



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – May 2015***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

Here's a really simple one for you at the end of the season... What's your favourite new coaching drill/game that you have introduced since last year..?

### ***Bill from Balloch***

#### ***Hi Bill***

That appears such a simple question but I've had to think long and hard before answering...

One of rugby's core principles of play is 'support' and encouraging players to get into good support positions, quickly is key to how I like to see the game played...

I often use a touch-rugby game as part of my warm-up where a 'tackled' player must **immediately** pop the ball up between his legs. If the ball is caught by a supporting player then play continues but if the ball hits the ground then possession is turned over. This simple game encourages players to support the ball-carrier from behind, to take the ball at pace and to scan for opportunities to attack around the tackle area.

I often then develop this game to one which focuses on decision-making and urgency to and at the breakdown. I may ask the 'tackled' player to go to ground and present the ball in which case the support player might 'pick and go' or simply ruck over and past the ball. I may ask him to look to offload the ball off the ground encouraging the support player to time their run when taking the pop pass. I might ask the ball-carrier to stay up and demand that the support player leaches through the contact. Finally I will open up all of the above options so that the support player must not simply be in the right position but must communicate well with the ball-carrier in order to effect the type of support that is most appropriate to the situation as it unfolds.

With breakouts to focus on technical elements such a simple game can expand into an entire training session... Try it next time you're caught under-prepared and need a fun, active but above all valuable activity with which to work with your players...

I hope that you find it useful, please let me know what your favourite has been too...

Good luck and work hard...



**Ask the Senior Consultant – March 2015**

**Dear Senior Consultant**

It's impossible at the moment to watch a game, listen to a commentator, open a newspaper or read a blog without facing the question 'how do we fix the current problems with the scrum..?' What is your spin on what is wrong with the scrum at the moment and how would you fix it..?

**Pete from Padstow**

**Hi Pete**

I seem to remember responding to a similar question about a year ago and it is of concern that this remains such a newsworthy issue.

I watch rugby at many age groups and levels and I must say that I still see this as an 'elite' issue only. In the community game the scrum still allows for a contest where strength, power, technique and experience may play a role without the need for repeated scrum resets and penalties. At the top of the game however there is clearly still a problem that is eating into the game-time at a concerning rate and damaging the game as a spectacle.

For me this is down to two types of pressure...

- 1) At the highest level rugby is now very much a career and when the livelihoods of stakeholders are on the line through salaries and bonuses etc it is only natural that every avenue will be explored to seek and exploit a competitive advantage.
- 2) Equally, the physical load on scrummaging players is immense and no matter how many reps are performed in the gym the human body cannot always cope with the physical forces applied and is unable to maintain a body position that complies with the laws of the game.

I doubt that there is any 'quick fix' but let me throw out some ideas for comment...

- 1) There will be many simultaneous infringements in any single scrum. Perhaps there should be a clearer hierarchy that determines which is really causing the scrum to fail..?
- 2) How about removing the repeat scrum-option after a free-kick, (afterall possession has been obtained), or making a 'free-kick scrum' uncontested rewarding the attacking side..?
- 3) Why not allow the Assistant Referee to come onto the pitch to police the blind-side of the scrum whilst the main Official manages the open-side..?

Let me know what you think and if you have any suggestions of your own...

Good luck and work hard...

## ***The Senior Consultant***



***Ask the Senior Consultant – January 2015***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

Last weekend my team's opponents opted not to compete at a number of lineouts and instead tried to claim various penalties from a bewildered official... Do you think that this is a good tactic and should I be trying to coach it..?

***Brendan from Bristol***

***Hi Brendan***

I have had the same experience this season and would you believe it, in a school game..!?! I was surprised and disappointed to encounter this in an age group fixture. Aside from all the usual arguments about coaching for player development rather than teaching 'trick plays' to win games I don't coach or encourage this tactic, but not perhaps for the reason that you might imagine... Quite simply, the 'powers that be' don't appear to like this approach and want the lineout to be a 'contest' as it was originally intended. For this reason clarifications of the Laws have already been issued which aim to make it more difficult for the non-competing team to profit and I sincerely believe that if the tactic persists then further changes to interpretations will be introduced. You may therefore enjoy a brief initial gain, (if the official is up-to-speed), but this reward will be short-lived.

I believe that you would be much better served in working on other approaches to resist the increasingly powerful driving lineout that has come back into the game. I may expand upon these options on another occasion but for now let me air another related personal gripe... With the driving lineout being so successful I really would like to see the ball-carrier, who is so well protected at the back of the maul, attach themselves correctly, ie with a full-arm bind. Of late it appears to be sufficient to just retain contact with those in front and many seem to behave like water-skiers behind the maul rather than forming part of it... Applying this condition correctly would still allow a good driving maul to gain an advantage but would help to redress the balance that currently seems to be so heavily weighed against the defending side.

Let me know what you think...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – April 2014***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

I try to attend as many CPD 'Coach Ed' events as possible but can you suggest any other sources that I might use to increase my repertoire of coaching ideas..? Have you got a freebie for me..?

### ***Billy from Balloch***

### ***Hi Billy***

It's great that you're continuing to develop yourself as a coach and that you're open-minded enough to seek ideas from others. Aside from formal CPD events I would encourage you to go and watch other coaches in action, perhaps at a local club playing at a higher level or even at representative sessions if the organisers will permit you to observe. I find that most coaches are incredibly open to share their ideas and whilst you may not agree with everything that you see it will often spark a train of thought on how the idea might be adapted to work for you and your players.

Coaching materials are increasingly appearing all over the internet, some free and others via subscription-based sites. I recently found the below game variant that I am sure I have seen before but seeing it in action again reminded me of just how useful it can be as a warm-up exercise...

A touch game is played where the ball-carrier looks to keep the ball alive with a pop-pass off the ground. A condition is imposed that at each touch tackle every other player must perform a 'down-up' before re-entering the game. Aside from being an excellent conditioning tool, with players up and down every few seconds, it also encourages a high work ethic from the support players who are nearest the ball-carrier and importantly it rewards runners who scan to see who might be regaining their feet slowly or who has left a gap in the defensive line. This is a really high intensity game though so limit it to two or three minute bursts, perhaps repeating it at the end of the session when players are fatigued and the gaps become wider and more widespread.

Never be ashamed to 'borrow' someone else's idea - we are all coaching magpies at heart - but also try to add your own 'spin' to make the exercise your own and to tailor it to suit what you are specifically trying to achieve with your players in any particular session.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – March 2014***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

With pitches finally starting to firm up after an extraordinarily wet winter I would like to get my team to play more of an offloading game. Where should I start..?

### ***Charlie from Chichester***

### ***Hi Charlie***

In the simplest terms there are two indispensable components for an offloading game, players must have the motor skills necessary to get the ball to where they want it to go whilst under significant pressure and there must be someone there to receive the pass / offload...

The first of these necessities is best rehearsed in a conditioned game with the amount of pressure and competition for the ball gradually increased. You may for example start with an 'offload touch' game where the only thing the ball-carrier needs to do is ensure that he gets his hands free of the touch-tackler and deliver an accurate pass out of 'contact'. At the other extreme, a full-on game might be played where possession is turned over if the ball-carrier is brought to ground. These two extremes, and all the iterations in between, will hone the players' ability to deliver an accurate offload under pressure and in a game-like environment.

To address the second fundamental (ensuring that support is present) I often use a 'turnover condition' whereby if a support player is not present, or doesn't get into a good position within a set amount of time, then the ball is given to the opposing team. Competitive players hate to see the ball turned over like this and you will quickly see an improvement in the urgency of support.

One final point to bear in mind is that the offload will not always represent the best option. I use the latter 'support urgency' game with the first arriving player given the option to receive a pass or offload, to leach onto the ball-carrier or to act as the first ruck cleaner according to how the ball-carrier has managed the initial contact. By all means practise each scenario in isolation to refine technique, but in the heat of the battle it will often be the decision-making process and the understanding between the ball-carrier and the support player that will most influence the outcome.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



***Ask the Senior Consultant – February 2014***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

I've got a 17-year-old lad who I want to play for my senior team; is this allowed..?

***Dave from Doncaster***

***Hi Dave***

The RFU publish very clear guidance concerning 'playing out of age group' and in the first instance I would refer you to their website ([www.rfu.com](http://www.rfu.com)) so that you can be sure that whatever you do remains in line with current RFU regulations.

Aside from simply conforming to regulations though I would be inclined to ask why you want the player to be playing senior rugby early..? There may of course be a valid reason for this but you should be mindful that this is to the ultimate benefit of the player rather than for the team or club.

Players develop at different times and at different rates, both physically and emotionally, and personally I am not keen on removing a player from his age group unless there is an overwhelming justification for the move and all parties involved, (parents, school, club, team-mates and possibly even opponents), concur that this is the correct course of action.

Though the player may be approaching the end of his school or youth rugby-career he is still in the early stages of his overall rugby-life and I would prefer him to continue to develop alongside his peers for as long as possible. Whatever you decide I would take this opportunity to politely remind you of your 'duty of care' and to reinforce the RFU's statement that 'the ultimate consideration must be for the welfare and safety of the player and those with whom the player will be playing'.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – January 2014***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

I am about to embark on another Coaching Course, what advice would you offer to ensure that I derive the maximum benefit from such..?

***Colin from Carlisle***

### ***Hi Colin***

Congratulations on making the commitment to continue your personal development as a coach; this alone shows that you recognise that the learning process is never complete and demonstrates that you aspire to be the best that you can be... Well done for that..!

In terms of 'advice' I would highlight the following as significant...

- 1) Understand why you want to take this next step in your coach development and be clear about what you expect to get out of the process...
- 2) Remain totally open-minded and ready to consider the opinions of others at all times; coaching is an art and not a science and one-size rarely fits all...
- 3) Take away what you find most useful, adapt it, improve it and implement it in a manner that is of most benefit to you and to your players...
- 4) Review the coaching course from all angles; technical content, coaching delivery, learning environment, coaching aids etc and consider how you might use/improve on these...
- 5) Even at the end of this particular course/stage, have a think about what might come next...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – December 2013***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

I've tried pleading, begging, insisting, threatening and shouting but attendance at training is falling away as the festive season approaches and my sessions are becoming frustratingly ineffective...

### ***Harry from Harrogate***

### ***Hi Harry***

I truly share your pain and my first piece of advice is not to take the drop in numbers personally... You must continue to prepare sessions of a high quality and to deliver them with equal enthusiasm to those you ran on balmy late summer evenings, but I do understand that a vicious circle may develop if those who do train feel unfulfilled as a consequence of the non-attendance of others...

The first piece of advice I would offer is to be realistic with your session objectives and to have a really positive back-up plan prepared in case numbers do not meet your session requirements or if a key player doesn't attend. This will ensure that you never appear to be unprepared and that those that do make the effort to attend always derive some return for their investment.

Secondly, I would encourage you to look at 'sub-unit' work, so if the full 1<sup>st</sup> XV pack doesn't make it then you are ready to work on back-row moves or front-row binding/engagement or 2<sup>nd</sup> row lineout delivery for example. Players can easily 'fill in' for the odd missing position and the experience will often raise their awareness and make them more sympathetic to the tasks expected of others.

Finally, even with severely depleted numbers, a session can be massively productive if it used to work on the real technical detail of a particular core skill. Often in early season training technical coaching can be a casualty when simply keeping everyone meaningfully occupied becomes the priority and these mid-season evenings present a great opportunity to work with much lower coaching ratios and to really drill down into the detail that is most relevant for each of the players.

Positive, educational sessions are invariably rewarded with improved attendance in the New Year.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



*Ask the Senior Consultant – November 2013*

***Dear Senior Consultant***

I heard a TV commentator recently describe the collisions in a modern, top-level rugby match as being of a similar ilk to that encountered in a car crash... Is it time for a rethink before someone gets seriously hurt..?

***Lenny from Leamington***

***Hi Lenny***

I've heard that analogy too and I'm sure that the modern GPS sensors that top players now regularly sport would back up the assertion evidentially. Few things are genuinely 'new' in rugby but I do think that there has been a genuine level-shift over the last ten years in the energy encountered at the collision area. Crudely put, it is not so many years ago that the big guys couldn't run that fast and the fast guys just weren't that big... I have commented before that as 'momentum' is equal to the product of mass and velocity the advent of huge backs and quick forwards is resulting in massive momentum at the collision.

I believe that there is a genuine risk that 'the game for all shapes and sizes' might become 'the game for all shapes and sizes, as long as they're above 2m and 125kg' and with injuries contributing to top-flight player careers getting shorter and shorter I do believe that the sport has some work to do, at the very least to exercise a duty of care to ensure that player welfare is maintained and that the inclusive nature of the sport is not compromised.

I feel however that any effort to limit the size of players involved in the game would not just be entirely wrong but would also be destined to failure. Perhaps the solution is a more subtle one with changes that empower the smaller, more agile participant so that the size of the player is left to self-regulate. Recent changes to the scrum laws for instance may contribute to this with so called 'driving hookers' (or 3rd props...) made to struggle against technically superior strikers, and similarly with the removal of 'the hit' the mega-prop may find himself battling against a slightly smaller opponent who can assume scrummaging positions that afford him an advantage that leads to scrummaging superiority.

