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Building The Scrummage: Part I - The Mini Midi Scrum

by Steve Peters

The coaching of the scrummage is considered to be the realm of the gnarled ex prop, who understands the so-called 'dark arts' of the front row. This article is written 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 and some examples of how to apply them in the coaching environment.

The focus of this article is on the building of the mini (three-player) and midi (five-player) scrums. However, the underlying principles are equally applicable to coaching the eight-player scrum in the fifteen-a-side game. It is important to stress that safety is the overriding factor in all rugby coaching and 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. (The mind is like a parachute...it works best when open! Although Confucius does say, "If mind too open...... brain falls out!")

As the parable in the 'Good Book' says, "It is better to build your house on a foundation of rock than of sand." Therefore, the first principles to be examined are those relating to foot position and balance. The following exercises, while highlighting key principles, can be used as part of a basic scrummage coaching warm-up.

Pair up players with those of similar size and build, stand them facing their partners in a line with about one metre between pairs. Ask them to hold their partner's right wrist in their left hand, holding up from underneath as if the wrist was a can of pop they were about to drink from.

The correct grip



Then ask them to use their index finger to try to tickle their partner's left ear while avoiding having their own ear tickled.

N.B. THIS DOES NOT ALLOW PLAYERS TO SLAP EACH OTHER'S HEAD.

After about a minute of this contest, identify how many of the pairs have been moved from their original start position and ask the question, "How many of you have been moved from your original start position?" A few hands may show, then ask, "Why do you think you have been moved from your original start position?" The answer you are looking for is because they were off balance.

There are a number of reasons why this happens:

- Too stiff-legged.
- Feet not under centre of gravity.
- No stable platform e.g. feet placed too close or too far apart.

Demonstrate the ideal foot position:

- 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 foot, not the heels.
- Hips, feet and shoulders facing forwards.

This position, sometimes called the 'athletic position', is what would be adopted by a soccer goalie on the line ready to move in either direction to make a save, or a tennis player waiting at the base line ready to return a serve.

The athletic position

Return them to their original positions, gripping their partner's wrist and again trying to tickle their partner's ears. This time make sure that they adopt the athletic position. This should ensure that the majority of the players do not get moved off their original foot position so readily. After about thirty seconds, swap hands and go left wrist into right hand for another thirty seconds.

The foot position involved in the athletic position will relate to all foot positions in the building of the scrum.



Make sure your players are all familiar and comfortable with it. As well as teaching about a balanced stance, this will also begin to warm up the upper body ready to scrummage. This is further developed in the next exercise.

Still working with the same partners, get into a press-up position about half a metre apart. Keep the weight evenly distributed over the four points of contact (two hands and two feet), arms shoulder width apart, feet just over shoulder width apart and knees slightly bent. They should look up through their eyebrows and their chin should be off the chest. This should ensure that they are balanced and that their shoulders and neck are in a strong position.

The balanced press-up position



They now attempt to tap their partner on the back of the hands while avoiding having their own hands tapped.

N.B. DO NOT ALLOW PLAYERS TO PULL THEIR PARTNER'S ARMS AWAY WHICH WOULD CAUSE THEM TO COLLAPSE.

Ensure that they keep their feet in the athletic position. After about thirty seconds stand them up and re-position them for another thirty seconds.

The next principles are those of co-operation and equilibrium, both important for the safe formation of any scrummage.

Again, working in their pairs, sit them on the floor back-to-back with shoulders and lower back in contact and a tight locking of arms with their partner; knees are bent, feet are shoulder width apart and flat on the floor. Keeping their hands off the floor, ask them to push with their legs against their partner and stand up together.

Sitting back-to-back

If they are unsuccessful at standing up, ask them why. The answer will be that the players who have not co-operated and worked together will not have been able to stand up.



Reinforce working together, foot position, a tight locking of arms and not trying to use their hands to push off the floor. Get them to sit down again and work together to stand up, stay joined and then sit down together. Repeat two or three times.

Once they have mastered this, join them with another pair to make a group of four. Ask them again to sit back-to-back with the same partner but link arms with a different partner so that they form the shape of a cross.

The cross shape



Again reinforce working together, foot position, a tight locking of arms and not trying to use their hands to push off the floor. Get them to work together

to stand up, stay joined and sit down together and repeat two or three times. Once they have mastered this, reinforce co-operation and teamwork by asking them to stand up together to two thirds of the way up.

Then rotate their group through 180° and sit down again. Repeat twice.

N.B. THEY MUST WORK TOGETHER AND BE NO LOWER THAN TWO THIRDS OF THE WAY UP.

Stand them up and ask them how they were able to support their weight as they were standing up without falling over. The answer is that equal forces pushing against each other bring equilibrium. Try to relate this to what happens in a scrum. This shows that if they work together, they can join a group of people in an unusual shape and end up with a stable entity and able to support their own weight. This is a bit like a scrum!

