



Whistle Talk

News from the British Columbia Rugby Referees' Society

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Scrum Time

The scrum is a crucial phase of the game. The contest for dominance is clearly seen. It is the time of “close combat” between players. It is a time of the great danger to the players.

The scrum has long been the domain of the “brotherhood” of forwards, those beefy players with short necks who jealously guard its secrets. To them it IS the game... all the rest is just running, kicking and scoring tries.

Few referees are part of the “brotherhood” and can only have the ways of the front row described to them. The difference between legal and illegal scrumming can be microscopic and picking out the instigator of a problem can be difficult... as unlikely as it sounds, referees have, at times, been accused of guessing who has transgressed!!

So what do referees focus on a scrum time.

#1 is safety ! Any action by players that creates a dangerous situation must be dealt with. Early engaging, clashing heads, twisting opponent's bodies and driving at an angle (up, down right or left) are some of the common acts that get scrummers hurt.

Referees divide scrum time into 3 sections: forming, engagement (“crouch, touch, pause, engage”) and post engagement (after the ball is put in).

At the forming stage, some of the keys the referee is looking for are:

- good binding among the players:
 - Props not covering the hooker's shoulder. Flankers bound onto the 2nd row (NOT onto the outside leg of the prop). The #8 bound to the 2nd row and having his head between their hips (NO slingshot... pulling back on 2nd row).
- good body positions:
 - the hips and shoulders of the props facing straight up the pitch... “spines in line”.
 - Everyone's backs flat and parallel to the ground... certainly not pointed down. The props with their heads up and looking where they will engage... looking “over their glasses” or “through their eyebrows”
- everyone stationary
- the backs 5m up the field from their #8s feet

At the engagement, some of the keys the referee is looking for:

- scrums are about the same height
- props hands pulled back after the “touch”
- Good driving:
 - only when they hear the “e” of engage... straight at each other... not driving up or down and “taking the hit”
- Good Prop binding:
 - the tight head prop binds on the back (OK ! the arm pit) of the loose head... not on the arm and not in a way that blocks the loose head’s arm. The loose head prop binds on the back (OK ! the side) of the tight head’s body
- none of the props pull down on their opponent.
- the hooker’s heads are directly above where the referee made the mark

In the post engagement, some of the keys the referee is looking for:

- the ball put in straight enough that there could be a contest for the ball (*insert snicker here!*)
- everyone is still bound and pushing straight ahead.
 - NOT pulling on an opponent or crabbing sideways
- the #9s onside and NOT messing around with each other or the flankers (see below)
- the ball still is in the scrum.
 - in is: under the bodies (“a bird can’t poop on it”) or under control of the #8’s foot
 - out is: ball not under the bodies or the #9 has for top divisions, 2 hands on the ball or at lower divisions 2 hands and air beneath the ball
- the backs are still 5m up the field

After all of this, hopefully the ball is moved away and the part of the game with lots of “running, kicking and scoring tries” can begin. Having to re-set a scrum is very tiring for the players and detracts from the flow of a game, but if the scrum has not been a fair contest, the referee will re-set it. NOTE: in the professional game played in other parts of the world, referees will allow the ball to be worked out of the scrum even if the front rows have collapsed to the ground. Our referees tend to blow up for a re-set, as a collapsed scrum is dangerous and that’s what the Law says.

The cadence for the “crouch, touch, pause, engage” can vary from referee to referee, which is why they discuss their cadence with the front rows before games. Referees are coached to make a gap between words... “crouchtouchpauseengage” is too dangerous. They silently say “one” between each word.

The referee’s cadence should be consistent throughout the game but may not be. Each word in the cadence is a call for an action by the players ie. binding, crouching, touching by props, pulling their hand back, remaining stationary. During the gap in the cadence, the referee is looking to see that the players have properly done their action. The referee may have to wait a moment for the players to comply. They may have to whistle up the scrum and re-set it.

What about the #9s at scrum time?

Once the ball is put in the scrum, a line across the field through the ball, is one offside line for the #9s. The attacking #9 (who puts the ball in) can have one foot on either side of this offside line. The defending #9 must have BOTH feet on his side of this offside line. Note: this offside line can move.

The attacking #9 must stay close to the scrum unless moving off to get a pass from the #8.

The defending #9 has an early choice. As the scrum forms he may: 1) move back 5m from the scrum (with the backs) and stay there until the scrum is over or 2) stay near to the scrum. Once making this choice he can't switch back.

When working close to the scrum, the defending #9 can take the usual path and follow the ball along the side of the scrum (on the side the ball was put in !). They may also move to the back of their scrum. A line across the field through their #8s feet creates another offside line for them. The #9 may move anywhere along that line (from sideline to sideline) but may not step in front of it or run back from it.

Who is that Referee, anyway?

The referees who belong to the BCRRS are a varied lot. Its hard to come up with a clear, common set of characteristics of a referee.

We have members who are young (17 years old) and some who can remember when a try was only worth 3 points, there were only 2 subs (injury only) allowed and rugby balls were made of leather.

We have members who are "gazelle like" with their low body fat and ability to sprint lightly around the pitch and some who are more rotund and get from sideline to sideline... eventually.

We have members from all walks of life: teachers, lawyers, engineers, mill workers, students, salesmen, farmers, repairmen, police officers, etc.

We have members who were part of almost every rugby club in the Province. UVic, UBC, Capilano, Meraloma, Castaway-Wanderers, JBAA, Burnaby Lake, Bayside, Surrey, Ridge Meadows is a partial list

This last point is probably the most important truth about the referees you see on the pitch each week.

While every referee needs to have the "right stuff" to be a whistle blower (fitness, knowledge of Law, good decision making skills, good interpersonal skills, "balls" to make tough calls, etc), they also need to have played the game.

Our referees have "walked a mile" in a player's shoes. They know what it is to be part of a team. They have lived with the "joy of winning and the agony of defeat". They have great memories of tries scored and tackles made. They remember wild things that happen on tour... those that are never spoken of at home! They have been hurt and healed to play again. They have been

aggrieved when a referee got it wrong. They have been penalized for their misdeeds and some of them have even been sent off.

Interesting enough, the loss of this team membership is often the greatest regret referees have. Some people won't referee because they will miss the "Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday for Life" side of rugby.

So, referees are not some alien creature that the BCRU clones in a secret lab in the basement of the building on Broadway. They were players, team mates and opponents who now serve the game, not by playing but by helping others play The Game... play it safely and fairly.

Any Questions?

If you have any questions or concerns about how the game is officiated in BC, please send them to me.

Referee Test

What's the call?

- 1) The Ambleside All-Blacks are throwing in and line up three players in the lineout and have no receiver. The East Surrey Blues have a player marking the thrower, three players in the lineout and a receiver. The ball is thrown in.
What should the referee rule?
- 2) The fullback for the Whistler Peaks kicks the ball downfield. The Peak's tight head prop is in front of the kicker and standing in touch. He is about 15 metres from where the ball lands. One of the Peak's opponents, the Bowser Boys intentionally touches the ball but does not catch it.
Is the Peak's tight head now able to enter the field of play and play the ball?
- 3) One of the locks for the Kits Knights has made a fantastic run but is chopped down by a brutal high tackle by a member of the Quilchena Quails. The ball flies out the locks arms and goes backwards into the arms of his prop team mate.
Can the referee allow advantage to Knights?