Finding the Extra Yard: the use of technology in elite sport.

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London Irish – an introduction:

- London Irish RFC is one of the leading clubs in European Rugby, playing in the Aviva Premiership, the Heineken Cup and the LV= Cup.

- Our recent list of honours include:
  - Middlesex 7's winners 2009
  - Premiership finalists 2009
  - Heineken Cup semi-finalists 2008

- The London Irish squad includes several international players such as Delon Armitage, Steffon Armitage, Topsy Ojo, Paul Hodgson, Sailosi Tagicakibau, Chris Hala'ufia and Seilala Mapusua.

- Our coaching team, led by Toby Booth, includes Mike Catt and Dave Ellis.

London Irish – our heritage:

- London Irish RFC was founded in 1898 as a sporting club for Irishmen in London

- In 1931 the club built a new home in Sunbury where we have been ever since

- The Sunbury facility played host to all our home matches until the dawn of the professional era in 1995 when, due to growing crowd numbers, the club was forced to find an alternative venue

- In 2000 the Club entered an agreement with Reading FC to share the newly built Madejski Stadium

- The club continues to train in Sunbury with the amateur and junior sides sharing the facility

London Irish RFC – our business:

- Fans:
  - Average home attendance of 13,000 with top attendance last season of 23,500
  - 20,000 subscribers to our weekly ezine
  - 75,000 fan database
  - Followed in 135 different countries

- Corporate Partners:
  - 5 kit sponsors
  - 20 seasonal box holders including Barclays, Trend Micro & IBM

- Commercial Team:
  - Five Directors
  - Fifteen support staff

London Irish RFC – our business (continued):

- Income Sources
    - Commercial Sponsorship
    - Ticket Sales
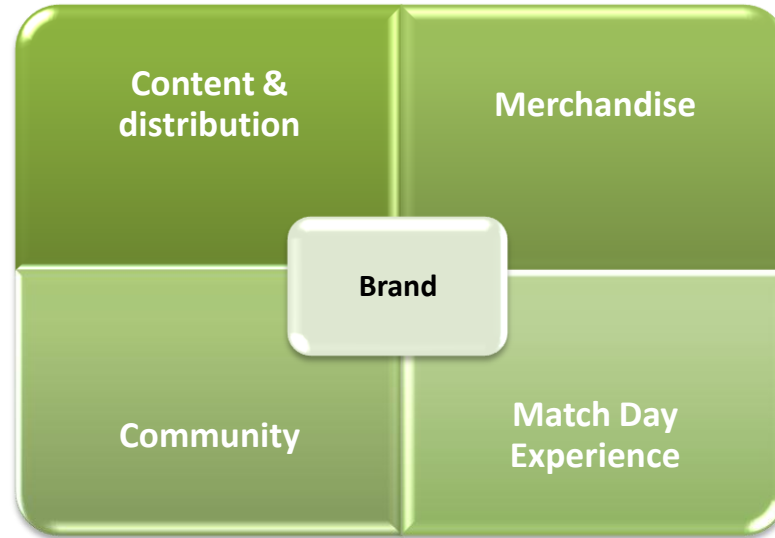   - Merchandising
    - Corporate Hospitality

London Irish RFC – our future plans:

- London Irish RFC is an ambitious club with high expectations

- Our recent on field success has been cemented with the agreement of long-term contracts for Toby Booth and his coaching team plus the recruitment of three new players

- Significant restructuring has occurred to build a commercial team that is capable of delivering sustained success off the field

- The application to relocate to a state-of-the-art training facility one mile from our current home has entered the final phases of the planning process

- Success on the pitch is essential to our success off of it

London Irish RFC – strategy for success:

- Success on the pitch is essential to our success off of it...