I don't think that there's an easy or single solution but subtle revisions to the game rather than draconian regulation changes represent the way ahead, (in my humble opinion)...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



***Ask the Senior Consultant – October 2013***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

I know that you've answered questions before about the refereeing of the 'contact area' but could you possibly 'dumb this down' for me and in particular explain what the official means when he calls out phrases at the breakdown, (eg "Arriver" and "Assist")?

***Colin from Clacton***

***Hi Colin***

I could write a book about this topic but it would immediately be out of date as the breakdown is a 'living thing' with laws, interpretations, tactics and techniques always evolving...Allow me to keep this response as factual as possible and to limit it to the assistance that the official may try to offer. As always I preface this reply with a nod of appreciation to our officials. I have written before of the difficult task that they are required to perform; one that is not always simplified by the law-makers. Please always remember that the official is not there to justify or support the Law, just to apply it...

Most breakdowns start with a tackle and this is key to 'what must happen next'... The tackler has a certain set of requirements once the tackle is complete, (eg he must fully release and move away from the tackled player and regain his feet before playing the ball but he is NOT required to respect the tackle gate). Importantly, the next player(s) to arrive following the completion of the tackle have a different set of requirements imposed upon them, (a critical difference being the need to approach the tackled player through the gate). In an attempt to distinguish between the two the Official may, (though he is not required to do so), identify the arriving player and thus remind him of his obligations. The usual call here is "ARRIVER" indicating that the player is not considered to be the tackler and must therefore adhere to the latter set of requirements.

When a player is involved in the tackle but does not himself go to ground he is not treated in the same way as the primary tackler. In most cases the call here is "TACKLE ASSIST" and this is a warning that following clear release he must respect the gate post tackle. An anomaly exists too when the tackler does not go to ground with the tackled player, (eg when a 'push-down' tackle is used). In this case, a tackle is deemed to have taken place but the player on his feet is considered to be a "Tackle Assist" and as such must again comply with the requirements of the tackle gate.

Whatever interpretation the official adopts at the tackle area their call of "Arriver" or "Tackle Assist" represents implicit advice on how that player must act. If clear calls are made then even if players disagree over their role in the tackle or its' completion, they cannot say that they were not warned... I have aired my views before that the different treatment of 'tackler', 'tackle assist' and 'arriver' makes the game much more difficult for both player and official alike but until this changes we must appreciate the latter's effort to make his interpretation clear and then to react to it accordingly...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



***Ask the Senior Consultant – September 2013***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

There has been much written, and many heated words spoken, about the new protocol for scrum engagement. Do you have anything different to add to the debate?

***Dave from Darlington***

***Hi Dave***

It is still very early to comment on the success or otherwise of the new “Crouch... Bind... Set...” engagement sequence, (and all the new interpretations of the existing Laws), but I’m ready to tentatively nail my flag to the mast in support of the changes.

Most would agree that the removal of ‘the hit’ will have a marked - and positive - impact on the completion rate for the scrum, but for me the more measured approach to engagement has many other benefits too. In past seasons Officials have often explained the tempo that would be applied at engagement during the front-row briefing which led to the two packs trying to anticipate the “Set” call in order to gain an advantage from winning ‘the hit’. Frankly, this was rather like brandishing a starting pistol or saying “ready, steady, go...” This tempo is now much less predictable; the packs must wait between ‘bind’ and ‘set’ (while binds are checked) and there is further subjectivity in the timing between ‘set’ and ‘yes 9’ (while the engagement is checked). I can only see this having a positive impact in reducing the number of ‘early engagement’ sanctions.

Checking the binding and ensuring that the scrum is reasonably stable before allowing the significant push to commence must surely also contribute to a safer and more stable scrum.

Like all ex-players of a certain age I yearn for the return of hookers who hook and scrum-feeds that are not fed and the general slowing down of the whole engagement process will now allow the Official a reasonable opportunity to observe and adjudicate on these ‘technicalities’ rather than trying to apportion blame when multiple misdemeanours took place in the blink of an eye...

We all need to give the new protocols the opportunity to bed-in before criticising them too harshly or celebrating a Utopian solution to all scrum issues but to my eye, the initial signs are positive...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – August 2013***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

As the new season approaches I find that there's an awful lot to cover in a relatively short period. When is the best time to introduce new ideas and concepts? My team is normally attentive but they have their moments when focus is lost; is there any 'rhyme or reason' to when they will learn best?

***George from Gillingham***

***Hi George***

I recently read an article that referred to the concept of 'Primacy and Recency' that may help to point you in the right direction. I'm not able to do justice to an excellent study in just a few paragraphs but the gist of the piece of work was that players are at their most receptive at the very beginning and at the end of a training session. This really made me think as the start and end of my sessions, like most I would wager, tend to be used for warm-ups and cool-downs.

In situations where I can rely on players to warm themselves up thoroughly I now ask them to manage this before the session begins and training gets under way right from the very start. If this is not a viable option then an alternative approach, (and another that I am passionate about), is to use the warm-up as an integral part of the session.

The primary function of the warm-up is of course to raise the pulse, to warm the muscles prior to stretching and to ensure the player's bodies are ready for the activity planned. Additionally though I set myself the task to design a warm-up that delivers a technical element, (albeit subliminally sometimes), that is rugby-related and relevant to the main session content. I also believe that the warm-up sets the tone for the rest of the session and so I am keen to make this as much fun as possible, raising the motivation of the players and ensuring an early focus on the task in hand.

The cool-down is perhaps slightly more difficult to manage in this way but perhaps this is the time to look at the really technical elements that need to be addressed. If performed at low intensity and with exaggerated body movements the dual role of stretching down and rehearsing technical elements may be successfully combined.

I'm not in any way suggesting that the core part of the training session is 'written off' but there is a lot of logic in the 'primacy and recency' argument and focusing on these elements may well ensure that we make really good use of the time available, from the first minute to the last...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – May 2013***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

Continuing the 'scrum theme' from last month, can you help me by suggesting a game or activity that will warm my players up for a scrummaging or general contact session..? They seem to get bored with the usual stretches and then don't focus or take them seriously...

### ***Billy from Bedford***

### ***Hi Billy***

It's really important to get players' bodies ready for a contact session and correct stretching should not be overlooked but in my opinion warm-ups should also be enjoyable and if at all possible involve some technical element, even if this is subliminal, else valuable training time may be lost.

A simple idea that I might employ in this situation is to run a game of 'touch' but with each restart taking the form of a one-on-one scrum between the tackler and the ball-carrier. The coach can control how physical this is, for example starting uncontested and then building the push, but without any 'hook', and always allowing the ball-carrier's team to retain possession. By varying the tempo of the 'Crouch - Touch - Set' the coach can influence how well organised the defensive side may be and the game could also be used to reinforce 5m offside discipline. Attacking decision-making can be practised by mandating the two nearest defenders to also form a one-on-one scrum, allowing them to practise their technique whilst giving the side in possession more gaps to attack.

If the subsequent session is to involve live scrummaging then the game could also be progressed to having the closest two from each side to join the ball-carrier and tackler in a three-on-three scrum, again presenting the opportunity to coach technique whilst retaining the game element.

I strongly believe in getting technical value from warm-ups and who knows you may even find that your stocky inside centre is actually a closet hooker in the making...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – April 2013***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

I'm sorry if this is a predictable question but with the current heated debate about problems with the scrum and how it is ruining the game I wondered what your perspective might be..?

***Bobby from Bradford***

***Hi Bobby***

Indeed it is very difficult to engage in any rugby related conversation at the moment without this topic coming to the fore... Trying to remain objective I have considered what has changed of late to make the scrum such an issue and why this is really only seen at the elite end of the game.

At the elite level, players are becoming more powerful than they ever were and in general front rows seem to be getting taller which must have an impact on the dynamics of the scrum but we are not going to be able to influence these developments and in my view the main issue (for there are surely many contributing factors) is a result of the scrum engagement process.

Listening to scrum coaches I hear the same instructions time and time again... "win the hit..." and "get across the gap..." being the most prevalent, but ask any Official and he will tell you that 'the hit' does not exist in the Law book and in my view it is this which creates the paradox upon which other problems develop. So what is 'the hit' and why does it contribute to such regular problems..?

When 100-plus-plenty stone of red team scrummagers line up against an equivalent mass of blue team forwards, both honed for power and primed to create an explosive clash, all initiated by an official's audible signal an immensely powerful and mechanically complicated collision occurs. But what comes next..? The answer is the requirement to absorb this impact and not to push until a further trigger is pulled, this time when the half-back feeds the scrum. We are basically expecting each scrum to accelerate like a Formula 1 car, impact with an equivalent tank-like vehicle with minimal damage, stop and then drive forward with the immense torque and power of a tractor.

With these two opposing vehicles each comprising of eight separate components, with thousands of moving parts, and each with the ability to make individual decisions (and errors) is it really any surprise that the scrum tends to fail..? Add to this mix the other significant variables, ground conditions, tight shirts, scrum-half feeding, inconsistent 'pauses' from officials, physical expressions of emotion from players, competitive tactics from coaches, the value of the scrum penalty compared with simply retaining possession etc etc and it is easy to see why there may be problems.

No-one wants to de-power the scrum but most would like to see a competitive pushing contest rather than a futile elk-like butting display that will surely end in tears for player and spectator alike.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – March 2013***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

I'm really struggling to get players at my club, even from the 1<sup>st</sup> XV, to consistently pass accurately. Can you recommend a drill that will fix this..?

***Francois from Frinton***

***Hi Francois***

I am regularly approached by coaches asking for a 'killer drill' that will solve their current coaching dilemma but I'm sorry to say that these just don't exist... It's really important to recognise that the game or exercise that you employ is really just a tool to get your players to regularly attempt the skill that you are trying to develop and that it is your role as coach to identify errors and to suggest corrective actions for the individuals concerned.

Faced with your situation I would probably construct a game that encouraged frequent passing whilst taking away as many other variables as possible, for example I might play touch rugby where players may only carry the ball for a maximum of three seconds. You are unlikely to need to award many turnovers as a result of this condition as instead players will look to make more frequent passes, (which in turn can be used to encourage better support running).

If practical, I would try to work with at least one other coach so that individual players may be removed from the game - without interrupting the flow - for individual advice on grip, ball position, hand/wrist mechanics, follow through etc. If common issues are observed across the group then the game could be stopped, the technique discussed, demonstrated and perhaps practised for a short period before returning to the game.

Understanding why the inaccuracy or inconsistency occurs and being able to work with the player to improve is the real skill of the coach. Couple this fault ID and error correction with a bank of games or exercises that create an environment for the particular skill to be repeated under pressure and observed by the coach and you will swiftly start to see improvements.

I hope that you will try this and let me know how you get on...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – February 2013***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

Hi Doc, I'm a player in a Level 9 Club and I just wanted to ask your opinion on how much 'full-contact' training you think should be done during the season..?

### ***Nick from Newcastle***

### ***Hi Nick***

Yours is quite possibly one of the most frequently asked questions that I come across in discussions with other Coaches and one that truly divides opinion.

Most Club Coaches will 'periodise' the season, (break it down into cycles), and tailor the degree of 'contact work' accordingly and it is of course massively important to manage the physical load imposed on the player base. I have read that for every one hour of full contact training an extra 24 hours of rest/recovery is required, and that can be tough to fit into any training schedule.

There is a 'but' though and one team that I coach genuinely appears to need an occasional Tuesday night 'blow-out'. With no disrespect intended, at Level 9 one of the coaching challenges most often faced is motivating players to come to training in the first place and I do believe that if they need this periodical 'physical release' then it is incumbent on coaches to afford this to them.

I have completed training sessions where my 'coaching objectives' have been met in full but which have left the players unfulfilled. In contrast a 'big bosh' session may leave me worrying about player availability for the weekend but will have players leaving the training paddock with a smile on their faces and keen to train next week.

I suppose therefore that this will always remain an area of major subjectivity and 'moderation' is perhaps the key word to keep in mind. I would just suggest that player motivation is not overlooked before blindly adopting important 'sports science' advice.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – January 2013***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

Following on from Pete's question last month and your reply has there also been a change in the management of players who go 'off their feet' at the breakdown? Some Officials appear to be applying a different interpretation here to what 'being off your feet' actually means...

### ***Donnie from Dundee***

### ***Hi Donnie***

Once again there has not been any Law change here but I agree that certain top-class Referees do appear to be tightening up here and not before time in my opinion. I believe that there are problems with the Laws at the breakdown at the moment but there is so much to be gained from simply stopping players going off their feet beyond the ball.

Quite aside from the obvious 'flop' beyond the ball that is relatively easy to spot and ping I regularly observe three other 'techniques' being employed that are in my opinion illegal and intended solely to slow down and impact on the quality of opposition ball.

- 1) 'Spidering' is a term that has entered the rugby vocabulary. It refers to the technique of 'crawling' on all fours over and beyond the ball at the breakdown. Players who adopt this technique are not supporting their own weight and should be penalised.
- 2) The 'flop and bounce' where players initially go off their feet beyond the ball before quickly bouncing back to a stong Jackal position also presents a difficult obstacle for the attacking side to deal with and again the act of going to ground beyond the ball should be penalised, even if the time spent off feet is short; the damage has often already been done.
- 3) When the Jackal makes no attempt to lift the ball from the ball-carrier and instead rests on his forearms, 'clamping' the ball to the ball-carrier and seeking nothing more than a 'not releasing' penalty is in my view cynical and does nothing to promote the flow of the game.

