

## EDITOR'S COMMENTS

### 13.2.07

My last plea got a response from readers and this is what I would like to see each week. There are so many issues in coaching and we would all benefit from other points of view.

Jeff Simm is Coach at BAE Systems RUFC and Cumbria U 20s. He thought something a bit lighthearted would be appropriate:

“I have watched with interest the implementation of the new scrummaging laws and wondered why, now that the front rows are deemed to be closer (the distance of the arm's length), why can't only the two loose head props touch? At first, this *sounds* like a good idea, but what if one prop's arm is longer/shorter than the other? We would not have two packs standing parallel. (So the Editor has been shot down in flames in the first paragraph! – Ed).

In spite of everything, we still see the props going to ground or being penalised for incorrect binding. I think the new Law will certainly reduce the impact forces generated when both front rows come together and will make a difference regarding the onset of neck problems for props in later years - but will it deter the front row union from trying to gain that little piece of advantage to ensure their team's possession? I doubt it.

As a coach, I can instruct the would-be front rower on how to stand before the entry, where the binding should be with head up, chin off chest and straight back, but I cannot instruct anybody on the subtleties of the front row union. Any self-respecting prop or hooker will tell you it's something you learn by just being there, by talking to your opposite number in the bar and by refining your new-found skills at the coal face.

Having spent my playing days at club and county as a hooker and being blessed with the hereditary stiff neck and aching back as a consequence, I feel I can speak with confidence. Gone are the days when the front row was a no-holds-barred environment. I remember being taken so low in the scrum that my head touched the grass and the only way you could win the ball was by deflecting it with your head; thankfully, all that went out when the Laws changed so the front rows could not bind lower than their hips.

One of my club props when I played was Mike 'Nobby' Clarke (you may not know him), who was a boiler maker and spent most of his days swinging a very large hammer. He was not a very big, muscular tight head prop in comparison to today's modern front rowers, but he was an extremely strong one. He used to take great pride in getting one over on the opposing prop with his unique style of body and head position combined with Cumberland and Westmoreland clamp-like holds. He had the ability to balance on his left leg, leaving his right leg to sweep across the tunnel like a steam hammer, winning numerous balls against the head - for which I

always took the credit. Whilst he couldn't say very much during the game because his gum shield was jammed firmly between his teeth, he invariably took the opportunity to regale all and sundry on front-row subtleties at the after-match festivities. He had usually consumed very large quantities of Guinness then quietly faded away into slumberland like a new-born baby after an eight ounce feed.

What's this got to do with the new Laws, you may ask? Absolutely nothing, except to say it doesn't matter how the Laws change (and as a coach I am firmly in favour of safety), the front row union is a unique club that will preserve its secrets to the grave to ensure that the odd-shaped ball passes through channel one without any interference."

Ian (Spike) Milligan from Swaffham has written before and he has another set of comments to make:

"Thought I'd drop you a line about a couple of things further to the Editor's notes last week.

Firstly, I always find the articles very useful. Even if I don't agree or understand them, they always provoke thought and normally lead to some change or test within the coaching at a later date. Or, and this is the most normal for me, I'll struggle with something during a training session or after a match and I'll go through all of the past articles to have a look for inspiration.

The decision-making article is very interesting. It is odd in so far as I have a couple of players who, if they have that moment to think about what to do, they seem always make the wrong decision; however, if they are placed under pressure their decision-making (or their instinctive decision) is normally the right one. I've tried to incorporate this into training by having overload drills (match scenarios) and trying to force the right decision and then go back and walk through why they chose to take that option and the reasons why it was a good idea or otherwise.

Going on to the scrum, I think the new engagement process is very good and do see the point of all props touching as it evens the distance and can be seen clearly by ref and/or touch judge. My concern about the scrum comes from the level at which I coach and ref - the Under 12 squad. Although the Laws are very clear, there remain issues with 'interpretation' of Laws. We have seen scrums pushed before the ball goes in, scrum half feeding the scrum, opposing scrum half pushing and shoving at the put in and following to off-side position - and even number 8 pick ups or breaking early on a defensive scrum.

In my opinion, the Laws around the scrum are bang on. However, the implementation is a whole different challenge and one, if we get it right, would be to the benefit of the whole game.

The other point I'd make is that the forums in the Community section are an excellent place to sound out issues and get advice from other people in a similar position to

mine. They have been invaluable recently and enable a further spread of the community feel of our game.

After this weekend's matches and the feedback and comments I've had from the age groups in our mini section about the scrum I'm going to do something at the club to try to explain/address some of the issues internally so any additional comments from the Technical Journal readers or forum sites would be gratefully received (or harvested!) to add some credibility to my points.

In the main, it seems to be a lack of awareness by parents regarding the Laws of the game their children play weekly, but there have been cases where referees (who are just like me, a parent who has got involved and volunteered) just don't seem to either understand or apply the Laws. In the most extreme cases, children have been coached something totally opposed to the Law. However, I still believe the knowledge, experience and commitment now is much better than four/five years ago when I started coaching and at all levels you have to accept a mistake or two (see a certain try at Twickenham two weekends ago as proof)."

Now these two pieces of opinion aren't exactly in coaching manual style, but they are no less valuable for that, because they come from committed coaches who operate at grassroots level and their views are *very* important and valued. If you can add to any of the points raised, please do get in touch with [keithrichardson@therfu.com](mailto:keithrichardson@therfu.com)

There were more replies but they are being held back as the Editor's Comments should not become longer than the main articles!

Keith Richardson (Technical Journal Editor).