

## The Socio-Emotional Vulnerability of Professional Rugby Union Athletes

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**Abstract :** This paper delves into the attitudes of professional and semi-professional rugby union athletes in regard to socio-emotional vulnerability, or the willingness to express the full spectrum of human emotion in a social context. Like all humans, athletes of all sports regularly experience feelings of shame, powerlessness, and loneliness, and often feel unable to express such feelings due to factors including lack of situational support, absence of adequate expressive language and lack of resource. To this author's knowledge, however, no previous research has considered the particular demographic of professional rugby union athletes, despite the sport's immense popularity and economic contribution to global communities. Hence, this paper aims to extend previous research by exploring the experiences of professional rugby union athletes and their unwillingness and inability to express socio-emotional vulnerability. By having a better understanding of vulnerability in rugby and sports, this paper is able to contribute to the growing field of mental health and wellbeing research, particularly towards the emerging themes of resilience and belonging. Based on qualitative fieldwork conducted over a period of seven months across France and Australia, via the mechanisms of semi-structured interview and observation, this work uses the field theory framework of Pierre Bourdieu to construct an analysis of multidisciplinary thought. Approaching issues of gender, sexuality, physicality, education, and family, this paper shows that socio-emotional vulnerability is experienced by all players regardless of their background, in a variety of ways. Common themes and responses are drawn to show the universality of rugby's pitfalls, which have previously been limited to specific demographics in isolation of their broader contexts. With the author themselves a semi-professional athlete, the provision of unique 'insider' access facilitates a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of first-hand athlete experiences, often unexplored within the context of the academic arena. The primary contention of this paper is to argue that by celebrating socio-emotional vulnerability, there becomes an opportunity to improve on-field team outcomes. Ultimately, players play better when they feel supported by their teammates, and this logic extends to the outcome of the team when socio-emotional team initiatives are widely embraced. The creation of such a culture requires deliberate and purposeful efforts, where player ownership and buy-in are high. Further study in this field may assist teams to better understand the elements which contribute to strong team culture and to strong results on the pitch.

**Keywords :** rugby, vulnerability, athletes, France, Bourdieu

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