Whether or not you agree with my views and interpretations perhaps the most disturbing aspect of each of the above is a) that they are clearly 'coached techniques' and b) that they are all so negative, intended only to slow the game rather than to encourage attacking play from quick ball.

The breakdown will always be a contentious area but once again I believe that many of the issues may be addressed without any need to resort to Law changes...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – December 2012***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

Watching the 'top of the game' on TV this season it seems that the time allowed for a 'scrum advantage' to materialise after a knock-on or forward pass is being reduced. Has the Law changed..?

***Pete from Purley***

***Hi Pete***

I too have noticed the slight difference that you refer to. There has certainly not been any change to the Laws affecting this area but it is possible that 'guidance' on the Referee's interpretation has been reviewed.

Law changes are still relatively unusual but attempts are made from time to time to improve the flow of the game by subtle variations to how particular facets of the game are managed by the Officials.

Whatever the source, I am wholly in favour of this particular nuance that we have both picked up.

Firstly, it reduces the number of scrums that need to be set and whilst the management of the scrum perhaps requires a separate and more significant review the shorter advantage is a practical way to minimise the time that is currently being eaten up by the scrum restart.

Secondly, for a relatively minor offence provided clear safe possession is attained by the non-offending team then the broken field counter-attacking opportunity presented is often better than a scrum set-piece where all players are correctly repositioned in defence.

Thirdly, and particularly in the Youth game where the set-piece can often be one-sided, a scrum restart is not necessarily an 'advantage' and does not produce the clear possession that might normally be expected to arise.

In short, I like to see the 'scrum advantage' kept short so we can all 'play on' wherever possible...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



**Ask the Senior Consultant – November 2012**

**Dear Senior Consultant**

I read Ravi's question last week about the breakdown and I sympathise massively with his dilemma over the officiating of this area. My players can be ill-disciplined at times and get particularly upset when they perceive that they are being treated unfairly at the breakdown. It might be a tough question, but can you offer any advice as to how I might manage this deteriorating situation..?

**Brian from Braintree**

**Hi Brian**

Though I do sympathise with your situation I always promote maximum respect to the Official and my major piece of advice here would be to ask your players to 'bite their tongues, back off and learn to deal with it'... Dissent of any kind is unacceptable and quite frankly in all my years of playing, watching, coaching and refereeing I have never seen any positive outcome when a player questions what an Official has interpreted from what he has seen.

One practical suggestion that I employ from time to time in game-based practise is to have one or two players in bibs, (flankers are generally a good choice...), and to allow them to 'cheat' at the breakdown by coming in at the side, not releasing the tackled player, not rolling away etc etc. When the teams are aware that the Referee/Coach is not going to penalise these infringements they tend to adopt a different mindset, and instead of gesticulating and moaning they get on with finding a way to counter the action of the offending player(s).

Let's face it, in our matches there will be many occasions where the Laws are broken, most instances will be seen and penalised but some, (hopefully not too many), will be missed or misinterpreted. By practising 'dealing with it' you may find that your team play more to the whistle and also become more effective in the marginal cases where the call may go either way.

I would reiterate that this 'cheat's charter' is to be used sparingly and in a manner so as to encourage your team to 'deal with it' and not as a license to push the boundaries for your next matchday Official...

Good luck and work hard...

**The Senior Consultant**



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – October 2012***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

My team are repeatedly infringing at the breakdown often getting 'pinged' for coming in at the side or 'through the gate-post'. I'm not sure what to do about the former and I'm not even sure what the latter really means. Can you offer any guidance..?

### ***Ravi from Runcorn***

### ***Hi Ravi***

The breakdown is a tough area to officiate and it is important that our players do not commit blatant offences as it is often these that are spotted by the Official resulting in frustrating penalties for the coach and team alike.

The 'gate-post' is not an official term but is often used to indicate the extreme edge of the 'gate', right at the point where the Official must exercise discretion as to whether or not a player has joined legally or not. If players approaching from the side can make a change in direction to head 'North' as they enter the ruck it will appear more legitimate and less liable to sanction. Players approaching 'diagonally' may end up in the centre of the ruck and feel that they have entered through the gate but may be deemed to have infringed by joining at or beyond the corner (gate-post) of the gate.

In terms of coaching advice, a simple suggestion would be to ask players joining the ruck to do so from 'over the ball'. When well presented, the ball is normally fairly central in the breakdown and joining by first passing over the ball will negate 'side entry' calls on by far the majority of occasions. A massive fringe benefit of this approach is also that the arriving player can scan and identify the most immediate threat to the ball and attempt to counter such. All-too-often players join the ruck just looking to make a big impact on the closest opponent without first assessing who is really challenging for possession. Coming in over the ball with chin-off-chest, scanning for major threats and then dealing with them should lead to very effective ball retention at the breakdown.

A further small point to conclude with; we all coach clearing players to ruck 'low to high' but I would also encourage them to drive from 'in to out' ie attacking the centre of the opposition ruck and attempting to deconstruct it from the inside.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



**Ask the Senior Consultant – September 2012**

**Dear Senior Consultant**

So the new season is upon us and we have first sight of the new Laws and their interpretation. Do you have any early comments to make..?

**Tim from Tonbridge**

**Hi Tim**

Let me pick out two of the changes for early comment...

**Scrum Engagement**

Whilst there only really seems to be an issue with the scrum engagement at the very top of the game I am delighted that what I have called 'the redundant pause' has been binned. Under the old engagement sequence, what were players doing after the 'touch'..? They were pausing and awaiting the invitation to engage... Further delaying the engagement by telling 16 pausing but primed players to 'pause' was senseless, and the varying length of the pause was the cause of many of the 'early engagement' offences in my opinion.

It's very early but from what I have heard to date I am not the only one who likes this change.

**'Use it or lose it' at the Ruck**

Once again I'm in favour of this change as the 'centipede' rucks that were being built to protect the Receiver had become an absolute farce. I do have some concerns though over the potential subjectivity of when the 5s count should begin. The Law states that the Official should call 'use it' when the ruck is won and the ball is available, but what does 'available' really mean? What if the side in possession casually place a leg or body over the ball on the ground, is it then available..?

There has always been some subjectivity over when the ball is 'out' of a ruck; a common phrase I hear is that the ball is *out* when the Receiver's hands are on the ball and the ball is off the ground, whilst others judge the ball *not out* if the Receiver is still having to dig for it. I fear that we will encounter similar ambiguity with the *won and available* distinction, but I repeat that I am in favour of the change and I'm sure that consistency will develop over time.

Perhaps we should see how things develop over the coming months before being too definitive either way.

Good luck and work hard...

**The Senior Consultant**



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – August 2012***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

Your last 'Ask the Doctor' article included some interesting comments on the Laws and their interpretations last season. Would you like to make any comment on the changes that are being introduced for the coming stanza..?

***Marek from Marston***

***Hi Marek***

Whenever there are new Laws, directives or guidance notes on interpretations issued my mailbox seems to fill with questions concerning refereeing. I read all of these notes with interest because I believe that Coaching and Officiating are inextricably linked. Without wishing to turn this site into a Refereeing Forum, (there are many others better equipped to manage that), I always pleased to offer another viewpoint or opinion on this key part of our game.

The new variations are interesting and will no doubt provoke much debate, but on this occasion I'd like to concern myself with two of the 'trial laws' that did not make it through onto the statute book.

- 1) Presumably with the intention of discouraging kicking in favour of more try-scoring it was proposed that a drop-goal attempt would be treated in the same manner as any other kick, ie that if it missed and went dead then a scrum would be offered to the defending side at the point that the kick had been taken. Whilst I am no great fan of the 'long drop goal' game that saw Jannie de Beer succeed with 5 attempts against England in the 1999 World Cup, almost unchallenged, I do appreciate the skills required in both the set-up and the execution of this approach and so I am in favour of allowing this attacking tactic to remain unchanged; it is after all much harder than it looks, or else everyone would be doing it...
- 2) A second proposal perhaps intended to encourage attacking play was the suggestion to restrict the scrum-half of the non-feeding team to stay at the line of scrummage until the ball emerged from the scrum, (as is the case in the lower reaches of Youth rugby). Releasing the pressure on the 8 and 9 would no doubt allow more time and space to launch attacks from the scrum but again I am pleased that this proposal was also shelved, though as I have commented before I do not understand why the defending scrum-half is regularly allowed to 'man-handle' his opponent well in advance of the emergence of the ball.

In these two cases then I believe that the conclusions reached after the trial were the right ones. Perhaps in the coming months I will tackle those changes that have been adopted as we start to see what effect they really have on the game.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## **Ask the Senior Consultant – May 2012**

### **Dear Senior Consultant**

For my sins I'm a rugby referee and each year I receive different *directives from above* concerning interpretations of the Laws of the game. I like to poll the opinion of the players that I referee and of their coaches and I would like to take the chance to ask you what has frustrated you over the course of the last 12 months in terms of the officiation of the game..?

### **Billie from Basildon**

#### **Hi Billie**

Firstly may I express my thanks for your commitment to the game, and that of your peers... 'no official, no match' as we are often reminded... I try hard to support referees at all levels and am always anxious to ensure that my comments are not perceived as criticisms of what is a hugely difficult task, so thanks too for the invitation to supply some feedback here...

Rather than wholesale changes to the Laws or major issues, here are some simple off-the-cuff 'gripes' from my perspective, 3 rhetorical 'why..?' questions concerning current interpretations of the Laws and three 'how..?' queries that I feel could improve the spectacle of the game as a whole...

- 1) Why do we allow the scrum-half of the non-feeding team to man-handle and push his counterpart as he moves round to the back of the scrum..?
- 2) Why do we allow the 'guards' of the team in possession of the ball at the ruck to assume an unbound stance in front of the hindmost feet..?
- 3) Why do we allow 'the jackal' to be exempt from the Law requiring 'shoulders to remain above hips' in the ruck..?
- 4) How are we going to grasp the nettle and deal with the whole issue of scrum binds being missed, largely caused by shirt design..?
- 5) How are we going to legislate against the new 'snake maul' that is being employed to shield the scrum-half from pressure when preparing to box-kick..?
- 6) How are we going to deal with the conflict between releasing a player when a tackle is complete without risking this being perceived as the tackled player never being held..?

Please feel free to e-mail me with your thoughts or comments...

Good luck and work hard...

**The Senior Consultant**



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – April 2012***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

This may seem to be a very specific query but I am looking for a way to improve my teams attacking play around the ruck area, particularly when the ball is slow. I just wondered if you have any game variations that you could recommend that would allow me to develop this..?

### ***Sid from Southampton***

#### ***Hi Sid***

One of the challenges that I have found over the years with this element of the game is to create realism without turning the session into a *free-for-all*. If you slow the whole scenario down to allow a detailed focus on techniques then there is a risk that the practise will become unrealistic but equally if you fire players off at each other at full intensity then there is the risk of unnecessary training impacts/injuries and also a lack of clarity over the necessary error identification and correction.

A variant that I utilised for the first time just a week or so ago was a 10-a-side, full contact game but using a 3kg medicine ball instead of a rugby ball. Frankly, this was a bit of an experiment but I was really pleased with the outcomes...

- I did not have to artificially create rucks because the heavy ball precluded attacking wide quickly and encouraged players to attack the ruck fringes.
- The unfamiliar ball really enhanced the players' focus on taking the ball into contact, managing the collision and working on the ground to achieve a good ball presentation.
- The game was played with great intensity but at a much reduced pace allowing the coach and the players to really see where things were going wrong and then how to fix the issues.
- The heavy ball encouraged players to really think about their technique in terms of how and where to carry and added to their focus on 'looking after the ball' in contact.

I'll openly admit that I had never tried this before but I am now thinking through how I can progress this concept because the combination of genuine intensity with reduced pace is one that I believe is quite unique and of immense value.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – March 2012***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

I read in the rugby press that a new 'white card' is to be trialled in this season's Super 15 series. Could you explain how it is to be used and whether you believe that it will benefit the game..?

***Chris from Castleford***

***Hi Chris***

Noting your whereabouts I would imagine that you're familiar with the Rugby League code and the facility for officials at the top of the League game to place incidents 'on report'..? For those unfamiliar, this option is used when an incident of 'foul play' is suspected but which hasn't been clearly seen by any of the officials. Play continues but the incident is marked for investigation after the match and sanctions may be applied according to the conclusions drawn from this review.

As I understand it, the 'white card' is to be used in a very similar way, with incidents of suspected foul play recorded by the official and reviewed later by the 'citing committee'.

I have to say that when I first came across this system in the League game I really liked the idea. Any mechanism that helps to ensure that foul play doesn't go unpunished must be welcomed and will act as a deterrent to potential offenders. My one fear though is that this facility may be used as a 'cop out' by the official, dodging a difficult call in real time and instead passing it down the line to another party. Whilst a verified incident would still be punished, eventually, the effect on the game in question will not have been satisfactorily managed.

