Sports fan data and insight accrued from nearly 20 years of industry experience
Set to satiate sports fans’ major event appetite, Rugby League World Cup 2021 (RLWC2021) will showcase Rugby League talent from across the globe, starting on October 23rd 2021. A tournament of firsts, RWLC2021 will deliver three concurrent tournaments - men’s, women’s and wheelchair - employing groundbreaking strategy to drive excitement and engagement for the tournament, with the ultimate aim of bringing people together for an incredible display of sport.

As Official CRM and Data Suppliers for the tournament, we were lucky enough to discuss data and insight, as well as new audiences, messaging, social impact and more, with RLWC2021 CEO Jon Dutton.

Q&A WITH JON DUTTON
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Rugby League World Cup 2021 (RLWC2021) is on track to be one of the first major sporting events to take place in the UK in 2021. What has been in the playbook to help the tournament remain steadfast while other events have been cancelled or postponed? How important has an insight-led approach been?

I started the project way back in 2015 where we began with a clear vision – staging three tournaments together for the first time ever. We are a tournament with a purpose and no-one could have predicted that five years into our journey that we would have to contend with the pandemic.

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Making decisions based on survey research insights - what people are saying – has helped put us in a great position, despite the pandemic and the challenges that we continue to face.

RLWC2021 have surpassed nearly every ticketing target that has been set so far, most recently targets set for the Priority Access Sale. Is this a standout achievement, and what other successes make you particularly proud?

We still have some way to go. We are currently on general sale and are 6 or 7 months away from the tournament. The standout achievement for me so far has been the ballot. It is the first time ever that the sport of Rugby League has done a ballot, so there was a little bit of nervousness and trepidation but one of our values is to be bold and brave – and we have been that the whole way through.

The most pleasing aspect about the ballots was that 70% of those who have purchased were not classed as Rugby League fans, so that shows through research and insight, and marketing, we have reached a new audience, which was always critically important.

Since the start of the journey we have always said that we need to service and support the loyal core rugby fanbase, but we also need to reach what we call the non-core audience - the event goers. Certainly through the ballots we did that, which is a great achievement.

RLWC2021 have employed a combination of fan data analytics and an integrated fan research program with Goodform. How has this approach helped drive ticketing and played a part in broader strategy?

What messaging have you used to assure fans during a period of uncertainty and to generate excitement for the tournament?

Dealing with the uncertainty through a 100% refund guarantee for ticket purchasers should the event not go ahead, or be postponed, has been important in assuring people. Payment by installments has also given people the chance to spread expenditure out, which is key given the financial hardships caused by the pandemic particularly in the early pre-sale.

And then more broadly, we have delivered bold and brave messages around being a Tournament of firsts, being trailblazers, showing a strong commitment to community, and our social impact program. As well as, hopefully, we have delivered everything that we stand for and sparked excitement.

This is about watching the world’s very best athletes, men and women and wheelchair on the same platform. I think the Power Of Together and our rebrand that we did last summer was a moment in time where of course people couldn’t, and still can’t attend events in person, so rebuilding to bring people together, through the power of together, was really important.
With RLWC2021 being a tournament of firsts, have there been any key data insights or general learnings that have pivoted the tournament strategy in new and exciting directions?

Reflecting on the ballots again, we over-indexed in London. Given that 85% of the tournament is based in the North of England, this was a pleasant surprise. What data analysis allowed us to do in the early days is see the trend of ticket purchasers in London and put more marketing spend behind it, with London coming out as a top buying postcode for the entire ballot. This is fantastic as we have a key semifinal at the Emirates Stadium and wheelchair games at the Copper Box Arena. With a lot of the tournament in the North, this was hugely positive, and as I say, we were able to measure it, do something about it and continue to see that upward trend.

Has focus predominantly been on selling tickets to the core Rugby League audience, or are there wider audience groups and if so, how do you plan to resonate with them?