Equal forces support the scrum

Arrange a 3 v 3 live scrum to demonstrate that equal forces support the scrum. This is an effective warm-up, highlights the key principles and prepares the body for scrummaging. The

next section expands on these principles and puts them into the context of scrummaging.

This warm-up, as well as highlighting key principles, has prepared the body for scrummaging. The next section expands on these principles and puts them into the context of the scrummage.

Scrummage foot position

Having established the athletic position, to reinforce it, ask them to stand with their feet in the position they should adopt if they were on the left hand side of the scrum. Once in this position, putting their hands on their heads, they should crouch as low as they can go, bending at the hips, knees and ankles. Stand them up and ask how many of them felt 'off balance'. Ask them why this might be. The answer would be that they did not have a balanced position and usually their feet may be too far apart from front to back.

Get them to adopt the athletic position with one addition; the toe of the right foot should be slightly behind the left foot so that the right toe is level with the left instep.

Left side scrummage foot position



Repeat the above crouching position and ask if they felt more balanced. The answer should be yes. If they were on the right hand side of the scrummage the feet would be reversed. Repeat the above sequence for the right hand side.

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, stable platform on which to scrummage. It will also ensure that they adopt a forward-facing body position, push straight and do not twist. They are stable front to back and side-to-side. Once players understand the basic foot 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 a weight lifter in the 'Get Set' position and about to start a lift. He would be looking up through the eyebrows with his chin off the chest, feet just over shoulder width apart and spine set strongly in its natural curve.

The 'get set' position

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 go below shoulders, pelvis is parallel to the floor, legs are bent to about 120° and feet are just over shoulder width apart facing forwards and as flat on the floor as possible.

The scrummage position emphasising shoulders above hips



To demonstrate this to young players, who may have poor body management and whose legs may look like 'Bambi on Ice', it is important to teach correct technique. Ask the players to kneel in the press-up position with knees apart, hands below the shoulders and head up with chin off chest. Ask them to try to remember how this feels.

Work in pairs, one kneeling, 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 pressup 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. If players do not understand what you are after, you can use the analogy of a 'happy cat' with a nice curved back being a good position; an 'angry cat' with back arched up is in a bad position. This should get your message across to young players.

Happy cat



The basic body shape and foot position are relevant to all players in the scrum, with only a slight modification to binds in different rows. The hooker's feet will be discussed later.

N.B. 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 start joining individual players together to form the three-player scrum front row. 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 for the bind to be

tight and strong without causing the arm muscles to fatigue too quickly. If you hook the fingers of your two hands together and pull against yourself as hard as you can for as long as possible, it is guite tiring. That is because your arm muscles are performing what is called an isometric contraction, where the fibres are under tension but neither lengthening nor shortening. This is the most fatiguing contraction a muscle can perform. Therefore, when forming the bind, we should try to avoid having to pull tight to secure the bind, as it will weaken as the muscles tire. Avoid this happening by using 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 middle player (hooker) stands with hands on head in the scrummage foot position with right foot up. The player who is to be the left hand or 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 walks around the hooker to the left to stand next to the hooker in the left scrummage foot position, making sure that the feet are not overlapping with the hooker. Hip goes to hip, with feet facing forwards. The LHP then drops the left arm across the body to 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, pushing 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 requires a firm grip to maintain it.

The player who is to be the right hand, or tighthead prop (THP), stands behind the hooker and makes a bind with the left hand on the waist band of the hooker's shorts between draw string and pocket, depending on the length of arm or build of 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 overlapping with the hooker's. Hip touches hip, feet point forwards then the right arm is dropped across the body and points at the hooker's left foot. This will enable the hooker to bind on the THP under the right armpit.

The prop position for the hooker's grip from back



The prop position for the hooker's grip from front



Once the hooker has a tight grip, the THP stands straight, pushing 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 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 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 that 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 and in line with the direction of the push.

Front row spines in line



Once players are bound they would crouch in preparation for the scrummage to engage.

THE ENGAGEMENT SEQUENCE IS AS FOLLOWS;

'CROUCH, TOUCH AND HOLD.... ENGAGE'

Engagement of the scrummage

For young players, learning to scrum for the first time, it is important that they become used to the unusual body positions that they will be adopting in a safe and unthreatening environment. This is especially important for the hooker, who has both arms involved in binding and may feel more vulnerable than the other two players. Time should be taken to build this confidence, using the techniques already outlined, once they are ready to be taught the engagement. The following confidence building technique is useful:

Kneeling engagement drill



Stage 1

Get two groups of three players to kneel, with the buttocks off the heels, facing the other group.

Team one stays upright and will not engage. Team two does not bind together. On the coach's command of 'crouch, touch and hold', they make sure that they stay balanced on their knees and shins and do not fall forwards. Repeat this a couple of times and swap roles so that team one crouch and team two stay upright. Swap positions and repeat so that all players experience the different positions.

