

## **Notes of the Joint Supporters Group meeting with Pro 12 and Pro Rugby Wales**

**Wednesday 2nd November 2016**  
**Liberty Stadium. Swansea**

Attendees:

JSG representatives:

Cardiff Blues Supporters' Club- Sarah Hopkins and David Elsmere

Crys 16 - Ian Lewis and Steve Hiscocks

Dragons Supporters' Club - Dan Hallett and Matt Andrews

Ospreys Supporters' Club - Nigel Jones, Keith Collins and Geoff Jones

Pro 12- Martin Anayi

Pro Rugby Wales- Mark Davies and Antonia Lamont

### **DISCUSSION**

AL opened the meeting at 6.45pm by welcoming everyone and thanking Martin for taking the time to do a return trip from London to Swansea to meet with JSG. Everyone present agreed that JSG would take the notes of the meeting for circulation to members afterwards.

AL thanked JSG for their support for the recent derby games. AL ran through the list of questions that had been provided by JSG and their members in advance of the meeting and explained that they would either be picked up by MA and MD in discussion or could be specifically picked up by JSG.

MD echoed AL's comments and said that PRW thought that meetings with the JSG was a constructive way to communicate on a two-way basis with supporters of regional rugby. MD confirmed that PRW as an 'organisation' consists of purely of one CEO and one Head of PR which is only contracted as a part time role – realistically and pragmatically with this resource the most effective way to communicate on complex issues is via the JSG – which is why, for example a conference call was arranged between all parties recently on the derby fixture scheduling.

MD thanked CBSC, OSC and DOSC for attending the meeting via phone conference the previous week which had been useful in setting the scene in advance of the recent derby games. MD confirmed that JSG will remain the primary means of communication on key issues as the official supporter network.

Martin Anayi, CEO of Guinness PRO12 (MA) introduced himself and said he welcomed the opportunity to meet with JSG. He explained that he had been working in his role with Guinness PRO12 for 12 months and during that time a number of key changes had taken place to create a stand-alone organisation with a dedicated team of people recruited to solely focus on promotion and development of the PRO12 Championship - not 6N or British & Irish Lions.

He believed that this was already seeing real benefits for the Pro12, although it was still early days. MA's priority in starting the job was to do something that hadn't really been looked at before, which was to look at the Guinness PRO12 from a customer's perspective. The feedback from supporters had been reviewed and already good progress was being made against the supporter 'wish list' but it would take time to get it right.

One of the main areas of feedback given to PRO12 was relating the fixture scheduling. Sunday fixtures were universally unpopular and supporters wanted regular kick off times

on Fridays and Saturdays. Substantial changes have been made in this area with SKY Sports being asked to give up their exclusivity to Saturday games as a result of supporter feedback.

JSG asked about the impact of KO times on families with less afternoon games making it difficult to bring children to games. MA said that in order to meet the very clear demand for less Sundays and standardised KO times, this had been an unfortunate outcome and one that needed to be considered going forward. JSG recognised that it wasn't easy to please all stakeholders but asked that this be a topic for future discussion with the group.

MA and MD outlined the significant complexity and time taken to renegotiate and existing contracts to allow the fixture moves from Sunday to Saturday included detailed discussions with key broadcasters to satisfy all needs; a lot of work had taken place to standardise KO times out to round 13 – this is further than the English Premiership as they have one broadcast partner and PRO12 has 7.

The discussion turned to refereeing standards with JSG sharing several aspects of concern about the quality of officials and the impact that this was having on games and the supporter/player experience. MA stated that the other main issue raised by supporters to PRO12 in previous feedback and surveys was that of the officials. MA explained that whereas in England any issues with referees centered around the issue of capability (as all refs were English, refereeing English teams) he had been concerned previously at the questioning of the integrity of officials in the PRO12 which seemed to be based on their nationality.

Any such assertion, whether perceived or otherwise, would have the potential to have a negative impact on the championship. PRO12 had spoken extensively to all of the coaches last season who they had said that their main concern was that of quality of officiating, which was more important to them than neutrality at this point.

MA and MD explained the first priority for coaches was that PRO12 referees were deemed to have the right capability levels above and beyond merely being neutral appointments (as it was previously). Therefore based on the coaches feedback, PRO12 took the first step of creating neutral TMO's and AR1's (first touch judge). This has been achieved and significant cost covered by additional sponsorship so no impact to distribution to Clubs. Referee development key item but, like players, cannot develop referees overnight. Review of season to date taking place end Nov which will include referee appointments, decisions and development needs as well as assessment process.

JSG asked about the development of referees and MD confirmed that Ireland and Wales were already well on with developing a good pathway for officials. MA and MD outlined that Ireland and Wales have mature competition structures that allow development and fast tracking of referees across multiple competitions. They are now including Scottish and Italian development referees in those pathways to fast track new referees. PRO12 now has a defined Development Group of referees from the 4 countries with a focus on fast track.

JSG noted that a detailed discussion had taken place the previous week with MD about scheduling, and the recent derbies and a full explanation given. However, given the questions and feedback from supporters, JSG asked for further comment from MA.

MA explained that it was a very complex process with all 12 clubs submitting individual requests to the tournament director in May (this might for example include the Welsh regions requesting a specific weekend for Judgment Day). Then any stadium restrictions had to be accounted for. MD added that this was particularly complicated in Wales due

to two of the stadia being affected by football (Ospreys and Dragons) and one being affected by events at the Principality Stadium (BT Sport Cardiff Arms Park).

