



THE REFEREE'S ROLE IN CONTROLLING THE GAME

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Providing coaches, referees, players, and administrators with the knowledge, skills, and leadership abilities to ensure that safety and best practice principles are incorporated into all aspects of contact rugby.

INTRODUCTION

During a game of rugby it is quite acceptable for a player to exert extreme physical pressure on his opponent, but this should never be done wilfully or maliciously, or to inflict injury. It is the referee's responsibility to ensure that the game is played in a controlled, competitive and enjoyable environment. This can be achieved if the referee ensures that the players respect their opponents, and exhibit sportsmanship, ethical behaviour and fair play at all times during a game. The referee uses management and communication skills, as well as the accurate application of the laws, to contribute to a safe match environment. The following sections regarding the referee's role in controlling the game are focused mainly on making the game safer for the players involved, by addressing those situations that could lead to serious or catastrophic injuries.

The referee's role begins well before the match kicks off.

1. PRE-MATCH CHECKS:

a. Inspect the playing enclosure for safety purposes

When inspecting the playing enclosure, it is important to study the pitch itself and look for any obviously dangerous aspects that may be prevalent. The pitch may, for example, be too hard, i.e. stone or gravel; or there may be potholes, which could pose a risk to players' ankles and feet. Pitches that are immersed in water should also be investigated and the referee should decide whether a possible danger may exist, in particular when it comes to collapsed rucks, mauls and scrums. Any loose debris should also be removed from the field, especially if the debris is sharp and/or hard.

b. Ensure the medical staff and equipment at the game meets the minimal requirements in accordance with IRB regulations

A key aspect here is the presence of a trained medical person, while minimum medical equipment should include: spinal board, neck collar, spider harness, and head blocks. Should any of these safety requirements not be met, the referee should notify the home team official and order it to be rectified before the game can start. If this is not possible, the game should be abandoned.

c. Remind the players that while on the field they are responsible for their own safety, as well as the safety of their opponents

Rugby is a highly competitive contact sport, and tempers and emotions will occasionally boil over. This may cause players to act recklessly and put themselves and others at risk of injury. The referee should make it clear that the players should at all times respect the safety of everyone on the field of play, and play within laws.

d. Remind the teams that play must stop immediately when the whistle is blown

This is important, as once the whistle has been blown, players relax their bodies and stop playing. In this “relaxed” position, they are particularly vulnerable, as they are not expecting any physical contact and are not in a position to brace for the contact. It is therefore likely that they will sustain serious injury should they be taken out or tackled after the whistle has been blown. Even more serious is players continuing to push in a scrum, or continuing to contest for the ball, once a scrum/ruck or maul has collapsed and the whistle has blown. In this scenario, players may be in a very precarious and weak position.

e. Request teams to respond to referee communications and instructions during the game

Referees should utilise various forms of communication during the game to maintain the standards and ethos of the game and, in particular, prevent actions that could cause serious injury to players or their opponents. The referee can also utilise communication to sanction player behaviour with the objective of changing the behaviour for the betterment of a game. For this reason, players should pay attention and respond efficiently to the referee's communication before and during the game.

f. Talk to front-row players on scrum engagement procedure, ensuring they understand the process

The referee should have a focused discussion with the front rows and highlight the importance of the engagement procedure, the binding, and body positions of the front-row players. The engagement procedure is the referee's tool to ensure all the scrum participants are ready and prepared for the impact of the engagement. Therefore it is vital that the referee makes a point of this, and drives home the message that non-compliance will not be tolerated. A general point should be made that all players should be bound and ready before the engagement may take place. The referee will encourage the front-row players to indicate clearly and vocally if they are not ready to engage.

2. SAFETY GEAR & CLOTHING:

A pre-match inspection of the players' clothing & gear is required by Law and IRB regulations. This includes any strapping that has been put on a player for protection.

a. Inspect the player's boots, ensuring they conform to Law and IRB regulations

Special care should be taken to check the position and number of studs, i.e. there should be no single stud at the top of the boot, and the boot should have all its studs in place. The length and shape of the studs should be inspected and compliance to Schedule 12 of these regulations verified. Studs can cause serious injury and attention needs to be paid to ensure compliance to schedule 12.

b. Players are not allowed to wear any hard braces and guards

(metal or hard plastics) and should be instructed to remove these.

c. Encourage that all players wear a mouth guard

d. Ensure all clothing and gear is IRB approved

All protective clothing should bear the IRB approved label. If it does not, the referee is entitled to ask the player to remove it.

e. Make a final inspection of players' clothing and gear just before the teams run onto the field

It is not law that the referee should conduct a final inspection to check and verify that any instructions that were given were adhered to, and that no "new" items were put on subsequent to the inspection. Further to this, if the referee observes, during the game, a player with an item of clothing that is not allowed, he should ask the player to remove it.

