

The Advantage Law

By

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The *advantage law* in Rugby Union provides a unique opportunity to present an exciting and flowing game to the spectators and also provides a risk-free environment for players to demonstrate their skills. Rejection of the advantage law, with players opting to deliberately 'knock on', hits at the very heart and ethos of the game and needs to be addressed.

Of all the laws, the 'Advantage Law' is most open to interpretation by the referee. The questions which need to be asked each time by the referee are –

- 1) ...has the non offending team gained an advantage?
- 2) ...how long do you allow before cancelling the advantage?

As with all refereeing decisions all coaches ask for is consistency, ideally from match to match, but at the very least within a match.

The circumstances of 'advantage' can be clearly defined into two specific areas from a refereeing perspective –

- 1) ...advantage played from a technical infringement (knock on, forward pass etc), an infringement that would lead to a restart of the game with a scrum.
- 2) ... advantage played from a penalty/free kick infringement (off

side, foul play etc), an infringement that would lead to a restart of the game with a penalty/free kick.

'*Advantage being played*' is verbally communicated to players along with a hand signal (arm out), allowing the non-offending team to have a 'freeby' set of attacks. It could even be that the non-offending team kick the ball and the referee will continue with advantage to see what develops before he makes a call based on what he perceives to be advantage gained or not. This is usually based on territory gained or on possession.

The length of time the referee allows advantage to continue and, indeed, the judgement of whether advantage has in fact been gained are the key issues. This has led to a recent development within the game with the players taking control of the *advantage* law and rejecting the *advantage* by deliberately knocking-on or kicking the ball straight out of play. George Gregan used this option during the last World Cup, so why is this starting to occur?

It is, in my opinion, hard to envisage any circumstances, with the exception of an *advantage* that leads directly to a try, in which any team would gain a sufficient advantage as compared to when a penalty is on offer. From a penalty decision the non-offending team can usually gain significant territory and retain possession from the line-out or

they can kick for goal. From penalty and free kick offences the defence must retire 10 metres, usually providing far greater attacking opportunities from quick taps rather than playing from an *advantage* option.

Indeed as the awarding of *advantage* requires the ball to be in possession of the non-offending team, thus ensuring that a quick tap is possible, it could be argued that the referee should *immediately* award a penalty giving the non-offending team the opportunity to take a quick tap penalty, a much more controllable attacking option. Players and coaches recognise this and are acting accordingly with deliberate technical offences such as a knock-on or forward pass in order to receive the penalty. They are choosing to reject the *advantage* and it's easy to understand why.

Professional Rugby Union teams are required to achieve a fine balance between winning/success and entertainment in order to attract support. The prospect of more and more teams adopting the tactic of rejecting 'advantage' from a penalty may disturb this balance. The 'Advantage Law' is a much envied law from those outside the game. However, when combined with the existing penalty option of being able to kick to touch *and* retain the throw/possession, it is coming seriously under threat.

Although the second set of circumstances of *advantage from technical offences* does **not** immediately have the same clarity of preference as from penalties/free kicks and does provide a good 'free' attacking sequence to the non-offending team, rejecting the

advantage even in these circumstances may become more popular in the future. Tactically teams may become more selective, preferring to take what is on offer due to their scrum superiority, better set piece attacking options or simply wishing to slow the tempo of the game. Again this would lead to a less attractive spectacle for the spectators with a slower, more scripted game. However, players and coaches may well be keener to adopt these tactics to provide greater order and control.

Possible solutions to prevent the development of players rejecting the '*advantage*' and in turn lessening the game as a spectacle, would require some law change and/or change of referee interpretation. The key change would need to be the non-offending side having the *advantage* downgraded if they were judged to have *deliberately* rejected the advantage; a penalty might, in those circumstances, be reduced to a free kick, a free kick to a scrum and a scrum to turnover. However, if this were to be the case then greater clarity would be required as to the parameters for the team rewarded with the *advantage*.

With the '*Advantage Law*' being played from penalty offences, the referee would need to decide immediately if a **try** is certain to be scored or if the try line is being seriously threatened - then allow the non-offending team that opportunity to attack. A missed dropped-goal attempt should also immediately cancel out any *advantage*, ensuring that the team was making a serious attempt for the try, in turn providing more exciting open rugby. They can always come back for the penalty.

This would be most likely occur from within the attacking zone near the try line but should not be restricted to this area, **However**, if the scenario occurs further out, a try must be deemed to be almost certain. *All* other penalties should be awarded immediately.

What effect would this have on the movement and overall look of the game? First, strangely, it should lead to greater use of the sin bin. At present, many persistent offences are being disguised by the *advantage* law being played in the hope something positive may develop. The frustration of the attacking team often results in players taking the law into their own hands *and* starting to reject the *advantage* on offer.

In turn, this would hopefully lead to fewer offences at the breakdown and, in turn, a more open game with less ball being slowed down. With penalties being awarded immediately the offending team would need to retire ten metres, thus providing far greater attacking opportunities than *advantage* currently does. Teams that were playing 'catch up' may well prefer quick tap penalties to the territory option. A parallel does exist in the game at the scrum, when free kicks are awarded and *advantage* is seldom played here. Quick taps are often used to great gain and a direct result is an increase in the speed of the game.

With *advantage* from technical offences, clarity is required as to how far teams should be allowed to go before returning to the original offence. Currently the choice for the non-offending team is good; a series of attacks with the option of returning to the original offence is in

their favour. Referees mostly give clear verbal instruction as to the status of the *advantage* and this provides a good opportunity for greater risk-taking and excitement for the spectators. But how far should they be allowed to continue?

The interpretations referees currently apply seem to be generally accepted and no change seems necessary. The referee assesses if the non-offending team have moved forward and have gained control *and* territory. Verbal and visual (arm out) confirmation at each breakdown as to the status of the *advantage* provides good information to both teams and spectators. However, allowing a 'free' drop-goal attempt from technical offence *advantage* seems too much reward for what was initially a simple handling error.

Teams deliberately rejecting *advantage* for technical/penalty/free kick offences are deliberately slowing the game down, but under the current laws this is a very understandable trend. However, these acts threaten the *advantage* law which sets the game of Rugby Union apart from other sports. These passages of play, 'free' attacks, can generate great excitement and they make the game special; they are envied by many other sports. As the pressures and rewards within the game grow then option to *reject advantage* will also surely increase.