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The Role of the Lebanese-Australian Diaspora in the Establishment of Rugby League in Lebanon

Danyel Reiche
Department of Political Studies and Public Administration, American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon

ABSTRACT
The Lebanese Rugby League was formed in 1997 in Sydney when a team comprised of Australian-based players of Lebanese descent participated in an international tournament. The Lebanese national team later qualified for two rugby league men’s World Cups (2000 and 2017). The case demonstrates how diasporas can shape sport development. The accomplishment of the Lebanese team has also given the small country some exposure at the global level. Additionally, since 2002, a new sport has been established in Lebanon, making the country one of the few cases in the world where rugby league is more popular than rugby union. This paper examines diaspora issues including the assimilation of Lebanese emigrants into Australian sporting culture and strategic uses of citizenship. Furthermore, the research sheds light on the ‘glocalized’ development of rugby league in Lebanon by its establishment at private Lebanese universities while it is known in Australia for its working-class origins. There is a relationship of mutual dependence between diaspora and homeland: without its diaspora, Lebanon could not participate in the World Cup, and without domestic development in the sport (which includes, since 2015, also women’s teams), the diaspora would not be permitted to participate in global championships.

KEYWORDS
Australia; citizenship; diaspora; Lebanon; rugby league

Successes of Lebanese Rugby League
This paper examines the role of the diaspora in sport development, focusing on the case of rugby league in Lebanon and the externally driven development of the game at the domestic level. Lebanon qualified for the 2017 rugby league World Cup hosted by Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea from 26 October to 2 December 2017, marking only the second time since 2000 that Lebanon has qualified for the rugby league World Cup. The win against France at the 2017 competition was the country’s first ever win at a World Cup. By advancing to the quarterfinals, Lebanon qualified for the 2021 rugby league World Cup in England.
It is remarkable that Lebanon, a small developing country in the Middle East with a population of approximately six million (one-third of whom are refugees), is able to qualify for a world championship or the Olympic Games in a team sport. For
example, the country has never qualified for the FIFA World Cup in soccer. Basketball is an exception: Lebanon has made three World Cup appearances in 2002, 2006, and 2010 but never qualified for the Olympic Games. Certainly, there is more international competition in soccer and basketball than in rugby league. However, Lebanon is also failing in niche sports. The last time the country won an Olympic medal was in 1980, one of only four Lebanese Olympic medals in the history of the Games. Few Lebanese athletes qualify for the Olympics; the majority of Lebanese athletes who do participate in the Olympic Games are invited by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to ensure the universal and inclusive character of the Games by having representation from developing countries. The vast majority of Lebanese athletes participating in the Games are typically eliminated in the first round.1 While notable examples of national teams comprised primarily of diaspora athletes do exist, such as the Algerian soccer team at the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil that consisted mainly of French–Algerians, the case of Lebanon has unique characteristics.2

The recent success of rugby league in Lebanon is entirely externally driven. Lebanon first qualified for the rugby league World Cup in 2000, which was also the first time a Lebanese team attempted to qualify for the event in history. At the time, the sport did not exist in Lebanon, and the Lebanese national team was completely comprised of Australian-based players of Lebanese descent. Nearly two decades later, the national team still relies on Australian–Lebanese players, but the sport has developed remarkably in Lebanon, a significant feat stimulated by the appearance of the diaspora team at the 2000 World Cup.

Lebanon is the only Arab country that qualified for the 2017 rugby league World Cup, winning two qualifying matches in October 2015 in South Africa against the host country with a squad consisting of 19 players – 16 from Australia and three from Lebanon. Lebanon gained the only available spot at the 2017 World Cup allocated by the Rugby League International Federation (RLIF) to the Middle East/Africa region. Only Lebanon and South Africa participated in the qualification.

The multi-religious Mediterranean nation-state is one of few countries in the world where rugby league is more popular than rugby union, the world’s predominant code of rugby football. Although rugby union is played in Lebanon, the national sports governing body is not yet recognized by World Rugby, the international governing body of rugby union. According to World Rugby, 8.5 million players (3.2 million registered and 5.3 million non-registered) in 121 countries (103 member unions and 18 associate unions) competed in rugby union in 2016.3 A main obstacle to the recognition of Lebanese rugby union by World Rugby, according to representatives from Lebanese Rugby Union, is the slow development of women’s rugby in the country.

As of March 2018, Lebanon is ranked ninth by the RLIF World Rankings.4 Overall, the RLIF lists 62 members on its website with three different membership statuses – observer, affiliate member, and full member. The Lebanese Rugby League Federation (LRLF) is a full member.5 There are no participation statistics on the RLIF website, but according to the General Manager of the Rugby League European Federation (RLEF), there are approximately 800,000 rugby league players in the world – less than 10% of the total number of rugby union players in the world.6
Rugby League and Rugby Union: The Great Split

Unlike rugby union, rugby league is not recognized by the IOC. In January 2018, RLIF was granted Observer Status by the Global Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF) – formerly SportAccord. For the RLIF, this was ‘the first step in the path towards fulfilment of all criteria required for GAISF membership.’ In many countries, recognition by one of these two major global sports organizations (the IOC, GAISF) is a requirement for governmental support. The Commonwealth Games Federation recognizes rugby league but requires further expansion of the sport before including it in the regular program of one of the largest multi-sporting events in the world, historically known as the British Empire Games. A shortened format of rugby league, rugby league nines, was included in the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, Scotland, and in the 2018 Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia, as an exhibition tournament. Discussions over whether to include rugby league nines as a medal sport in the 2022 Commonwealth Games were ongoing at the time of this research.