I have written before about the yellow card sometimes being used to 'dumb down' an offence and to avoid removing a player from the field permanently rather than for the original intention of penalising 'professional, cynical or repeated' offences.

Whilst generally in favour then I will reserve my final judgement until I have seen how the white card is used in the Super 15 this season. Watch this space...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



***Ask the Senior Consultant – February 2012***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

My team's game at the weekend has just been cancelled because of the threat of a frozen pitch. This is massively frustrating and seems a nonsense to me as we play on pitches that are just as hard in the early weeks of the season. Wouldn't you agree..?

***Brian from Basildon***

***Hi Brian***

I certainly share your frustration and I'm always disappointed when a game is cancelled for any reason but I suppose that conditions will always come into play whilst ours remains a winter sport.

I do believe that there are important differences though between a frozen surface and an early season dry pitch. Most importantly, when a pitch has become muddy and 'cut up' there are often ridges and troughs and even large 'lumps' of mud/grass present. When these freeze they represent a genuine hazard and can cause significant injury when players come into contact with the ground. Additionally, the frozen winter pitch is often slippery as well presenting an unacceptable risk not just to players on the run but also in the set-piece.

Fundamentally we must ensure that any unnecessary risk is removed from our game and just occasionally that may mean that we lose a game or two to the weather. In my view this is entirely justified.

Let's hope that the weather improves soon...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – January 2012***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

I read somewhere that the 'Law-makers' are going to trial a change to the scoring system in rugby. What changes would you make to the Laws to improve the game..?

***Roger from Reigate***

***Hi Roger***

The scrum has come in for significant criticism over the last 12 months so two of my suggestions address this area. The third tackles the 'impossible' job that the Official faces at the breakdown and I also suggest an 'interpretation' that I believe would improve the game...

- 1) Crouch, Touch, Pause, Engage... What are the two packs doing immediately after the Touch call..? Pausing..? Do they really need a separate instruction to do something that happens anyway..? I would completely do away with this superfluous part of the engagement sequence.
- 2) Turnover after a wheeled scrum... If we want to discourage wheeling then why reward the defending side with the put-in if the scrum wheels..? I would apply the Youth laws whereby any deliberate wheel results in a penalty but where an accidental wheel just generates a reset.
- 3) Tackler..? Tackle Assist..? Arriver..? The over-complicated tackle area could be cleaned up and the task of the Official made so much simpler, (and less subjective), if all players at the breakdown were treated the same, ie all must approach through the gate and none may keep hands on the ball if a ruck forms around them.

My personal 'gripe' with the game at the moment concerns players going off their feet beyond the ball. The Laws already legislate for this but it seems to be an area routinely ignored by Officials. When I referee I explain to both teams that I will not tolerate players going to ground beyond the ball and I penalise such aggressively. I find that the tackle area soon becomes far more clean and provided I apply my interpretation consistently then the players adapt to and appreciate this focus.

I hope that the New Year sees the game continue to improve as a spectacle...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – December 2011***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

It's me again Doc... the game that you outlined last month has worked really well in training and I just wondered if there were any progressions or similar game variations that you would recommend..?

### ***Simon from Southgate***

### ***Hi Simon***

I'm really pleased that you found the suggestion useful and that it worked for you and your team.

A similar option which your players should adapt to quickly having played with a defensive overload is to reverse the numbers such that there are now more attacking players than defenders, (repeating the 12 to 8 ratio). I would limit the available width, perhaps playing between the 15m lines or if the numbers are higher between the 5m trams. I would also condition the defence to implement a soft or passive drift defensive scheme, covering the ball and then pushing from 'in-to-out' when the ball is passed between attackers. Once again this has dual benefits:

- The defenders have the opportunity to to practise their drift defence and must be really well organised to deal with the overload. If communication is good then you might be surprised at just how effective the limited numbers in defence can be.
- The attacking players on the other hand must learn quickly that even with extra men it is not simple to just use the overload to go around the outside. In general you will find that your players soon realise that they must first earn the right to go wide by committing some of the defence through the use of a 'short' phase or two before going wide.

Once again you can leave your players to work out the route to success without having to force feed them with your advice. The fringe benefit with this variant is that the attacking players soon realise that they must produce 'quick ball' from the short phase if they are to exploit the temporary loss of defenders at the tackle area and you can then point out ways to improve the pace of recycling.

I hope that this one works for you too...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – November 2011***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

I want my team to practise in a game-like environment but when I try this the session normally descends into a melee of bodies with little meaningful development. Is there anything that you can recommend..?

### ***Simon from Southgate***

#### ***Hi Simon***

The 'game-like' training environment to which you allude is to be highly recommended as it will simulate match conditions in a way that other drills and practises cannot mimic. The secret to success here is how you 'condition' the game, (or put another way, how you change the rules or parameters to achieve the outcome that you seek).

A game-sense practise that I am utilising a lot at the moment is one where the defending team have more players than the attacking side, (perhaps 12 to 8 or a similar ratio). I then condition the defence such that they may tackle, drive and compete in any normal manner, but where they may not play the ball at all. This has dual benefits:

- The defenders have the opportunity to repel multiple attacks and can practise their tackling, rucking and defensive re-organisation in a live environment.
- The attacking players on the other hand are assured of retaining the ball and are provided with multiple phases through which they must try to unlock the organised defence.

All players are active here and the game is close to real conditions yet the melee should be avoidable as the defence cannot turnover the ball. It is important of course to rotate the players so that all have the opportunity to perform in both roles.

A fringe benefit that I have seen emerge from using this exercise is that the defending team learn that they can make ground without the ball and also that they do not need to over-commit to the breakdown in order to defend successfully.

I hope that it works for you and let me know how you get on...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



***Ask the Senior Consultant – October 2011***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

At a recent game I kept hearing the words “Fire” and “Ice” being shouted when tackles were made. I thought that I was *au fait* with rugby terminology but these calls were new to me, have you come across them and if so, could you please elaborate..?

***Gary from Guildford***

***Hi Gary***

One of the key decisions today at the tackle area is whether to compete for the ball or not. If the defending team commit too many players to the ruck then they can be left short-handed if the ball is moved away from the breakdown. Conversely if there is no possibility to win a particular ruck then the best way to defend is often to keep players out and instead have them in the defensive line.

As ever communication is key so that all players react in a co-ordinated way and the calls that you have heard simply inform all arriving players whether the counter-ruck option is deemed to be realistic “FIRE...” or if it seems better to set a defensive formation “ICE...”

The first time I came across the “Fire” call it was being used in a slightly more sophisticated way. Having completed a tackle and hearing the ‘Fire’ call from an arriving team-mate, (who saw the counter-ruck as being realistic), the tackler would release, regain his feet and leave the tackle area but in the direction of the opposition try-line, clearing arriving support players en-route. Whilst this may sound like ‘obstruction’ in an area of heavy traffic with players arriving from both sides it often goes un-noticed and can represent a very efficient route to turnover ball.

As ever making the right decision in the heat of the battle remains key.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



***Ask the Senior Consultant – September 2011***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

With the start of the Rugby World Cup just days away who do you think is going to win and why..?

***Colin from Christchurch***

***Hi Colin***

I'm afraid that I'm not prepared to commit at this early stage Colin but what I would suggest is that how the tournament is officiated will have an enormous effect.

Like most true rugby officianados I strive to support our Officials at every opportunity and will always support efforts to make their role a more realistic one to deliver well. What most players and coaches, (and spectators), seek is 'consistency' so that they can avoid unnecessary sanction and it is this which intrigues me with the Wold Cup looming.

Many eulogise about the differences between the Southern Hemisphere Super 15 and Tri-Nations and the Northern Hemisphere European Cups and 6-Nations but I'm convinced that some of these variations stem from the treatment of the breakdown area. In the South it would appear that laying on top of the ruck like a star-fish, (or 'spidering' as the technique is becoming known), is permissible making counter-rucking virtually impossible with quick, safe ball an almost certain outcome, whilst in the North such action is much more likely to be penalised.

Some may consider this spidering to be a 'constructive' act by the attacking side whilst others will observe that the player is off his feet and not supporting his own bodyweight. Some will suggest that if the spidering player continues to move forward then he is legally clearing at the ruck whilst others will see him as illegally sealing off the ball allowing the opposition no chance to compete for it. I have my own strong opinion on this but will keep it to myself at this stage but I do believe that how this technique is interpreted at the World Cup will have a major impact on the outcome.

Of course, all teams need to be able to adjust their techniques according to the nuances of each individual Official but to me at least this particular matter seems to be much more than a personal quirk. Let us hope that any such issue is dealt with in the early stages of the tournament and does not contribute to any major upset that might spoil what promises to be a magnificent event.

May the best team win...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – May 2011***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

Do you think that the recent popularity of the short format 7-a-side game and its inclusion in future Olympic Games will one day threaten the original 15-man variant..?

***Nick from Nuneaton***

***Hi Nick***

In short, no I don't... The game of rugby as a whole is under pressure to provide a great spectacle, not just to entertain traditionalists but to attract a new and wider audience too and I believe that the game of 7s will play a hugely significant part in meeting this challenge. Just this month more than 100,000 people went to Twickenham to watch the London leg of the IRB World 7s tournament and rugby as a whole will surely benefit from this massively commendable achievement. But rugby still needs real scrums, rucks, mauls and defensive attrition to be a wholly fulfilling phenomenon.

Let me be proactive and ask 'Why 7s..?' In days past, aspiring players were often 'sent on the 7s circuit' in order to gain the fitness necessary to play at the top end of the game, but these days players already achieve these strength and conditioning levels. Some view 7s as taking something of a separate path to the full-sided game and indeed a few players are now specialising in this format only, yet for me 7s is more of a weapon in the armoury for development of the wider sport.

History shows 7s as a great 'training ground' for the 15-man game, just look at the astonishing number of New Zealanders who have first played 7s and then gone on to becoming full All Blacks. In some ways 7s is to rugby what 20:20 is to cricket... a shorter and faster format, perfect for the marketeer, palatable for the newcomer and dare I say sometimes a 'sideshow' to the other entertainment on offer... Just as cricket will always have its roots in test matches rugby will similarly always be played in a format resembling that of the current 15-a-side game. Some Law changes may be needed to rectify current issues and the game will continue to evolve, but it is here to stay.

Make no mistake though, the 15-man game must step up too. A ticket costing 1/3 of the price of one for a single Six Nations match entitles the 7s spectator to watch 44 international games...

Long live both formats...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



***Ask the Senior Consultant – April 2011***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

I follow a National League team and can't believe some of the scores that are being recorded this season. Why do you think that is there such a gap between the top and bottom teams..?

***Jamie from Jersey***

***Hi Jamie***

From your address I'm guessing that we may be talking about National League Two South.., and I too have seen the mammoth points differentials that have been recorded there this season. In fact 5 different teams in this League have recorded 100+ points on 6 separate occasions.

If it were just one club that was continually on the receiving end of these drubbings then it might be more understandable but in N2S 3 different teams have conceded more than 100 points in a game.

I suppose that in the National Leagues, with some clubs now turning 'pro', or at least 'semi-pro', the improvement in strength and conditioning that this affords will make an enormous difference to scorelines, particularly at the season's beginning and end when the ground is hard and fast.

Personally, I do not like to see these heavily one-sided results, particularly at such a high level in the League structure. In my playing days, a margin of 50 or 60 points was a complete annihilation and for a team to record a century of points suggests to me that the two opponents are severely mismatched. With such a disparity I can't help thinking that this must raise safety concerns too.

Promotion and relegation would normally sort out these anomalies but near the top of the National Leagues, where only one Club goes up or down each season it can take some time for the correct League status to be achieved. Similarly the sudden injection, (or withdrawal), of finance at a Club may see wholesale personnel changes which in turn may leave them in what is in practical terms the wrong Division.

Professionalism has done much for our game but there are still a few wrinkles to iron out...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



***Ask the Senior Consultant – March 2011***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

If you were the England Coach, how would you deal with Chris Ashton and his 'Swallow Dive'..?

***Martin from The Midlands***

***Hi Martin***

Let's first congratulate Chris on his fine start to this year's 6 Nations campaign. Equalling the record of six tries in the tournament having only played two games is an outstanding achievement and with his current form who would bet against him owning that record in his own right by the end of April..?

Unfortunately for 'the other Martin' this situation has now been adopted by the media and its treatment will be played out in the full eye of the public making it extremely difficult to deal with it quietly and in proportion to what is actually happening.

As a coach, I have absolutely no doubt that somewhere, someday the Swallow Dive will cause a try scoring opportunity to be missed; as an England supporter I just hope that it is while training for Northampton rather than while playing in the World Cup Final for England...

In truth, Chris simply needs to understand that the try comes first and the celebration, if merited, comes afterwards. I have no doubt that this simple message would have been conveyed in moments in any normal situation but now, having been forced onto the front page, it has been blown out of all proportion and will therefore be much harder to manage.

Let's hope that Chris' next tries for England are scored soon, that he takes ownership of the record for himself and for England but that the celebration is held back until after the ball is grounded...