One team upright, the other kneeling & crouching



Stage 2

Once players have become proficient, they should actually prepare to engage with the coach using the correct sequence of instructions. On 'crouch',

the front row bend at the hips and knees, look up through the eyebrows, hold the chin off the chest and set the back, making sure that they stay balanced and don't topple forwards. On 'touch and hold' the LHP and THP touch their opponent on the shoulder to ensure that they are the correct distance apart. The coach pauses so that the players can see where they are putting their heads. On 'engage', heads go to the left and there is shoulder-to-shoulder contact, making sure that they bind correctly to their opponent with the THP taking the outside bind. Unbind and get ready to go again. After a few tries, change players into different positions and repeat.

Stage 3

The next stage is to get players used to the sensation of tightness in the scrum. The following explanation/demonstration can be helpful at this stage. Once they are engaged as above, on the coach's command they will all raise their left leg to put their left foot on the floor (kneeling on the right knee only). Once all are safely in this position, the coach gives the command to stand up onto both feet. As they stand, they experience the sensation of the bind becoming tight as balance is maintained. Once players have mastered this, they are ready to commence engagement from standing.

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

Scrummage engagement from standing

The sequence of engagement is the same as for the kneeling 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. On 'crouch', the front row bend at the hips and knees and ankles, looking up through the eyebrows, chin off chest and back set, making sure that they stay balanced and don't topple forwards. On '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 the players can see where they are putting their heads and on 'engage', heads go to the left and there is shoulder-toshoulder contact, making sure that they bind correctly to their opponent with the THP taking the outside bind. Unbind and get ready to go

again. After a few tries, exchange players into different positions and repeat.

This covers all the aspects of foot position and balance, binding and body position and the safe engagement and binding to opponents for the three-player Mini scrummage. The role of the hooker and their foot positions will be covered later in the article. Scrummage technique should be taught from the middle of the U8 season in training, even though it is not used in games until U9. It is vital that even in an uncontested scrum, the two packs adopt correct technique and are correctly engaged as this reduces the amount of learning required in the transition from Mini Tag to contact between U8 and U9. These techniques should be developed throughout the U9 year to prepare them for the contested scrum at U10.

The next section includes the addition of a second row of two players to the scrum in Midi rugby. The addition of these players need not cause major problems providing their basic technique is sound. The key areas to address are those of foot position.

Second row binding

As explained earlier, the technique of binding is important to maintain a tight scrum. However, for second row, the most important bind is not across the row but through the rows. Second rows have traditionally bound together tight 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 second rows bind correctly we must reinforce the RFU continuum, which states that the second row must be bound around the hip of the prop.

N.B. THE POWER BIND THROUGH THE LEGS MUST NOT BE USED BY MINI MIDI PLAYERS.

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 this is formed, the second rows stand to the outside of their respective props and grip the waistband of the props' shorts. They then make a bind with the outside hand on the waist band of the props' shorts between drawstring and pocket, depending on the length of arm or build of the prop. They then walk around as the props did earlier.

Second row walk around bind



Once they have this bind on the prop, they should crouch and engage their heads between the hips of the prop and hooker, placing their head at the larger gap between the knees. They then work 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 their 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 to be in. It is also a stronger position from which to drive.

Crouching second rows



As they engage together the right hand lock, who should also be the taller of the two (this enables the hooker to turn his hips more easily towards the ball), binds over the top to ensure the

right lock's left shoulder is helping to turn the hooker's hips towards the ball.

Second row bind from behind



It is important that the body position explored earlier is reinforced to second row players:

- Feet placed just wider than shoulder width apart.
- Outside foot slightly in front of the other.
- 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.
- Shoulders above hips.
- Look up with chin off chest.

Check list of key points for second row binding:

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

This concludes the building and engagement of the three-player and five-player scrum. The final topic to cover is the foot position of the hooker so that he is ready for the strike.

Role of the hooker

The role of the hooker in the three-player and fiveplayer scrum is to strike the ball from the throw-in, through the legs of the LHP for the scrum half to gather and start the game again. The ball is always put in from the left on the loose-head 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 on his own left leg and, through the arm bind, by 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.

Loose-head feet position



Hooker feet position



Tight head feet position



The hooker's right foot, prior to engagement, is placed slightly in front of the left to give a stable platform at the engagement. After the scrum has engaged, the hooker places the right foot next to the left with a slight inward turn of the ankle to enable the hooker 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. If it is flat on the floor it's not possible, which is why 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. Standing one metre away, the scrum half 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. He then 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.

This concludes Building the Scrummage Part 1. Hopefully you will appreciate that any coach can and should be able to teach young players the basic, safe techniques of the Mini Midi scrummage without having to resort to the use of a scrum machine, which may require specialist knowledge to get the best out of it.

In Part 2 the eight-man scrum will be developed, along with some more advanced techniques for older junior and adult players.

