

## COACHING TOUCH JUDGING

By  
Clive Leeke

*Clive was an RFU Panel Referee and Touch Judge. In 1995, he was appointed as the RFU's first Regional Referee Development Officer, where he had a responsibility for the development of touch judging. He has now retired from the RFU, but continues to coach the Elite Touch Judges who perform in the Premiership and in European club matches.*

### Club Touch Judges.

The great majority of the hundreds who patrol the touchlines at most club matches each weekend are 'willing volunteers', who have probably started the chore because there was no one else prepared to step forward. All but a few have learned the trade by experience and 'advice' from those around them, few have had any training (perhaps many would not want any). The remainder of the country's flag wavers are mainly referees, ex-referees and trained touch judges. Most rugby people would not profess to knowing (or maybe not wanting to know) an awful lot about refereeing, and there are probably even less who have a yearning to an in-depth knowledge of touch judging. For those who have never tried it, it is not as easy as it looks. Ask the two international referees who ran the line in this season's England v. Ireland match!

For a start, there is the problem of running (or strolling) along the touchline without being impeded by coaches, replacement players, spectators who have leaned so far on the rope that they are also on the touchline, water carriers or their water bottle containers with the sharp edges that always bite the shins or the soft spots just above boot top level. My most alarming experiences as a TJ on a cramped touchline were a bicycle on its side with one of its pedals pointing skywards within two feet of the line, a beer glass actually on the line and a baby buggy, with child, again about two feet away and with a cup-match crowd three deep behind it and the proud mother. Then, of course, there is the added problem of the shouts from the spectators who believe that all TJs (more commonly referred to as 'linesman', or even 'lino'), like their colleague with the whistle, do not know the 'simple' laws covering situations when the ball is in touch. Then there are the TJs' own problems caused by doubt in their minds as to how far they can help the referee in areas other than raising their flags, or not. Some refs will ask for help from the TJ by showing the players where the 10-metre line is at lineouts, or at penalty or free kicks, and some may go further than this.

From a touch judge coach's point of view, the most relevant advice I could give a club TJ would be to ensure that his area of patrol is as safe and impediment-free as he, the referee

and the club can make it. To give him any comprehensive advice on the Laws of the Game covering touch would take too long and probably cause a response of something on the lines of, “You must be joking!” I mentioned the ‘simple’ laws above. Most spectators probably think they are simple. They are not, and believe me, because of the vagaries of them, there are often quite heated discussions on this topic, even between experienced National Panel TJs of several years standing. If any layperson is intrigued enough, or any club TJ keen enough, there are RFU Touch Judging courses available that will help in understanding them. The modules of this course designed for the Club TJ last for only about two and a half hours. Contact your local Referees’ Society if you are interested.

Just to give a very brief outline of the basic laws; there are two main instances which deem that the ball is in touch. One is when it is travelling freely through the air, usually after it has been kicked. It is deemed to be in touch when it hits the touchline or the ground beyond it or any object or person in these positions. (So, the banana kick, where it crosses the touchline in the air and then bends, or is blown, back over the pitch, is not touch. Couldn’t they use that one to good purpose in soccer? It would make play more continuous, not just with balls not going into touch, but with all those swinging corner kicks that go beyond the goal line, swerve and then land in the penalty area.)

The second instance of touch in our game is when a player carrying the ball touches the touchline or the ground beyond it (or occasionally, the corner post). Sounds simple enough, and it usually is. It gets complicated when a player tries to stop the ball crossing the touchline, or tries retrieving it after it has crossed the line. Touch then depends on whether he taps the ball or catches it, whether his feet are in the field of play or in touch when he does so, or where they are in relation to the touchline when he plays it if he jumps in the air to do so. Once this has been decided, the decision then is which team should throw it in and whether the throw in should be level with where it crossed the touchline or level with the position from where it was kicked. Unfortunately, simple it is not.

### **Society Referees as Touch Judges.**

When appointed by their Society to run touch, their main duties are the same as the club TJ in indicating touch, touch in in-goal and successful penalty kicks at goal and conversions after a try has been scored, plus the added responsibility of identifying and reporting incidents of foul play to the referee. Any other assistance given to the referee should not interfere with these priorities. These other tasks can include giving advisory signals to indicate forward passes, knocks on, offsides which affect play and, in down time when the ball is dead, informing the referee of general trends in the game. *Advisory* is stressed, because that is what this information is; the referee does not have to act on this information. The only times the referee has to act on a TJ’s actions is when the TJ uses his flag and he only does that to signal touch, goals and conversions kicked and foul play.

Most Referee Societies, if they have the referees to spare, will appoint referees to run the line in local cup matches. This can cause a dilemma for those running the line and for the referee. For most regular referees, running the line is such an unfamiliar role and is, believe it or not, so very different a job from refereeing. Just take the foul play role for a starter. Because, again believe it or not, all referees are human beings and are therefore not clones; an incident perceived by one TJ to be worthy of reporting to the referee may not be seen in exactly the same light as another inexperienced referee-TJ or, indeed, by the referee for that match. This can cause doubt in the mind of a TJ not wanting to 'interfere' with the referee's game but also wanting to bring justice to the game himself. From the perspective of the match referee, refereeing with TJs can also be an unfamiliar situation and can put extra pressure on him, especially if the TJs are not as experienced in their roles as he is in his.