To coin a phrase 'one Swallow Dive does not make a Summer' but let me take this opportunity to wish England well for the remainder of the 6 Nations tournament and beyond in this crucial year.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



**Ask the Senior Consultant – February 2011**

**Dear Senior Consultant**

Sorry for posing a refereeing question but I feel that it does impact on how I should be coaching my players to behave at the breakdown... Could you please explain in simple terms how the Tackler should react at the breakdown particularly in terms of when and from where he may play the ball?

**Ray from Ruislip**

**Hi Ray**

The breakdown is such a critical area of the game today. Beyond the letter of the Law we must also consider *interpretations* and I must confess that what we see on TV at the top of the game is often a very different interpretation to that which many in the Community game encounter on a Saturday. I wrote in September 2010 about one particular area of interest for me which is the interpretation of the push-down tackle. Consider the below extracts from the current IRB 'Laws of the Game'...

**Law 15 Definitions**

***Opposition players who hold the ball carrier and do not go to ground are not tacklers.***

Despite this definition, the interpretation this season appears to be that a push-down tackle, where the 'tackler' forces the ball-carrier to the floor but does not go to ground himself, is still deemed to create a tackle situation. This is fine, but then we have to consider how the 'tackler' must behave...

**Law 15.4 c) The Tackler**

***The tackler must get up before playing the ball and then may play the ball from any direction.***

So in a conventional tackle, once the tackler has released the ball-carrier, regained his feet and allowed him to play or place the ball he may compete for the ball from any direction, but...

**Law 15.6 c) Other Players**

***Players in opposition to the ball carrier who remain on their feet who bring the ball carrier to ground so that the player is tackled must release the ball and the ball carrier. Those players may then play the ball providing they are on their feet and do so from behind the ball and from directly behind the tackled player or a tackler closest to those players' goal line.***

So in a push-down tackle, again having released the ball-carrier and allowed him to play or place the ball he may again compete for the ball, but is now bound to do so from behind the ball.

I raise these points to highlight just how difficult this makes the situation for the Official to manage consistently and correctly. Surely a unification in the treatment of the two types of tackler would make it more clear for the Official, players and spectators in this complex area..?

Good luck and work hard...

**The Senior Consultant**



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – January 2011***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

What are your New Year's Coaching Resolutions for 2011..?

***Ray from Ruislip***

***Hi Ray***

The Christmas and New Year period provide an invaluable opportunity to sit back and take an arm's length view of how the season is developing. Having undertaken just such a review of the 2010 portion of this season I have vowed to reinstate the following personal coaching goals...

- 1) Focus upon the next game rather than the last...

It is all too easy to spend precious coaching time looking at what went wrong, rather than looking ahead to the challenges presented by the next game. The past cannot be altered, we may learn from it but must look forward to those outcomes that can still be influenced.

- 2) Add value at every session...

As soon as training becomes mundane or predictable then motivation and output will wane. Amateur players invest their personal free time to train and deserve to receive energetic, developmental coaching in return, throughout the entire session and every week.

- 3) Keep training fun...

With the dark, cold, January and February evenings looming it is essential to provide as much incentive as possible to encourage attendance at training. This may be as simple as providing a hot snack after training but enjoyable sessions will have the greatest influence.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



*Ask the Senior Consultant – December 2010*

***Dear Senior Consultant***

With the ground frozen and hard, how much 'contact' should we be doing at training..?

***Ian from Islington***

***Hi Ian***

The severe weather has had a major impact on the playing schedule of most teams but you raise an interesting point about the degree of contact employed in training. Coaches will have differing views about the amount of contact work that is practised in training irrespective of the ground conditions and the frozen pitches simply add another variable into this discussion.

Some will argue that you must 'train as you play' and that full-contact sessions are essential in order to prepare for weekend matches, whilst others will argue that keeping sessions lighter will allow players to 'give of their all' come match day.

Personally, I use a technique referred to as 'periodisation' to plan what we should be covering during particular stages of the season. This may involve an emphasis on core skills and endurance training over the summer, unit work in pre-season, revisiting problem areas as the season develops and taking advantage of breaks around the holiday periods to allow for recovery. Under this regime I rarely plan to engage in significant amounts of contact work just prior to Christmas under normal conditions and so this year's icy ground has had little impact on my existing plans for the season.

The final word must as usual relate to safety. As a coach I try not to ask players to do anything that I would feel uncomfortable doing and as such 'pummelling on the permafrost' is never the order of the day. On matchday of course, the opinion of both teams will be sought concerning the suitability of the playing surface but in the end the go/nogo decision rests with the Official who must be convinced that the surface is safe to play on.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



*Ask the Senior Consultant – November 2010*

***Dear Senior Consultant***

My team run an 'up-and-out' defence reasonably successfully but we are suffering from some indecision about player's roles when a tackle is effected on the ball-carrier. In this situation, should the next defender come in to try to secure the ball or stay out on his man..?

***Harry from Hayes***

***Hi Harry***

That's a really tough question because every tackle situation will be different but let me at least suggest some basics that may lead to the correct decision being made on more occasions...

Importantly, with an in-to-out defence it is essential for the tackling player to go low, ensuring that the attacking run will not continue. Whilst this may leave the offload option open it is less risky than targeting the upper body of the ball carrier or the ball itself.

Once the tackle has been effected, the next defender needs to assess many parameters in a very short time... who has dominated the collision, has the tackle line been broken, does the ball-carrier look capable of offloading, where is the attacking support, how quickly could I join the tackle..?

If the ball-carrier looks capable and intent on offloading then it is probably better for the next defender to stay with the drift and mark the next attacker. If however the tackler has been effective in minimising the offload option then the next defender can probably come in high and target the ball, either looking for a quick 'rip' from the unsuspecting ball-carrier or to 'jam in' on the ball, itself preventing the offload and initiating what should be a winnable maul.

Decision-making such as this is absolutely fundamental to successful rugby and is best practised in game-like scenarios. Drills will hone technique but making the right call in the heat of the action will ultimately have a much greater impact on your success.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



*Ask the Senior Consultant – October 2010*

***Dear Senior Consultant***

My team have trouble co-ordinating and timing the 'pick and go' option often ending up with players getting isolated and losing the ball. Can you suggest any solution..?

***Walter from Wembley***

***Hi Walter***

The 'pick and go' can be a dynamic attacking tool but it is increasingly used these days to 'restart' an attack when the ball has been recycled slowly and the defence has become well set. It is also a useful way to reconfigure and realign when key attacking players have become entangled in the breakdown, (eg the scrum-half). Against a set defence though it is essential that players do not attack on their own and get isolated as you suggest, far more effective is a consolidated drive from two players leaching on to each other, staying on their feet and protecting the ball.

A coach that I respect highly introduced me to the 3Ts, talk, tap and tug... suggesting that the two players taking the ball up should use one of these signals to time their combined drive. Either party can instigate the drive by talking, the supporting player might encourage the ball carrier to go by giving him a tap or the ball carrier might secure the support of his team-mate by giving him a tug. I have found the 3Ts to be extremely effective in getting players to 'pick and go' together.

Another option is a 'two part call'. A common call for the 'pick and go' is "Smash" and I have developed this call with one of my teams to "Smash and Grab". The player intending to pick up the ball first calls "Smash" clearly setting out his intention, but he musn't start the drive until a supporting player has called "and Grab" indicating that he is binding on and joining the drive. The timing between the "Smash" call and the "Grab" call can vary significantly but the combination of calls ensures that no-one goes off on their own.

Whatever the call or communication method employed it is essential that the leaching pair drive dynamically and work together to stay on their feet. The 'pick up and fall over' that we see at the very top of the game, particularly in the closing minutes, is tiresome and needs to be driven out of the game if the last five minutes of every match are not to be lost to dull 'possession rugby' by whichever team holds the lead. It is in my opinion akin to soccer players making no attempt to attack and simply dribbling the ball to the corner-flag. Surely rugby can do better than that?.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



***Ask the Senior Consultant – September 2010***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

With the new Law interpretations this season has the 'Day of the Jackal' now been and gone..?

***Fran from Finchley***

***Hi Fran***

I'm delighted that you refer to the 'new Law interpretations' rather than to 'new Laws' as so many members of the rugby community believe that the Laws pertaining to the tackle area have changed this season when they certainly have not...

The IRB have issued guidance on five areas of the game in total which they believe will allow the game to flow better and to function properly.

Looking specifically at the tackle area, the new guidance simply asks referees to strictly apply the law stating that the tackler who has fallen with the tackled player must release said player before he returns to his feet to compete for the ball. This subtle change redresses the balance at the breakdown by allowing the tackled player a brief opportunity to place or play the ball before he is seized upon by the tackler. I am certainly in favour of this interpretation and advice.

I do not believe that this will spell the end of 'jackalling' though as any player arriving legally through the gate, may still compete for the ball in the traditional manner, (provided he has not been involved in the tackle in any way). I foresee a subtle change in defensive tactics with the arriving player timing his approach to avoid being deemed to have been involved in the tackle but remaining close enough to compete for the ball before the tackled player has had an opportunity to play or place it.

A further 'grey area' worthy of clarification relates to the interpretation of the push-down 'tackle'. If a defender forces the ball-carrier to ground but does not go to ground himself, then he is not deemed to be a tackler and may under one interpretation compete for the ball. However, another construal is that no tackle has taken place, and any player who has not been tackled remains entitled to play the ball without interference, (as long as this is done immediately). I foresee this being tested at the highest levels of the game and I will be closely watching how the match officials deal with this situation under the new guidance.

Interestingly, many of the recent changes and revised interpretations have been implemented to improve the game at the professional level and the IRB themselves note that in community rugby players just want to 'get on with the game'. Whilst there is only one set of Laws, games at Twickenham differ significantly from games in the park, and the onerous task of making a success out of both falls on the match official. We should support them and acknowledge their difficult role.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



*Ask the Senior Consultant – May 2010*

**Dear Senior Consultant**

What are your views on the new 'scrum-time' clock that is appearing on recent rugby coverage and what are the issues behind this..?

**Bob from Brockley**

**Hi Bob**

I'm pleased to see that TV innovations are now being introduced in rugby as they have been hugely beneficial in other sports. At the top of the game the multi-angle match coverage from so many TV cameras has seen a marked reduction in foul-play which can only be good for the game.

The 'scrum-time' clock highlights an important issue whereby significant amounts of playing time are lost re-setting a failed scrum, whether the failure has been caused intentionally or accidentally. Pointing out the problem though is the easy part and it is perhaps more important to consider what should be done about it. I suggest below two simple steps that could immediately address this:

- 1) When the ELVs were still at 'trial' stage Linesmen were rebadged as Assistant Referees. In my opinion it is time for them to begin to 'assist'... The Referee can only ever be looking at one side of the scrum, and inevitably of course it is on the other side that things go awry. If the Assistant Referees were more active, with the Referee covering the open-side of the scrum and the closest Assistant Referee focusing on the blind-side for instance then more misdemeanours would be identified, and more quickly.
- 2) Officials are also in my opinion too lenient, allowing successive scrums to fail before taking any action. Early penalties that punish the offending team would swiftly focus the attention of players, coaches and supporters and if kept in proportion would reduce time wasting.

Match officials have an important duty to try to keep the ball in play for as long as possible, and I know that there are statistics available that show significant differences in the amount of live 'game-time' in matches refereed by certain well known officials compared to their peers. Reducing the number of scrum resets would be a good place to start for those officials who find themselves at the lower end of the game-time league table.

My last word though relates to other time-wasting facets that blight our game as a spectacle. Meaningless 'football-like' substitutions with a minute or two to go on the clock and the endless procession of mini-rucks that seem to occupy the last five minutes of most top games these days are just two more areas that would benefit from some thought and attention from the law-makers.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – April 2010***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

I heard that rugby was recently re-classified from a Contact Sport to a Collision Sport... whatever you choose to call it, there seem to have been more injuries in recent years. Why do you think this is and what can be done about it..?

### ***Will from Westminster***

### ***Hi Will***

I never liked the definition of rugby as a Contact Sport... Surely Boxing is a contact sport, where the primary intention is to make contact with the opponent..? I tell many of my players that rugby is a 'sport where contact may occur'... if we were talented, agile, evasive and quick enough we would score tries without making contact with the opposition at all..!

Returning to your important observation though, in my view the major difference in recent years has been the physical development and conditioning of players. In times past Forwards were big and slow and Backs were small and fast. My basic recollection of GCSE Physics is that 'momentum' is equal to the product of mass and velocity, and so neither the conventional big, slow Forward nor small, quick Back would generate massive momentum in the collision. Now though we have 100kg-plus Backs and Forwards who can sprint, and so the energy in the collision is hugely increased.

I believe that there is a collective responsibility amongst the law-makers, law-enforcers, coaches and players alike to ensure that the physical development of our top players doesn't make the game unsafe or damage the viability of the sport as a whole.

A related physiological issue is that whilst players get bigger and bigger in terms of muscle-mass, the frame supporting this mass and even more importantly the complex joints that hold everything together will not evolve at anything like the same pace and huge strain is therefore being exerted on the bodies of all such players. Once again, I believe that it is the responsibility of all in the game to ensure that rugby remains viable and sustainable such that participants may enjoy long playing careers and injury free retirements...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



*Ask the Senior Consultant – March 2010*

***Dear Senior Consultant***

A friend of mine who is a Referee told me that a recent briefing has encouraged Match Officials to look at the binding of players joining the ruck. Can you explain what this is all about..?

