

Building The Scrummage:

Part II – The Junior and Youth Scrum

by Steve Peters

Steve Peters is a former North of England tight-head prop and is now an RFU Level 3 Coach Educator and RFU RDO for Cheshire.

This article is written as a follow up to Part I in the Autumn 2003 Technical Journal on the building of the mini scrum. It is to encourage any coach that the coaching of the scrummage can be undertaken with confidence, built upon the acquisition of an understanding of basic principles alongside some examples of how to apply them in the coaching environment.

The focus of this article is on the building of the junior eight-player scrum. The underlying principles developed in the earlier article are equally applicable to coaching the eight-player scrum in the fifteen-a-side game. As the forces increase, due to the increase in strength of the players and increased numbers, it is important to stress that safety must be the overriding factor in all rugby coaching. This is particularly important when coaching the scrummage.

The basic equipment you will need to get you going is a whistle to attract immediate attention when ears are muffled in the heart of the scrum, a few cones to mark your working area and an open mind. If you have access to a scrummage machine, ensure that you are confident and competent enough to use it. It is important that you familiarise players, row by row, with the machine before engaging a full scrummage against it. This will be covered in more detail later in the article.

The start point for all scrummaging is balance. The warm up for mini midi players in the previous article is equally applicable to older players. This warm up, as well as highlighting key principles, prepares the body for scrummaging. The next section expands on these principles and puts them into the context of the scrummage.

Scrummage foot position

The start point for all scrummaging is a good balanced foot position, as demonstrated in the previous article.

Here are the key points of the **athletic position** just to remind you:

- Feet placed just wider than shoulder width apart.
- Outside foot slightly in front of the inside foot.
- Knees slightly bent.
- Weight evenly distributed on both feet.
- Weight on the front of the foot, not the heels.
- Hips, feet and shoulders facing forwards.

The athletic position



Get the players to adopt the athletic position with one amendment. The toes of the inside foot should be slightly behind those of the outside foot so that the toes of the inside foot are level with the instep of the outside foot.

Left side scrummage foot position



Right side scrummage foot position.



This method of keeping the feet in roughly the same plane means that players, whichever row of the scrum they play in, will have a balanced and stable platform on which to scrummage. It will also ensure that they:

- Adopt a forward facing body position.
- They will push straight and will not twist.
- They are stable front-to-back and side-to-side.

Once players understand the basic feet position, they can begin to develop the correct scrummage body position.

Scrummage body position

The human spine is designed to resist force; however, it must be in correct alignment to do this. The spine is an elongated 'S' shape and these curves allow the force to dissipate as the load is spread by the curves of the spine. Think of the example of an Olympic weight lifter in the 'get set' position when he is about to start a lift. He will be looking up through the eyebrows with chin off chest, feet just over shoulder width apart and with the spine set strongly in its natural curve.

This strong back position is the same basic position players should adopt in the scrummage, but the angle of the back and legs would be different.

- Hips should be below shoulders.
- Pelvis parallel to the floor.
- Legs bent to about 120°.
- Feet just over shoulder width apart, facing forwards and as flat on the floor as possible.

To demonstrate this to youth players, who may have poor body management, it is important to teach correct technique. Ask the players to kneel in the press-up position with knees apart, hands below the shoulders, head up and chin off the chest. Ask them to think of this and remember how it feels. Then, working in pairs with one kneeling and one standing, the standing partner should be able to balance a rugby ball on the small of his partner's back without it rolling off. Ask them now, still in the press-up position, to come off their knees and try to maintain the same body position.

Good scrummage body position



Again the partner tries to balance the ball on the small of the back. If it rolls off forwards, the hips are too high or the back is arched. If it rolls off backwards, the back and legs are too straight or hips too low. If it rolls off sideways, then their hips are twisted. Coaches should monitor and assist the players to establish the correct body position. The basic body shape and foot position are relevant to all players in the scrum. There is only a slight modification to binds in different rows and the hooker's feet that will be discussed later in the article.

N.B. AS THE FORCES IN THE SCRUM INCREASE, THE ADOPTION OF THE CORRECT BODY POSITION IS A KEY SAFETY FACTOR.

Once players are aware of and familiar with the basic individual foot and body positions, it is possible to move on to binding of individual players to form the front row. Remember, the most important factor when joining players together is the binding.

Front row bind

In order to ensure that the players are tight across the row, it is necessary that the bind is tight and strong without causing the arm muscles to fatigue too quickly. Use the 'walk around' bind where the length of the bind taken determines the tightness of the bind.

The walk around bind

Get the players into groups of three. The hooker stands with his hands on his head whilst in the scrummage foot position with the right foot forward. The loose-head prop (LHP) stands behind the hooker and makes a bind with the right hand on the front of the hooker's jersey between armpit and sternum (breast bone), depending on the length of arm or build of the hooker. He then walks around the hooker to the left to stand next to the hooker in the left scrummage foot position, making sure that his feet are not overlapped with the hooker's. Stand hip to hip, with feet facing forwards, drop the left arm across the body and point at the hooker's right foot. This will enable the hooker to bind on the LHP under the left armpit. Once the hooker has a tight grip, the LHP stands straight and pushes the right shoulder forward under the hooker's left armpit so that there are four shoulders in line facing forward. This action will tighten the bind but only a firm grip is required to maintain it.

