

**CHANGING THE LAW, CHANGING THE SCRUM –
A ‘TOUCHY’ SUBJECT (AND A FEW MORE
OBSERVATIONS)
BY
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*There is nothing more difficult to take in hand,
More perilous to conduct,
Or more uncertain in its success,
Than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.*

Niccolò Machiavelli
The Prince (1513)

I don't think too many of Machiavelli's principles would be entirely relevant to the playing, coaching or refereeing of rugby union but he was certainly right when he basically said that people don't like change.

The International Rugby Board (iRB), the law makers and custodians of the game, have a moratorium on law changes until immediately after each Rugby World Cup. Then, each union is asked to submit any suggested changes in law that they may have, along with some evidence of why the law should be changed. It is then for the iRB to decide on which changes, if any, should be implemented. Alongside this process is the 'Conference on the Game,' where senior players, coaches and referees of the international game meet and discuss various aspects of the Game. Although this group actually have no real power, their influence as a recommending body can be considered significant.

The only exception to this process occurs when a Special Council Meeting is called to assess law changes that are due to "unforeseen circumstances, safety, or emergency provisions" and in the case of the new scrum engagement law, this is exactly what happened. Since January 1st 2007, an extra 'step' was added to the engagement process of the scrum. Essentially, this change was brought about as a result of a number of high profile injuries and is a clear attempt to reduce the impact of 'the hit', the moment the front rows physically come together.

The iRB invested much time and money, using experts from on and off the field, and this new engagement process is the outcome. Referees should now call players together using a four stage sequence, namely "Crouch – touch – pause - engage". For those of us in the northern hemisphere, the change had to occur almost overnight; some Guinness Premiership teams, who played under the 'old' law on the 27th December 2006, were refereed under the new process only a few days later. There was much worry and concern; would it work? Would it take away some of the power

from scrummaging teams? Well, after the first month or so of the new law and the start of Southern Hemisphere matches, how is the new scrum engagement perceived now? What initial issues have there been and what possible resolutions can be suggested? I'm writing to offer a referee's perspective and discuss some feedback from senior players from Guinness Premiership and International matches. To best discuss this, perhaps it is best to examine each phase individually.

Crouch.

When the players are assembled and ready to scrummage, the referee will call "Crouch". This is an indication to the teams that the referee wants both front rows to come down into a fully crouched position, at the same height and with the hookers at the mark. It's accepted that some teams like to crouch early and that's fine. The referee will not go on to the next stage of the process, however, until he has called crouch and is happy that both teams are in the acceptable position for the next step, the touch. Teams who fail to come into the horizontal crouch position when instructed are liable to sanction. Some teams have stopped doing the early crouch, now citing fatigue caused by the extra time taken to go through the new four stage process and hence standing in the crouch for longer than usual. I suspect there are many props working on their 'squat' right now! CROUCH!

Touch.

On the call of the referee and not before (!), all four props should touch the outside of the shoulder of their direct opponent and then withdraw their arm. Props who fail to touch or touch in the agreed manner are liable to sanction. This new step has been created to provide a safe and consistent gap and stop players from forming some distance away from each other and 'charging' into the hit. A number of players have suggested that they don't like the closeness of the procedure and, certainly, the taller props don't seem to be as comfortable as the shorter ones. Before Christmas, when some clubs were practising this, they said that they felt that there were more collapses with the new law than the old law! When investigated further, it was apparent that the props were not touching adequately enough; they were setting up quite far away from their opponents, stretching as far as possible and were literally using their fingertips to faintly touch the opposing prop. When they did this and withdrew the arm, they were already overbalanced and starting to fall over. It's important that referees recognise this quickly and stop it. Here, the referee should blow the whistle and stand the front rows up, get them closer together and start the process again. Props who touch early also risk causing difficulties, since it may cause their opponent to rush their touch in an effort to catch up and, hence, cause a mistiming of the process which could cause an early engagement. CROUCH – TOUCH.

Pause.