Looking back at the last time the tournament was staged in the UK in 2013, we know the audience was predominantly the Rugby League community. They came out in great numbers, and we achieved great success on a fairly modest budget. However, the aspiration for 2021 has always been greater: to get to the event goers, to serve a great experience for the customers and hopefully establish a long-lasting legacy for the sport where people who have seen the RLWC2021 will come back to Rugby League.

There is nothing like international sport – nation going against nation. With the visibility that we have on BBC, with all the 61 games broadcast live, the fantastic venues that we have and aspirations to reach the new audience – we hopefully have a powerful combination. What’s more, there are such exciting nations competing. Whether you like or know about Rugby League, we think that we can excite people beyond the sport itself.

Have you had any difficulty with the venues, as they face the same challenges due to the pandemic? As partners to you, how have they responded?

They’ve been incredibly understanding and supportive, acknowledging that at the moment no-one can go into stadia. We've had to take an agile approach in dealing with uncertainty and I can say that what hand on heart it is the toughest thing in my career that I have had to deal with. We all want certainty, and it’s something that no-one can provide right now.

We’ve had to take a different approach and we have 21 venues of all different shapes and sizes. Indoor wheelchair events, which is quite new to us, and some large outdoor venues.

Is there a responsibility for major events to establish a measurable legacy? Is this a priority for RLWC2021 and if so, how are you achieving it?

It’s our number one priority. We prefer to use the term social impact; a legacy is something that you leave behind but a social impact is something that we are doing right here, right now. It has been at the heart of our journey the whole way through. We are blessed to have received some funding from the government which we are investing in capital facilities that have been transformational for the community of Rugby League. We also have a mental fitness program that we launched at Buckingham Palace in 2020 with Prince Harry, which is our trailblazing social impact program. We’ve got work in schools through education and we’ve got a big culture program that we are about to launch – along with lots of other different activities.

We don’t have all the answers and we won’t get everything right, but hopefully people will take a greater responsibility in providing a social impact.

Which matches are you most excited for and do you have any wildcard picks in regards to the nations that will be lifting the men’s, women’s or wheelchair trophies?

Most disappointingly, I’ve done my draft itinerary of where I’m going to be and I’ve realised that I can’t get to all 61 games - it’s just not possible! I think our opening three games in each tournament stand out: England vs Samoa at St James Park in Newcastle - what a way to start the tournament. England vs Brazil in the women’s tournament; I mean Brazil, it’s just so exciting to have a South American competing nation, and of course, England vs New Zealand in the wheelchair tournament at the Copper Box Arena. Certainly three strong games to kick off the tournament.

There will be upsets and there will be things that we don’t expect. We are just really excited to see the diversity of the nations. We’ve got the Jamaica mens national team playing, which is exciting to say the least!

SOME ACTIVITIES ARE NOT RUGBY LEAGUE SPECIFIC, BUT WE HAVE AN AMAZING OPPORTUNITY, THAT OTHER EVENTS ALSO HAVE, TO DO SOMETHING MORE THAN JUST WHAT HAPPENS ON THE FIELD OF PLAY. WE THINK THAT SOCIAL IMPACT IS SO CRITICALLY IMPORTANT GOING FORWARD AND WE WANT TO BE FLAG BEARERS.
Rugby League World Cup 2021 (RLWC2021) will be the biggest and best Rugby League tournament to date, featuring the men’s, women’s and wheelchair competitions for the first time in one event.

Attaining insight into Rugby League fans and event attenders is made more important by the challenge of selling tickets for 61 games at 18 venues across England during a global pandemic.

As Official Data and Insight Supplier, Goodform provide holistic audience understanding through Sportswise data analysis and a fan research programme, steering strategy for sales phases, and long-term financial modeling and scenario planning.

Fan attitudes and behaviours have shifted throughout the past year, but RLWC2021 and Goodform have had a finger on the pulse, utilising data to deliver highly-targeted marketing and insight-led decision-making.

With the backdrop of the pandemic, ticketing KPI’s for the priority sale and the first ever Rugby League World Cup ticket ballot, have exceeded expectations.