***Sammy from Sutton***

***Hi Sammy***

You are correct that recent guidance was issued drawing the attention of the Referee to Law 16.2 (b), which is reproduced below:

***A player joining a ruck must bind on a team-mate or an opponent, using the whole arm. The bind must either precede, or be simultaneous with, contact with any other part of the body of the player joining the ruck.***

The primary reason for this guidance is to minimise the aggressive clearing out of players involved in the ruck. The advice included video examples where players were clearly not 'rucking' but rather just smashing the opposition in a manner that could easily be seen to be dangerous. As ever with changes in emphasis or interpretation this is likely to cause some disruption and player frustration but with the modern player being so 'physical' it is important to keep safety high on the agenda.

Taking the chance to review the Laws pertaining to the ruck, take a look at Law 16.2 (e), again reproduced below:

***Players must have their heads and shoulders no lower than their hips.***

Next time you see a tackler return to his feet and 'jackal' for the ball, (confirmed as legal in another recent briefing), with a ruck forming around him ask yourself where his shoulders are in relation to his hips... a further guidance note may soon be on the way...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – February 2010***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

There's so much talk at the moment about whether the Fly-half should stand deep or flat... which do you think is best to promote a successful attack..?

***Nobby from Neasden***

***Hi Nobby***

This is certainly a topical issue with various 10s being 'pigeon-holed' and judged according to their ability to play 'on the gain line', but I believe that it's important to consider the player's all round game rather than just focus on this facet . An ideal 10 would be able to manage both formations, and to implement either according to the opposition faced and defensive structure encountered.

The main advantage of a flat alignment is that the defence has much less time to think and adapt to what is coming at them. Changes of running angle, 'moves' and attacking patterns will take place so late that it may be difficult for the defence to react in a timely manner. Clearly this is a big offensive benefit at a time when defences often seem to be 'on top' but never forget that the offence has to be equally agile, both mentally and physically, or the attack will fall down.

An offence that is set more deeply will have much more time to execute their patterns, even if the ball provided is not that quick/clean. Players will have more time on the ball and will perhaps find it easier to get the ball wide or to identify holes in the defensive line. The flip side though is of course that the defensive line will have more time to organise themselves.

Having already said that I would like my 10 to be able to play both ways it is worth thinking about where and when we might opt for each system... A first phase attack in the opposition 'red-zone' may be the perfect time to try the 'flat' formation whereas a broken field attack from a midfield position may be a better time to set up a 'deep' structure. Rugby is rarely 'black and white' and provided teams have the core skills required and communicate well then I believe that there is room in the game for both systems.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – January 2010***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

There has been criticism of the spectacle offered by the game after the ratification of some ELVs and the 'new interpretations' of the tackle/breakdown area. This has inevitably led to conjecture and speculation about further Law changes; what would you change to improve the game at all levels..?

***Eddie from Enfield***

***Hi Eddie***

As so often happens, you have identified one of the major issues within the last few words of your question itself... One of the greatest challenges for the IRB is to settle on a single set of Laws that will work at both Elite and Community level, (and everywhere in between). I still believe that we have a great game and don't need to change too much at all, but having read so much on this topic and having discussed it so widely with rugby friends below are a personal "Top 3"...

### **Regulations**

In my playing days one of the greatest pleasures was grinding down an opponent for an hour before exploiting this groundwork in the last 20 minutes... these days, a tired or 'beaten' opponent is simply replaced with another. I would limit the number of permitted substitutions so that players would tire with the inevitable impact on defensive efficiency and hence try scoring opportunities. Care would need to be taken to avoid player injury and of course the front-row would need special consideration, but for me the 'American Football' approach of throwing on whole new 'teams' is not good for the game. This change might also kill off the 'time-wasting' seen when substitutions are made in the last 15 minutes of most games to 'run down' the clock and interrupt play.

### **Laws**

Perhaps an odd choice but an interesting suggestion that I saw recently was to allow a 'mark' to be called anywhere up to a team's own 10m line. This *may* put an end to the 'kicking tennis' that has been so prevalent in the higher echelons of the game this season.

### **Interpretations**

At the breakdown I would like to see the Law stating that the tackler must release the ball-carrier and return to their feet **before** jackalling, more rigorously enforced thus allowing the ball-carrier to play or place the ball immediately before being seized upon by wannabe Richie McCaws...

Let's not forget that rugby is fully Professional these days though and coaching teams and backroom analysts will inevitably find ways to turn matters to their advantage, so let's limit the experimentation and only fix the very few parts of the game that are actually broken...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



*Ask the Senior Consultant – December 2009*

***Dear Senior Consultant***

I'm having difficulty getting my team to provide enough support to the ball-carrier, particularly in contact situations. Players tend to 'stand-off' and this hesitation is proving to be costly in terms of possession. What can you suggest in the way of training activities to sharpen their support..?

***Mickey from Marleybone***

***Hi Mickey***

I whole-heartedly agree that any delay, no matter how momentary, will have a negative impact on your team's ball retention. This is particularly true now that Referees have been briefed to allow the tackler to compete so aggressively for the ball.

The decision making process as a ball-carrier takes contact is almost instant which implies that the support player's reaction must be similarly rapid. If you think about it though this is a demanding expectation as the support player must first assess what the ball-carrier is doing, how the tackler and other defenders are positioned and what other support is available from his team-mates, and then having assimilated all this data, react 'in an instant'. For this to work in practice it must become 'automatic', almost pre-programmed, so that those essential moments of hesitation are driven out and support indeed becomes instantaneous.

One game-based practice that I regularly implement to address this very point is to play a loaded game, but with the attacking team disadvantaged in terms of numbers, (eg 5 attackers against 7 or 8 defenders). Played on a wide pitch this puts the attacking team under immense pressure just to retain possession and almost removes the decision as to whether supporting players should join the breakdown. Most players react to being undermanned by being more committed and aggressive and the psychological effect of being the 'underdog' will also play a role.

Players should be regularly rotated to allow all to experience both roles and you will find that the hesitation in support swiftly diminishes. Allowing play to continue if there is a turnover will also test your player's ability to convert numerical advantages into scores...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – November 2009***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

With the hard ground in September and October several of my players have picked up early-season injuries. I want to phase them back into training as soon as possible but equally I don't want to push them too hard too soon. Most are good trainers but there are some who use their injuries as an excuse to miss Tuesday and Thursday nights... what advice can you offer ..?

### ***Rikki from Radlett***

### ***Hi Rikki***

The first advice must of course be for the players to be properly assessed by a Club Physio or similar. You are absolutely right in not wanting to rush players back into action too early, as this is usually detrimental both to the player and ultimately to the team and club.

One suggestion that you may find useful is to have the coaching team 'grade' their session plans according to their Intensity (how hard are the players going to be pushed) and to their degree of Contact (full match practice, tackle suits, tackle shields, unopposed etc).

This process often has dual benefits... firstly coaches are forced to examine their own plans and often realise that they are asking too much of players in terms of Contact or Intensity, secondly the Physio can look at the plan and decide which sessions are reasonable/achievable at any point in each player's individual convalescence. For example, everyone should be able to join the chalk-board / video analysis sessions, some may be able to take part in team runs or non-contact sessions, whilst others may just need to skip the high intensity elements.

This will not only allow players to phase themselves back into training at the appropriate time but it may even encourage the 'shirkers' to get down to the Club on training nights and to stay involved with the team...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



***Ask the Senior Consultant – October 2009***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

Though I coach a Senior team I still like to get some 'fun' into my sessions... I'm struggling though with the lineout. Do you have any ideas to take this away from a standard, repetitive practice..?

***Ben from Beckenham***

***Hi Ben***

I too always try to make training fun and making drills/exercises competitive is a good way to start. Though time will still have to be invested in set-piece rehearsals, (especially in the areas of the scrum and lineout) there are always other ways to liven up the practicing of the basic skills involved.

Try playing the following game with two packs competing against each other in a channel maybe 10m wide and 40m long, where each team is trying to 'score' by catching the ball in an in-goal' area at either end. The hooker may throw the ball in any direction but it must be caught by a jumper supported off the ground by two lifters. If successfully caught the ball is quickly placed on the ground and the hooker throws again from that point as the lifting pods move and reform further down the channel. There must be no contact and the hooker must be given 5m as he throws but opposition lifting pods may try to intercept the ball at any point. If the ball is dropped, caught whilst the jumper is on the ground or goes outside the channel then possession is turned over.

This 'game' allows the lifting pods to practise movement, lifting and catching and the hooker to rehearse various length throws. The game invariably ends up being very competitive and played at a rapid pace.

Once mastered, narrow the channel to 5m and play again, then to 3m, and finally to about 1.5m. Your teams will suddenly realise that they are actually practising a conventional lineout, but the competitive angle of 'scoring' by catching in the in-goal area adds the edge.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



**Ask the Senior Consultant – September 2009**

**Dear Senior Consultant**

I simply have to ask before someone else does... what is this 'new interpretation' of the law governing the tackler at the ruck all about and how do you think that it will affect the game..?

**Eric from Epping**

**Hi Eric**

Let's cover the easy part first – the new interpretation of the 'hands in the ruck' applies to all levels of the game and in their own words the IRB Directive states:

Laws 15 & 16

- Providing a player from either side on their feet after a tackle comply with all aspects of Law 15 and have the ball in their hands prior to contact with an opposition player on his feet those players may continue with possession of the ball even if a player from the opposition makes contact with those players in possession of the ball
- Any other players joining the two players contesting the ball must not handle the ball in accordance with Law 16.4 (b). If the ball is not in possession of any player after a tackle and a ruck is formed players may not use their hands in accordance with Law 16.4 (b).

A referee I know quite well gave me this interpretation... "So the first man there gets hands on, he no longer needs to let go when the ruck forms... he can continue to contest the ball with his hands... contrary to our historical understanding of the ruck law... Now, the first man is '*king*' as long as he is there legally and on his feet."

In terms of what it will mean for the game, I envisage three things:

- 1) A good 'jackaller' is going to secure much more ball at the breakdown...
- 2) There will be more penalties awarded against the tackled player for 'holding on'...
- 3) We will see rucks turned into mauls...

The best approach that I can see to help the ball-carrier's team to retain possession is for the ball-carrier to attempt to stay on his feet long enough for his support players to get close so that they may create the ruck before the jackaller can regain his feet and get his hands on the ball. It will certainly be interesting to see how both offences and defences manage this change.

Good luck and work hard...

**The Senior Consultant**



## **Ask the Senior Consultant – July 2009**

**Dear Senior Consultant**

Summer has arrived... what is your recommendation for training during the 'off-season'..?

**Harry from Hampton**

**Hi Harry**

It often appears that there is no 'off season' any more and certainly most coaches now prefer to design a 'periodised' season which runs for a full 12 months, with different emphases placed at various stages of the cycle.

I personally like to divide the 'summer' into the following three phases:

- 1) Active Recovery                      "Recover from all those knocks but stay active..."  
  
Swimming is recommended as are other non-contact sports, particularly those that develop hand-to-eye co-ordination.
- 2) The Fitness Bank                    "Invest now and make withdrawals once the season starts..."  
  
Sets of 300m track intervals, with limited recovery will build deep-rooted stamina that will be invaluable come September. The addition of some anaerobic sessions that develop power and pace are advisable too, but don't neglect balance and evasion work.
- 3) Pre-Season                            "Work on unit and individual skills..."  
  
The weeks leading up to the start of the season are often over-complicated and too intense. Of course some contact work needs to be gradually built in but it is advisable to 'keep things simple' at first and to add to the basics as the weeks progress.

The precise scheduling, mix and balance should be tailored to suit your particular requirements but the pattern outlined above will allow you to reap dividends when the new season gets under way.

Good luck and work hard...

**The Senior Consultant**



***Ask the Senior Consultant – June 2009***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

My team is working hard in training to develop more of an 'offload' style yet we invariably seem to get forced into ruck after ruck. Is there a quick fix..?

***Syd from St John's Wood***

***Hi Syd***

I'm reluctant to ever suggest that there is a 'quick fix' in rugby but there are a couple of very simple things that you might try to improve your team's offloading.

A coach that I frequently work with talks about looking to offload 'before the tackle, during the tackle or after the tackle' in that order of priority. Offloading before the tackle means passing and avoiding the contact altogether and is a laudable goal. Offloading during or after the tackle is about taking the contact 'on your terms' and not accepting going to ground and the ensuing ruck as inevitable. Keeping the hands free and maintaining a strong legdrive through the contact may enable the latter types of offload which can be devastating when combined with a well-timed support run.

The second key point is to utilise footwork as the contact situation is approached. It is a reality that a straight runner attacking an effective tackler will almost always result in a ruck situation. If the ball-carrier can instead use footwork to move the defender around, get him off balance or force him to turn his hips to reveal a 'weak shoulder' then the opportunity for an offload is considerably higher.

Remember too that the offload is not the only way to keep the ball alive. It might be useful to revisit the many other techniques that allow 'continuity' and quick ball... the hit and spin, the screened gut-pass, the rip and spin, the pass off the ground, the early placed ball and a pick and drive etc.

