



# Whistle Talk

News from the British Columbia Rugby Referees' Society

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In the past few weeks, referees have seen an increase in players questioning their calls, to the extent that these have detracted from games.

The Law is quite clear about the roles of players and referees with respect to decisions about play. Law 6.A.4(a) says that the referee is the sole judge of fact and Law 6.A.5 says that the referee can change a decision only under certain circumstances... mostly after reports from a Referee Assistant. In the definitions, it states that the Captain is the only player allowed to consult with the referee (other players who back chat to the referee are risking penalty or a card!).

What does it mean to consult with the referee? Numerous Laws state that referee needs to ask the Captain for an option... "kick or scrum?", "Going for goal?", etc. The referee also can tell the teams the reason for a decision or what the team needs to do to prevent further penalties. These messages are usually sent through the captain as they are the leader of their team. The captain and the referee should be on the same page. Every referee understands that having a constructive relationship with the Captain can only help the game.

It is when a Captain's questions become too frequent (they "get into to the referee's ear") or they force the game to stop so their questions can be answered that the "consulting" relationship turns sour. The carping behaviour of some Captains detracts from the flow and energy of the game. The referee must take focus from other matters to deal with the haranguing. The captain's teammates lose their focus on the play and the rhythm of the game breaks down.

Captains need to understand that, though referees want to have a functional dialogue with them, if the relationship becomes toxic to the game, the referee can cut off further communication. Captains need to understand that they may face the same risk other players; too much back chat and sanctions will occur... penalty or card. Their privilege to "consult" is not absolute and can disappear.

In 1992, South Africa played Australia at Newlands. They felt they had been given the brush-off by the referee the week before and in a meeting with the referee Dave Bishop, the South African captain, Naas Botha, said to him: "Will you allow us to ask you a question?" Bishop replied: "I will give you, Naas, the opportunity to ask a question and I will give you the courtesy of a reply. There will be no debate." When Botha asked if his vice-captain could also ask questions, Bishop replied: "I will give you, Naas, the opportunity to ask a question and I will give you the courtesy of a reply. There will be no debate." This succinctly sums up the relationship between a captain and a referee.

Footnote: It is important for fans and players to understand that the Referee Assistants must not be targets of haranguing or abuse. Their role in the game is not as a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> referee; they are responsible for the ball into touch, kicks at goal, foul play and any assistance the referee may ask for. It is only when the referee is unsighted or unclear about a decision that they will ask for the RA's help. We coach RAs not to become too involved with the decisions.

## **Rucks**

The other day I got an e-mail from a rugby fan in Ottawa who was ticked off with how he saw rucks being refereed.

“... often the "defending" team is not participating - nobody bound or in contact at all, maybe a body on the floor at best - but the so-called "ruck" continues with the attacking team basically standing on its own, bound, looking menacingly at anyone who might move towards them.”

So how are the rucks refereed and why is something that doesn't look much like a ruck, be a ruck. For answers, I polled the local referees on the Rugby Canada Panel.

Principle #1: rucks must be a contest for the ball.

This is actually one of the basic principles found in the IRB Charter... the ball can be contested for, at all phases of the game. This is the “spirit of the Law” that is written into the Laws of the Game.

Most rucks happen after a tackle. The Laws that govern play at the tackle are not the same as those that govern the ruck (or maul) that follows.... ie. at a tackle there are no off-side lines and a player on their feet can use their hands. The time it takes for play to transition from tackle to ruck can be very short... a few seconds. The 2 phases flow together and what happens in the tackle can greatly affect the ruck that follows... ie ball carriers isolated, having poor body positions, etc.

To have “the contest” for the ball at the ruck, players must come from their side of the ball, be on their feet, bound and pushing. The IRB uses the phrase “like airplanes taking off” to describe the body position and movement of the players entering a ruck... head up, back flat, pushing horizontally or up. These players often contact and move back an opponent to clear the space around the ball. Players who, “like airplanes landing”, go to the ground, close the space around the ball and prevent a contest for it. They are liable to be penalized.

It is possible to have players with good intentions ending up off their feet at the ruck. Sometimes players who properly enter the ruck fall over because they have pushed the opponents back, they have tripped or no opponents met them in the ruck so momentum carried them forward and down. Coaches have trained players to grab the opponents in the ruck (especially the 1<sup>st</sup> one there) and to twist their bodies like an Australian Croc to get them away from the ball. These players are not usually penalized unless they just lay like a dead fish near the ball, leave their hands on the ball or in some way prevent the next wave of players from competing for the ball. The ruck is still on. New players can enter the ruck properly (through the middle and on their feet!) and the contest for the ball can continue.

What if the defending team pulls away from the ruck so all you have are the attackers? The IRB gave a ruling that the ruck is still on, all of the ruck laws apply (no hands, offside lines, etc) and

the defenders cannot then run around the attackers and grab the ball. (There is a similar ruling for mauls)

Often a team will win the contest for the ball... its well back on their side. As players are lying in a pile on the ground there is no one to counter ruck against and no way "through the middle". Though it may be frustrating for the other team, the contest at the ruck is over and all they can do is look to their defenses when the ball is next played. If a player starts to climb over the bodies like a Great Blue Heron, they are not rucking, not bound and thus offside (they are also exposing themselves to a clumsy and dangerous drive). Referees are to stop or penalize these players.

If the ball does not emerge smoothly from the ruck and the number of bodies on the ground rises, referees may be forced to (as long as nothing illegal has happened) declare it unplayable and go to the scrum. Not the flowing, open play that makes for great rugby.

