

Rugby pro shares his MBA study insights

By [Philip van der Walt](#), issued by [Milpark Education](#)

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Philip van der Walt plays professional rugby for the Newcastle Falcons, a Premiership team based in the UK. For the past four years, he has been playing professional rugby while studying for an MBA with Milpark Business School. It's not been easy to juggle it all, and he admits he might have dropped the ball a few times.



Many MBA students work by day and study by night, but not many day jobs involve hours of physical training and performing your work before crowded stadiums. Professional rugby player Philip van der Walt knows how to manage pressure, and he knows how to be single-minded about a goal. Growing up on a farm in Adelaide, in the Eastern Cape was his first training ground. “When I was old enough to hold a shovel, I was loading sand onto the tractor!” he says.

No question, Philip earned his opportunities with hard work; he’s among the coveted few who have turned a passion for sport into a career. But the life of a professional athlete, however distinguished, is fragile and short-lived due to injuries and mental health issues. The Rugby Players’ Association predicts the average Premiership career lasts [seven or eight years](#). For all its status and adulation, it’s a path of great uncertainty, which drives Philip to keep pushing himself off the field.

Philip was playing professionally in Japan when he decided to pursue an MBA at [Milpark Business School](#). Not long after, his wife fell pregnant. Without family to help when their daughter was born, his wife took on the bulk of the caring because Philip couldn’t do much to assist between practice and after-hours study.

Whenever he thought of giving up, he would think of how she had made it all possible for him. “It would mean all that sacrifice was for nothing,” says Philip, “The idea of failure was always worse than pushing on.” Now in the fifth year of his studies, completing his dissertation is the final test in obtaining his degree.

Although playing professional rugby has been a lifelong dream, he’s conscious that this career has a shorter shelf life than most. “I always knew that there would come a stage when I would stop playing rugby,” he says. “There are only so many coaching or TV presenting jobs, and you have to prepare for the future.”

The foundation for his awareness of the importance of academics was laid by his mother, who motivated Philip to study after school, when all he wanted to do was play rugby. After matric, he studied a BCom in Human Resources at the University of the Free State. While there, he was drawn to the idea of using a more holistic understanding of business management.

In choosing a topic for his MBA dissertation, he picked up on his earlier interest, examining what people value most in their

workplaces and what truly motivates them. He explores why money seems to motivate employees less than factors like personal enjoyment and a sense of purpose. These questions have surfaced with urgency as a result to the disruptions to work and life caused by Covid-19. Work-life balance, employee wellbeing, the trade-offs of time and money, and the increased pressure on employers to acknowledge the holistic lives of their employees – these are the relevant themes of today's working world.

If it wasn't for the flexibility and guidance offered at Milpark Education, Philip says that studying wouldn't have been possible. Whether it was postponing assignment deadlines or tests to accommodate international travel or offering extra guidance to help him grasp difficult concepts, the support systems were holistic and robust. He is also grateful to Milpark for providing him with the opportunity to study an MBA despite being an international rugby player with set commitments that dominate his schedule.

While the physiotherapists and wellness coaches on the team knew about his studies, he didn't tell many people about doing his MBA. And although his career meant dealing with many demands, he was well aware that other students have stressful jobs and life circumstances too. The student network he built was instrumental in boosting his morale when things were tough, much like the teams he spent his life playing with.

He recently signed another three-year contract with the Falcons, so Philip has some time to plot his next move. The thought of setting out on an entirely new career path is a little unnerving, but he also knows he's prepared. He's done his training and, when the time comes, he'll be ready for a new field of play.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip van der Walt is an MBA alumni of Milpark Business School.

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