Inclusive Rugby: research into experiences of racism and classism in elite rugby in England
Executive Summary

Background
Purpose Union was commissioned by the Rugby Football Union (RFU), Premiership Rugby (PRL) and the Rugby Players' Association (RPA) to conduct a series of interviews across the elite game (men's premiership, women's P15s, 7s and national teams) in England to understand experiences of classism and racism. From September to December 2022, a total of 27 interviews with 29 participants were conducted, the majority with players but also some staff and parents of academy players.

Key findings
The perception of the game amongst participants is that rugby is by its nature an inclusive sport: no matter what your size or build, there is a role on the pitch for you. There was also a sense from the majority of participants that once you were on the pitch, no one cared about your background - the only important thing was how well you played. Rugby has the potential to be a great leveller.

The interviews found experiences of racism in every area of elite rugby covered - men's and women's game, national team, clubs and academies. Very often these took the form of inappropriate or discriminatory comments and jokes from teammates, opposition players and coaches. In the majority of experiences, these were described as repeated occurrences rather than one-off incidents. Participants also gave experiences of being stereotyped - for example being placed on the wing because of a perception that black players are faster. These incidents were often attributed to ignorance rather than malice, the understanding being that they were a result of unconscious bias.

Microaggressions such as these made some players of colour feel that they were not welcome in the game, and that they had to conform to a whiter and more middle class culture in order to be accepted. Participants spoke of changing how they spoke, altering their behaviour and hiding part of their identity. Those that remained in the game often credited their thick skin rather than finding an inclusive culture. The research found instances where the club culture led to people of colour and working class people leaving the game.

Experiences of classism were reported far more in the men's game than the women's. In the men's game, the perception amongst participants was that having gone to an independent school would make it far more likely for a player to reach professional levels and generally more likely to stay in the game past age 11. This was attributed to the historic association of the game with independent schools; the ability of independent schools to coach and play rugby due to their resources and timetable flexibility; and the current relationship between clubs and their local independent schools, particularly around coaching and selection. The interviews suggested that this led to an overrepresentation of independent school graduates in the men's game, which in turn may give rise to a culture that can be perceived as elitist and exclusive.

Access to the game was discussed in both men's and women's game interviews. For those who did not play rugby at school - the majority of state schools - access was via the local clubs. Participants from the women's game raised the question of safety when attending these local clubs, as well as practical considerations such

as transport links and kit requirements. These were perceived to be barriers to entry for families from working class backgrounds.

Rates of reporting incidents of discrimination or microaggressions were low among participants. Two fears were cited as preventing reporting: firstly, that the report would have repercussions on their career (for example the coach would perceive the reporting player as a trouble maker and leave them off the team sheet). Secondly, there was fear that leaders would not take incidents seriously. This was attributed in part to the idea that leaders were largely white and would not understand the impact of some of these microaggressions.

The interviews suggest that leadership from non-players plays a crucial role in creating inclusive - or otherwise - environments. Participants felt that there was a lack of diversity in the leadership, and that there was an absence of role models of colour. This was linked to, but not seen as the only cause of, a perceived lack of accountability and support in issues of race- or class-based discrimination.

This is linked again to a common issue raised by senior players of colour: they felt that the twin burdens of educating people about race and racism and calling out racist or inappropriate behaviour all too often fell to them. Stronger, pro-active leadership by coaches and club staff in these areas would help to relieve this burden.

When asked about how they felt about the response of the governing bodies to racism and classism, participants in the main felt that it tended towards the performative. Participants could cite visible initiatives such as Rugby Against Racism, but could not point towards impact on the ground or in their experience.

While racism and classism were experienced in both the men's and women's game, classism was felt more in the logistical and financial barriers to entry for girls looking to get involved with the game. Many female players also felt that the most prominent way they were discriminated against was in the difference in treatment between men and women.

Recommendations
Our research suggests that English rugby is not immune to systemic racism, and has a specific problem with classism due to the historic associations of the men's game with independent schools. Purpose Union highlights six areas where the governing bodies should work together to drive change. It's important that any efforts to drive change are holistic and aim to create environments where all players and staff can thrive.

1) *Strengthen and equip leaders to drive change* - educate and equip non-players to build inclusive team environments, and hold them accountable
2) *Revise and strengthen reporting procedures* - make current procedures clearer, define what can be reported, and humanise the procedures
3) *Improve access to the game for players outside of the independent school system* - for boys and girls, consider expanding current outreach initiatives and building relationships with state schools
4) *Strengthen the women's game* - learn from the growth of the women's game, consider specific outreach to girls of colour, and build gender parity into inclusion work
5) *Build new audiences* - empower existing players of colour and working class players to be visible role models, and build relationships with unreached communities around clubs

6) *Build consistency across the game* - use data to hold leaders accountable, work collaboratively between the governing bodies and the clubs, and include the players - but don't burden them with driving change