

THE RUCK (OR MUCK) – TRYING TO CREATE A POSITIVE THOUGHT PROCESS INTO THE SHAMBLES OF THE POST-TACKLE. BY PETER THORBURN.

Peter Thorburn will be best known here as Director of Rugby and Head Coach at Bristol Shoguns. Before that he had coached New Zealand 'A', New Zealand U21s, various New Zealand 7s teams and had been an All Black selector. He was a New Zealand representative on the IRB Shape of the Game Committee and initiated and drove discussions that resulted in the 'five second rule' at the maul being introduced in June 2001.

I invited Peter to offer some coaching ideas on the ruck, knowing that it is a part of the game that is disappearing – at least as it used to exist. However, the skills that are required for effective rucking are invaluable for so many other facets of the game and Peter's ideas will be thought-provoking for coaches of all levels. He did stress that his ideas, some a couple of years old now, were more about trying to create a positive thought process into the post-tackle shambles than they are about the ruck itself. Editor.

Two years ago, as a New Zealand representative, I put together a paper for a 'Shape Of The Game' meeting in London and presented my thoughts to Syd Millar and various others. My starting point was that I firmly believe that if we do not encourage/enable players to stay on their feet and/or keep the ball off the ground, we will continue to have the game of pile-ups and static ball. *True* rucking is a dynamic phase and can not be developed from static possession. The clean-out, legal or otherwise, that all teams use now is the nearest thing to true rucking that is possible in the modern game.

What we see, more often than not, is hacking and stomping by players who are trying to free up static ball. True rucking, however, is a by-product of **dynamic, go forward** play. Most teams practise the basic requirements towards developing better ball presentation, pick and go and clean-out. Sometimes this is carried out in close proximity to the ball or, as is creeping back into the game, way past and clear of the 'muck' to obstruct potential defenders. Poor refereeing allows this to go beyond what is legally allowed at the breakdown and, unless we change the laws at the breakdown, *true* rucking will remain a thing of the past.

Many players and coaches have not really grasped the advantages to be gained from the 5 seconds law at breakdowns in general play (When a maul becomes stationary, referees are advised to inform players that they have 5 seconds to use the ball – Ed.), in other words at the mini-maul when one or two players are involved from



either side. It seems that nearly all teams now spend plenty of time perfecting major mauls following a line-out, kick-off receipt and at penalty/free-kick set-up opportunities. But we may be neglecting opportunities from, say, the tackle in the backs where the ball-carrier fights to stay up and his nearest support player (the 'snake') gets onto him, carries on the momentum and helps the ball carrier to stay up and go forward. Then, when the ball carrier has had to go to ground (by choice or by the actions of the tacklers) and certainly after the **go forward** has been achieved, the next arriving players create ruck ball – or, as I suggested earlier, the clean-out.

Part of the current problem is that, with multi-sequencing, not many players are sent to the breakdowns. In the modern game, therefore, many of the best 'snakes' (or 'drivers', call them what you will) are backs, as they are generally the nearest support players. We are still trying to change the mindset of players to **fight to stay up** rather than go lamely to ground so that continuity of possession can be guaranteed. When these mini-mauls go to ground after the go forward has been achieved, it is the responsibility of the ball carrier to present the ball correctly (BODY BEFORE BALL) to enable support players to ruck or clean-out effectively. With defenders now having to come 'through the gate' (not allowed to enter from the side), the further forward the ball carrier and support can get, the more difficult it is to defend. The very best rucks are those where the players on the ground see the socks and boots of their own players going over the top of them.

Thoughts presented on 30 October 2001 on the pre-tackle maul-ruck/muck/*uck. The post-tackle shambles.

If we want to encourage more players to stay on their feet, thus creating more ball off the ground, particularly at the contact or pre-tackle situations, we need to find ways to reward players/teams if they do stay up at contact/impact. The one-on-one tackles in general open play are rarely a problem as the clarity of actions of the participants is not obscured by any congestion of bodies at this phase as there are few players in the immediate vicinity. The major problems occur at the more numerous post-tackles (for want of a better name) around the more congested static phases that so dominate general play. Upwards of 70% of all phase ball ends up like this and often there has not been a true tackle and most occur within 5-10 metres of the usually static preceding play.

The greater number of these impacts are gang or multiple tackles with one or more snakes driving on the ball carrier at impact, often into or between at least two opponents. To be pedantic, many of these are actually mauls and should, therefore, be refereed as collapsing a maul. The ball carrier and his snake(s), as well as opposition players, usually end up on the ground in a tangle of bodies and it is virtually impossible for the referee to decide who did what to whom. All the hoo-ha concerning players rolling away, releasing the ball, getting back to their feet, allowing players on their feet to play the ball etc etc, will remain a lottery to all



concerned - teams, referees and spectators. The ball on the ground then becomes part of another subjective interpretation for the referee to make because the ball becomes a magnet that draws the flies to the dead horse. All the laws in the world will not enable players to go for the ball and comply with the physically, geometrically, ergometrically and logically challenging 'stay on your feet with head and shoulders above waist height' law.

So the goal becomes one of how we encourage more players to stay on their feet whilst keeping the ball at impact. There was a logic in re-introducing the ability/skill and available time to set and drive a maul. This was the first step in encouraging teams to keep the ball off the ground and, to be fair, many sides have utilised the full maul potential from line-out and kick-off receipts. These big mauls do commit many of the defensive screen and leave the defence with a big decision to hang off or commit. The usual sequence is to drive forward and produce the ball at the back of the maul for a decision by, say, the half-back on when to release while still driving forward.