Before being able to report foul play to the referee, the TJ has first to have seen it. If the incident is near to the referee, the referee himself will probably have seen it sufficiently well to have dealt with it. For the inexperienced TJ, if the incident is near the referee, he will probably have seen it as well. If it is not near to the referee, the inexperienced TJ will probably not see it. Why not? Because, like most of us, he likes to watch a game of rugby and, in so doing, will spend most of the time watching the area near the ball.

Not only will their eyes be looking in the wrong direction, but the TJ's positioning will probably be in the wrong place to give the referee the best support. Touch judging needs the TJ to be a team player, the main responsibility being to support the referee in managing the game – and the referee is the leader of this team.

From a coaching point of view, trying to find ways of changing the mind set from that of a refereeing role to that of an effective TJ can be very difficult. Most referees will have spent years watching the ball when they were players and watching the play around the ball as referees and the same when they have had time to watch a match as a spectator.

To watch as much of the pitch as possible, TJs are encouraged to 'triangulate'. For example, at kicks in open play and when play moves away after scrums, lines out, rucks or mauls, the TJ on the touch line towards which the ball is played will follow the ball upfield and become the leading touch judge. The further (trailing) touch judge will not follow the play but hold back to mark the place of the kick and to watch for foul play in the area from where play has just moved and watch the area as long as there is any likelihood of misconduct by players still close to opponents. It takes a strong will to maintain this position and to resist the temptation to watch the area of play near the ball in the new phase of play further upfield.

Another skill that is difficult to master in this unfamiliar role is that of concentration. Do referees not concentrate, you may be asking? Of course they do, but it is different for them. Paul Dix's article (also published this week) covers this point by saying that a referee is constantly making decisions whereas a TJ may be out of the game for long periods of time and then suddenly back in it again.

## **RFU Panel of National Touch Judges.**

This panel is recruited and managed by the RFU Referee Department (Steve Savage's article also published this week) and officiates at National League matches and cup matches. Panel TJs are expected to be accurate with their decisions and to understand the game sufficiently well to know what calls to make and when to make them. They are mindful of the fact that, irrespective of their experience as referees, they are there to assist the referee in the management of the game and not to referee it for him. They are reminded that their priorities are touch and foul play and that any additional duties, such as advisory information on offsidings, knocks on, forward passes or match trends, must only be contemplated if they do not interfere with them undertaking these priorities. Many spectators, and some players and coaches, are not aware of this and will occasionally berate a TJ for missing an incident in one of these non-priority areas when the TJ may well have been watching a situation where there could be a potential for foul play.

In their early days, TJs will still be tempted to watch the game and the area around the ball and also to position themselves in 'referee' positions at tackle, ruck and maul phases, instead of concentrating on areas where the referee is not watching. Most referees will spend most of their time in these situations behind the attacking team's backfoot, looking to see that the ball is being cleared without interference. The inexperienced TJ will probably be level with the ref, watching the same area because old habits are die hard. The experienced TJ will probably be diametrically opposite the ref, watching players who are out of his sight and not taking the slightest interest in the ball.

At many matches at this level, the team of three are in radio contact. This is a very beneficial aid to the team, but needs to be used properly or it will be a hindrance to the ref if it detracts from his concentration. The good TJ will know when to transmit information, the better TJ will know when the decision is best left to the referee

Coaching TJs at this level is mostly about reminding TJs about their responsibilities in supporting the referee and identifying if they are concentrating on the priorities.

## **Elite Touch Judges.**

There are currently sixteen Elite TJs who operate at Guinness Premiership, European Cup and other cup matches involving the top domestic teams. They are recruited from the National Panel and are managed by the RFU Elite Referee Unit. Most are ex-panel referees, but not all. Some might say that to be a top TJ, you need to have been a top referee; experience as a top referee is very useful but not essential. Those who have experienced both will tell you that the two jobs are quite different in many ways and therefore require some quite differing abilities. Some referees do not wish to take up a touch judging role whereas some find it gives them a different string to their officiating bow.

As you can see from some of the points raised above, the aspects of the game on which the TJ has to concentrate are quite different from those of the referee.

Many good National Panel TJs have asked me what they need to do to qualify for the extra step onto the elite. I ask them what they see as the main differences in the jobs at the national and elite level. The most common answer is the game is faster at the elite. This is not the main difference – many National 1 matches are played at a faster pace than most premiership matches. The main difference is the pressure under which elite TJs (and referees) have to operate. There are pressures at national level, but nothing to compare with those at the top. It is not just pressures from the players and the coaches, but also the noise of 13,000+ at Northampton and more at Leicester, regularly questioning your ability and then, on one game in six each week, there is trial by television and the big screen at the end of the ground.

Coaching these TJs revolves a lot around getting them to prepare mentally for their game, knowing that, like every other person on the planet, they will make the odd, well-publicised mistake and that the best thing to do is try not to dwell on it but to concentrate on their experience and training to enhance their ability to get the next decision right. Not easy, but what challenging, adrenalin charged experience is?