The tight-head prop (THP) stands behind the hooker and makes a bind with the left hand on the waistband of the hooker's shorts between drawstring and pocket, depending on the length of arm or build of the hooker. He walks around the hooker to the right to stand next to the hooker in the right scrummage foot position, making sure that his feet are not overlapped with the hooker's, Stand hip to hip with feet facing forwards, drop the right arm across the body and point at the hooker's left foot. This will enable the hooker to bind on the THP under the left armpit.

The front row bind – rear view.



The front row bind – front view.



Once the hooker has a tight grip, the THP stands straight and pushes the left shoulder forward under the hooker's right armpit so that there are six shoulders in line facing forward. This action again will tighten the bind, but it only requires a firm grip to maintain it. It is important to make sure that the shoulders, hips and feet of all three players are facing forward and are not overlapping. As players become used to the technique, they will know how far round to grip a given player to make the bind tight. It is important the both the LHP and THP only turn their upper body, not their whole stance, and push their shoulders through after the hooker has bound. This will ensure that their spines end up parallel to the touch-line in line with the direction of push.

Role of the hooker

The role of the hooker in the eight-player scrum is to strike the ball from the throw-in, to guide it through the legs of the LHP for the scrum half to gather and restart the game. The ball is always put in from the left on the LHP side and is struck with the hooker's right foot. This enables the hooker to protect the ball from the opposing hooker with the right leg.

During the strike, the hooker's weight is supported by his own left leg and both the props. It is important that the hooker has a solid base from which to strike. To facilitate this, the hooker's left foot should be placed next to the right foot of the LHP, making sure that the hooker's and prop's legs are **not** crossed over. This enables them to support the hooker using the LHP's right leg and the hooker's left leg.

Front row feet position



The hooker's right foot, prior to engagement, is placed slightly in front of the left foot to give a stable platform at the engagement. After the scrum has engaged, the hooker places the right foot next to the left foot with a slight inward turn of the ankle to enable him to strike, regardless of the height of the scrum. To see why, try crouching down with your chest on your knees and then try to lift your right foot when it is flat on the floor. It is not possible; therefore you need the turn of the ankle.

Once the hooker is ready, the scrum half approaches the tunnel. From there, the hooker will signal for the ball to be put in. The scrum half stands one metre away and rolls the ball along the floor down the middle of the tunnel. As the ball arrives, the hooker drives the right foot

forward and towards the ball to close the channel and then he sweeps the ball with the sole of the foot between the legs of the LHP and back to the feet of the left hand second row, where it is gathered by the scrum half.

Once players are bound they should crouch in preparation for the scrummage to engage. **The engagement sequence is as follows: ‘CROUCH, TOUCH AND HOLD.....ENGAGE’.**

IT IS IMPORTANT TO MAINTAIN CONTROL THROUGHOUT AND THAT PLAYERS REACT TO YOUR COMMANDS ACCURATELY AND QUICKLY. THIS WILL ENSURE THAT THE PLAYERS ARE SAFE THROUGHOUT.

Engagement of the Scrummage

The sequence of engagement is the same as for the mini midi scrum. The key coaching points are to ensure that the players adopt the correct foot and body positions prior to engagement and engage in a safe and controlled manner, with the coach using the correct sequence of instructions:

CROUCH – The front row bend at the hips, knees and ankles, looking up through the eyebrows, chins off chest and backs set, making sure that they stay balanced and don’t topple forwards.

TOUCH AND HOLD – LHP and THP touch their opponent on the shoulder to ensure that they are the correct distance apart. The coach pauses so that players can see where they are putting their heads. The arms do not have to stay in the touching position when the players move forward into the engagement. The touch is purely a safety measure to set the front rows the correct distance apart before the engagement.

ENGAGE – Heads to the left, shoulder-to-shoulder contact, making sure that they bind correctly onto their opponents, with the THP binding opposite the arm of his LHP opponent. Unbind and get ready to go again and repeat.

Practising the engagement

Engagement of the front row can be practised against opponents to ensure that players get the correct bind on their opponents’ backs. The outside arm is an important part of the props’ armoury. The outside arm should be bound as quickly as possible. Props must bind to their opponents; it is illegal for props to put a hand on the floor or to lean on their knee instead of binding.

The LHP has two binding options. He can either bind long with a straight arm reaching towards the waistband of his opposing THP, or he can bind with a bent arm to reach between the shoulder blades of the opposing THP

Loose-head prop long bind



Loose-head prop bent arm bind



The THP should bind with a bent arm reaching to his opponent's back behind the armpit of the opposing LHP. The THP should use the right shoulder to pressurise the LHP while keeping the elbow up, but not above shoulder level when the scrum is engaged. The THP must not pull down with the outside arm.