Rugby league developed in the late nineteenth century in Northern England as ‘part of the symbolism of northern working-class history and identity’. Rugby league separated from rugby union over the dispute between amateurism and professionalism in 1895, a ‘showdown over payment for play,’ according to Tony Collins in Rugby’s Great Split. Since splitting from rugby union, rugby league has allowed compensation for the loss of working time (‘broken-time payments’) that ‘sought to place the working man on an equal footing with middle-class players.’ In 1905, the English Rugby League Federation, otherwise known as the Northern Union, officially allowed professionalism. One year later, rugby league developed into a separate sport with reduced team sizes (13 players instead of 15) and completed the ‘transformation of the Northern Union game from a professionalized version of rugby union into a separate and distinct sport with its own rules and playing style.’

Apart from the externally driven domestic development and the larger relevance of rugby league compared to rugby union, another unique characteristic of rugby league in Lebanon is the social composition of Lebanese athletes. In most parts of the world, particularly rugby league powerhouses Northern England and the Australian states of Queensland and New South Wales, the sport is popular among working-class people; however, rugby league and rugby union in Lebanon are not used by their supporters to identify class positions, and the traditional “union_middle class/league_working class” dichotomy does not apply to Lebanon. Rugby league is mainly played at elite Lebanese universities and schools while rugby union is played at private high schools. The challenge for both sports is to expand beyond the cosmopolitan, middle, and upper classes of the Lebanese population.

Major Topics in Lebanese Diaspora Research

How can the assimilation of Lebanese emigrants into Australian sporting culture by the adoption of rugby league, a sport unknown in Lebanon until recently, be explained? Is the establishment of a Lebanese national rugby league team driven by the Australian–Lebanese diaspora proof of dual Lebanese–Australian identity or
instead the strategic use of two available citizenships? Which role did the diaspora play in the recent establishment and rise of rugby league in Lebanon? This work relies on both rugby league and Lebanese diaspora academic literature. To better understand rugby league’s history, particularly its socio-economic context, a main source utilized is Collins’ book *Rugby’s Great Split: Class, Culture and the Origins of Rugby League Football*. There also exists a rich body of academic literature on the history of the Lebanese diaspora. Hourani and Shehadi study the mass emigration that occurred during the Lebanese Civil War from 1975 to 1989. Abdelhady examines Lebanese communities in New York, Montreal, and Paris. Other studies discuss the impact of the Lebanese diaspora in countries such as Australia and the Gulf states. Arsan’s work analyzes the impact of the Lebanese diaspora in several West African countries: Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Guinea, Benin, and Mauritania. Comparative studies such as Truzzi’s contrast Lebanese emigrants in Brazil and the United States. Koinova compares the Lebanese and Albanian diasporas. Another study focuses on the role of entrepreneurs within the Lebanese diaspora.

A major topic of Lebanese diaspora research is the diaspora’s influence on their new home countries through various means, including the globalization of Lebanese food, the portrayal of the homeland as an important theme in artwork, or the conversion of locals from Sunni to Shi’i Islam. There is also the reverse phenomenon of the new environment shaping the Lebanese diaspora by an alteration of some practices and values, an aspect relevant to this work. Other important diaspora aspects to consider are homeland relations and different forms of engagement with Lebanon, such as tourism, remittances, and participation in Lebanese elections. Some emigrants do not leave their home country permanently. Khater, for example, discusses the phenomena of return emigration.

The history of rugby league in Lebanon is a virtually non-existent topic in academic literature with the exception of one chapter in the book *On Being Lebanese in Australia*, edited by Tabar, Noble, and Poynting. The book chapter ‘Wogs and Bulldogs’ discusses why Lebanese–Australians became interested in rugby league, a sport unknown in their home country until recently, and particularly how the popularity of the team Sydney Bulldogs within the Lebanese–Australian community can be explained. Important sources for this research also include a survey of articles in Australian, Lebanese, and international newspapers as well as websites. Interestingly, the website of the LRLF is entirely in English, revealing the extent to which the sport is dominated in Lebanon by diaspora peoples who attended English-language schools and universities. Apart from those secondary sources, primary data for this research were collected through nine interviews. Some sources were interviewed on more than one occasion. Interviews were conducted with Lebanese Rugby League (LRL) officials and other sports authorities in the country, as well as coaches and players. Both the former and current Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the LRLF were interviewed. The former CEO was the first person to hold the position and played a key role in establishing rugby league in Lebanon. At the time of this research, he served as the General Manager of the RLEF. The director of athletics at the Lebanese American University (LAU) was interviewed as well as the
head coaches of the women’s and men’s rugby league teams at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Both AUB and LAU were essential in establishing rugby league in Lebanon. An AUB student interviewed is one of the few Lebanon-based members of the Lebanese team. The chairman of the Lebanese Rugby Union Federation provides insight as to why rugby league is more popular than rugby union in Lebanon, and a member of the Lebanese National Olympic Committee discusses the inclusion of both sports in the Lebanese sports system. An interview was also conducted with the director of the Institute for Migration Studies at LAU who lived in Australia and specializes in researching the Lebanese–Australian diaspora.

