

Big drinkers or big dreams: Is rugby at university perpetuating toxic drinking cultures or aiding towards growth and development?

Pints of sick, eating raw eggs, and downing pint after pint of beer. Drinking cultures surrounding university rugby have become increasingly controversial over the years, but what happens when the negative stories cloud the ones of success, talent, and skill? Grace Dembowicz explores how at Swansea University, the drinking culture is taking a back seat to make way for a more professional attitude. and losses consoled? Speaking to several Swansea

Standing in the middle of the living room in a student house in the heart of Swansea, masters student and university rugby player Hywel Williams looks around at the early evening antics.

It's the beginning of the academic year and for first year students hoping to become part of the rugby club that means only one thing: initiation. Somewhere above the crowd, a voice orders seniors to pair up with freshers, with a smirk the older boys find their unsuspecting partner and so begins a night of drinking, debauchery, and debatable behaviour.

In the past, Hywel remembers nights spiralling out of control with boys being made to "down a pint of sick or down a pint of their piss", admitting often nights have escalated to questionable behaviour, "beer fuels arguments, beer fuels people to do stupid things". He knows this will be another heavy night, and with that, takes another swig of his beer.

Over 80% of the 150 universities across the UK have a rugby club that is part of the British Universities and College Sports (BUCS) and with an average of 250 members per university rugby club, that's a total of over 32,000 male and female students up and down the country. But what happens when the 80th minute is up and the last try is converted? How are wins celebrated

University rugby club associates, there is no denying there is an underlying issue with the drinking culture surrounding the sport with the potential to impact overall performance.



Hywel Williams (pictured centre) playing for the first XV team against Exeter at St Helens pitch, Swansea

Research shows that one in four university students will suffer from mental health issues at some point during their degree, whether that be financial, social, or due to pressures to succeed. However, playing team sports has been proven to aid with anxiety and stress relief. Stephen Mellalieu, a professor in sport psychology at Cardiff Met University and Osprey rugby union club psychotherapist discussed how mental health and

wellbeing is becoming an increasing priority. However, financial investment for these under-resourced welfare teams are lacking and therefore struggling to deal with the “challenge of mental wellbeing and health problems that young people and students are facing in society”.

A simple internet search highlights the number of incidents associated with university rugby. Back in March of this year, an allegation of sexual assault and 15 formal complaints were put forward against the University of Bath’s rugby team after one night out. In 2018, UCL’s rugby club was disciplined after they made continuous sexual chants, and in 2019, Bristol University came under scrutiny after it was discovered that firstyear rugby players were forced to eat raw chicken livers. Hywel was keen to explain that this perception of rugby culture is not one size fits all and it’s actually the boys who don’t play games that push for this kind of behaviour, “it’s the ones who’ve never had a taste of playing at a proper level. It’s the socialites, it’s how they get their own back on freshers who play on the first team for example”. Drinking culture increases the potential for “structured bullying”, if you react then you could give yourself a bad name, Hywel worries “it could make someone want to leave the club, but why would you leave the club if you want to play rugby, it should be about the sport”.

“You do get boys wearing the ties, blazers with rumours coming back they’ve told girls they play for the first team or that they’re the captain”

Head coaches at Swansea University, Siwan Lillicrap and Hugh Gustafson, explained how since they joined the club three years ago, the programme has developed to become one that prioritises training and high performance. “We’ve seen a difference in the attitude of the players, at first the group of boys we had were used to being out 3 nights a week but now, the attitude has flipped, they’ve seen the success of other boys who have gone to gain professional contracts; their mentality is different. We’ll say after certain matches: ‘you can have a drink, you can go out tonight, enjoy yourselves’. We do try and control what happens in phases to ensure hangovers don’t affect training”.

Is the issue solely based on drinking or are there other problems embedded within rugby culture? Hywel’s girlfriend of six months, Cerys explained how in the past she’s seen clubs restrict entrance to the boys, “if an incident happens with one then it adds to the stereotype that all of them are overly rowdy, a problem and a nuisance on nights out”.

But how do these clubs know these boys are a part of the club? Anyone that has experienced a Wednesday night out on Swansea’s Wind Street will almost certainly have passed a sea of green blazers, ties, and chinos as they move as one down the street, a blur to themselves and others. A status symbol obtained through a social event where you win your tie by downing three pints quicker than your opponent.



Hywel Williams (pictured right) with his team mates in 2018 after playing the Cardiff vs Swansea Varsity rugby match

Hywel recognises and addresses this social image, “for a lot of boys, wearing the tie and blazer makes them feel like they’ve got that extra inch, that extra bit of confidence on a night out. You do get rumours coming back that they’ve told girls they play for the first team or that they’re captain. It needs to be means-tested how you get into the club, you definitely need to play rugby to get a tie. You’ve got freshers playing for the first team who can’t get a tie and fourth-year boys waltzing around in a tie who haven’t played a game since first year”.