Never neglect the ruck though, whatever your gameplan rucking is an inevitable part of the game and effective ball presentation, clearout and decision making must be practised and perfected.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



**Ask the Senior Consultant – May 2009**

**Dear Senior Consultant**

The ELV imposing a 5m offside line at the Scrum seems destined to become a permanent feature of the game. Does this spell the end for the *Blitz* defence..?

**Craig from Clapton**

**Hi Craig**

Defence has assumed a more and more important role over recent years and certain teams have employed the *Blitz* to great effect. The Blitz relies on great linespeed and the ability to get right 'in the face' of the opposition, pressurising them into a handling error or poor decision. Whilst at scrum-time it's impact does appear to have been diluted by the imposition of the 10m-plus gap between the offensive and defensive lines I certainly don't feel that it will disappear from the game, afterall it remains wholly valid at other phases. As an aside, with Referees rightly focusing on activities at the scrum itself, the 5m line is rarely aggressively policed... when did you last see a penalty awarded when the openside wing or outside centre stole a metre or two..?

An option that I regularly promote, (provided that the team is adequately equipped), is to employ and 'up and in' defence at scrum-time, that does not rely on pure linespeed nor on trapping the inside backs in possession, but rather just forces the play back inside towards the scrum as it breaks up. When performed well, this out-to-in approach cuts attacking options significantly.

As with all defensive systems, for this to work well everyone must understand their role and responsibility and must fully 'buy-in' to the pattern. From such set-piece situations there should be no 'spare man' and the defence simply sets up on their opponent with their outside foot forward, no more than a metre 'outside' their target. When the defensive line advances, it must do so rapidly, together and initially straight ahead, applying pressure on the ball-carrier who should feel that an outside pass may be intercepted. As the tackle line approaches. a sharp in-field change of direction towards the ball-carrier should force them back inside. It is essential that any attempt to move 'outside' by the advancing offence is matched by the defender so that they always maintain a tackling position that starts from outside their opponent.

This is not a simple defensive pattern to employ and does need complete adherence and significant practise but particularly from set-piece it offers an aggressive alternative to the Blitz. One obvious caveat... the best defensive system in the world will not function unless tackling is strong. It is essential to hone basic tackling technique before becoming obsessed with defensive systems.

Good luck and work hard...

**The Senior Consultant**



## **Ask the Senior Consultant – April 2009**

### **Dear Senior Consultant**

I'm a front row player and have recently moved clubs... My new coach uses a totally different method of building the scrum... who do you think should bind to the hooker first, the loose-head or the tight-head..?

### **Phil from Feltham**

### **Hi Phil**

I sometimes wish that there was a 'one-size-fits-all' solution to coaching... particularly at scrum-time, (although many coaches would then be out of a job and I guess there might be a lot of drawn matches..!). The reality is that the infinite number of permutations of body shapes, sizes and strengths within a scrum will dictate what works and what doesn't and of course every coach and every front row player will proffer an opinion... here's mine...

Reproduced below are a couple of extracts from a document that I published on 'building the scrum' which cover the area that you have raised... I would be interested to learn whether you and/or your coach agree, and more importantly whether your scrum improves when you use this sequence...

**Combinations** The hooker and the loose-head work together as a 'ball winning' team, together with the left lock whereas the tight-head is more isolated maintaining the scrum's stability and drive, with support from the right lock. The loose-head and hooker should therefore bind together first.

**Stance** The Front Row should adopt a wide, squatting stance in advance of any instruction from the referee, bending at the knees and rotating the pelvis such that the lower back is concave, keeping straight (parallel to touchline) and level (left and right shoulders at same height). A call of "sit" from the hooker will enable the pack to get ready before being forced to start the engagement sequence.

**Cooperation** 'Working Together' must be the mantra when practising for the scrum. In training, nothing is to be gained from 'beating the opponent' and far greater benefits will derive when players use scrum practices against each other collaboratively to develop their technique and strength. Players should be encouraged to work together to maintain stability and improve core strength whilst experimenting with and developing binds, changing body angles, heights and positions.

**Practise 1 on 1** (Prop V Prop, Lock V Lock, Back Row V Back Row)

**Practise 2 on 1** (Loose-Head and Hooker V Tight-Head, Prop & Lock Vs Hooker)

**Practise 2 on 2** (Prop & Lock Vs Prop & Flanker)

Good luck and work hard...

**The Senior Consultant**



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – March 2009***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

With all the current controversy over England's indiscipline, can you explain what yellow cards are for..? Do you think that referees sometimes 'bottle out' giving 'yellows' when 'reds' are deserved..?

***Terry from Twickenham***

***Hi Terry***

Most referees will quote the same three adjectives when asked to define what constitutes a 'yellow card' offence... professional... cynical... persistent... Clearly, an offence doesn't need to exhibit all three of these to merit a yellow card, any one alone should be enough.

Whilst I will never criticise an individual referee, in my view cards should be considered from the first minute of the game until the last... there are in my opinion too many 'final warnings'...

Moving on to your second point, yellow cards were introduced to punish the 'professional foul' without totally altering the course of a game with a permanent exclusion. Sometimes the outcome appears obvious but there are occasions when referees encounter very marginal circumstances and face a difficult choice between awarding a penalty or issuing a yellow card, or indeed on selecting the colour of the card that is produced from the pocket.

When I put your exact question to a very senior referee last season, he seemed to support officials who erred on the side of caution, asking whether certain 'marginal' offences really merited changing a game so radically, (by reducing one team's headcount). There is a danger here in allowing too much subjectivity to creep in, but before you next question such a decision made by an official, have a think about the grey areas... What action would you take in case of the below..?

# A clear punch that does not make contact with the intended target..?

# A crunching 'tackle' where the arms only wrap and play a part well after the collision..?

# An impact on a player who is off the ground by an opponent who is wholly focused on the ball..?

# Or more light-heartedly... a scrum-half who repeatedly feeds the ball at the scrum..? Surely of all of the above this offence is the most professional, cynical and in today's game, persistent...

One offence that seems to be on the increase at the moment that does alarm me considerably is the 'trip'... this is a dangerous and wholly unacceptable offence that needs to be driven from our game swiftly with firm on-field decisions and stern disciplinary sanctions.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – February 2009***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

Many pundits predicted that the ELV imposing a 5m offside line at the scrum would lead to the return of effective 'backrow' moves and a significant increase in tries but after the inevitable 'settling down' period when easy scores were available the attacking advantage now seems to have waned. Is this just another example of defences being on top or are the moves simply not good enough..?

### ***Kevin from Kingston***

### ***Hi Kevin***

The tries we saw scored from 5m scrums early in the season do seem to have dwindled as defences have restructured and reorganised to nullify attacking options. I still welcome the return of the backrow move from scrum though and I would just ask detractors to consider whether the success rate is any worse than it was from the ubiquitous 'kick to the corner' of recent seasons?

As ever I believe that a look back at the basics will have a greater impact on the conversion ratio than the design of a more imaginative yet perhaps over-complicated move. Let's first understand the objective of the move... usually a mismatch is sought, either in numbers or in personnel.

Though the defending scrum-half still has several options, most continue to shadow their opposite man around the side of the scrum. Promoting the tighthead side, even marginally, can create the mismatch that most moves look to exploit, with the defending scrum-half chasing shadows and his backrow colleagues on the back foot. A quick pick-up from the Number 8 will present many attacking options, with forwards running down the 10 channel or creating extra men to the right.

With well organised and pacy defences though this may not be enough and I would encourage a wider attack down the 12 channel, (or even the 13 channel), which will stretch the defence further making it more likely that a weak inside shoulder will be exposed and potentially exploited.

A quick pick-up, pace off the mark and an accurate offload will be prerequisite for the Number 8 who should dedicate time to practising these basics in semi-opposed and fully defended situations.

Defences will always adapt to counter innovation but if the attacking team stay ahead of the curve with outcome-led, simple moves then this is one ELV that does have the potential to achieve the goal of improving the spectacle of rugby, without discouraging traditional skills and tactics.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



*Ask the Senior Consultant – January 2009*

***Dear Senior Consultant***

My team has always pre-called moves from set-piece restarts but our new Coach says that we must abandon these and just 'play what we see'. This is a demanding request... what's your view..?

***Ronnie from Richmond***

***Hi Ronnie***

How much 'structure' a team plays with depends upon many variables, not least the team's ability to observe, interpret and react to scenarios that unfold in front of them. It has certainly become fashionable over recent years for coaches to tell players to 'play what you see' but this approach is indeed demanding and will only achieve the desired outcome if it is genuinely realistic for the group of players involved to operate in such a mode.

Most teams would be best served adopting a combined approach, with a general plan (eg to play one way across the field) whilst retaining the option to deviate from the plan when circumstances demand. This delegation of decision making is essential if a team is to achieve it's true potential but it won't be successful overnight and much work will be needed on the training field focusing on decision-making (under pressure) and reacting as a team as plays unfold.

I wouldn't abandon your 'moves' either, but keep them as a framework of options on which to build rather than as an inflexible, predetermined series of plays. I have seen some awfully complex moves that don't really work after seven or eight attempts in a training environment, let alone in the heat of the game. Multiple runners, lines and angles are great but rather than predetermine who will be the 'dummy' runners and who will actually receive the ball, why not implement some form of signal or call that ensures that the best-placed attacker receives the ball as the chosen option..? Utilising players as option runners rather than dummy runners will sharpen your team's reactions and deceive your opposition far more than a complicated move that attacks the wrong area, simply because that is the way the move was conceived and rehearsed.

Whatever level you play at it is crucial to spend training time working on decision-making... this may not sound like a core rugby skill but in my view good decision making is utterly fundamental to playing successful rugby, and like all other parts of the game it deserves time and attention and must be honed before it may realistically be expected to deliver results.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



*Ask the Senior Consultant – December 2008*

***Dear Senior Consultant***

The TV commentators seem to have learned a new word... 'leaching'... and they're all being rather derogatory about it. What does it mean and why don't they like it..?

***Norman from Northolt***

***Hi Norman***

"Leach", "Latch", "Buddy", "Snake" are all terms referring to the same thing... put simply, it is the practice of a supporting player binding onto the ball-carrier as he/she approaches a tackle or contact situation, to add momentum to the impact and to help protect the ball.

Those criticising the technique believe that it limits the ability of the ball-carrier to use footwork and that it is somewhat negative in that it makes the impending collision 'inevitable'. It is used a lot around the edges of the ruck when 'slow ball' has developed to try to add new impetus to the drive.

Whilst I accept these arguments, I do believe that when used in the right situation and when implemented correctly, it is still a valid attacking tool. Whilst we should all be looking to avoid 'contact' wherever possible, in the real world of rugby these collisions do happen and surely entering into them on advantageous terms is a sensible approach?

Leaching came to the fore when a technique known as the 'double drop' was introduced (originally by the Australians I believe), where the ball carrier would go to ground and the 'leach' would immediately bridge over him, instantly protecting the ball. The current refereeing focus on illegal bridging has negated this somewhat but still the leach can perform a very effective 'scatter rucking' function as they are so close to the ball carrier and know exactly when the latter is going to ground.

I don't like the dull, leaching 'pods' that sometimes stifle the game but equally I don't believe that the technique should be abandoned simply because it is sometimes used in a negative manner. Rather, it should be applied in more appropriate situations, (eg at a 'red zone' lineout where the throwing hooker joins a player peeling around the front to create a powerful 'tram-line' attack on an unsuspecting blindside wing...).

Teams need to have every weapon at their disposal and players must use their decision making skills to select the most apposite one for the game scenario that unfolds in front of them; leaching is just one of these weapons...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



*Ask the Senior Consultant – November 2008*

***Dear Senior Consultant***

My team keeps getting penalised this season for 'sealing off' at the ruck... what does this mean and is it one of the ELVs..?

***Pete from Pudsey***

***Hi Pete***

'Sealing off' is the practise of forming a barrier just beyond the ball, usually in a ruck situation. This has been extremely prevalent for the last few seasons, particularly at the highest levels of the game, where one or more players arriving at the ruck would routinely go to ground and quite literally 'build a wall' to prevent the opposition from competing for the ball...

Preventing a fair contest for the ball has always been contrary to the Laws of Rugby and the change this season is one of 'refereeing attention' rather than of any new law or ELV... Referees have been instructed to look for this offence more keenly and to immediately penalise infringements.

In my view, this new focus was long overdue and it has had a massive, positive impact, helping to 'clean up the breakdown' and to give both teams the opportunity for fast ball.

I believe that there are around 19 offences that may be committed at the ruck area... but if the requirement for 'all players forming, joining or taking part in a ruck to be on their feet' is correctly policed then many of the other 18 will never arise.

This more forceful application of an existing law has made a really big difference and in my view if a few more of the current laws were more vigorously enforced then many of the ELVs would soon appear superfluous and we could all get on with enjoying the game rather than worrying about the various different ELV sets, their consistent application and perceived advantages for certain teams/countries under each variant.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



**Ask the Senior Consultant – October 2008**

**Dear Senior Consultant**

Could you please offer some advice on 'counter-attacking'..? My team always seems to take the wrong option ending up with a player isolated with all his team-mates in front of him..!

**Andy from Acton**

**Hi Andy**

Well, you've already identified one of my 'golden rules' for counter-attacking in your question...