3. SCRUM SAFETY:

The scrum can effectively determine the outcome of a match, as it plays a vital role in one side gaining ascendancy over the other. It is for this reason that so many teams have built their structures and game plans around this facet of the game. It is also one of the key ways of restarting the game after a stoppage in play. Scrumming historically contains the highest risk of serious and catastrophic head or neck injuries if performed incorrectly. Much of this risk can be reduced through adequate coaching and education, physical conditioning, technical preparation, and scrumming experience. It is furthermore the players' responsibility to play within the laws, and to practice the correct techniques come scrum-time.

During the game it is the referee's responsibility to maintain high safety values at the scrum. This requires strict application of the law. The referee needs to focus on four aspects at the scrum:

- a. Pre-engagement**
- b. Controlling the engagement**
- c. Body positioning of players**
- d. Monitoring the scrum.**

Pre engagement:

- a. The referee's work at scrums starts with the pre-engagement preparation, or setting up of the scrum. The referee needs to observe the formation of the scrum and ensure that the players of both teams are forming correctly.**

From a safety point of view, the referee needs to ensure all scrum participants are properly formed, especially the locks and loose forwards. If they are not, and the engagement takes place, this could cause serious injury to especially the props. It is also important that the locks and loose forwards are bound on with shoulders attached, i.e. as one unit, because if they hit onto the hips of their team mate fractionally after the engagement, this can cause a prop to buckle from behind, causing potential injury.

- b. The referee needs to ensure that all the players are correctly bound.**

It is important that the hooker and props are correctly bound, with the hooker binding over the props' arms (NOT under) and that the props' shoulders are clear of the hooker's armpit.

- c. The referee needs to ensure that both teams are crouched at a safe distance from each other.**

Teams can pre-crouch before the engagement, but what the referee should be looking for is that one set of front rows is not higher than the other, and that both hookers are over the mark. This will prevent one pack "hitting" down onto the other, causing it to cave in.

Controlling the engagement:

Four distinct calls by the referee are required by law to ensure the engagement process is safe.

- a. Crouch** – Front rows need to be at the same height. Front rows to be square onto the opposition, i.e. over the mark and the 3 heads of each front row in-line with their try-line. Front rowers are not moving, i.e. shifting sideways or front/backwards (this could be a subtle movement, but needs to be managed as it has a large influence).
- b. Touch** – The four props touch on the outside of their opponent's arm, near the shoulder, and "recoil" it back to the original position. This is the opportunity for the referee to ensure a safe distance is maintained. This is important, because if the players are too far apart it could cause the engagement to go downwards and collapse, which is an unsafe situation for any front row player.
- c. Pause** – At this point the referee observes the readiness of the teams to engage. The props should break all contact with their opposition, i.e. after the "touch" call. Front-rowers should maintain their distance and brace themselves for the engagement. This is the stage when all scrum participants get themselves ready for contact and establish the tempo for the engagement.
- d. Engage** – Front rows engage with their opponents. Loosehead binds onto the body of his opponent on the inside of the opponent's arm. Tighthead should bind onto the body of his opponent on the outside of the opponent's arm.

The referee should ensure that neither of the teams charge their opponents. At times a prop will try and gain an ascendancy over his opponent by trying to jump the engage. This is dangerous and should be dealt with.

After the engagement, neither of the teams should push before the scrum starts; this only occurs once the ball is put in.

Body positioning of players:

The referee must ensure all players adopt a safe body position on engagement. This means the following:

a. Props and hookers must be in line and properly bound

None of the front row players should be standing higher or lower than their opponent. The packs should be taking the pressure as a unit, and not with one player going one way and another player the other way.

b. Ensure props stay straight on the hit

After the "hit" has take place, the front rows need to stay straight. This means that they need to scrum as practicably as possible towards the opponents' goal-line and with their upper bodies as parallel to the ground as possible.

c. Ensure head and shoulders are above the hips

A player with his head lower than his hips is in a dangerous and precarious position and could potentially do harm to himself and others. This should be stopped immediately.

d. Ensure front row players have a solid and square foot positioning

The foot positioning of the front rows is a dead give away as to the direction they intend to push in. Their feet should be positioned in a pushing position, squarely on the ground, with their toes pointing in the general direction of the opponents' goal-line.