The real and extra benefits that can be accrued from setting mauls, particularly at the mini-maul, has not been explored fully. This is nearly always away from congestion to start with and the current interpretation of the law as it is written (Law 17.6 (c)) is that if the maul is formed, say, by 13 taking the ball up, setting at contact with a snake (probably another back) right on him and they drive through and then go to ground (often as a deliberate, true ruck-generating opportunity) and the ball gets tied up or slowed down in delivery, the scrum put-in is given to the side that did not take the ball in. Yet one of the major benefits of these mini-mauls is that every metre of go forward makes the opposition defence come from a deeper position to defend legally. If law 17.6 (c) could only be more liberally administered, or fine-tuned to reduce risk of losing possession to the ball- carrying team, we might see more mini-mauls and, therefore, more go forward, front foot ball. The defence would have to choose whether to defend the maul or risk being broken through at that maul if there are not enough defending players there. This could create more space somewhere, be it at the maul because the defence is lightnumbered or at the sides if the defence has over-committed to the maul.

As I suggested earlier, the creation of dynamic mini-mauls with fewer bodies in the impact area and many of them arriving later (in dribs and drabs?) from further afield, could have the effect of making the impact less congested which in turn makes it easier for the referee to monitor the infringers. The rewards must be available to defenders but they need not be given equal opportunity. They already have a choice of option on whether to put numbers in to go for a turnover, or whether to put the attacking ball carrier to ground. As in the original 5 second proposal at the maul, the whole point is to encourage players to stay on their feet with ball in hand and, if play becomes static, to turn this static possession into dynamic, go forward opportunities.



These suggestions are geared towards a medium-term solution without a law change and to encourage deeper discussion on other 'solutions' that are possible. I believe that my suggestions more involve confidence and coaching rather than tampering with and amending existing law.

- For example, the South Africans have a proposal that could be a solution. This would allow a player to lift the ball in a ruck/muck provided that the players involved were on their feet and in an onside position.
- Other remedies, not cures, that have been suggested and need to be canvassed, concern the fact that true rucking is impossible at the frequent static phases that appear in many games, though excellent ball can be produced once some go forward has been introduced. Contrary to popular belief, the old rucks had much to do with muddy grounds. The ball was always wet and heavy and the laws allowed a scrum to be screwed around to start a dribbling rush. This dribbling was a natural by-product of having to play the ball with the foot at the tackle and, if modern players think we have a flat line defence now, how would they react to the offside line at line-out being the line of touch? Rucks were basically a by-product of ball that went to ground unintentionally at a tackle or, simply, because players lacked skill.

At the time it was introduced, being able to pick up the ball at or after a tackle was one of the most influential improvements in the speed and continuity of the game. So don't get into the frame of mind that rucking is the answer to the problem; it is part of it but requires complementary other parts such as dynamic, go forward play.

- Players not involved in muck, ruck or maul, except for the half back or his equivalent, must be a set distance behind a line through the hindmost foot.
- Re-visit the standing tackle and ask ourselves what was good and bad about it. Is there benefit to be gained from a re-introduction of this part of play in some form?
- Reduce the number of players to 13 instead of 15.

Some of these thought-provoking ideas came from a variety of sources, not least Canada, Ireland and South Africa.

SUGGESTED PHASES OF PLAY.

The flow chart shows and defines four phases of play.

- 1.Standing tackle.
- 2.True maul.
- 3.True ruck.
- 4.Stack-up (Muck).



- 1. Standing tackle when a player with the ball is held up by one or more opponents. The ball carrier's obligations do not exist until one or more of the opponents and/or the ball carrier and/or support players go to ground with the ball carrier.
 - If they stay up and off the ground, the true maul laws apply.
 - If they go to ground either a true ruck can ensue or the phase becomes a stack-up (muck) with the appropriate laws applying. This means that the ball must be set or released/placed immediately and all players who are on the ground must roll away and/or get to their feet and into an on-side position without delay before any further involvement in play can occur.
 - At the standing tackle, the tackler's choices are whether or not to put the ball carrier to ground, which then makes available immediate further options of (i) true ruck, (ii) pick and maul, (iii) pass or clear, (iv) kick through, (v) get numbers into the area to create a true maul or (vi) if required, create a stack-up. However, players on the ground have no rights to the ball. And at true maul, true ruck, stack up and standing tackle, players on their feet have precedence.
- 2. True maul occurs when ball is in hand, players are on their feet and on-side. Sometimes players will end up on the ground but they must be passive, get out and get back to their feet and on-side without delay.
- **3. True ruck** occurs when the ball is on the ground and all participating players are on their feet, bound and on-side, apart from the ruck setters who have gone to ground to set the ball for the ruck. There must be a drive over the ball and players on the ground and the foot movement must be a back-heeling one, not hacking.
- **4. Stack-up (muck).** Players are predominantly on the ground but there are some standing. The ball will be on the ground or amongst the players who are there, but these players must remain passive about the ball. They can attempt to get out and back to their feet to re-participate from an on-side position. Players who are on their feet and on-side can use hands to play the ball with a lifting action but feet may not be used in the stack-up and opponents may not be pulled in.

Some general rules would need to be clarified on:

- Offside lines at all four phases, which would be the hindmost foot of each team.
- Players may enter a phase only from behind and onto the last player on their team.
- Backsides should be pointed directly at their own goal line to prevent players
 arriving short and driving in at the sides. (This was a request from the New
 Zealand group to stop the second tackler at the tackle area hanging on at the side
 then getting in on the ball when he is not the prime tackler.
- Any ambiguous and misleading laws and descriptions at phases could be simplified and co-ordinated.



The original brief for this committee was to look at longer-term options to clear the static/on ground blight in the game and these thoughts are meant to provoke discussion on the problem.

