

**KNOW THE LAWS?
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QUESTIONS

1. I'm a relatively old player (just turned 40) and play in a fairly low level league. The rugby is fun, but we are at the mercy of sometimes erratic refereeing. Most of it is a bit of a laugh, but as I'm a tight head prop, the one thing I consider very important is my safety and the safety of my fellow front-row.

I've been in the situation where referees have got very annoyed with me as I refuse to engage until I am ready, which means when the whole scrum is set. I tend to shout the calls, so I will always tell my pack when to crouch and hold. Some refs I've had to deal with had just wanted us to engage as rapidly as possible - without thought for the scrum actually being ready to engage.

Who is right and who is wrong in this case? I personally believe that my safety is paramount, so if I disagree with a referee's approach to engagement at the scrum, I will ignore him, even if it means getting penalised.

Your comments would be welcome.

2. This question is about when a ball is out of a ruck. On numerous occasions you see the ball at the back feet of the ruck (but not out) and the scrum half has one foot in front of the ball so that he is straddling it. He then puts his hands on his thighs and looks around and waits for his stand off to give him the nod. When it is our stand off, this can sometimes take a quite a while as he tries to remember the calls!

During this period, what can the defending side do? Can onside players go for the ball? Is the scrum half liable to penalty for being off side or for not binding? Can the opposition legally grab him and bind him into the ruck?

You see this situation time and time again and I have never seen any sort of penalty or action by defensive side, even though the scrum half is clearly in front of the back foot and the ball is still in the ruck.

3. I have always wondered why the referees don't use their touch judges more often. Many times I have seen an incident during a game, hidden to the referee but clearly visible to the touch judges and yet they say and do nothing. Surely these officials are

qualified to make decisions and it seems ridiculous that they ignore opportunities to help the referee and eradicate foul play.

4. Law 11(b) has been amended experimentally, so that when a scrum wheels, the ball is put in by the team not in possession. I don't like this experiment, because it encourages sides to illegally pull on one side during a scrum as a way of defending and they are then rewarded with possession.

Why was this experiment introduced? When will it end, and is it likely to be adopted permanently?

5. As we all know, the flying wedge is illegal and pre-forming a maul before any of the opposition are engaged (i.e. when receiving a kick off) is also against the Laws of the game. My query is with regard to the lineout.....wouldn't the most effective defence against the driving maul from the lineout simply be not to engage any of your players into it....in this way it becomes a flying wedge and illegal?! What would the Laws of the Game say on this? (Submitted by a "thinking prop.")

ANSWERS

1. This is one of the more difficult enquiries. I will try to deal with your points paragraph by paragraph.

1st Paragraph - "Rugby is fun." Absolutely vital! Generally, we only do what we like doing and we should focus on the enjoyment element much more - referees as well!

Safety is the number one priority for *everyone* involved in a match - players, coaches and referees alike.

I am sure you are not "relatively old." I thought you guys in the front row just took a little longer to mature - like a fine wine.

2nd paragraph - "I refuse to engage until I am ready to," worries me a lot. What happens if you are ready to engage and the opposition are not? The referee has to manage the engagement sequence. He should do this by calling, "Crouch and hold" and should then invite the front rows to engage when they are both level and straight.

All of this vital safety sequence should have been talked through with the front rows when the ref does the pre-match briefing. Many referees find it valuable to tell the players to talk to him/her before the invitation to engage, if there is a problem. That is when you should get straight and level etc. The problem you describe would be helped by dialogue pre-match.

3rd Paragraph - "Who is right and who is wrong?" I feel the referee must brief the front rows as described above. All six front-row players (and substitutes if there are any at this level) must buy into the agreement and be aware of how the referee will manage the engagement sequence. I am very worried about the scenario that you appear to describe as I could see one front row engaging with another not in the crouch position, which is potentially very dangerous.

Why do you not make contact with your local Referees Society and go along to their meeting and offer to explain some of the points you raise on front row play? We referees are always learning and an experienced practitioner like yourself would be a valuable source of knowledge.

2. Briefly the answers to the points you make in the middle paragraph are:

Q. During this period, what can the non-ball winning side do?

A. Wait - they are offside if they come round.

Q. Can onside players go for the ball?

A. Yes, but as long as the ruck exists there is an offside line which the non-ball winning side cannot cross until the ruck is over - i.e. the scrum half has possession of the ball.

Q. Is the scrum half liable to penalty for being offside or for not binding?

A. No – not in either case.

Q. Can the opposition legally grab him and bind him into the ruck?

A. No, the defender carrying out the grab and bind would be penalised for playing a man without the ball and/or offside.

I cannot see the problem - the ball winning side are just exercising their right to slow the ball down. As referees we might not like it, but that has nothing to do with us. I don't care what the teams choose to do as long as it is legal - after all it is their game, not mine.

3. A lot depends upon the level of the match. In the vast majority of matches the touch judges will not be Referee Society officials but will be club men or women who help out. Under the Laws of rugby these TJs cannot indicate anything to the referee other than touch and kicks at goal.

Matches at higher levels will have officially qualified TJs and they can help by indicating foul play as well as giving other useful advice.

4. We referees cannot pick and choose the Laws we like/don't like. I understand what you are saying, though. To me, it is fine for the top end of the game but it just creates problems at lower levels.

The experiment was introduced by the IRB a couple of seasons ago in an effort to stop constant resets when the scrum went round legally. I believe the RFU wanted the experiment to be discontinued but their view did not prevail.

Pass on your last question. This may not be the response you want but that is how I see it - I am just a humble referee, not a politician!

5. The thinking prop - now there is an oxymoron if ever I heard one!

I agree with you on the flying wedge but I am not sure about the second part of your first sentence - you would need to clarify what you mean. You can bind round your own player who is catching the ball at a restart, though you cannot stand in front of him and obstruct.

The driving maul from a line-out is, as you imply, not a 'maul' in the technical sense until one opponent binds on. I would never in a thousand years even think of penalising this as a flying wedge as it is a maul - commonsense dictates that.

The Flying Wedge came from free kicks or penalties where the defenders had to be back ten metres and this created danger for them. In the situation you describe, the defenders are a metre away and the attackers cannot generate the same speed on impact.

To defend a catch and drive from a line-out, be patient; put one man in against the drive and let him pull it down – this is perfectly legal as no maul has formed.

Remember to put **only one** man in and he has got to take it down **immediately**.

Nice to hear you from a thinking prop again - you really must take up my challenge and take a referee course. We need thinkers like you!