Monitoring the contest:

During the contest, front-rowers must maintain their binds and referees need to act strictly. Both teams need to push straight and not upwards, inwards or outwards or pull the scrum down. A key element of the contest is front-rowers dipping or twisting their upper bodies and intentionally rotating or collapsing the scrum. This should not be tolerated and should be penalised accordingly. Despite controlling the engagement process, it is not uncommon for scrums to collapse or break up legally. However, the referee should stop the scrum immediately, and deal appropriately with any player that continues to push after the whistle. In summary:

a. Ensure front rows maintain their bind

b. Ensure both teams are pushing straight, and not up or pulling down or inwards or outwards

c. Ensure safe body positions are maintained – no dipping or twisting of upper body

d. Stop the scrum immediately when front row players collapse or stand up.

4. LINEOUT SAFETY:

The referee must give players in the line-out legitimate protection. Awareness of three aspects is essential to ensure player safety at the line-out.

a. The contest

b. Jumpers

c. Players on the ground.

The contest:

a. Referee must ensure the 1m gap is maintained.

This allows the jumpers to make a fair and unhindered jump, without being concerned with opponents taking them out as they jump.

b. Referee must try to determine where the ball is going to be thrown to and focus on it.

There will more than likely be issues of safety around the area where the ball is going. If the referee is aware of where the ball is going, then they should move into a position where they can see and observe the full situation of the contest.

c. Ensure that the contest is fair

The referee should ensure that all participants are able to contest for the ball legally. The referee does this by ensuring the ball is put in straight and that no player is hindered in any way, or gains an unfair advantage by transgressing the law, e.g. by players pulling another player down or using an opponent as a launching pad.

Jumpers:

a. Ensure jumpers are lifted safely, with support

Players who are jumping should be supported above the knees from the front, for example on the thighs, or anywhere on the shorts from behind, e.g. under the buttocks.

b. Ensure jumpers are brought back to ground safely by their support players

The referee should be equally vigilant when it comes to players supporting jumpers. It is the supporters' collective responsibility to make sure they bring their jumper down to ground safely. Often players, in their enthusiasm to play, simply leave their team mate in the air, after which they fall to ground. This should be dealt with.

c. *Ensure there is no interference with the jumper whilst in the air*

Whilst a player is in the air, they are very vulnerable. The slightest nudge could mean serious injury. Players will make contact whilst competing for the ball, but no barging with elbows, shoulders or full body should be allowed. Contact in the air should only be allowed as a consequence of the legitimate contest for the ball.

Grabbing, slapping or pushing the opposing jumper's arms and hands is not allowed and should be dealt with strictly, as this could cause injury and prevent a fair contest.

d. *Ensure jumpers are not crushed by opposition jumpers coming down on them.*

A very dangerous infringement in the line-out called "crushing" has found its way into the game. This is when the opposing jumper loses the contest in the air, then wraps himself around the jumper who has won the ball in mid-air, bringing him down to ground illegally and landing on top of him. This can lead to severe injury, and should be penalised harshly.

Players on the ground:

a. *Ensure supporters are not taken out by opposition players*

It is dangerous for a player to push, nudge or interfere with another player that is supporting a team mate in the air. This could cause the supporter to lose control of the player in the air and could cause serious injury.

b. *Ensure players do not play jumpers while their feet are off the ground*

Again, a small push or nudge could result in players falling and injuring themselves.

c. *Ensure players maintain the gap and do not cross the line of touch prematurely, thereby posing danger to players in the air*

Players will often walk into the gap and across towards players trying to jump or those supporting a jumper. This should be dealt with strictly as these players pose a threat and an obstacle to the player in the air as they return to ground.

5. TACKLE SAFETY:

The referee has an important role in keeping the tackle situation as safely contested as possible. The referee in the process of controlling the game cannot react quickly enough to stop high or dangerous tackles from occurring. Preventative measures need to be covered in the pre-match communication; however, through their actions in response to high or dangerous tackles, the referee can influence

the subsequent safety of players on the field. The referee can set the tone of the game by strictly enforcing the laws that govern the tackle, by penalising and sanctioning offenders.

The referee must ensure that the tackle is conducted in a safe and fair way. During the game, this is a phase where the referee cannot be preventative, and can only be reactive to actions. The tackle is the area where the referee needs to closely observe the actions of players involved in the tackle. It requires strict application of the law to deter players from such actions. Four different dangerous actions in the tackle need to be looked for.

