



Rugby Football Union uses predictive analytics to drive fan engagement

Inspiring a new generation with a smarter solution from IBM Global Business Services

Smart is...

Using historical data to surface real-time insights into live rugby matches

The Rugby Football Union (RFU) wanted to improve the fan experience by uncovering and presenting real-time insights into the game in an exciting, intuitive and accessible way. RFU worked with IBM to create TryTracker, a predictive analytics solution that visually represents player influence, keys to the game and the momentum of matches in real time. The solution has contributed to a 27 percent rise in unique website visitors to RFU.com during the RBS 6 Nations, and web access supports worldwide fan engagement.

Founded in London, England in 1871, and headquartered in Twickenham, the Rugby Football Union (RFU) is the governing body of the English rugby union. Employing over 500 people and generating an annual turnover of around £116 million, the RFU has a strategic objective to invest in English rugby clubs, the England national rugby union team and rugby in schools.

Inspiring a new generation

RFU wanted to generate increased interest in rugby through its RFU.com website – creating a platform to improve the fan experience and increase understanding of the game. To achieve its goal, the organisation needed to find a way to represent the tactical complexity of the sport in a way that was both engaging for those new to the game, and insightful for knowledgeable fans.

As Sophie Goldschmidt, Chief Commercial Officer at the RFU explains: “Our aim is to bring more people into the sport at all levels – from casual touch-rugby games to professional coaching in schools and clubs. We knew that driving fan engagement was the key to realising this vision.”

In the past, RFU displayed rugby union statistics from Opta, a sports data provider, on RFU.com in a basic table format. This traditional approach to presenting data made it difficult for newcomers to understand the importance of the statistics at a glance in the heat of a match.

Telling the story of a match in real time

Nick Shaw, Head of Digital at the RFU says: “We saw a major opportunity to bring the rich data we had on past rugby matches to life on RFU.com, and tell the story of a match in real time. By creating a platform for insight using the latest business analytics technologies, we realised that we could transform RFU.com into the destination site for anyone interested in rugby, and reach new fans around the world.”



Business benefits

- Drives interest in live rugby by helping to boost the fan experience at home or in the stadium.
 - Delivers engaging, real-time insights into the ebb and flow of rugby games – helping to introduce new fans to the sport.
 - Contributed to a 27 percent rise in unique website visitors to RFU.com during the RBS 6 Nations Championship.
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Creating an analytics platform for rugby posed a significant challenge. Unlike individual sports such as tennis – where data processing requirements are limited to one player – the 23 players on a match-day rugby squad introduce a large number of variables, making outcomes far more difficult to predict accurately.

To assist with the design, configuration and implementation of its analytics solution, RFU engaged expert analytics consultants from IBM® Global Business Services®.

Designing TryTracker with IBM Global Business Services

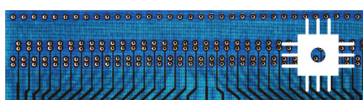
“We selected IBM Global Business Services because we were extremely impressed with their innovative work in the field of sports analytics,” says Goldschmidt. “Working together with the IBM sports analytics team, we developed a first-of-its-kind, web-based predictive analytics platform for rugby called TryTracker – enabling us to offer rugby fans around the world new statistical insights into live games for the first time.”

In a series of in-depth workshops, IBM Global Business Services and RFU’s in-house digital team analysed data from 300 international rugby matches to determine the statistical measures that were truly reflective of good team performance. Based on this analysis, IBM and RFU designed and configured three analytics dashboards using IBM SPSS® software. During live matches, “momentum”, “keys to the game” and “player influence” dashboards are displayed on RFU.com – each delivering a different kind of real-time insight to fans.

“The keys to the game dashboard highlights specific areas where teams are over- and under-performing, and identifies three targets that a certain team needs to achieve to increase their probability of winning a match,” says Shaw. “On a match day, these three keys to the game are surfaced on the TryTracker hub page; if a team hits all three, then

Smarter Sports

Driving fan engagement with predictive analytics



Instrumented

TryTracker combines historical data with live match statistics – performing complex analysis to reveal changing trends in a match, and their likely effect on the outcome.



Interconnected

The three most statistically significant “keys to the game” for each team are displayed in the hub view of TryTracker on RFU.com, along with a visual representation of the changing momentum of the game.