The main purpose of the interviews was to learn the respondents’ views on the driving forces behind Lebanon’s rugby league development, specifically the role and motives of the Lebanese-Australian diaspora in this process. The chosen format of asking a series of open-ended questions allowed a more fluid interaction between the researcher and respondents while providing a multi-perspective understanding of the topic by not limiting respondents to a fixed set of answers. Furthermore, as a professor in Lebanon since 2008, the author has experienced first-hand the topic under study through regular interaction with rugby league officials and players and attendance at national and college games.

**Diaspora-Driven Development**

When Lebanon first participated in the rugby league World Cup in the 2000 tournament held in Great Britain, Ireland, and France, the sport was non-existent in the Mediterranean country. The national team was completely comprised of Australians of Lebanese descent. Lebanon qualified for the World Cup by competing for the first time in a qualifying tournament in 1999 with five other countries (Canada, Italy, Japan, Morocco, and the United States) for only one available spot at the World Cup. When the Lebanese team won the tournament, it was a watershed moment in rugby league for Lebanese in Australia. Qualification for the World Cup happened only one year after the Lebanese team played their first friendly match in 1998, defeating Japan 52-28. While the BBC marked this match in 1998 as the beginning of the LRL, the CEO of the LRLF insists that the roots of LRL go back to 1997, when a team comprised of Australian-based players of Lebanese descent participated in Sydney in the World Sevens, a rugby league pre-season sevens tournament. Two brothers from Sydney, John and George Elias, were among the initiators to put together a team from the Lebanese-Australian community.

The popularity of rugby league among Lebanese-Australians is surprising since research shows that immigrants tend to participate in sports they (or their families) are familiar with from their countries of origin. For example, there is a study about the underrepresentation of immigrants in German handball. Tabar, Noble, and Poynting state in their book *On Being Lebanese in Australia: Identity, Racism, and the Ethnic Field*:

Unlike many immigrants from the Mediterranean and elsewhere that have maintained soccer as their preferred code of football in Australia, the Lebanese-background communities in Sydney, particularly around Canterbury-Bankstown, have enthusiastically
followed rugby league, the predominant and culturally ‘mainstream’ winter sport in New South Wales (NSW).  

According to Collins, rugby league development in Australia and Britain shares similarities: in both countries, the sport became ‘an arena for conflict between its middle-class leaders and working-class players and spectators.’ In Australia, links between the new game, the rise of the labour movement, and the rights of working-class players were even more explicit. Examining emigration patterns from Lebanon to Australia, particularly immigrants’ geographical spread and predominant social class, helps to better explain why rugby league became as popular as it did among Lebanese–Australians.

There are an estimated 250,000 Lebanese–Australians, approximately 70,000 of whom were born in Lebanon. In Australia, 75% of Lebanese–Australians are concentrated in NSW, the hub of rugby league, most of whom reside in the state capital Sydney. According to Monsour and Convey, ‘Although some Lebanese families have become very wealthy, Lebanese in Sydney are disproportionately concentrated among the unemployed and low-income families.’

Sports writer Mike Gibson states, ‘Newcomers from Lebanon became as passionate about the game as those working-class Australians whose efforts had spawned it early last century’. The professional rugby league team Sydney Bulldogs, based in an area in which many Arabic-speaking immigrants live, is the favourite team of Lebanese–Australians. On the Sydney Bulldogs fan day in October 2014, ‘Hijab-wearing women lined up for autographs’. According to Tabar, Noble, and Poynting, ‘The bulldog is a well-known symbol of Britishness, but among rugby league football fans in Sydney it signals Lebaneseness’.

Hazem El Masri is one of the greatest all-time stars of the Bulldogs. Born in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, he migrated to Australia during the Lebanese Civil War at age 10. After his arrival in Australia, El Masri played soccer, but

... growing up around Belmore, like most Lebanese kids, I found myself getting along to cheer for the Dogs ... I was like every other young kid in the district. Belmore Sports Ground was our Mecca. All I wanted to do was to play for Canterbury.

El Masri played for the Bulldogs from 1996 until 2009. The Sydney Morning Herald portrays him as

an openly devout Muslim as a player ... the winger was a pioneering figure during his career, a magnet in attracting others of his faith and origins to the game, and a beacon for social cohesion.

**Image of Lebanese–Australians**

Why do Lebanese–Australians play for the Lebanese and not the Australian team? Two explanations are possible: the first is that Lebanese–Australians identify more with Lebanon than with Australia; the second, more obvious, reason is that the Lebanese-Australians who do not make the Australian NRL team opt to play for the Lebanese national squad to compete at the international level.
The image of Lebanese–Australians in Australia is not always positive; in some Australian media, they are portrayed as criminals. In relation to rugby league, Lebanese–Australian Bulldogs supporters are associated with spectator violence. A newspaper columnist from the *Sydney Morning Herald* stated that the “Bulldog army” supporting the Canterbury club is filled with violence-prone Lebanese hoons. When, in January 2017, four Lebanese–Australian men were arrested in Sydney over an alleged plot to bring down a commercial plane, one suspect was pictured in the media wearing a Bulldogs jersey. Press articles alarmed the public with such headlines as: ‘Bulldogs fan … “planned to blow up 500 passengers on Sydney flight”’. According to a *Guardian* article,

... the worst incident came in 2005, when Australians of Lebanese descent were targeted during the Cronulla riots. Critics of Australian multiculturalism have been known to say, ‘we don’t want to end up like Lebanon’, and in 2016 immigration minister Peter Dutton said it had been a ‘mistake’ to invite Lebanese people into the country.