- a. High/dangerous and stiff/swinging arm**
- b. Early or late**
- c. Shoulder charge or no arms**
- d. Lifting and driving or dropping.**

High and dangerous:

- a. All tackles above the shoulder line are dangerous tackles and should be penalised and sanctioned accordingly.
- b. Tackles which start safely but end up above the shoulder line are also dangerous tackles. The attributes or actions of the tackled player, i.e. being short or ducking, are not a mitigating factor. It is the tackle that is judged and it is the responsibility of the tackler to make sure the tackle is safe.
- c. One technique is for a player to strike an opponent in possession of the ball with a stiff arm, using his arm as a club to dislodge the ball and/or inflict injury on the opponent. This often happens quickly and appears to be part of the tackle. The key is that the tackler should lead with the shoulder and bind onto the ball carrier.
- d. Using a swinging arm to grasp high or knock over an opponent in possession of the ball is a dangerous tackle. This often occurs when a player has been sidestepped or dummied and tries to grab the opponent with a swinging arm.

Early or late:

As mentioned previously, players should be given the opportunity to brace themselves for contact. When a player is waiting to receive or has just released the ball, they are in a very vulnerable position and should they then take contact, an injury is likely.

- a. Tackling an opponent before he is in possession of the ball is dangerous. It is important to note that a player may only be tackled when in possession of the ball. Reaching, grasping or stretching for the ball is not in possession. The player needs to be in control of the ball, before he can be tackled.
- b. Tackling an opponent after he has passed or kicked the ball is dangerous. It is the responsibility of the tackler to make sure he gets his timing right. There is no such thing as, "I was dedicated and could not pull out". The tackler must judge his timing and if he feels he might not make the tackle, he should then take action to pull out. A good rule of thumb is that if by virtue of the tackle, the intended direction of the ball was influenced, then the tackle is legal.
- c. Tackling an opponent who is in the air is dangerous. This is always dangerous, and the referee should be strict on this. It does not matter if the player is 1 cm or 2 metres off the ground: he may not be tackled.
- d. Diving onto or tackling a player who is on the ground is dangerous. This is similar to a player being taken out without the ball. The mere fact that he is defenceless amplifies the situation. A player that is lying on the ground cannot move in a direction to soften the impact and if a player falls on that player the player on the ground needs to take the full weight and impact of the opponent. This can and normally does cause serious injury. A typical scenario that referees should be very strict on is after a player has scored a try and an opposing player dives on him. This should be dealt with harshly.

Shoulder charge:

- a. Charging or knocking over an opponent with the shoulder is dangerous. The point of a shoulder can inflict serious injury and is not allowed. It is often referred to as a "sharp shoulder". The game of rugby is about a fair contest and the contact between players needs to be fair. A shoulder charge puts a player at an advantage in terms of handling or dealing with the collision. Knocking an opponent over could cause the player to lose balance and this can result in injury.
- b. Tackling an opponent without attempting to grasp the player is dangerous. Similar to the above, it is all about the collision being a fair contest. If a player is pushed, he is placed at a disadvantage in this contest and could lose balance and sustain injury.

Lifting tackle:

This is a particularly dangerous scenario and needs to be stamped out of the game. It is not for the referee to decide whether there was an intention or whether it was momentum that caused it, but to simply to judge the facts. Answer the following questions:

Was the player lifted in the tackle? If yes, then go to next question

Was the player tipped and driven into the ground? If yes, then penalise and sanction. If no, then ask:

Was the player returned safely to ground? If yes, then play continues. If no, then referee should penalise and sanction.

In summary:

- a. Lifting a player and driving him into the ground is dangerous
- b. Lifting a player and dropping him to the ground is dangerous

These tackles can cause serious injury, in particular to the neck and spine, and should be shown zero tolerance.

NB: Should a player be lifted in the tackle it is the responsibility of the tackler to ensure the player is brought to ground in a safe manner.

6. RUCK & MAUL SAFETY:

Referees should note that although rucks and mauls are a dynamic and unstructured part of the game, the safety aspects are crucial. By virtue of this unstructured nature, the referee needs to be aware of the potential dangers.

Referees need to focus on three main areas. In the formation of a ruck or maul – the referee needs to note how players enter the ruck or maul. Players need to enter from behind or alongside their hindmost player. Players may not jump or fall onto opposing players on the ground. Referees should be aware of players caught up on the wrong side of the ruck or maul being formed, and give them protection. Players are not allowed to lift the legs of or tackle opponents in the ruck or maul. Once the ruck or maul has been formed, the referee has to observe how other players join the ruck or maul.

Players should join by binding onto a team mate, and not charging in without the use of the arms. It has become common for players to enter these phases with the shoulder and this should be penalised. Players should not step on or trample players on the ground in the ruck.

