



RUGBY WORLD CUP 2003
By David Hands, Rugby Correspondent, The Times.

David has been rugby correspondent of The Times since 1982. In that period he has covered over three hundred internationals, including all five World Cups, for the paper. His career as a journalist started with the South Wales Argus in Newport and he joined the sports desk of the Leicester Mercury from 1971-78. In 1978 he became a staff member of The Times. Apart from Leicester's centenary history, he has written autobiographies with Peter Wheeler and Rory Underwood and, most recently, a history of the Five Nations Championship.

Several weeks have passed since the end of the 2003 World Cup in Australia but the expression "truck and trailer" has yet to enter the English rugby lexicon. Clearly we are either sadly behind the times or else we simply do not understand the need for yet another way of describing the good old rolling maul in which the ball-carrier is either part of the truck or, scarcely bound, the trailer.

Mercifully, the World Cup was left free of late legal changes which make coaches tear what remains of their hair from their head, but it was obvious from the outset that the authorities were going to examine the inter-action of competing front rows very closely. It started with Paul Honiss, the New Zealand referee, when Australia played Argentina in the tournament's first game and it was still going on when Andre Watson handled the final, between Australia and England.

How correct the match officials were in their interpretations is a matter for debate: the age-old battle of the prop forward to con the referee shows no sign of dying, nor the look of outraged innocence on the face of the penalised player. In one sense it does not matter: referees down the years have looked for an opportunity to award an early penalty, usually in a 'neutral' area of the field - that is to say, one out of the range of a goalkicker, though that is becoming hard to do these days - just to indicate to the teams that they are alert to any tricks.

The interesting aspect of the World Cup final, though, is that having established in the first half a sound scrummaging technique, the game swung against England so vividly in the second half. Watson, the South African who is by common consent one of the world's top three referees, had Honiss in his ear from touch for much of the first half advising him about Trevor Woodman's packing on the loose-head side of the scrum; the excellent ear pieces available to members of the public wishing to eavesdrop on the comments of the match officials left little to the imagination.

It was to Watson's credit - in my view - that he ignored his touch judges for much of the time. Both Honiss and Paddy O'Brien advised him about various incidents which Watson, clearly, had already seen and taken a view on. At times he became quite snappish with the amount of information coming at him from the sidelines but after the interval, England found themselves on the wrong end of his whistle. The only change in personnel in either front row during the eighty minutes of proper time was at hooker, where Australia replaced Brendan Cannon with Jeremy Paul, but it was the more settled England combination which was consistently penalised.

Either England's front row of Woodman, Steve Thompson and Phil Vickery were being incredibly foolish, since they had established the upper hand during the first half, or Watson's interpretation of what was happening changed. It is conceivable that Vickery would have welcomed Paul to the fray by putting the squeeze on him illegally at the first opportunity; it is also conceivable that England's tight forwards became frustrated at the number of scrums which went Australia's way thanks to the stream of knock-ons and turnovers perpetrated by the England backs.

The tide, which had run so strongly for England before half-time, was now running against them because of their own inadequacies, and in such circumstances it is perfectly possible that the front row will try to compensate in their own area. At the same time the Australia front row, it seems to me, has become well-versed in the art of playing innocent: their approach at scrums is to stand at a slight angle before packing down, suggesting that they are not quite ready and then to pack down on their own terms and feed the scrum swiftly so that stronger, more experienced opponents cannot scrummage for too long.

Watson insisted afterwards that his decisions stood up to scrutiny and that they have been highlighted only because two of them led to Elton Flatley kicking at goal twice to level the scores at critical moments (and all credit to Flatley's nerve that he landed two far-from-easy penalties). What the referee did achieve was a marvellous piece of theatre in which both England's nerve and tactical acumen were tested to the very limit and, in response, came up with a virtually perfect minute and a half of rugby which won the Webb Ellis Cup.

Consider the problems facing Martin Johnson after 100 minutes of playing time, when the score stood at 17-17 and a match that should have been well won was slipping away. At that stage it was simply a matter of territorial position from which Jonny Wilkinson could kick a goal: from the moment Johnson ordered a long restart kick, everything had to be right or the game would go to sudden death. The chase to put pressure on Mat Rogers so that he was left with no other option than the clearing kick to touch; the long, and therefore risky, throw to the back of the line for Lewis Moody; the drive over the Australian ten-metre line with a ball which had been consistently mishandled in the wet conditions.

All that and then the break by Matt Dawson which carried play to Australia's 22 and then trapped the scrum half beneath a ruck; with Neil Back acting scrum half, Johnson took

the decision to set another ruck by carrying the ball himself, thus giving Dawson the opportunity to extricate himself and fire back the pass which gave Wilkinson the space in which to drop the match-winning goal, out of range of even the most predatory Australian. Sportsmen often say they are looking for the perfect game: England will be happy with that perfect sequence, however brief.

They would, though, have been even happier to have won in normal time a game which, at the interval, looked in their pocket. So Watson's decision-making, and those of southern-hemisphere referees in general, came in for scrutiny, the critics recalling Honiss's performance in England's home game with France at Twickenham in last season's RBS Six Nations Championship when the visiting front row was battered by a series of penalties.

All of which forces the game to make a decision over what they want the scrum to be. Having considered ten years ago the process of de-powering the scrum in the interests of safety, the attitude now appears to be going the other way, towards the restoration of the contest for possession. Professionalism has created greater discipline in all areas of the field, including scrummaging, that sort of discipline which allowed Kees Meeuws to respond instantly to the call of "neck, neck, neck" from Ben Darwin during the World Cup semi-final between Australia and New Zealand. Meeuws, the All Blacks prop, realised Darwin had been hurt and pulled back from any increased impact.

The International Rugby Board's conference on the game takes place in Auckland this month (The article was written at the beginning of Jan 04 – Ed.) and the scrummage will be on the agenda. The consequences of the conference may be seen during the 2004 Six Nations a month later when several of the less-experienced refereeing fraternity will be given games. The most senior officials, Watson, O'Brien, Jonathan Kaplan and Tony Spreadbury among them, have been stood down in the interests of developing the next tier, men like Kelvin Deaker and Mark Lawrence.

This in itself is instructive since players would argue that the best games deserve the best officials. Yet opportunities have to be created for match officials too and the IRB's decision in this respect is a good one. It will be revealing to see which of the up-and-coming referees have the self-confidence to adjudicate with authority on so difficult an area as the scrum, with the World Cup still fresh in their minds. The likes of Alain Rolland, the Ireland official who was praised for his World Cup performance, fed enough scrums as a player to have an excellent idea of which front row has the upper hand but not all his colleagues may be so well-versed in the dark arts.