

Player POWER

As rugby continues to increase in popularity, The NPD Group highlights the main players in the GB market



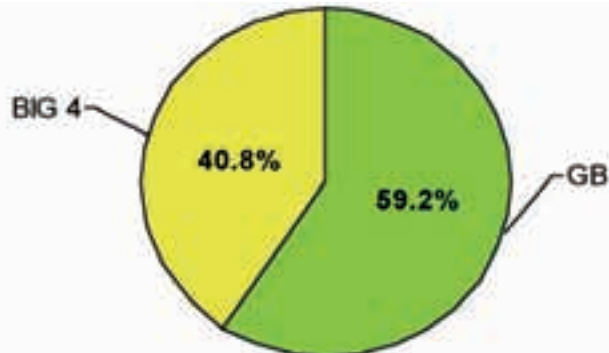
This year's Six Nations has been one of the most closely contested tournaments in recent years - to the delight of rugby fans. Celtic nations are no longer outplayed by the traditional powers England and France and Ireland's long wait for a Grand Slam finally came to an end.

The average audience for the 15 matches of the tournament broke the previous record set in 2007 and the growing interest in this championship is emblematic of rugby's wider popularity as a whole. New TV deals, which will result in greater TV exposure, could significantly boost sales of rugby shirts and boots in the coming months and years.

Fig.1 Rugby Market GB vs. BIG4 (France-Italy-Germany-Spain) Market Share

12 Months To December 08 - %Value

Source: the NPD Group Sports Apparel and Footwear Consumer Panel





Participation figures

The International Rugby Board states that England has 700,000 registered rugby union players and the UK has the largest number of rugby players in the world. They are encouraged by an increasing number of passionate supporters in the stadiums and armchair fans, which makes the UK an ideal and dynamic environment in which to market rugby footwear and apparel.

During 2008 over £50million-worth of rugby boots and shirts were sold in Great Britain, according to NPD data. This figure, although far below the one we see in football, remains impressive considering rugby

receives much less TV exposure.

Sales of shirts account for over two-thirds of total rugby sales. While national team shirts are the most popular, their sales generally fluctuate according to teams' recent performances. Wales' shirt was a strong seller in 2008 following their Grand Slam during the Six Nations and their great performances against Australia and reigning world champions South Africa.

Nike's performance is dependent mainly on sales of the England shirt, as it does not sponsor any of the teams in the Guinness Premiership. New Zealand brand Canterbury sponsors current Six Nations Grand Slam winners Ireland and Scotland, as well as Wasps and London Irish in the Premiership. However, both Cotton Traders and Kooga each sponsor three of the 12 Premiership teams, but have no involvement with any of the Six Nations sides. Their strength with domestic teams means they benefit from considerable TV exposure in the Guinness Premiership and the Heineken Cup. Wales were sponsored by Reebok for their 2008 Six Nations Grand Slam, but have since switched to Under Armour.

Nevertheless, the migration of some of the best British rugby players to France could damage the quality of the game and affect audience figures, which would consequently impact sales.

Footwear

When it comes to rugby footwear, Nike and adidas command greater market share than they do with shirts. Even though the rugby boot market generates less revenue than the rugby shirts market, it is interesting to note that several millions of pounds of football boots bought in 2008 were actually used for rugby.

Just over two years separates us from the next Rugby World Cup, and considering the positive displays by Wales and Ireland supporters must be relishing the opportunity of watching their country compete successfully on a global stage. This world cup will be highly anticipated by rugby fans as it will be hosted by the world number one ranked New Zealand team, which have gained great respect from other rugby-playing nations over the years, but have struggled in recent tournaments.

The build-up to the world cup promises to arouse the attention of millions of supporters hoping their team will be able to beat New Zealand, who have no other option but to win on home soil. However, if rugby shirt sales are to see a boost it is also vital for the home nations to progress to the latter rounds. **31**

The NPD Group monitors the sales of sports footwear and sports apparel in many countries around the world. For more information contact The NPD Group sports team on 01932 355580.