According to Tabar, Noble, and Poynting, the US terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 and in Bali on 12 October 2002 ‘were followed by demonization of Muslim communities in Australia.’ There is an ‘ongoing salience of the Arab or Muslim Other as the pre-eminent folk devil in contemporary Australia’. ‘I feel the media are against the Bulldogs because half the Bulldogs’ supporters are Muslim,’ stated a Bulldogs fan in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Manifestation of the backlash against Muslims includes incidents of women’s hijabs being torn off in public places. There is also increasing support for the anti-Muslim ‘One Nation’ party led by Pauline Hanson that won four seats in the upper house during the 2016 Federal election. Interestingly, three of the four senate seats were won in the rugby league strongholds of NSW and Queensland.

Although experiences of discrimination might strengthen immigrants’ sense of loyalty to one’s country of origin and descent, there is little indication that playing for Lebanon is a conscious stand against Australia. Firstly, not all Lebanese are affected by anti-Muslim sentiment in Australia. A majority of Lebanese–Australians (62%) are in fact Christian. While the most famous Lebanese–Australian rugby league player Hazem El Masri is Muslim, other successful Lebanese–Australian rugby league players, such as Tim Mannah, are Christian. Certainly, Muslim Lebanese–Australians are a visible group among Sydney Bulldogs supporters, as pictures in media outlets of women in headscarves and Bulldogs shirts show. Many Christian Lebanese–Australians are also interested in following the National Rugby League (NRL); however, they tend to support another club from Sydney, the Parramatta Eels, which highlights a division among Lebanese–Australians, not only in society (the two communities typically live in different neighbourhoods, for example) but also in sport.

‘We have six or seven Muslims [on] the team,’ said Brad Fittler, the coach of the LRL national team at the 2017 World Cup. The fact that Fitter is unaware of the exact number of Muslims on his 24-men strong squad supports the statement of player El-Zbaideh, who is quoted in the *Guardian*: ‘We don’t discuss who’s Muslim, who’s Christian, who’s Catholic, who’s Orthodox – we’re all just Lebanese.”
Secondly, players nominated for the Lebanese national team, including Muslims, do not distance themselves from Australia. Some Lebanese–Australian players, such as Josh Mansour and Robbie Farah, have even played for both the Lebanese and the Australian national teams. Farah, Lebanon’s captain at the 2017 World Cup, has even switched national allegiances back and forth: he played for Lebanon in 2002 and 2017 and represented Australia in between.

**Eligibility Rules in International Rugby League**

Playing for two different countries, like Josh Mansour and Robbie Farah, is possible according to the eligibility rules of the RLIF. Both Farah and Mansour were born in Sydney and have never lived in Lebanon. However, according to RLIF eligibility rules, citizenship is not an eligibility criterion. To represent the country, it is sufficient to have at least one parent or grandparent born in Lebanon. Furthermore, players can change national teams as long as the teams are not both from the ‘Tier 1’ category, comprised of Australia, England, and New Zealand. All other countries are classified as ‘Tier 2’ (full members) and ‘Tier 3’ (affiliate) countries. Lebanon is a ‘Tier 2’ country. The RLIF rules state, ‘A Player is entitled to move between a Tier 1 and a Tier 2 or Tier 3 Nation freely save that a Player may not change their National Team during any RLIF Global Event’. A player has up to three weeks prior to an opening match of an RLIF global event to decide which country to represent. There have been instances in which players were nominated into the preliminary squads of two countries prior to a World Cup before a final decision about their championship appearance was made.

This flexibility in the RLIF rules implies that players such as Mansour and Farah are able to wait and see whether they are nominated for the World Cup by Australia and, if not, compete with the Lebanese team. ‘Country-hopping’ is common practice in rugby league, a sport with more lenient eligibility rules than basketball (FIBA) and soccer (FIFA). The RLIF eligibility rules are, however, controversial. The Guardian commented:

> Opinion is divided between those who believe these rules turn the tournament into a gimmick, and those who believe they are essential to grow the game internationally. Many of the nations that have qualified for this year’s tournament are filled with Australians. When the Kangaroos play Lebanon in Sydney, for example, it will almost be like Australia ‘A’ versus Australia ‘B’.

Collins presented a different view in a commentary for the website Conversation:

> The RLIF decision reflected the fluidity of national identity today. As immigration and movement across national boundaries increases, national and regional identities become changeable and multi-layered … The 2017 World Cup and its diaspora national sides may well point the way to a new model for international representative sport in the twenty-first century.