The social emblem of the tie and blazer is something the coaches are aware of. Hugh explains: “It probably does give you a bit of an ego boost that people know your name. But it depends on the personnel, their beliefs, culture and attitudes. I’ve got some people who are lions on the field and lambs off, they’re naturally very quiet but then you put them on the field and they’re different, you’ve got to be careful who are lambs on the

field and lions off it. The ones who think they are very good rugby players will talk about it but when you put them on the field they’re not, they’re the ones who take the attitude off the field”.

Often perceptions of a group can be worse than who they really are individually. Hywel recognises that other students may view the boys negatively, putting it down to “history, tradition, there are times when the boys will think they’re a bit chocolate (arrogant) and maybe get in a fight”. Swansea alumni student George* who was part of the club during his time at university four years ago explained how he had to attend various hearings in front of a disciplinary board regarding the behaviour of boys on nights out, which nearly resulted in the club being permanently disbanded. When you hear what goes on during the initiations it’s hardly surprising.

George explained he had to “eat raw eggs and sardines all whilst downing beer, cider, and wine. We exercised to be sick whilst covered in flour”. George still felt that the club was unfairly targeted, more so than “regular students or other sports clubs, especially when sports and socialising goes hand in hand”.

“Our philosophy now is, it doesn’t matter if you’ve been here three years, doing your masters, or coming in new, treat everyone with respect”

With testosterone pumping through the club, the need to prove your ability is strong. In the past, the coaches explained how there was a feeling of entitlement from seniors when it came to being picked for games. Hugh expressed how they've tried to eradicate this hierarchy: "We had student coaches involved with trials last year, one coach was speaking to a fresher badly, I pulled him aside and gave him a warning, that was nipped in the bud. Our philosophy now is: it doesn't matter if you've been here three years, doing your masters, or coming in new, treat everyone with respect. It helps breed success, everyone's out there for the same goal".

No matter how old you are, the pressure to be out on the pitch is always there. Hywel explained how in the past, seniors have mentally struggled with freshers being selected for big matches over them, with a constant fear of not making the team : "I've seen some of them (seniors) just not get picked, I think there needs to be a better player management system in place for boys who get dropped. A student after a few training sessions isn't going to morph into a fully mentally or physically capable adult. If you are dropping players, it makes you doubt yourself. Even if it's just a text from the coach, a phone call or meeting, rather than dropping a boy and not telling him why after weeks of training".

Typical training week for the Swansea University teams:

Monday:

- 7:30am HIIT workout
- 8:00am Rugby session
- Followed by a weights session

Tuesday:

- Two training sessions focusing on rugby
- For boys selected for that weeks' match, there is an additional team session in the evening

Wednesday:

- Match day

Thursday:

- Day off

Friday:

- 45 minute rugby session

Saturday:

- Weights session

Sunday:

- Day off

To achieve high levels of rugby, training is intense but no matter how seriously rugby is taken, lectures will always come first as Siwan highlights: "If boys have lectures, then lectures take priority, they go to lectures then will do their 'weight' slot later in the day. That's why we train before 9am and after 5pm so it won't affect their learning".

Hywel explained that the levels of commitment needed to secure a place on the first team can be a struggle, "it's hard to muster up the energy for the day when you're waking up at 6:30 am on a Monday for training, an early one on Tuesday and Friday. I do struggle some mornings". In the past, some boys have stopped committing to training because they've gone long

lengths of time without being picked, Hywel explained how “it’s good for routine and fitness but at the end of the day, you want to be playing. You’re always thinking about the Monday session or when the squad will be announced, it’s mentally draining, especially when you’re concentrating on assignments and lectures”.

Dr Mellalieu reinforced this when explaining with dual career student athletes, (studying and training) pressure can easily mount, “there’s often pinch points in the year where the demands of the sport, demands of university and social activities cause extra pressure and stress. Looking after yourself, training and eating well, rest, recovery and reaching out to positive and supportive friends are all important. If we have good wellbeing, it tends to support our mental health and our ability to cope with whatever life throws at us”.

“We implement real world culture”

Hugh explained how sometimes personal lives can affect his player’s performances and mentality: “I could have a girlfriend break-up situation, you don’t realise how that will affect a player. Sometimes they don’t want to speak to us because they’re worried it’ll affect selection. They may need to take two weeks off but worry if they do, they won’t be in the group anymore”. Communication is key, as Dr Mellalieu highlights: “there’s no magic wand, there’s no rocket science to it except good planning and preparation, encouraging your players to talk and if they do face any

bumps along the way, talk it through with them and offer them support strategies”.

Ensuring the boys are prepared for life after university is something both Hugh and Siwan feel strongly about: “You couldn’t go into a job and be ten minutes late, you couldn’t show up to your job hungover, if you’ve got uniform given to you, you wear it. We implement real world culture, you can’t act like this when you leave university, even if you’ve got a first-class degree. We’re reaping the rewards now, the culture has changed to such a positive light now. People understand what it means to play for Swansea. You see development and growth, they come in as young men and leave as grownups”. •

*Name has been changed