

In safe hands

With the Rugby World Cup approaching, the RFU is kicking on to ensure the sport's continued success

Making the most of a good opportunity in rugby can change a game. With the Rugby World Cup 2015 on the horizon, this is just as true off the pitch as on.

The Rugby Football Union (RFU), the governing body responsible for growing the sport at all levels, recognises that the next few years offer a unique opportunity to take the sport to a bigger audience, both at home and abroad. Crucial to this is planning.

"We see an opportunity to make a real change in the next couple of years," says the organisation's chief commercial officer, Sophie Goldschmidt. "For us, 2015 is a five-year plan – it's not just about the seven weeks of the tournament. It's a competitive landscape out there, so we need to make ourselves as attractive as possible so people choose to play rugby."

In practice, this means promoting new forms of the game, an increased focus on new communication channels, such as digital and social platforms, and producing innovative content, as well as continuing with tried-and-tested development programmes. RBS RugbyForce, which is delivered under the banner of NatWest RugbyForce in England, has been a great success. The programme provides grassroots clubs access to funding and support, and encourages clubs to improve their facilities to become stronger businesses.

Looking overseas, the organisation plans to help up to 15 countries in Europe gain interest and resources around rugby in the run-up to 2015. This includes increasing the provision of services, such

as clinics and coaching, and finding new ways to share knowledge.

However, growth and innovation is not without risk, and an area of importance for the RFU is its brand. "We're going to be refreshing the brand and what it stands for before the start of next season," says Goldschmidt. "You will have ups and downs on the pitch and there are some things that are out of our control, but brand, reputation, and what people think of rugby are within our control. The organisation has also had a very integrated approach recently, meaning that the message is consistent.

"From a financial perspective, our sustainable business model and significant asset base mean that we can plan for and cover the loss which occurs in every four-year cycle during the World Cup year when Twickenham Stadium doesn't host the Autumn Internationals. Overall the RFU is in a very strong financial position which allows us to invest back in the game."

Meanwhile, the RFU has made RBS its first ever official banking partner – with a commitment across sponsorship and community aspects of the game, and provider of corporate banking services. "It's a unique and groundbreaking relationship for us," explains Goldschmidt. "We want our partners to have a much more integrated relationship with the union, and RBS embodies that.

"We're in the process of investing around £75 million in Twickenham Stadium in the lead up to 2015, so RBS will be helping to provide the best solution for that."

Winning the bid to host the Rugby World Cup in England has given the RFU a "once in a generation opportunity", says Goldschmidt. The challenge now is making sure the organisation remains focused on things that will make a real difference. "It's a constant juggling act, but that's not specific to sport – it's any industry. It's very competitive out there, so you need to keep moving. You can't afford to be complacent." ■

Words/Ruth Stokes Picture/Dean Belcher

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Clear view: The 2015 Rugby World Cup is a "once in a generation opportunity" for the RFU, says Sophie Goldschmidt



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DETAILS

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Sophie Goldschmidt
AGE
38
COMPANY
Rugby Football Union
LOCATION
Twickenham, London
WEB
rfu.com
POSITION
Chief commercial officer
TYPICAL DAY
Sometimes heads to gym before arriving at the office at 8.30am. Spends two thirds of the day in the office and the rest meeting partners or prospect stakeholders
PERSONAL LIFE
A keen tennis player and loves to travel
RFU BANKS WITH
Philip Brown, RBS Corporate & Institutional Banking, philip.brown1@rbs.co.uk



INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

As part of its sustainable business model, the RFU has a number of subsidiary ventures, including corporate hospitality and events business Twickenham Experience Limited, a joint venture with Compass Group. "All the money we make, all the profit, goes back into the game – investing in the grassroots and development side of the sport"