Lastly, the referee needs to be weary when rucks and mauls go to ground. It is important to determine if the ruck or maul went to ground legally or not. Any player in a potentially dangerous position requires the referee to stop play immediately. Once the ruck or maul has gone to ground, the ball should be made available immediately, and if not play should be stopped. A delayed whistle could lead to injury.

Referees are also to ensure that players taking part in these phases of play do so within the laws. Referees must be aware at all times of the players' body positioning when joining these phases, as well as the body positions when these phases legally collapse or go to ground. Three areas need to be monitored closely.

Forming a ruck/maul:

- a. To form a ruck/maul, players need to bind onto an opponent using their arm and hand.***

Players who are participating in a ruck/maul are not expecting a player to run into them with a shoulder and are often defenceless in this scenario, with their hands and body involved in the contest. Referees need to ensure that they can participate in the contest without fear of being blindsided by reckless play.

- b. Players need to stay on their feet to form a ruck/maul***

From a safety perspective, this is important as players going to ground unnecessarily

could potentially fall on other players already on the ground, and pose dangers to them and/or others in the process.

c. Players are not allowed to jump on players in the ruck/maul

This would result in an unnecessary and unexpected weight being put on players in the ruck/maul. This could cause the ruck/maul to collapse and result in injury to the participating players.

d. Players are not allowed to lift legs or tackle opponents in a ruck/maul

This will cause the ruck/maul to potentially and unexpectedly collapse and could cause injury to players. In addition, this action could cause individual players to fall and/or twist, which could cause damage to joints or limbs.

e. Players forming a ruck/maul should be aware of players on the ground

As the game is a dynamic one, by virtue of the ferocity of the contest, players will and do fall on the ground. It is the responsibility of the players joining the ruck/maul to observe and take note of the players on the ground and take action not to step on or trip over these players.

f. Referees should be aware of players caught on the opposition side of the ruck/maul

This is commonplace and although the players caught here are required to immediately roll away, the participating players have no right to step on, kick or strike these players. Players will often try to defend their actions by saying, "He should roll away". No player may take the law into his own hands.

g. Referees should communicate the phase to the players

to ensure players comply with the laws required by that phase. This is a good preventative practice that will trigger compliance from players if used correctly.

Joining a ruck/maul:

- a. Players joining a formed ruck/maul need to do so from an on-side position, i.e. from behind their last man's feet or alongside that person. This also applies to a maul or ruck that starts after a lineout, irrespective of whether that lineout is over or not. Particular attention should be paid to players being taken out on the side of the ruck, as these players are in a defenceless position and are not expecting to be taken out.
- b. Players joining must bind onto a team mate in the ruck/maul.
- c. Players joining must not step on or trample players who are on the ground. There are often players on the ground and joining participants need to take responsibility to avoid stepping on these players.

- d. Players joining the ruck/maul must be wary of the vulnerable position of players in the ruck/maul as these players are not able to defend themselves sufficiently or are not aware of the potential impact and cannot brace themselves.

Ruck/maul going to ground:

- a. Referees must observe the body position of players when a ruck/maul legally goes to ground. Any players in a dangerous or potentially dangerous position require the referee to stop play immediately.
- b. The ball needs to be available to be played when a ruck/maul goes to ground. If the ball is not available, referees are to stop play immediately and should not allow a prolonged wrestle for the ball on the ground.
- c. Players may ruck the ball and not players. Boots on players is not acceptable and must not be tolerated. A player who steps on another player's head, groin or any joint, should be ordered off the field.

CONCLUSION

Referees must realise that the safety of players takes precedence over all other aspects of the game and they should referee games accordingly. All injuries to players must be treated as serious. This requires the referee to stop the game and ensure proper treatment and attention is given to the injured player. Players in front row positions must be suitably trained to play in those positions and the referee must ensure before and during the game that all the players in those positions are capable and suitably trained. All players who have an open wound or a bleeding wound (blood injuries) need to be ordered from the field of play and may only be allowed to continue playing after the wound is covered and the bleeding stopped. All clothing containing blood needs to be changed before the player can continue.

Referees are entitled to decide whether it is safe for a player or safe for the game to continue. They must not shy away from this responsibility. Referees are allowed to make adjustments to applications of the law where it is clear that because of a lack of skill or ability a player/s are at risk of being injured. Referees must, and are entitled to, manage imbalances that pose a risk of injury to players.

The Laws of the Game provide guidelines to referees for ensuring a safe playing environment. Referees should apply a common-sense approach and not rely on law only to ensure the safety of all players on the field. It is a referee's responsibility, as a human being, to be concerned about the safety of his fellow humans.