Performance – the role of analysis in elite sport:

- Rugby has experienced significant transformation since turning professional in 1995

- As with all elite sport, coaches have turned increasingly to the use of sophisticated performance analysis to better understand performance and identify areas for improvement

- Performance analysis is used for:
  - Enhancing match day performance
  - Injury prevention
  - Training effectiveness
  - Short-term team selection and long-term squad management
  - Factual assessment rather than subjective review

- The role of analysis in the professional era is vital to success where minute improvements can make the difference between winning and losing

Performance – data sources:

- All performance analysis begins with a wide range of data collection

- At London Irish we collect performance data from a number of sources, including:
  - Match day
  - Training
  - GPS
  - Strength & Conditioning
  - Medical

- With so many sources of data it is essential to have a system that enables quick and accurate interrogation.
  - Without this, data can become a burden.

Performance – the potential data burden:

- Match day analysis involves the careful review of video footage and the classification of each event by player
  - To put this into perspective, there are 120 different event categories from missed tackle and effective offload to line break and try scoring.
  - There are 22 players in a match day squad and each player will generate multiple events during a game.
  - This is just the match data!

- In addition, we collect data from the GPS units worn by each player to measure their physical exertion during the match and also in training.
  - These units record everything the player does from their top speed to total distance covered and the G Forces experienced during a tackle.
  - Each piece of data is time stamped to record exactly when it occurred

Performance – the potential data burden (continued):

- Further data is collected during training with the Coaching staff recording the type, timing and intensity of each session.
    - The session is also filmed to capture key data such as individual error counts.

- On average the London Irish team will play one game every 6 days between September and May
    - min 32 games per season

Performance – the potential data burden (continued):

- Whilst this data is comprehensive, it is only effective if the Coaches are able to derive useful information in a timely manner

- Effective performance analysis therefore requires a system that enables the quick and accurate interrogation of multiple data.
  - This was the primary driver for our decision to invest in a new analytics system

System Requirements – room for improvement:

- Our Head Coach, Toby Booth, is renowned in the sport for his innovative approach to performance analysis and employs a comprehensive system of data collection

- With the growing amount of available data, Toby and his team identified a need to enhance their interrogation capabilities whilst reducing the amount of administration required to maintain the current analysis process

- This would allow more time to be spent on analysis and less time managing data

System Requirements – our priorities:

1. Enhance our analysis capability without requiring extensive changes to the established collection processes

2. Easy upload of data to avoid duplication of entry

3. Enable high level analysis of team performance with drill-down capability to positions and individual players

4. Allow analysis over different periods of time (i.e. matches, weeks, months, seasons)

5. Create links between different data sources to signpost potential reasons for over/under performance (i.e. link training to match events)

6. Create regular report templates to allow fast access to data by end users (coaches)

System Requirements – selecting a partner

- London Irish RFC is a rugby club and we do not have the in-house expertise to build a world-class analytics system

- We therefore need a partner who is capable of understanding our data requirements and communicate clearly the best way to achieve our objectives

- An off-the-shelf solution was unlikely to work because a bespoke system was required to accommodate our current methods of data collection

- The proposal submitted by IBM Business Analytics clearly addressed each of our priorities and enabled us to build a bespoke system that is unique in the sport of rugby

- We believe the combination of our in-house expertise with the system knowledge of IBM will create a powerful partnership which can lead us to tangible success on the field

System Build – the role of IBM Business Analytics:

- The consultation process consisted of a series of meetings between the IBM Analytics Team and the London Irish Coaching Team

- The first few consultation sessions were spent exploring the current data sources, the links between the data and the format of the data reports

- Once the existing data was fully understood focus was shifted to explore any new data that would enhance the performance of the system

- Finally, the interface with the end users was discussed in detail to ensure their requirements were fully understood

- Work then began on the actual build of the system with regular interaction with users to gather ongoing feedback throughout the project

Summary:

- London Irish RFC is club that demands success both on and off the field

- With the margin between winning and losing becoming ever smaller it is essential we use the modern technology available to us to derive better insight into performance

- The ability to gain this insight in a timely manner will differentiate us from our competitors and deliver tangible results on the field

- The partnership with IBM Business Analytics has enabled us to deliver a system which is truly unique in the world of rugby

- We believe this system will enable our coaches to find the extra yard required to be successful in elite sport

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