The fact that players are willing to represent both Lebanon and Australia demonstrates that many Lebanese–Australian players have a ‘dual identity’; this is also recognized by the Lebanese government: ‘Just as it is your duty to be loyal to the nations that took you in and granted you a better life, and which you helped build
... it is also your duty to be loyal to your motherland that calls on you to also help build it’, stated Lebanese President Aoun at the 2017 Lebanese Diaspora Energy Conference.61

**Citizenship of Convenience**

As Spiro writes in *At Home in Two Countries: The Past and Future of Dual Citizenship*, dual citizenship has become a fact of globalization, with a near-universal tolerance. According to Spiro, ‘Dual citizenship increases the strategic use of citizenship on the part of individuals’.62 Related to the world of sports, he coins this phenomenon as ‘Olympic citizenship’, defined as ‘cases in which athletes aren’t good enough for their home-country teams but are good enough for others’.63

A closer look at Lebanon’s squad at the 2017 rugby league World Cup confirms that a vast majority of the Lebanese players were not ‘good enough’ for the Australian national team. Apart from a few stars from the NRL, such as Robbie Farah and Tim Mannah, ‘most of the squad are part-time players,’ playing in lower-tier leagues.64

Dual citizenship allows individuals to enjoy ‘the best of both worlds’.65 However, Lebanese–Australians would not likely compete for Lebanon if that meant they had to give up their Australian citizenship as part of the deal. The Lebanese government cannot provide its citizens with basic services, such as clean water, an uninterrupted supply of electricity, and a proper waste management system. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Australians are more satisfied with their lives than the OECD average: ‘Australia performs very well in many measures of well-being relative to most other countries in the Better Life Index. When asked to rate their general satisfaction with life on a scale from zero to 10, Australians gave it a 7.3 grade, higher than the OECD average of 6.5’.66 Dual citizenship allows Lebanese–Australians to represent the Lebanese team while living in Australia simultaneously: ‘With acceptance of dual citizenship, there is no price at all.’67

Australian-born Robbie Farah, who played for both Australia and Lebanon, said prior to the 2017 World Cup during which he captained the Lebanese team:

> When you think of my parents and my cousins’ parents, they left their hometown 40 or 50 years ago to come here to give their children a better life, but they’ve still got an emotional attachment to their motherland, so to see one of their kids pull on the colors of Lebanon, you can imagine how much it means to our parents.68

The inclusive citizenship laws of Australia have allowed Lebanese immigrants to become Australian while the eligibility rules of the RLIF allow them to represent Lebanon, despite having never lived there. Playing for Lebanon is the second choice for players after Australia, as a remark by the Lebanese coach for the 2017 World Cup regarding the player Josh Mansour makes clear: ‘If he doesn’t get that green and gold jersey, the Cedars will be waiting for him’.69 After being nominated for the Australian squad, Mansour said, ‘There’s going to be a lot of mixed emotions playing against my heritage ... But I am very proud of where I come from, being Australian born’.70
In an interview with the researcher, one of the few Lebanon-based team members on the Lebanese squad that played two play-off matches against South Africa in Pretoria in October 2015 stated that the working language on the Lebanese team was English: ‘When we were socializing with people in South Africa and they asked us where are we from, the Lebanese-Australian players answered Australia, and not Lebanon’.

The careers of players are short. The rugby league World Cup takes place every four years (prior to 2013 it was even more infrequent). Earning a spot on the Australian national team is the most difficult challenge in international rugby league: out of an estimated 800,000 rugby league players worldwide, almost 500,000 practice the sport in Australia. With the exception of Northern England and the Super League (which includes, apart from 11 English teams, one French team), Australia and the NRL with its 16 teams are the global centre of rugby league. If players do not qualify for the Australian squad, having the option to represent another country is a welcomed opportunity for players to participate in one of the few World Cups that take place during their entire professional careers. The player Abbas Miski, born in Australia to Lebanese parents, said in a press interview prior to the 2017 World Cup: ‘I’m playing for my career and I want to play well, but there’s that certain aspect of playing for my parents and playing for their heritage that makes it 10 times better’.

Interestingly, some players stated after being nominated for the Lebanese national team that they hoped to improve the image of Lebanese–Australians in Australia. ‘Over the years, a small minority has really impacted the perception of the large majority of Lebanese people, so we have got a really good chance and a great responsibility to show the rest of the country what Lebanese people are really like, the positive contribution they make to the community, and how genuine and loving they really are,’ stated Sydney-born player Tim Mannah prior to the 2017 World Cup. Robbie Farah made a similar statement in a newspaper article entitled ‘Lebanon’s League Stars Looking to Change Perceptions’:

Without sugar-coating it, there are times in this country that the Lebanese community does get a bad name, and they’ve been in the media for all the wrong reasons. We’ve got an opportunity to be in the media for the right reasons.

These statements clearly show how much Lebanese–Australian players identify with Australia. Players like Hazem El Masri, who spent his early years in Lebanon, have a more obvious connection to the Mediterranean country than players such as Tim Mannah and Josh Mansour, who were born in Australia and have never lived in Lebanon. Mannah said in a press interview prior to the 2017 World Cup that he was planning a first visit to Lebanon after the tournament to ‘... see a bit of where we originate from. I’ve never been there before so it would be a really good experience’.

