

16 What If the Secret to Winning Starts Years Before the Game?

The most consequential decisions any organisation makes are rarely the visible ones. They are the structural choices made years earlier, when the return was uncertain and the cost was real, by people who had the conviction to invest before the evidence existed to justify it.

Most leaders understand this in principle. Most organisations behave as if they do not. The incentive structures that govern how performance is evaluated, and how leaders are held accountable, consistently reward the immediate and penalise the patient. The result is organisations that are permanently better prepared for yesterday's challenges than for the ones that are actually coming, not because their leaders lack intelligence or ambition, but because the system makes long-term structural investment look costly in the near term and invisible in its returns.

Sport has forced this question more honestly than most environments have, because the feedback is eventually unambiguous. You either win or you do not. And the programmes that win consistently tend, on examination, to have made structural investments years earlier than other programmes deferred because the return was too distant and the cost too visible. The England women's rugby programme provides one of the clearest recent examples of what that investment looks like, what it costs, and what it eventually produces.

The Morning After the World Cup

England's Red Roses woke up on the morning after their 2022 Rugby World Cup victory with medals still around their necks and a record that, by any measure, demanded examination. A 33-13 victory over Canada in the final. Six consecutive Six Nations Grand Slams. A record thirty-three Test wins in succession. A domestic league widely considered to be the best