

Same laws, better game



The laws of rugby exist to allow the game flow and function properly. However, this can lead to concerns over the interpretation of these laws. The IRB is currently concentrating on five key areas that they want referees to focus on to improve the quality of the game.

BY PADDY O'BRIEN, HEAD OF THE IRB'S REFEREE BOARD

There are five areas where we have asked referees to be more vigilant. There are not changes in the law, but details that have not been refereed as well as they could be. Coaches and players need to be aware of these areas so they can help their players, and in turn help the referees.

1 Illegal obstruction at the maul

From our observations of games across the globe, the lineout maul has been poorly refereed. The ELVs originally allowed the maul to be brought down. That ruling was not adopted, but there still needs to be a fair contest at the maul. Especially from lineouts, teams have formed barriers in front of the ball carrier before the maul is formed. It creates an obstruction. Your team now needs to make sure it engages with the opposition before allowing the ball to be moved back in the maul.

2 Offside from kicks

There is more kicking because of the 22 metre pass back law. We have noticed that sides have been poor at putting themselves onside from a kick. The non kicker has to wait to be put onside, moving away from the intended receiver if he is within 10 metres.

Crucially, teams that are "lazy" give the receiver less time. This penalises the receiving team, giving the kicking team more reward. Even two metres of extra space allows more options for the receiver.

You will have seen more penalties given in the Six Nations for offsidings from kicks. We think adopting this tougher stance will reduce the aerial game.

3 Slowing down the scrum call

We have requested that referees do not let players dictate the scrum engagement cadence. They

have to trust the referee's call. We want to slow the engagement process down to reduce the number of scrum resets.

At the moment there is a lot of talk about scrum resets, but it is a phenomenon mostly found at the top level. Yes, the referee has a strong role to play. The problem lies also with the players. They are trying their very best to outdo the opposition, by foul means or fair. With all that movement, inevitably scrums will collapse.

If you go down a few levels, you will not find the same amount of resets. It boils down to player buy-in. Why should the referee have to battle with the front rows to gain a steady scrum?

4 Offside at the fringes

Players not getting behind the back feet at the ruck chokes the game. This is still an area that is poorly refereed and so

we have asked referees, along with their assistant referees to look out for this infringement.

Even half a metre offside reduces the attacking team's options.

5 Tackler rolling away

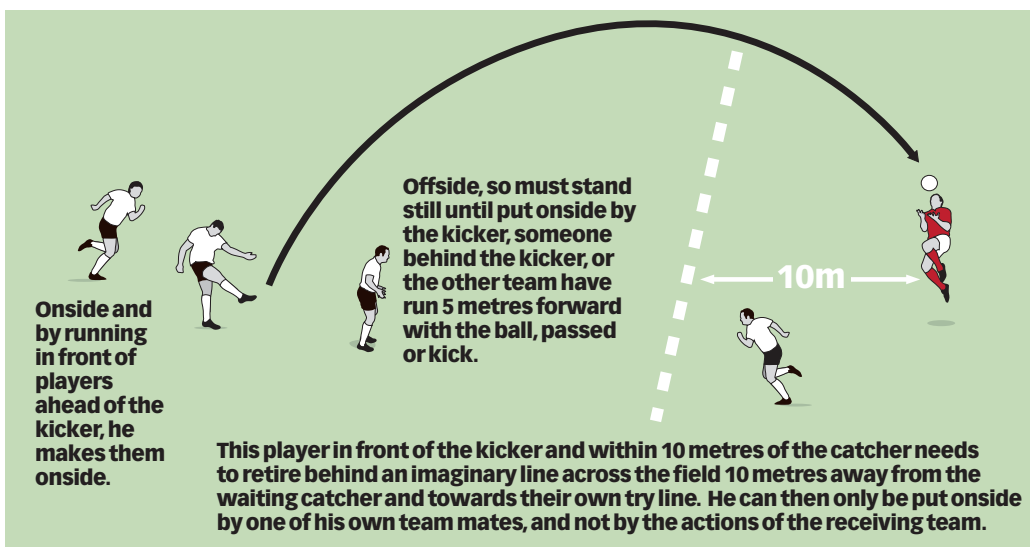
We have asked referees to strictly apply the law at the tackle. The tackler who has fallen with the tackled player must release the tackled player before he gets up to compete for the ball. Previously players were getting away with holding onto the tackled player as they regained their feet. Observations from the Super 14s demonstrate this has created quicker ball at the breakdown.