‘Glocalization’ of LRL

Lebanon’s presence at the 2000 rugby league World Cup did not receive much attention in Lebanon. A British newspaper article quoted a Lebanese journalist under the striking headline ‘Is it Lebanon or Australia?’. The article highlighted the
disconnect between the rugby league team and the country at large. ‘For Lebanese people this tournament means nothing. They have no association with the sport because they never see it and nobody here plays it’. To note, another possible reason for the marginal attention given to the rugby league World Cup is that the event slightly overlapped with the Asian Football Confederation Asian Cup, the continental soccer championship hosted for the first time by Lebanon in 2000, which showcased the rebuilding of the country after a decades-long civil war.

Interest in rugby league has increased over time in Lebanon. There was an extensive coverage in print media, radio, and television on Lebanon’s qualification for the 2017 rugby league World Cup. However, no Lebanese television station obtained the rights to broadcast and the matches could only be seen by those with a subscription to OSN Sports satellite television sport channels. One explanation for the increased interest in the sport could be that the sport is no longer new to the country and has developed at the local level since 2002. Unlike the 2000 team, the 24-men 2017 World Cup national team included one Lebanon-based player, Raymond Sabat (and four more in the 40-men strong preliminary squad), a voluntary commitment by the LRLF. In theory, all players could have been from Australia, but the LRLF wanted to further promote domestic development by exposing local players to the most prestigious international event in the sport. However, the performance gap was so large that Sabat did not make it onto the 17-men strong team (13 players on the field plus four on the bench) during any World Cup match. The coach considered a potential nomination of the local player ‘as a security threat for him’. Funded by an Australian government grant, a group of Lebanese coaches and match officials also travelled to the 2017 World Cup for a series of training courses.

Unlike rugby league powerhouses such as Northern England and the Australian states NSW and Queensland, the working class did not shape the development of the sport in Lebanon. The emergence of rugby league in the Mediterranean country can be framed by the term ‘glocalization,’ which ‘refers to complex interactions between the global and the local in which one borrows elements from the other’. Without ethnic linkage to players like Lebanon-born Hazem El Masri and other players born in Australia to Lebanese parents, interest towards the development of a rugby league sector in Lebanon would have been meagre. Rugby league developed in Lebanon after the diaspora-driven participation of the Lebanese national team in the 2000 rugby league World Cup – El Mazri was team captain and no player on the team lived in Lebanon at the time. The global and the local merged into a new ‘glocalized’ entity when rugby league as a global sport with working-class origins developed at the local, Lebanese level in the environment of private universities.

**Domestic Rugby League Development**

Danny Kazandjian, General Manager of the RLEF since 2010, was crucial in bringing rugby league to Lebanon after the 2000 rugby league World Cup. At the time of the 2000 championship, Kazandjian worked as a freelance journalist covering rugby league. After the World Cup, Kazandjian moved to Lebanon to build the rugby league sport. Though Armenian, Kazandjian has felt attached to the Mediterranean
country for a long time – his mother worked for the United Nations in Lebanon, and his parents were married there. When Kazandjian arrived in Beirut in March 2002, it was his first time in the country.79

Kazandjian’s first major achievement in his attempts to build the sport was the organization of the Lebanese team’s first match in Lebanon in October 2002, two years after Lebanon’s appearance at the rugby league World Cup. The match against France, which Lebanon won, took place in the Northern Lebanese city of Tripoli and attracted 10,000 spectators. It was the first trip to Lebanon for many Australian-born players. Among the team members, six were born in Lebanon, and their participation in the match was contingent upon protection from military conscription.80

A year after Lebanon’s successful rugby league win against France, the Lebanese Ministry for Youth and Sport recognized rugby league as an official sport. In 2009, rugby league was granted federation status by the Lebanese government. This national recognition lay the groundwork for Lebanon’s full membership within the RLEF in August 2011 and the RLIF in May 2012.81

Kazandjian secured a sponsorship deal with the Bank of Beirut worth more than USD$200,000 and a grant of USD$17,000 from the Lebanese government. While the government’s contribution was minor compared with private sponsorship money, it was of major symbolic importance: ‘We felt the country is supporting the game’, Kazandjian stated during an interview on 24 March 2017. In 2006, Kazandjian began working full time for the LRLF, another landmark development for the sport in Lebanon.82

Why did rugby league develop in Lebanon in universities rather than working-class neighbourhoods as it had in Australia and England? According to Kazandjian, this was a pragmatic decision that took into account the lack of rugby league (and sport in general) infrastructure in the country: ‘We had no resources while the universities had the facilities and budget to run a championship’.83

‘Danny walked into my office in 2002 and convinced me to set up a rugby league program at LAU’ remembers the Director of Athletics at the LAU of Beirut. One year later, he became the Secretary General of the LRLF.84

According to the CEO of the LRLF, there are more than 1,000 registered rugby league players in Lebanon.85 There are three rugby league levels for male players: the LRL Championship in which six teams compete – two from Beirut, two from Tripoli, and one each from Jounieh and Mount Lebanon; the Collegiate Rugby League (CRL) Championship, organized in two divisions with 10 teams from six different private universities, two of which – AUB and LAU – are able to field two teams in both divisions; and the Schools Rugby League Championship (SRL), divided into two geographical zones – Mount Lebanon and North Lebanon. The Mount Lebanon area (Beirut and surrounding areas) consists of four schools, and the North Lebanon area consists of three schools. Overall, five schools are private and two are public.86 This composition highlights the unique socio-economic status of the LRL sector compared with rugby league to the international level.

