

One of the Team

A culture based on teamwork, humility, and determination has transformed the World Rugby Specialists Group into a prominent player in the Australian market and on a global scale as the company forges ahead with its aggressive international expansion strategy.

Images by Fullframe Photographics

The adage 'It's how you play the game' is taken to heart at the World Rugby Specialists Group, with its 90 staff treated as teammates rather than as employees.

WRS Group is the parent company of KooGa, Silverfern, Linebreak, Brant Media, and the new, strong-performing brand BLK.

With offices in Australia, Japan, England, Fiji, and the United States, WRS is more than ready to compete on the global stage.

The CEO Magazine spoke to WRS Group CEO Tyron Brant about the team's strong performance through the GFC, the company's core values, and its strategies for the future.

The CEO Magazine: What led you to your current position as CEO of WRS?

Tyron: I was involved at ground level in establishing the company in 1999, and it just grew from there to where we are today. We were playing rugby in the United Kingdom at the time and we brought back some headgear and shoulder pads. We realised there

was a bit of a gap in the market because there was an incumbent brand that basically had 100-per-cent market share. I suppose whenever there's a monopoly in the marketplace, there's an opportunity.

How has your love and involvement in the sporting industry shaped your management approach?

I think that's probably the most exciting part for us. Coming in to work is really a pleasure. We are working with and for some of the most respected sporting teams in the world, and to know that we are producing cutting-edge, high-performance apparel that our partners and their star players actually want to wear gives the entire team enormous satisfaction.

That desire to win, the team ethos, and our underdog status is essentially what drives our business forward and keeps us constantly looking to improve our products and service, and fuels our desire to achieve even greater success.

Just like on the sporting field, we want to win. We treat all of our

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team here as a team. We don't use the words 'employee' or 'staff' around here; we say we're a team. It's the same sort of feeling that you get on the sporting field that we use in business.

Would you say that involvement in sport has significantly influenced the culture at WRS?

Yes, without a doubt—not just personal involvement in sport, but continually being involved with the elite and the grassroots sporting teams. We very much operate the same as a team does, with each member required to be at their best at all times to ensure the whole team is able to achieve its set goals and targets. It all comes down to that same willingness to win.

How do you utilise the global reach and expertise of WRS Group to help you steer BLK?

For us, it's actually the reverse. It's what we've done from BLK in Australia that's actually shaped where we're going to take the business globally. We have significantly increased our global reach and are working towards cementing our place as a significant contributor to the global sports >



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apparel industry. What we've been able to achieve here in Australia—the learnings, credibility, and authenticity of the brand and the group—has certainly assisted us with gaining entry and real traction across international markets.

What are some learnings that you've attained in Australia that you'll apply overseas?

We've made sure that we get the small things right and that we have the best teams in place to achieve our targets. As we are now at a level where we have global reach, our distribution, logistics, and the production of industry-leading apparel are in place along with guarantees that we can have orders sent to the stores, clubs, and teams on time. We're personable and diverse enough to be able to turn things around very quickly to maximise opportunities and provide service and a level of care that our major competitors aren't able to achieve.

What have been your greatest achievements as CEO of BLK?

We're very forward-driven, so we try not to rest too much on our laurels. One of the things in our business that we need to get better at is spending more time celebrating the victories and our achievements; we're always very quick to set off pursuing the next challenge.

Of course, the easy answer is continued growth during the global financial crisis. At a time when a lot of our competitors were struggling and being bought out by multinationals, we managed to remain private without any requirements of capital funding. In fact, we actually grew our business significantly during the GFC, which is something we are quite proud of.

On top of that, I think the thing I'm most proud of is establishing a strong team around me. The guys we have working around us, our

colleagues and teammates, bring significant value to the brand. Establishing a strong core team of people with the same sort of global ambitions has been a proud achievement for me.

How do you engage and encourage that team?

That's something that we spend a lot of time on. From a company perspective, we've emerged from that developing stage where everybody's got their nose to the grindstone, and now it's more about culture and opportunity. We want to make sure that everyone working here and across the WRS Group has opportunities. If it's not for growth within the company, we want to make sure that when they leave here, they're leaving as a better person with increased work skills and career ambition. We put a lot of emphasis on bottom-up and group decisions. Our core values weren't established by an executive team or board; they were created by all involved in the



relationships are 12 years old. We just make sure that when we tell them we're going to do something, we actually do it. As we grow, we make sure that they grow with us. We don't look to squeeze them or try and get better prices at every opportunity. Obviously, we're not so naïve that, as we grow, we have to get better pricing; it's a two-way street. I think the respect we show our partners and colleagues is the same respect that we show our suppliers and supply chain.

As a leader, what is your vision for BLK and WRS Group?

We want to build a global sports brand. If you look at Australian sports brands, there isn't actually a global leader. It's fascinating for me that a nation with so much history in sport and such a culture of sport doesn't have a sporting brand that goes beyond our borders. We want to be that first sports brand that transcends the borders of Australia and becomes a global entity.

We also want to make sure that all involved are rewarded and have an opportunity to grow. It's very important to us that everybody who's involved here feels that they are part of something special.

At the last Rugby World Cup, we flew our whole team in to the head office here in Queensland. We sat down with them and said that there's about to be two billion people watching the World Cup, and out of all the suppliers of the World Cup, we're the only one that's privately owned and has under a billion-dollar turnover. Despite that, we have more teams in the World Cup than any other brand. That was achieved by the 90 people in that room. It's something to be really proud of.

If we can take that vision and apply it to everything that we do, we are going to be in a strong position to achieve long-term success as a global brand. •

“We want to be that first sports brand that transcends the borders of Australia and becomes a global entity.”

- Tyrone Brant

company. They were voted on, everyone had their input, and it was the employees who actually told us what values they held dear as an organisation and what our values would be.

What are your core values?

We've actually established eight core values as a business. One of the first ones we established was humility. I think that is one of the values that is really important to us. We started at the garage level, and now that we've built the brand and had some mild success, we want to make sure that we all stay humble and remember where we've come from.

Innovation is another important value, making sure that everyone who joins the company wants to be part of something special. We want to be innovators, not imitators. We want to continue that competitive nature, so that's another of our values. Everyone here has to have that competitive nature and want to win. A lot of our values are connected to sport, like team spirit and determination.

Communication is another core value, not just to clients but between ourselves and our teams.

The last two values are customer experience and equal opportunity.

How do you pick the right people and shape that strong team?

I think it comes down to our core values. It's something that we're quite strong on during recruitment. We've got to make sure that we've got like-minded people. We've had a lot of people who have come from significant backgrounds who have been willing to take pay cuts to join us because they believe in what we are doing and where we are headed as an organisation. They're fed up with merely being a cog in an engine, and they want to have their voices heard and be part of something special. I think that's one of the things that attract people here.

How do you work with suppliers and strategic partners to achieve success?

Those same core values apply to our strategic partners and suppliers. A number of our

- Quick implementation
- Maximise return on investment
- Save time, gain insight, be in control

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