

Maul By R.J.Tilley

The RFU Laws Laboratory has been running for some seven years and during this period a large number of experimental variations has been trialled. One area of the game which has attracted more attention than any other is the maul. Seven variations related to the maul have been trialled. Two of these were concerned with the offside line at ruck, maul and scrummage. Both these variations were aimed at creating space in mid-field and they did achieve their objective. The first created an offside line five metres behind the back foot of a ruck, maul or scrum. The second looked at the effect of providing a similar offside line for the same three aspects of play but only one metre back. These two variations did not attempt to solve the major perceived problem of the maul.

Driving mauls have become an ever increasing feature of rugby union at all levels of the game. At the elite end, the maul is not regarded as an attractive part of the game and therefore does not add to 'the spectacle'. At the community end it is accepted as a necessary part of the game and helps many players to make a worthwhile contribution to their team's efforts and, therefore, is an attractive area.

The elite end of the game has a need to put 'bums on seats' and, because of that, unattractive aspects of the game are not desirable. The evolution of the maul law has now allowed teams to move the ball back from the original ball carrier to a player at the rear of the maul. This player cannot be tackled by the opposition and, in addition, the players in front of him provide both a shield and momentum to take the ball forward. This has become a vital weapon in most teams' armoury, especially from a line-out in the

opposition's 22m area. The current law, which allows the team two attempts to go forward before they need to produce the ball, has accentuated the problem. Now teams can take their time to organise before they need to go forward immediately – as, of course, they had to do under the old law.

Unfortunately, the maul is one way to break down the 'iron curtain' defences of modern rugby and it is necessary to allow the team in possession to go forward and hopefully suck in defenders, thereby creating space elsewhere on the field.

At Cambridge we have trialled five experimental variations which directly affect the maul.

1. In 1999 we trialled a variation which did not allow players to leave the maul once they were bound into it, irrespective of whether their team were in possession or not. The only player allowed to break off was the ball carrier. This law was trialled for one term only and was considered to be neither easy for referees nor helpful to players. The variation did not create space either around the fringe of the maul or wider out, as The Laws Committee had hoped. Mauls became loose and fragmented, leaving players and referees in difficult situations and not clear as to what they could do. Successful mauls from both an attacking and defending point of view require a team to be bound tightly together working as one unit. Players who are not in that position need to be allowed to break off and start again, not cause

hassle as they find themselves in ineffective positions.

2. In 1998 a limit on the forward movement of a maul was imposed by a variation which put five metres as the maximum distance allowed. The purpose of this trial was to ensure that mauls were not prolonged and the ball had to be recycled. This variation did severely restrict the effectiveness of the driving maul. Teams needed to transfer the ball quickly to the back of the maul to ensure its availability. Defenders did not, however, commit to the maul as they well knew the restrictions that were being applied. Finally, referees' interpretation of five metres varied considerably, given the dynamic nature of the game. There is no doubt that this restriction would almost eliminate the maul as an attacking aspect of the game. In addition, this variation allowed defenders to fan across the field, thus posing yet more problems for attackers.
3. The definition of a maul was addressed in 1997-98. A new definition was drawn up which needed two or more players from each team on their feet and in physical contact round a player who is in possession of the ball. The objective was to allow the defending team (the side not in possession of the ball) more opportunities to stop a driving maul. The law was difficult to manage for referees. Players became frustrated by the intertwining of players, which occurred due to the delay in forming a 'maul'. At the elite end of the game the speed of the game would ensure mauls form very

quickly and, therefore, this law would be ineffective.

4. Between 1998-2000 the defending team was given a chance to end the maul almost before it gained any momentum. This variation allowed a maul to be collapsed by grasping the ball carrier above the waist and below the shoulder and taking him to ground.

A number of people objected to this trial law on the grounds of safety. In the three seasons we ran this variation we had no injuries resulting from collapsed mauls. The 'sacking' of the player in possession following a lineout has become common practice at all levels of the game and this law does allow a defending player an opportunity to stop the maul before the ball is moved away from the initial ball carrier. This trial law was viewed very positively by players and coaches. Its success was caused by the very specific definition about how the ball carrier must be brought to ground. The player making the tackle is in contact with the ball carrier and cannot hit the maul with speed before collapsing it. There is no doubt this variation gave the defenders one opportunity to legally stop a driving maul.

- 5 In the season 2000-2001 we trialled a law which gave an incentive to the defending team by giving them the opportunity to win the throw into a scrum following an unsuccessful maul. The trial law stated that the team that had been moving forward just before the scrum was ordered would have the throw in, therefore giving incentive to the team not in possession to counteract the

driving maul. This law proved to be popular with the players, who soon realised the potential to create turnovers, gain ground or suck in defenders. Defending teams did commit players to mauls to try and stop forward movement and create turnovers. The result was more space for the attacking team to move the ball away from the contact area. Mauling techniques improved and teams were appreciating 'quick' ball from maul situations, especially when going forward.

All these maul law variations have achieved some success in addressing the

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'problem'. The most successful, without doubt, was permitting the ball carrier to be taken to ground. Our experiences also suggest that the put in to a scrum following an unsuccessful static maul should go the side going forward - if we want defenders committed and tied in to the maul.

Law makers need to decide what type of game is required. Eliminate the maul and we are another large step down the road to 'rugby league'. The answer to this problem revolves around whether we want 'bums on seats' to finance an elite game or 'bums in shorts' to keep people playing in the community game.