Approximately 10% of rugby league players are women. In 2017, the ‘Junipers’, the Lebanese women’s team, competed for the first time on the international stage. The
match against Italy, held in a soccer stadium in the Lebanese city of Jounieh, received substantial media coverage; approximately 1,000 spectators, including the Australian ambassador, were in attendance. Women’s rugby league in Lebanon started in 2015 when AUB established the first women’s CRL team in the country. Shortly thereafter, LAU established a women’s rugby league program. Two clubs (Jounieh and Lycans) and one school (Jamhour) also started women’s rugby league programs. Unlike the Australian-based men’s team, all players that represented their country in the first international match on 26 February 2017 live in Lebanon.

‘Olympianization’ of LRL

Although men’s and women’s domestic matches draw only meagre crowds in Lebanon, the remarkable attendance at the first national men’s team match held in Lebanon in 2002 and the first national women’s team match in 2017 indicates that there is at least the potential for what Markovits and Rensmann have described as the phenomenon of ‘Olympianization’ of sports; in other words, public interest occurs primarily around major events. ‘At the same time, local and quotidian leagues and games barely draw significant attention and remain well behind the established languages of the respective sports cultures in terms of passion and interest’. The ‘Olympianization’ of the LRL national team goes beyond the country’s borders and includes the diaspora. ‘There were about 1,000 fans in the stadium, a vast majority of them Lebanese,’ a player who was interviewed for this research remarked with enthusiasm regarding the two play-off matches against South Africa in Pretoria in October 2015.

While rugby union is far more popular than rugby league globally, there are approximately only 250 rugby union players in Lebanon as of April 2017. There is a national men’s team for the traditional rugby union version played with 15 players as well as for rugby sevens, played with seven players. Lebanon participated in rugby sevens in the 2014 Asian Games in Korea. While some women play rugby union in Lebanon, at the time of this research there was no national women’s team. According to the chairman of the Lebanese Rugby Union Federation, ‘they [Rugby League] are better organized than we are.’ He cites the establishment of rugby league at the most prestigious Lebanese universities as a prime example. However, two of the most prestigious high schools in Beirut, the American Community School and the International College, have integrated rugby union and not rugby league into their physical education curricula. While there are some players who play both rugby league and rugby union, according to the chair of the Rugby Union Federation, there is not much interest by the Rugby League Federation to cooperate with the Union Federation. ‘League and Union are different sports,’ remarked the AUB rugby league head coach during an interview with the researcher.

Rugby league development in Lebanon emanates from a mutually dependent relationship between global and local elements. ‘If I hadn’t gone to Beirut,’ says Kazandjian, ‘there wouldn’t be a Lebanese rugby league project.’ But, he continues, ‘I would have never gone without the 2000 World Cup appearance.’ The Lebanese–Australian players inspired Kazandjian to bring the sport to Lebanon.
He emphasized that ‘there would be no Lebanon in the World Cup’ without the development of rugby league in Lebanon, arguing that the International Rugby League Federation would not have accepted the permanent presence of a Lebanese team without a national league. Some of the diaspora athletes who have never lived in Lebanon visited Beirut to help develop the domestic rugby league sector.94

Understanding a sport is similar to learning a language with its own set of rules and particular identity, as Markovits and Rensmann point out in their analysis of how sports reshape global politics and culture: ‘Just like with languages, the early socialization process is hereby decisive, the earlier one learns to speak baseball, soccer, or basketball, the more proficient one is in all their respective complexities and nuances’.95 The CEO of the LRLF was born in Sydney and began playing rugby league at four years of age, and many other key figures in LRL were also raised abroad. The head coach of the AUB rugby league team, for example, grew up in England; the same applies to the Lebanese rugby union chairman who lived in the South of England for 30 years.

It is well known how much Lebanon depends financially on its diaspora. According to the World Bank, in 2015 personal remittances contributed 15.9% (USD$7.48 billion) to the Lebanese GDP.96 However, the cases of the LRLF CEO and the rugby union chairman support the claim made in the literature on the Lebanese diaspora: that apart from financial contributions, ‘they transported people, goods, and ideas more frequently and swiftly between the two worlds and thus brought them closer than they had been before’.97 This includes the transfer of new sports to Lebanon, like rugby league, as well as the adoption of certain concepts of modernity, such as secularization and the promotion of women’s sports in, according to Western standards, a relatively socially conservative country.

Although Lebanon still relies on its Australian diaspora at the national team men’s level, the sport at the grassroots level has grown substantially. Control of the LRLF has also gradually shifted from Australia to Lebanon since its first World Cup appearance in 2000. Lebanese-Australians are, however, still important to the national team. A Lebanese-Australian construction company from NSW, Chalouhi, fully funded the salary of Lebanon’s head coach for the World Cup; other Lebanese-Australian companies have sponsored the team as well.98 However, key strategic decisions are now made in Lebanon. When the head coach of the national team stepped down in April 2017, the CEO of the Lebanese Federation travelled to Australia to interview candidates for the position.99 These instances demonstrate the mutual dependence present between the LRL community and its Australian diaspora.

