The sport of rugby union takes its name from a town in the middle of England. I lived there for a period in the mid-1990s and from the plaque at Rugby School which states how in 1823 William Webb Ellis ‘with a fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his time, first took the ball in his arms and ran with it’, to the museum where you could watch a rugby ball being hand stitched, this is largely what gives this small town its identity. The areas surrounding Rugby are those where association football is, just like in most other parts of the country, the dominant sport. England’s second city, Birmingham, is home to two premier league football teams, and other major football clubs are nearby. Living in the shadow of the association game is a constant of much of the history of rugby both before and during the professional age. Nearby Coventry were once a formidable power in English rugby but by the dawn of the professional age had witnessed years of decline and languished below the top-tier of the game (A. Smith, 1999). Within this chapter I briefly outline the history of the game and then provide a broad overview of where and why rugby matters. This is intended to serve as an introduction to better locate the sport in a wider perspective and provide some context to the discussion that follows.

The origins of rugby union

Rugby union, like its sister code of association football, evolved from the variants of folk football that were a characteristic of pre-industrialized Britain. These games were very much local affairs as each particular
place played their game in something of a splendid isolation. Indeed, confusion over the different rules and terminology were a defining feature of the ‘football’ contests of this period and even after the codification of these games following the ‘split’ of 1863 it was not uncommon for teams turning up to play an association football match to find that their opponents were a rugby football team (Garland, 1993).

Prior to this it was in the public schools of England that the games first became subject to more stringent controls and regulation in the mid-1800s (Dunning and Sheard, 1979). It was at Rugby School in 1845 that the first laws were written down and its origins within the public school system served as a powerful symbol of manliness, masculinity and muscular Christianity (Nauright and Chandler, 1996). These rules were then taken to the leading universities by the students from the school and then as these old Rugbeians graduated and became school masters they were taken to other schools (many of whom already had their own form of ‘football’). This of course is a very short and incomplete explanation of the early development of rugby (as a codified sport) as space does not permit a detailed discussion of this process but the work of social historians clearly outline these developments elsewhere (see especially, Collins, 2009; Dunning and Sheard, 1979; Nauright and Chandler, 1996).

There is little evidence to support the place of Webb Ellis as the central figure in the development of rugby football and in an age where oral testimony held sway it is important to note that Thomas Hughes, author of the influential *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, attended Rugby School in the 1830s and that the Webb Ellis legend had not survived a little more than a decade after the now widely celebrated event was said to have occurred. In 1923 a combined Wales-England team played an Ireland-Scotland team on the very field where Webb Ellis ‘picked up the ball’ to commemorate the occasion and thus further reinforce its status as the significant moment in the birth of the game. Sixty-four years on and the Webb Ellis Cup was the most coveted prize in the game as the sport took what we can now recognize as an inevitable step towards open professionalism.

Whatever the exact sequence of events in the development of the sport of rugby union, and the merits of the claim from those associated with the Rugby School, Webb Ellis has become an important figure in the game. Like many other sports it is hard to clearly define who actually ‘invented’ the game for there is evidence of games with