It is important to note that a tackled player must be released by anyone involved in the tackle. So even if the tackler remains on their feet, they must release the tackled player before they can play the ball.

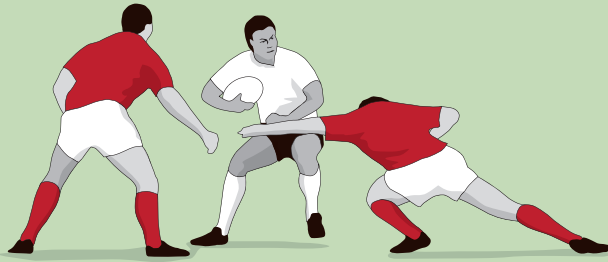
Managing referees

I think we have come full circle in terms of communication between the referees and players. The constant chat from the referee had become too big a feature. We now like the idea of "less is best". Players should not rely on the referees to tell them what to do. One command should be enough. A player should know when he is offside or off his feet.

There should be less talk from the players as a



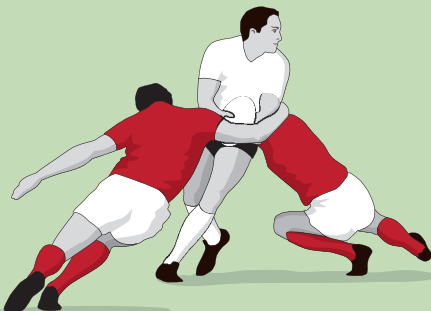
Releasing the tackled player and playing the ball



One man tackle
One player makes the tackle. The other defender is not involved in the tackle.



Legal challenge
The player on his feet can grab the ball as long as he was not involved in the tackle, or has released the tackled player and then grabbed the ball.



Two man tacklers beware
If two tacklers get the ball carrier down, with one targetting the ball, they must release the tackled player and the ball, even if one of them remains on his feet.

consequence. We do not want to move down the road of other sports where referees are fair game for arguments.

We have also changed what used to be known as the “massage session”. Coaches would meet with the referees before the game, often with video footage of the opposition. We took this away because it turned into a protracted criticism of the opposition. Now we have come back to a more controlled meeting where coaches and referees can clarify points. It is not a chance to talk about the opposition.

Referees, as a matter of course, speak to the teams before the game, and specifically the front rows. I would suggest this is a good time to discuss anything unusual you might be doing in the game. For instance you might say “we are going left from the kick off”, so the referee knows to stand on the right.

New laws?

There will be no changes in the laws between now and the 2011 World Cup, unless there is reason to make changes on safety grounds.

Two hemispheres, the same laws

There is common misconception that there are two sets of laws, one for Six Nations and European rugby, one for the Super 14 and Tri Nations. Some even go so far as to say that there is a law book for professional rugby and another for amateur. There is no difference in the laws at any level. However, there is a difference in standards between referees, and a difference in players. I see that there is far more

player buy-in at more junior grades of rugby. Generally, the players at this level want to play rugby and “cheat” a lot less.

At top levels, players are highly tuned, extremely well prepared athletes. They will bend the laws as far as possible. This inevitably impacts on how the game is refereed and managed.

As to perceived differences in hemispheres, I would put this down to two factors. The laws are the same, but the weather conditions

are different when the tournaments are being run. Hard grounds in South Africa produce a different game to soaking, windy conditions at Twickenham.

It is also fair to say that different countries have a different style of rugby as well.

Even in the Northern Hemisphere, there are differences between nations. So, whilst the laws are equal across the globe, players will play in a different way, thus invoking different situations in which the laws are applied.

Paddy O'Brien

Head of the IRB's Referee Board

Paddy is a former policeman from New Zealand. He started his international refereeing career in 1994 and became New Zealand's most capped rugby referee in 2003 when he took charge of the Six Nations game between France and Wales. As part of his role for the IRB he oversaw the Experimental Law Variations and the adoption of some of these Laws into the current game. He is currently monitoring the effects of the refereeing interpretations announced at the start of 2010. He was recognised for his services to rugby in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in 2005.