Setting an Example for a Non-Sectarian Sports Sector

The Lebanese sports sector is dominated by patron–client relationships in which ‘political leaders finance the clubs but expect complete loyalty from the teams, implemented through such practices as choosing their party color as team colors or posting large pictures of themselves in the arenas’.100 Rugby league, however, refuses to associate rugby league with any party or religion, setting an example for a non-sectarian Lebanese sports sector. Rugby league’s stance is further proof of how the
Lebanese diaspora imparts alternative practice in Lebanon. During an interview with the researcher, the CEO of the LRLF stated:

... the LRLF has absolutely avoided sectarianism. We are not linked to anybody. It’s just about pure sports. People offered money. We don’t want to be associated with any group. We rejected conditional sponsorships, such as the stipulation that board members have to be from a specific party. Different parties and blocs approached us.101

Former member of Lebanon’s team, Sami Halabi, wrote in an article entitled ‘Lebanon’s Rugby: Take the Sect Out of the Game’ for the news website Beirut Today:

When I worked as a development officer for a short stint at the [LRLF], one of the largest football clubs in Beirut told me that if we agreed to start a team for their club, we could use the pitch as much as we liked at no cost. Naturally, the Federation and I refused. From the start, Rugby League in Lebanon has been devoid of sectarianism. Instead, the sport developed out of universities and used their facilities to play (when they allowed it).

**Limits to the Spread of Rugby League**

The RLIF promotes rugby league globally through lax eligibility rules for national teams, an approach that deserves critical examination. A result of this leniency is that Lebanon, for example, is represented by athletes who have never lived in the country and hardly speak Arabic. The common practice in rugby league of ‘country-hopping’ (allowing national team members to alternate the country for which they play) turns national allegiance into an arbitrary concept, which could harm the credibility of the sport.

In competing with rugby union, soccer, and other team sports, there may be limits to the global spread of rugby league beyond its hubs in NSW and Queensland (Australia), Northern England, Southwestern France, and Papua New Guinea. It is remarkable that in less than 20 years, a domestic rugby league sector with about 1,000 players in several clubs, schools, and universities has emerged in Lebanon and that public interest in the national women’s and men’s teams have increased to such an extent. However, rugby league still remains a niche sport in the Middle Eastern country, lagging far behind more popular team sports, such as basketball and soccer that have longer histories, stronger infrastructure, and more participants. The main challenge for LRL is to narrow the performance gap between local and diaspora players. Given the small size of the country and player pool, more cooperation between rugby league and rugby union could be beneficial. For example, the seasons of league and union could be coordinated to allow players to participate in both championships, and rugby league players could be recruited for the Olympic sport of rugby union sevens. Both sports face similar challenges, particularly a lack of infrastructure and reliance on football fields, a lack of governmental support and private sponsors, and difficulties in developing both codes of rugby in public schools.102

Future research should examine other cases of diaspora-driven developments in rugby league and other sports. Do national teams comprised of diaspora athletes
stimulate domestic development in the respective sport, as has occurred to some extent in the case presented in this work? Or will diaspora athletes mainly serve the purpose of representation on the international level? How can the eligibility rules of international sports governing bodies be compared? How do these rules affect sport development on the domestic as well as global level? Why do some sports become global games while others remain restricted to certain geographical areas?

This work has provided a case study on Lebanon and the role of the Lebanese–Australian diaspora in the development of rugby league in Lebanon; however, these results are limited to one country. More case studies are required to determine how unique the case of rugby league in Lebanon is and to what extent the case can serve as a blueprint for the development of new sports in other countries as well.

Notes

1. Danyel Reiche, ‘Why Developing Countries are Just Spectators in the “Gold War”: The Case of Lebanon at the Olympic Games’, Third World Quarterly 38, no. 4 (2017), 996–1011.
11. Ibid., 119.
12. Ibid., 154.
13. Ibid., 143.
14. Ibid., 162.
15. Ibid., xv.


42. Ibid., 124.


47. Tabar, Noble and Poynting, On Being Lebanese in Australia, 132.


54. Gorman, ’Lebanon’s World Cup is About More than Simply Rugby League’.


59. Gorman, ’Lebanon’s World Cup is About More than Simply Rugby League’.


62. Spiro, At Home in Two Countries, 139.

63. Ibid., 141.

64. Woods, ’Rugby League World Cup 2017’.

65. Spiro, At Home in Two Countries, 133.


67. Spiro, At Home in Two Countries, 142.


74. Ibid.
75. 'Is it Lebanon or Australia?', Gloucester Citizen, 27 October 2000.
77. Woods, ’Rugby League World Cup 2017’.
88. Markovits and Rensmann, Gaming the World, 38.
95. Markovits and Rensmann, Gaming the World, 18.
102. These ideas were discussed in March 2018 at a meeting of the Lebanese Sports Scholars/ Sports Scholars in Lebanon Network (LESSN) entitled 'Rugby League and Rugby Union in Lebanon – The Promise of a New Sports Culture?'. A summary of the meeting, written by the author of this article, was posted on the network's Facebook page on 12 March 2018, https://www.facebook.com/LESSNetwork/ (accessed 27 March 2018).
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Note on Contributor

Dr Danyel Reiche is an Associate Professor of Comparative Politics at the American University of Beirut (AUB). He graduated with distinction from Leibniz University Hannover and joined AUB in 2008 after working as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Georgetown University. Professor Reiche published *Success and Failure of Countries at the Olympic Games* in 2016 with Routledge.