By the end of May, all clubs requests are taken into account as the Tournament Director creates a draft schedule. In June, once the Football fixtures are released, all stakeholders in the competition clubs, unions, broadcasters are provided with the weekend schedule for formal agreement at the end of June.

The next step is for the broadcasters to make their 'picks' - their requests and this season the impact of the requests from PRO12 supporters for less Sundays and more standardised fixture times had to be negotiated into the contracts. This is then circulated back to the clubs who feed back to the Tournament Director for formal sign-off mid-July.

A two-week gap is then given before public announcement to allow Team Managers to book travel. The 'Big Weekends' approach as an exciting and vital new development in the competition to raise profile and effectiveness as a Championship was agreed by all Stakeholders in May; but dates have to be agreed across all 4 countries – ie Judgement Day date has to be agreed by Ireland to ensure Irish derbies take place same weekend and vice versa if any requests from Ireland/Scotland/Wales.

The Big Weekend at round 7 agreed and signed off by all parties end June, so everyone involved missed the implication of overlap with call up window in Wales and MA and MD apologised to supporters that had been unhappy with R7 schedule although they outlined that the call up window in Ireland also overlapped but there had been no issue in Ireland. MD outlined that it was positive that the derby weekend had seen strong crowds and two great games of rugby from the wider squad players entertaining supporters without all internationals being available. MA pointed out that if the round had been inter-Union then Welsh regions would have been up against full strength Scottish or Italian sides who did not have the additional international weekend call up.

JSG thanked MA for his honesty and said that this openness with the wider supporter network previously might have prevented some of the comments posted on social media. MD said that PRW and PRO12 both feel strongly about being open with supporters and per the previous week's discussions, the primary focus was to support the Clubs in the build-up to the important derby fixtures and to project the positive aspects of these games. JSG were supportive of this position as had been agreed at the previous meeting.

MA went on to say that there was now a bigger commercial balance between club championship and international levels and that both recognised that there were mutual benefits for success in both arenas, from a rugby perspective and a commercial one. MD said that the current relationship between the regions and WRU had been transformed over the last 12 months and that it was now much more of a partnership approach to rugby and commercial activity.

MD outlined that particularly in Wales, for the success of Welsh rugby, club and international rugby are completely inter-reliant. MD emphasised the complete 'partnership' approach is currently working well in Welsh Rugby.

JSG asked about the move to an improved season structure. MA said that all parties recognised the need for less games in the season and that this was a hot topic everywhere. MD said that contractual arrangements were in place until 2019 and there was lots of work behind the scenes on developing options to plug the commercial gap that would inevitably be left by less international fixtures.

JSG asked about the value of continuing to have the Italian teams in the GuinnessPRO12. MD said that all aspects of the 'product' had to perform and if any area

was not contributing or was affecting the quality or integrity of the championship, then that would be reviewed. MA said that the Italian market for rugby was generally struggling and PRO12 were active in trying to help them develop commercially. There are also participation agreements that had to be honoured.

JSG asked how PRO12 was considering its uniqueness (4 nations clubs) as a selling point and point of growth. MA said it was important that the PRO12 did not shrink but that it grew, and a discussion was had about the great opportunities supporters had to travel within this competition, although logistics and costs could be prohibitive.

JSG asked whether there were plans to expand the PRO12 championship. MA said that standing still or going backwards was not an option and that PRO12 had to look to grow. MD added that PRO12 was equally being pursued by other parties. His view was that this was inevitable given that there were only 4 professional leagues and two of those are ring-fenced.

JSG asked whether expansion would be likely by adding a development league and MA said that this was not on the agenda as improving quality was of key importance. This was currently an issue with others seeking a place in the PRO12 as even countries such as the USA and Canada don't have a substantial structure in place as yet. MD said that another advantage of the PRO12 was how flexible and open to change the participants were.

MA said that wage inflation remained a big factor in our game and that although revenues are increasing, wage inflation is still increasing at a faster rate, although there had been discussions at EPCR recently about this issue.

JSG asked about future TV deals and when the next one would be negotiated. MA said that the next cycle of deals starts in the 18/19 season and so this means going back to market in around April 2017. PRO12 are currently working on agreeing our proposition and packages so that we can place ourselves to get the best commercial deals. MD said that previously the PRO12 had not been sold as an exciting 'product' and a lot of good, positive work was going on behind the scenes in this area.

MA said that the recent improvements in attendances, TV viewership and digital engagement was helping the brand and the product which should, in the longer term, drive more investment in the PRO12.

AL said that the PRO12 would be seeking to engage with supporters again via survey to gain more feedback on the competition and would work with JSG to get detailed feedback from their memberships to inform PRO12 and PRW on the specific views of supporters in Wales; to help shape and focus forward activity to help provide the best possible customer experience for supporters of the PRO12 competition.

AL said that she would work with JSG to arrange a wider consultation session for the members of CBSC, Crys 16, DoSC and OSC in early 2017 and thanked everyone for attending.

JSG thanked MA, MD and AL for their time and for the frank and constructive discussions, reiterating that this was a great format to jointly discuss and communicate relevant issues on behalf of members and the wider supporter base.

Meeting closed at 9pm.