French Riches Threaten the Future of English Rugby

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By Ben Smith

French rugby clubs are becoming the latest toy for the restless millionaire. As the chosen few revel in their newfound wealth, Premiership clubs are restrained by the salary cap, and are nervously pondering the future of their brightest talent.

London Wasps were the first to fall foul of the French gravy train. James Haskell, Tom Palmer and Riki Flutey have all been enticed by the lucrative deals on offer. As of next season, Haskell and Palmer will ply their trade for Stade Francais, and Flutey for Brive. Even as one of the richest clubs in English rugby, they have still failed to match the deals on the table in France and are resigned to losing three of their most talented players. It is a great shock to a club that has been a dominant force in both domestic and European Rugby. Since the introduction of professionalism in 1995, Wasps have won the Premiership four times and have been champions of Europe twice.

Since the confirmation of their departures, players from several other Premiership clubs have been keen to follow suit and join a league that is awash with cash. Newcastle Falcons will lose four players to teams across the channel. Winger Tom May has yet to confirm his destination, while Jamie Noon has joined Flutey at Brive, and Ollie Phillips has signed for Biarritz. Their biggest loss though will be the departure of talismanic fly half Jonny Wilkinson, who has put pen to paper on a two-year contract at Toulon.

London Irish fan David Hendy said: “The standard of rugby in England is better so if they are just going for the money they obviously do not love the game.”

It has been reported by the BBC that Wilkinson’s deal will bring him an alleged 700,000 Euros (£623,000) a year. That is approximately ten times what the average Guinness Premiership player will earn according to Channel Four website, which states the figure at around £60-70,000 a year. The salary cap operating in the Guinness Premiership limits clubs to a maximum wage bill of £4m and this makes it impossible for them to afford such exorbitant wages on star players. It is little wonder, considering the deficit in pay that many

players are being tempted, or have made the move to France. It would seem that having the ability to play at the top level in domestic rugby, they want to be properly rewarded for their skill and that Premiership wages do not do them justice. At first this may seem greedy, but if you compare the average Premiership wage in rugby union to its football counterpart, their claims bare fruit. Whereas the average Premiership player in rugby union can expect to earn £60-70,000 a year, according to The Times, the football equivalent will earn £1m in the same period.

It could be said that in ideal world rugby players would be paid more than footballers. After all, due to the nature of the game, they put themselves in far more physical danger than a footballer is exposed to. Rugby union is a far more physical game and due to the onset of professionalism in the modern era, players are constantly getting fitter and stronger. As a result, the tackles they make are more powerful and the risk of injury increases.

However there may also be concerns about what the effect of this wealth could have on the players. Rugby Union, since its amateur days, has always had a reputation of players and supporters share a special bond. Many players have no qualms with sparing time for supporters, and will often share a drink and chat with them after a game. The injection of cash into the game could jeopardise that. I fear that it could drive a wedge between players and supporters, who could not longer identify socially with players earning sums way beyond the average spectator's annual salary. This has been seen in football, where players quickly become millionaires and can sometimes forget their roots and fail to appreciate how fortunate they are.

A mass exodus to France could have a negative impact on the quality of rugby in England's top league. Clubs may find it hard to replace players adequately with the wage restrictions in place. Consequently they may be forced to bring in youth team players that are not ready for first team rugby. This could not only be detrimental to the clubs' progress, but also to the long-term development of those young players.

It may also have a wider impact on the national game. In the Guinness Premiership, there is an agreement between clubs and the Rugby Football Union to release players for England duty two weeks before a game. This allows the team to fully prepare for the match and get a firm grasp of the tactics the coaches want to implement for the game ahead. Players in England's Elite Squad who have made the move to France would not be subject to this agreement unless this requested that it was written into their contract. Therefore some players may arrive late for training and would be behind the rest of the squad in picking up the coaches' plans for a match.

RFU Chief Executive Francis Baron was clearly worried by the situation, and reacted by sending a letter to all England players warning that they could jeopardise their international places by moving abroad. Head of the Professional Rugby Players' Association Damian Hopley was angered by the move, calling it "a restraint of trade" and said they were seeking legal advice. Gloucester fan Tracy Ashton said: " It is clever because the old adage applies

‘Let your opponents think they know what you are doing, when actually they have not got a clue.’ It is politics, the RFU versus the rest, and all about egos. The fan who loves rugby is not even asked their opinion.”

What happens next will be pivotal to the future of the English game. Meanwhile, English rugby holds its breath.