So it is entirely possible that what started as a ruck, can end up NOT looking like a ruck but still be a ruck.

### **School Games**

With the school season upon us, (perhaps!?) it's a good time to review the Law Variations and the variations in the way these games are refereed.

Principle #1: these games must be safe.

Rugby is an inherently dangerous game but players 13 to 18 can be at greater risk in the game. Compared to most adults, their bodies are not as developed, they are not as strong, their skills are poorer and their emotions are less controlled (I did say 'most adults'). The school games cannot be refereed as if the players are just little adults. Referees need to put a greater emphasis on safe play rather than on the game itself.

Principle #2: referees tend to be more mentor/coaches of school players.

Time may be spent explaining laws. Re-dos may be allowed for poorly executed plays... ie drop-kicks. At times, the referee may not penalize a player for an infraction caused by poor skills or lack of understanding of the laws.... ie off-side at open play kicks. (NOTE: this principle disappears at higher level school games... the finals of the high school tournaments are played at the level of a Div 1 game !)

Principle #3: "It is what it is !"

The majority of experienced referees work for a living to 5:00pm daily. Thus the referee at a 4:00pm high school game is likely to have less experience, skill and understanding of the Law. (There are around 580 certified referees in BC but only about 15% of them are part of a referees' society... thus receiving current referee education, guided development and coaching. The 85% are club players or teachers who only do the odd school game)

Calls will be missed. Wrong penalties applied. Inconsistencies will occur. When players, fans and coaches feel frustrated by what they think is poor refereeing, they must apply the sage advice of the (in)famous philosopher Bertuzzi; "It is what it is !"

There is nothing to be gained by "losing the game" and berating the referee. The downside is huge. Players lose their focus... they key on the "injustice" instead of the right play to make. They learn that hormonal rants (which they have by nature) are OK. The adults around them are modeling them. They are likely to lash out physically. This creates even worse problems.

In my, albeit slanted, view, the worst downside effect is on the referee. The most common reason people give for not becoming or continuing to be a referee is being exposed to the ranting of a coach, player or fan. We do not have the luxury of driving people who pick up a whistle, out of the game. When players, fans and coaches feel their blood pressure rise to dangerous levels they need to take a deep breath, close their eyes and repeat the mantra "it is what it is!"

**Summary of Law Variations.** (see the Law Book at IRB.com for exact wordings)

#### Number of players – substitutions/replacements

If a team nominates 22 players, there must be 6 players who are trained to play in the front row positions. If a team nominates more than 22 players there must also be 3 players who are trained to play the lock position.

A player who has been substituted (ie tactical) may return to a game to replace any injured player.... ie not just for blood or front row.

- A player who has been replaced (ie for injury) may not return to a game for any reason.

#### Time

A game must not exceed 70 minutes of playing time. This includes any overtime to be played. U-19 players must not play more than 90 minutes per day... ie at a tournament

#### Cards

If the number of team's players has been reduced because of a red or yellow card issued to a forward, the number of players in subsequent set scrums will be affected. The reduction of numbers in the backs has no effect on the scrums.

If the number of forwards is reduced by:

- 1 player... the scrum will be 3-4... ie no #8
- 2 players... the scrum will be 3-2-1... ie no flankers
- 3 players... the scrum will be 3-2... ie. no flankers or #8

Notes:

- the least number of players per team in a scrum is 5
- the number of players for each team in a scrum must be the same
- forwards removed from the scrums to reduce numbers must be 5m back

#### Tackle

The use of the "turtle" or "squeeze ball" by a tackled ball carrier is NOT permitted... ball carriers must NOT lay face down and push the ball back under their body and between their legs.

- If the referee believes that the ball carrier plays the ball in this way:
  - inadvertently, they should call for a scrum (non-offending team has the put in).
  - on purpose, they should penalize the ball carrier.

### Scrum

If at any time a team does not have trained players for the positions in the front row or locks, scrums will be played as uncontested scrums.

If at any time, a team does not have enough trained players for a scrum (ie 8 players), the number of players in the scrum will be reduced as described in Law (see above).

The #8 must be bound with their head between the hips of the 2 locks

- the #8 may not delay the ball from leaving the scrum once it is at their feet
- the #8 is the only player in the scrum who may pick up the ball

Once the middle line (front rows) of the scrum has gone through 45 degrees, play needs to be stopped and a new scrum ordered.

- the team who put the ball in at the original scrum shall put in the ball at the new scrum.
- Teams must not intentionally wheel the scrum.

Once a team has pushed the scrum 1.5m from the original mark, it must stop pushing.

### Games that require a winner

The games will have 30 minute halves.

If tied after full time the following method will be used to decide the winner of the game.

- a) Two periods of five minutes extra time shall be played, during which the first score shall be conclusive.... ie Sudden death

If tied after the 2 x 5 minute over time periods, the winner of the game will be the team which had:

- b) More tries scored.
- c) More goals (converted tries) scored.
- d) More drop goals scored.
- e) More penalty goals scored.
- f) First points scored in the game.

If still no winner, the winner is declared then by a goal kicking contest:

- g) Place kick at goal. Each team shall nominate one player.
- h) A coin toss shall determine the first player to attempt a place kick at goal. Both players shall attempt the same number of place kicks. The first kick shall be taken from behind the twenty-two metre line at the centre of the field.

The team whose player is successful when the opposing team's player is unsuccessful shall be declared the winner.

If both players are successful, the referee shall move five metres directly back from the twenty-two metre line and repeat the process until a winner is declared.

Answers to January's Referee Test:

- 1) play on
- 2) Yes and Yes
- 3) Yes