Intelligent

TryTracker enables rugby fans to see the way a match is unfolding in an exciting, intuitive and accessible way – even when they are unable to watch live at the stadium.

Solution components

Software

- IBM® DB2®
- IBM SPSS® Modeler

Services

- IBM Global Business Services®
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“Compared to the previous year’s RBS 6 Nations tournament, we saw a 27 percent increase in unique website visitors – and TryTracker was a significant factor in driving this increase in popularity. The next step is to build on this increased popularity to further boost interest in live matches and grow the popularity of the game.”

— Nick Shaw, Head of Digital,
Rugby Football Union

their probability of winning increases dramatically. This feature of TryTracker shows new fans exactly what to look out for as a match progresses – helping them to get more from the experience of watching live rugby.”

Fans visiting the RFU website during a live match can also select the momentum dashboard in TryTracker – a view based on the concept of Wimbledon’s IBM SlamTracker solution.

“Momentum is a live, interactive timeline of a match, which uses a stream of real-time factors such as possession and score to show fans which team is on top, and therefore more likely to score next,” says Shaw. “This is an extremely effective way to visualize the way the momentum of a game changes over time. In addition to enhancing the experience of watching a match live, the mobile-enabled view allows fans to check in on the progress of a match in a highly engaging visual format while on the move.”

To increase the accuracy of its predictions, the TryTracker solution from IBM takes into account factors such as player influence – the effect that players entering or leaving a match has on a team’s overall chance of winning, based on their historical data and the current momentum of the match.

Increasing predictive accuracy

“Refining the accuracy of TryTracker’s predictions was an area where the expertise of the IBM Global Business Services team really stood out,” says Shaw. “The IBM team really understood rugby, and applied their insight to find innovative ways to augment TryTracker’s predictive abilities.”

He continues: “For example, TryTracker is configured to use line breaks as an indicator of a passing game, which can show if one team is playing more aggressively than the other, and is therefore more likely to win. However, in wet weather, games tend to be less expansive, and the number of passes drops significantly. The IBM team noticed that this was skewing TryTracker’s keys to the game when conditions were wet, and introduced the weather as a variable in the solution – improving the accuracy of our predictions by 33 percent.”

Goldschmidt comments: “We set ourselves the ambitious target of launching the solution during the biggest rugby tournament in the northern hemisphere, as we knew that the RBS 6 Nations Championship would enable us to collect high-quality data on the way our website users engaged with TryTracker. The IBM Global Business Services team were as committed to the success of the project as we were – they went above and beyond to get the TryTracker solution live in just three months.”

Engaging thousands of fans

On a match day, the TryTracker hub view – showing momentum, player influence and keys to the game, along with live commentary – becomes the default homepage for RFU.com. Fans can click through to see more detail – for example, events such as individual line breaks and the influence they have had on the course of the match. As a result of the TryTracker solution from IBM Global Business Services, RFU is achieving its aim of bringing the sport of rugby to a wider audience.

“The launch of TryTracker was a major success,” says Shaw.

“Compared to the previous year’s RBS 6 Nations tournament, we saw a 27 percent increase in unique website visitors – and TryTracker was a significant factor in driving this increase in popularity. The next step is to build on this increased popularity to further boost interest in live matches and grow the popularity of the game.”

Goldschmidt comments: “In the past, the match-day experience at RFU.com consisted of score updates and a live commentary feed. Today, we are using IBM analytics to offer rugby fans a completely new level of insight – augmenting the experience of watching live matches.”

Based on the success of TryTracker in the RBS 6 Nations, RFU is working with IBM to enhance the accuracy and utility of the solution.

Shaw says: “When we began this project, we were clear that we wanted TryTracker to have a life beyond the 80 minutes of a rugby match. We’re currently planning to develop an editorial layer for the momentum view of the solution, which would enable newcomers and long-term fans to explore pivotal moments in a game with text, video and audio commentary, and gain a deeper appreciation of the tactical complexity of the game.”

Goldschmidt concludes: “In close collaboration with the team from IBM Global Business Services, we are continually enhancing our statistical models – making TryTracker’s match predictions even more accurate. Thanks to IBM, we have created an innovative way to help meet our strategic objective of introducing, inspiring and engaging a new generation with the sport of rugby.”

For more information

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