1) Attack where the defence isn't...

'Attacking Space' is fast becoming a cliché but with defences often 'on top' these days it is important to target an area of the field where the defence is at its weakest. However, this doesn't always mean just heading straight for the open space as defenders will often be able to drift to cover. The first attacking movement may need to be towards the area where the defending side are positioned in order to commit them before braking away again to the wide outside...

2) Avoid getting caught behind your team...

It's a pet hate of mine when a member of the back three opts to 'take on the world' and ends up being tackled behind the gain line, the tackle line and more importantly behind his team-mates... Of course, the back three need the freedom to 'go for the gaps' if there is a genuine opportunity to break through but 'playing with your head up' also means knowing when discretion should take over and when a clearance kick may be the best option...

3) Be decisive and trust your instincts...

One challenge facing players starting a counter-attack is picking the right option... my advice here is simply that any decision is better than no decision... How many times have you seen a player think about the kick, then start to run, find himself in trouble and then get hurried into forcing a poor kick away..? Your first thought may well be your best, and your first action will trigger how your team-mates react to support your option, so be decisive and stick to your guns...

4) Be whole-hearted and bring your team with you...

Team-mates will need to believe in you and your chosen option if they are to work hard to get back behind the ball in support. Be clear about your intentions and really 'go for it' so that they know what you are planning, where you are heading and what they might be able to do to help...

Under the ELVs many teams are dropping extra men back to receive the anticipated clearance kick opening up new spaces which may be exploited if the counter-attack is well constructed...

Good luck and work hard...

**The Senior Consultant**



***Ask the Senior Consultant – September 2008***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

I know that all coaches are experimenting with new plays to take advantage of the ELVs, but can you identify one area that presents a real opportunity from which to score..?

***Bill from Brentford***

***Hi Bill***

You're right Bill, coaches everywhere are trying to find ways to steal a competitive advantage from the law changes that are currently being trialled. From what I have seen to date, the most significant advantage, (and one not yet appreciated by all), is the freedom for the scrum-half of the side putting in to the scrum to roam relatively freely within the new 'space' created by the 5m offside lines.

The defending scrum-half is restricted in his movement and must either stay close to the scrum, stay behind the 5m offside line when the scrum is set or retreat directly back from the scrum to a position behind the same offside line. Whilst the attacking scrum-half must of course remain behind the ball/back foot, he may move sideways within the 5m gap between the rear of the scrum and the attacking back line.

If the attacking scrum-half moves quickly away from the scrum he is in an excellent position to receive a wide pass from the Number 8, almost certainly creating an extra man advantage.

Imagine a 5m attacking scrum with all the defence behind the try line. The scrum-half puts the ball into the scrum and then moves to take up a wide position between the scrum and the blindside wing. A quick pass from the Number 8 will give the scrum-half and the blindside wing a 2-on-1 against the defending wing man, with the defending scrum-half confined to the area immediately beside the scrum until the ball is picked up by the Number 8 or forced to retire directly back 5m before sliding out to help the wing defend. If the scrum-half stays behind the 5m offside line from the outset, then a Number 8 pick will again leave the attacking scrum-half in significant space.

Timing will be key and I'm sure that defenses will soon find a method to cut out this advantage but until then it is an attacking situation ripe for exploitation...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



*Ask the Senior Consultant – August 2008*

***Dear Senior Consultant***

Why are hookers never penalised for placing their foot over the line when throwing into a lineout..?

***Wayne from Wandsworth***

***Hi Wayne***

In a word Wayne, 'materiality'... Referees are under instruction to 'keep things moving' and only to stop the game if an offence really 'makes a difference'... I would agree that at 90% of lineouts the hooker steps into the field of play, technically breaching Law 19... and is therefore liable to penalty, but unless he is trying to place the ball in the hands of the front jumper or to steal an extra metre on a long throw, does it really matter or affect the game..? Most would agree that it does not and that we should therefore 'play on'... Personally, I agree that in many cases immaterial offences should be overlooked so that the game is not punctuated with needless stoppages....

One cannot talk about 'Rugby Laws' at present without becoming embroiled with the 'ELVs' but I would prefer to take your theme a little further... On the subject of 'materiality', I have listed up below my ***top 5 most frequently broken laws*** that in my opinion **ARE** usually material and should therefore be penalised rather than overlooked as so often seems to be the case...

Pillars and posts who are offside... I covered pillars and posts in July but take a look at how often they are in front of the back foot of the ruck, often jostling with opponents, but so rarely penalised.

Backrow releasing their bind... As a former Number 8 this one irks me as it is so easy to spot but again is so infrequently pinged, giving a real advantage to the defending side.

The forward pass... I know it is easy when watching the television, with replays etc, but in such a technical game, that is so liable to subjective refereeing and interpretation, surely something as basic as the forward pass should be picked up?

Blocking at restarts... Standing in the way of chasers and turning your back is a cynical as it comes, yet only the least subtle offender appears to be reprimanded.

Crooked feed... I acknowledge that the referee has 99 more important things to look at when the scrum is formed, but call me 'old school', I would like to see a contest at the scrum.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – July 2008***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

I feel I'm getting left behind with all the rugby jargon proliferating at present... You could say, I'm being dragged between pillar and post... Could you start by defining a 'pillar' and a 'post'..?

### ***Erica from Ealing***

#### ***Hi Erica***

I can sympathise... if the jargon wasn't complicated enough, there are often several names for the same aspect or action... Let me start with the 'pillar' and the 'post'.

These terms are most frequently used when setting up a defensive ruck. Assuming that the ruck is 'over' as a contest and that committing more players to the ruck will not stop the ball being won by the opposition, the next player to arrive generally takes up a position directly behind the ruck to organise, make calls and to defend against a pick and drive through the heart of the ruck. The next two players arriving often assume a position immediately either side of the ruck, (probably blind-side first, open-side second). These two players are the 'pillars' or alternatively the 'guards'. Their principal objective is to defend the sides of the ruck from a close drive and they will generally turn their hips towards the ruck area. The next arrivals adopt positions slightly wider and either side of the 'pillars', these are the 'posts', also known as the 'body-guards'. These two have two roles, (at least), to defend outside if the ball is moved away from the ruck but also to be available to support the pillars if the attack remains close. It really doesn't matter what you call these players, as long as everybody knows their role and precisely what is expected of them... One of these days I will compile a glossary of 'jargon' but for now, here are a few more definitions...

**Leaching (or Latching)** This phrase simply refers to a support player binding on to the ball-carrier before he goes into contact with the opposition, adding momentum, weight and width to the attack and making the job of the defensive tackler more difficult by protecting the ball. When the ball-carrier goes to ground, the 'Leaching' player is already in position to 'bridge' and protect the ball from the opposition, making the ruck ball more secure.

**Jackalling (or poaching)** This refers to the action of a defender who is on his feet trying to rip the ball from a tackled player. Performed by the tackler, (if he is quick to regain his feet), but more often by the first arriving defender, the 'jackaller' stays on his feet and tries to either win the ball or force the tackled player to 'hold on' longer than allowed and make him liable to penalty.

**Jack-Knifing** This is a phrase used to describe a body position adopted when presenting the ball after a tackle. The tackled player keeps his lower body aligned across the pitch, (maintaining an offside line), but turns his upper body through 90 degrees, stretching out his arms to present the ball towards his team-mates and as far as possible out of defensive reach.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – June 2008***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

My club runs several teams but with injuries, work commitments, family functions and skiing holidays we never seem to have the same players available two weeks in a row. We have sufficient players to shuffle the teams and we are able to promote players to fill the gaps but we're really losing continuity and our teamwork is suffering. What can we do..?

### ***Neil from Northwood***

### ***Hi Neil***

I have a couple of suggestions for you...

Firstly, it's really important that you switch players around in training so that the regular 1st team get to know the strengths, weaknesses, nuances and styles of their understudies and vice versa. Aside from familiarity this will also make it less daunting for those who are asked to step-up.

Secondly, if you have not already done so I would advise the introduction of a PlayBook that can be read and understood by every player in the club. It may be that the more sophisticated plays are only called in the more senior teams but if everyone has the same basic understanding then this will be of benefit when someone has to deputise. The PlayBook will also breed a club-style that can pervade from 1st team to Veterans and may help to focus activities in training too.

You can find many templates for PlayBooks but in short this should include at the least the following basic elements:

- 1) Style – how your club play the game
- 2) Calls – consistent calls for all facets of the game
- 3) Kick-offs – formations and calls (offensive and defensive)
- 4) Back-row moves – which to use when
- 5) Penalty moves – which to use when
- 6) Scrum and lineout moves – which to use when
- 7) Defensive system – how your club plans to defend
- 8) Kicking policy – when, where, callers and chasers

Good luck and work hard...

### ***The Senior Consultant***



***Ask the Senior Consultant – May 2008***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

I play for a team that is trying to adopt a fast, rucking style of rugby but even the fittest players amongst us are struggling to make it to breakdown after breakdown and so our game-plan isn't really working. Aside from endless hours of fitness work, do you have any other suggestions..?

***Pete from Pinner***

***Hi Pete***

I covered a similar question earlier in the year but allow me to add a further option... this may or may not work for your club but it is certainly an approach that has been successfully adopted in the past.

Rather than aiming to get every forward to every breakdown, divide the pitch into imaginary channels, a left third, a centre third and a right third, (for simplicity, let's name them L, C and R). Next, allocate one prop and one lock to cover L and C and the others to cover C and R. The hooker should maintain a position in C and the back row should cover L, C and R to the best of their ability. Such a Pod system will ensure that you have forwards spread across the pitch ready to join offensive or defensive breakdowns as necessary.

With so few players actually committed to the majority of rucks and mauls these days, the Pod system rarely exposes a team to an overload situation but should this arise then backs may temporarily deputise, and a call for support will see forwards from the next channel arrive relatively quickly.

This is not an approach that can be implemented overnight but with some strong coaching input and a buy-in from all players you may swiftly see an increase in numbers at the breakdown and hence your team's effectiveness in this area....

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – April 2008***

### ***Dear Senior Consultant***

Our club is trying to implement a defensive system for the first time. I've heard that some clubs operate more than one system at a time, changing it according to the position on the field and the state of play. Is it really feasible for our club to change a defensive system 'on the fly'..?

### ***Henry from Hendon***

### ***Hi Henry***

Defence has become a huge focal point in recent years as it has been proven that effort and training time invested in this area yields the most immediate results in terms of improved team performance. The various defensive systems currently used internationally and by the top clubs are complex and may indeed be altered during the course of a game but if this is your club's first attempt, then I would recommend that you are not too ambitious at this stage.

Whatever system is employed, the simple building blocks must all be in place first... teamwork, communication and sound, basic tackling techniques are prerequisite to successful defence, irrespective of the system adopted.

It's crucial that alignment is maintained with respect to your team-mates and that when the defensive line goes forward that it does so quickly and 'as one'. At the point of contact, arguably the most important technique to master is getting below your opponent and driving him from low to high, and ideally from inside to out. If the ball is passed prior to contact then it is essential to maintain concentration and to cover the allocated space in case there is a cutback and change of direction.

If your club are reasonably confident in these basics then I would encourage you to consider and study the so-called 'BLIFT' defensive system. As you may deduce from the name this is a hybrid system that combines the rushing 'blitz' defence with a secondary 'drift' stage. The benefits of a fast and aggressive defensive line are well documented but if this is then followed by a synchronised drift phase then more often than not your opposition will be forced wide and compelled to make flat passes to players who have lost their depth and hence their momentum.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of clear and concise communication so take some time in your training sessions to work on this... it will pay dividends...

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***



## ***Ask the Senior Consultant – March 2008***

***Dear Senior Consultant***

Our Forward Unit is built for power rather than for speed and when we arrive at a breakdown the opposition have often already set up a strong defensive ruck. Aside from working on fitness and speed, can you make any suggestions as to how we might still compete for the ball..?

***Danny from Dulwich***

***Hi Danny***

You have identified one major issue in your question... It's important to have a balance of power and speed within your pack and I'll leave you and your coach to work on this and your levels of fitness but there are other components that you might add to assist your competitiveness.

Firstly, it will aid your team's speed to the breakdown if they take a moment to 'think' and try to anticipate where that breakdown is likely to be. The great Ice Hockey star Wayne Gretsky famously stated "I don't skate to where the puck is, I skate to where the puck is going to be..." This is not simple in rugby, but efforts to improve your understanding of your opponent's patterns of play will pay dividends.

Secondly, even powerful forwards will reap rewards from increasing their work rate. A simple but effective route is to have them sprint the first five steps away from every breakdown, scrum or lineout. Counting these steps aloud will provide an audible confirmation of this increased effort and these first five steps will go a long way to improving their pace to the breakdown.

Thirdly, if your Forwards arrive at a ruck or maul and find it 'fully developed', then clearly simply adding their weight at the back is unlikely to have a major influence. It will be far more effective if they identify a weakly bound player on the fringe and work to 'pick him off' and drive him out of the ruck. If the ruck is deconstructed in this way, player by player, then a more manageable target will emerge and your remaining players will be in a far stronger position to attempt to counter-ruck and win the ball.

Good luck and work hard...

***The Senior Consultant***