Tight-head prop bind



This covers all the aspects of foot position and balance, binding and body position, safe engagement and binding to opponents for the front row.

The next section includes the addition of a second row to the scrum. The addition of these players should not cause problems, providing their basic technique is sound. The key areas to address are that of **foot position** and **binding** for the second row.

Second row binding

As explained earlier, the technique of binding is important to maintain a tight scrum. However, for second row (lock forward), the most important bind is not across the row to their second row partner, but through the rows to the prop. Locks have traditionally bound together tightly across the row and put less emphasis on the bind to the prop. This would be like building two brick walls but not fixing wall ties between them! It is important for the stability of the scrummage that the bind through the rows is seen as the most important. To ensure that the locks bind correctly, we must teach a new technique, the '**power bind**'. For the eight-player scrum, the second rows can bind through the legs of the props

N.B. THE POWER BIND THROUGH THE LEGS OF THE PROP MAY ONLY BE USED BY PLAYERS IN THE EIGHT-PLAYER SCRUM.

In order to maintain a tight bind without undue fatigue, it is possible to use a walk-around bind for the second row. Start by forming the front row correctly as previously detailed. Once formed, the locks crouch to the outside of their respective props and reach as far through the prop's legs as they can to grip the waistband of the prop's shorts and make a bind with the

outside hand on the waistband of the prop's shorts as close as possible to the prop's inside hip pocket, depending on the length of arm or build of the prop. The locks should work to get their hands as close to their own ear as they can. The arm should follow the angle of the inguinal crease (the fold in the groin where the leg and abdomen bend).

Second row power bind

Second row power bind – front view.



Second row power bind – rear view.



Once they have this bind on the prop, they should engage their heads between the hips of the prop and hooker, placing their head at the larger gap between the knees and working their head up so that their shoulder is underneath the curve of the buttock of the prop forward. As they walk round and straighten up, it is important that they do not go down on their inside knee, as this could lead to them becoming trapped under the collapsing front row if they experience pressure from their opponents at the engagement. They should stay on their feet, as this is a stronger and safer

position. It is also a stronger position from which to drive. As they engage, the right-hand lock, who should also be the taller of the two, binds over the top to ensure the right lock's left shoulder is helping to turn the hooker's hips towards the ball. They bind together with their inside arms and the flankers can help them move their hands to the correct position to bind on the shorts of their second row partner.

Crouching second rows



Check-list of key points for second row binding:

- Bind through the legs of the props first, using walk-around bind.
- Shoulders under the prop's buttocks.
- Right-hand second row binds over the left-hand second row.
- Bind to partner's waist band to keep hips together.
- Second rows to be bound to props before scrum engages.

Adding the back row

The flankers are an important part of the second row at the scrummage. The flankers should help the second rows to bind by guiding their inside hands to the correct position. Once the second rows are bound, the flankers bind with their inside arm, binding across the back of the adjacent second row and pushing with their shoulder against the outside buttock of the prop as part of the second row. The flanker's outside hand should bind to the shorts of the prop.

N.B. IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THEY DO NOT BIND ONTO OR PUSH THE PROP'S LEG AS THIS CAN UNBALANCE THE PROP AND CAUSE A DANGEROUS COLLAPSE.

They should be off their knees in a pushing position, hips facing forward, with feet in the scrummaging position described earlier so that they are pushing parallel to the touch-line. There is no need to push inwards to drive the prop's hips inwards, as the foot, hip and shoulder position of the props ensures that they will already be driving straight. As with the second row, the most important bind for the flankers is to the prop to ensure that the drive is transmitted through the front row to the opposition. The flankers should be down and bound before the scrum engages.

The flanker's bind



Check-list of key points for flankers binding:

- Help locks to bind.
- Bind inside arm across the back of the locks, gripping the waistband of their second row partner's shorts.
- Shoulder under the prop's buttocks.
- Outside hand binds to the prop's shorts.
- Bind to partner's waistband to keep hips together.

- Flankers to be bound to prop and second row before scrum engages.

No.8 binding

The No.8 would be the last player to bind and must bind with head between the two locks and arms around the hips of the locks. The No.8 should adopt the scrummaging foot position and must bind with a full arm bind. The No.8 should keep off his knees and be down at the engagement.

No.8 bind



It is important that the body position explored earlier is reinforced to second rows, flankers and No.8. The addition of the flankers and No.8 should not cause any problems if the underlying principles of binding and feet position are adhered to:

- Feet placed just wider than shoulder width apart.
- One foot slightly in front of the other.
- Knees slightly bent.
- Weight evenly distributed on both feet.
- Weight on the front of each foot, not the heels.
- Hips, feet and shoulders facing forwards.
- Shoulders above hips.
- Look up with chin off chest.

This concludes Building the Scrummage Part II. Hopefully you will have found this enlightening and see that any coach can, and should, be able to teach junior players the basic, safe techniques of the eight-player scrummage. In Part III, the adult eight-man scrum will be developed further with more advanced techniques for adult players.