French Riches Threaten the Future of English Rugby

By Ben Smith

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French rugby clubs are awash with cash
The salary cap operating in the Guinness Premiership limits clubs to a maximum wage bill of £4m. This makes it impossible for clubs to pay top wages for star players.

In contrast, French clubs have no such restraint. They are flashing their cash to lure top UK players across the channel. Unsurprisingly, many are being seduced.

Who is taking the French money?
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. **Newcastle Falcons** will also lose four players to teams across the channel.

As of next season, London Wasps' Haskell and Palmer will ply their trade for Stade Francais, and Flutey for Brive. Even as one of the richest clubs in English rugby, Wasps has still failed to match the deals on the table in France and is resigned to losing three of its 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.

From Newcastle Falcons, winger Tom May has yet to confirm his destination, while Jamie Noon has joined Riki 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 a two-year contract at Toulon.

How much money will players get?
It has been reported by the BBC that Wilkinson's deal will bring him €700,000 (£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. In contrast, a Premiership footballer would earn £1 million.

How will players and fans be affected by the money?
The injection of cash into the game 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.

Rugby Union, since its amateur days, has always had a reputation of players and supporters sharing 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.

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.

Fans may also doubt players' commitment to the sport. 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."

What will happen to the UK game?
A mass exodus to France could hurt the quality of rugby in England's top league. Wage restrictions may make it hard for clubs to replace players.

They may be forced to bring in youth team players that are not ready for first team rugby. This could not only harm the clubs' progress, but also the long-term development of the 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 it was written into their contract. So players may arrive late for training and be behind the rest of the squad in picking up the coaches' plans for a match.

How can English rugby fight back against French poaching?
RFU Chief Executive Francis Baron has sent a letter to all England players warning that they could jeopardise their international places by moving abroad.

In response, head of the Professional Rugby Players' Association Damian Hopley called it "a restraint of trade" and said he was seeking legal advice.

Will the game recover?
But all this in-fighting could damage the game irreparably in the eyes of fans.

Gloucester fan Tracy Ashton said: “It is politics, the RFU versus the rest, and all about egos. The fan who loves rugby is not even asked their opinion.”

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Should we blame the 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 bear 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.

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