of FBF over rugby, however, was not verified in any consulted documentation. What seems to be part of its influence, is the São Paulo Football Amateur League, which points out one of their deliberations in an official release of the board of directors in the newspaper *Correio Paulistano*:

A sports event shall be held [...] as a tribute to the veteran champion Juvenal Campos. It is a rugby match between C. A. Paulistano and A. A. das Palmeiras, and a main match between a team made up from a selection of players from the capital and another from players from Santos, Campinas and Jundiahy^{34:13}.

It is not clear how strong the Football Amateur League's influence over decision-making and the organization of rugby matches. We are led to believe that their action was limited, such as FBF's, being the practice of rugby organized by the own practicing community.

Other teams also deserve attention. One of them is the team of Faculdade de Direito, which played once against C. A. Paulistano³⁵. "In the next year, it is possible to introduce a rugby championship in São Paulo. There will be the presence of C.A. Paulistano, Faculdade de Direito, A. A. das Palmeiras and, probably, E.C. Germânia and Guarda Civil de S. Paulo. This sport, as you can see, promises to be well-developed among us."³⁶

The other mentioned team is Sport Club Corinthians Paulista, which tried, in 1929, to organize a league: "rugby director asks through us [...] the presence of all athletes [...] in the sports square Parque São Jorge for a practice of the aforementioned sport [rugby]. The presence of interested partners is also requested"³⁷.

In the 1930s, besides the confrontations between local leagues, there was an intense amount of matches against visiting foreign leagues, including the second best South African team, the Junior Springboks (or Gazelles), in 1932, in Rio de Janeiro, which won 73 x 0, and a British team, the Lions, in Niterói, in 1936, with a score of 82 x 0. In the period, however, the adherence of Brazilians without British ascendancy to rugby was still low, which was suggested in the match's program (1936):

Unfortunately as yet, Rugger is not not generally popular amongst our Brazillian friends. Some of the Soccer Clubs have shown interest in the game, and on several occasions exhibition matches between local English Fifteens have been played on Brazillian Football grounds preceding important Soccer games, but the Rugby game has not greatly appealed. [...] One or two of our four Brazillian friends are playing Rugger already, and with fewer young Englishmen coming out from home these

days, we hope more Brazillians will turn out and soon become as profient as they are with the round ball.

The same author, who was not identified, still points out that: “From time to time, matches have been played against French and Japanese colonies, but unfortunately no regular league has been kept”.

It is worth highlighting that during this period, the official matches and the matches between leagues occupied only a small share of the practitioner’s activities. There are several registers of friendly matches and matches between non-official teams, which corroborates the logic of a non-centralized modality, mainly managed by its practitioners. In this sense, a series of friendly matches can be constantly underlined, such as “Brazilian vs. The rest”³⁸ and “Paulista vs. English”³⁹, among others.

The centrality, present in these friendly matches and non-official matches, can be understood based on the modality’s own characteristics. While football quickly puts aside the amateur ideals by means of the professionalization after the end of the 19th century, rugby abides by these values and keeps them until 1994⁴¹, when the modality officially puts aside its amateur status. In this sense, the institutionalization is regarded as a means to make the practice easier and to improve the players’ experience, which justifies the low creation of official championships.

With the advent of the Second World War, either a big part of the English community was drawn back to Europe, or those who were not directly involved in the conflict still dedicated a great share of their time and efforts to the war, providing help to the allied troops⁴⁰. Apparently, although conquering a shy popularity among the sectors of the Brazilian elite, the modality could not gain traction without the support of the British community.

Conclusions

The present article started with the sentence “Rugby, this is going to be big in Brazil”, an allusion to the sports supplement of the newspaper A Gazeta, in 1929, which contradicts the current idea that the introduction of rugby in Brazil is recent, a passing trend, result from the new means of communication and an efficient marketing strategy.

The goal of this paper was to demonstrate that, despite the lack of knowledge about the modality and the disseminated notion that this practice is recent, this practice has existed in Brazil since the 19th century, specially in urban areas of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, where rugby has been nearly uninterruptedly practiced since the 1920s.

The growth of the number of players and the most diverse adopted measures to bring the knowledge about the practice to the society have been generally perceived as unprecedented by the media and the practitioners. In this article was suggested that, despite this widely spread notion, rugby has been practiced in the country since the 19th century. Furthermore, the modality counts on some dedicated practitioners, who have aimed – with more or less success - to the sport’s diffusion and growth in national territory.

In this regard, this article is an attempt to construct a narrative of the first steps towards a systematization of the rugby in Brazil. It addressed, in this first moment, only events that took place in the country between the 19th century and the beginning of the Second World War. This shows that despite the lack of knowledge of the general population and the reduced number of practitioners, there has been a solid and engaged basis of competitors since the beginning of the century. Thus, knowing the modality’s history plays a major role in its growth and understanding.

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Author address: Diego Monteiro Gutierrez. Al Alemanha 170, Granja Vianna, SP, CEP 06355465. E-mail: diegomonteirogutierrez@gmail.com