This phase is often underestimated, often too short and often guessed! The pause isn't there for the referee's ego but, far more importantly, it's there to make sure the players are finally all in the correct position and are ready to engage. Players must remain stationary, balanced and again are liable to sanction if they infringe. Problems here are often caused by players overstretching on the touch, the second rows pushing early or, more likely, the players just trying to guess the referee's call. Referees

should, and will, vary the length of the pause, even if only slightly.
CROUCH – TOUCH – P-A-U-S-E-.

Engage.

This is the referee's indication for the players to come together and, should players delay unreasonably or go early, then again they are liable to penalty. There is provision in law at each phase of the process to sanction teams who do not comply since referees will offer little sympathy at the scrum engagement due to the important safety considerations. It's important that the referee's voice is clear and audible enough for the whole front five of both teams, since it's not just the front row that have to be considered during this procedure. CROUCH – TOUCH – P-A-U-S-E - **ENGAGE!!**

Consistency matters! Referees will confirm and reinforce the engagement procedure prematch and it's important that referees are consistent in their application of the process and that players take responsibility for their actions here, as in every other aspect of the game. It is a clear sequential process which must be adhered to one step at a time. At this point, I must say that the players that I have refereed this year with this new law have been, on the whole, excellent. They have approached the engagement sensibly and have been honest in their feedback and appraisal.

In addition to the new law, January 1st saw the iRB re-emphasise that referees should ensure that the ball is introduced to the scrum correctly or, to use the iRB's terminology, the throw-in should be 'credible'. Quite how we have got to the current state of affairs I don't exactly know. The iRB, and even the RFU, have threatened before but there is one subtle difference this year, namely the Rugby World Cup. IRB Panel Referees have been told in no uncertain terms that if they do not referee the throw-in correctly then they will not be selected! Referees have been noticeably more proactive than usual in their management of scrum-halves of late and so the new procedure at the scrum is actually;

"Crouch – touch – pause – engage – Put the ball in straight and down the middle please!"

So, despite initial concerns and perceived difficulties, the actual feedback received from players, coaches and referees is, in my view, actually pretty positive. The key to it is getting the players involved 'bought-in' to a safe and consistent engagement process. Once they are engaged, then let them get on with it!

Other Law Changes?

You may have heard of some other laws being trialled in various 'Law Laboratories' around the world. The objective is to come up with a simpler, shorter and more effective set of laws while retaining the essential features of rugby union. The experiments also aim to quicken up the game and take the subjectiveness out of referees' decision making. In the opinion of Paddy O'Brien, the iRB's International Referee Manager, *"Some of the laws are becoming unrefereeable. We want to make the game easier to play, coach and referee - and to watch."*

The iRB is trialling 8 Experimental Law Variations (ELVs) in 5 countries – England, Scotland, France, Ireland and Australia. As an example of some of the proposed changes:

- Downgrading most penalty offences to free kicks.
- Backs must be 5m behind rear foot at scrum.
- Ball cannot be passed back into 22 and kicked, but if it goes out on the full the throw will be from where it was kicked.
- Removing corner posts.
- At quick throw-ins, you can throw the ball anywhere except forward.

Specifically, here in England we are trialling three of them in all County Championship matches. Arrangements will be made to video certain matches for the iRB Game Analysis Unit and a questionnaire will also be prepared and circulated to coaches and captains for their comments. The County Championship coaches will receive special “Coach the Coaches” sessions from Richie Dixon of the Scottish Rugby Union who is a member of the iRB Laws Project Group and who has project managed the experiments in Scotland. Furthermore, RFU National Panel referees and touch judges will receive training from the iRB’s Bruce Cook on the implementation of the ELVs. These are the three ELVs specific to this year’s County Championship:

Maul:

- When a maul has been formed, players from either team may pull it down.
- Players of the team in possession of the ball in the maul may break away from the maul and be bound together in front of the ball carrier, providing the ball carrier is bound to those players who are in front of that player.
- The maul ends unsuccessfully if the ball becomes unplayable and a free kick is awarded. The free kick is awarded to the team not in possession when the maul began.

22:

- When a defending player receives the ball outside the 22 metre line and passes, puts or takes the ball inside the 22, the following can occur:
 - a. If the ball is then kicked directly into touch, the lineout is in line with where the ball was kicked.
 - b. If a tackle, ruck or maul is subsequently formed within the 22 and the ball is then kicked directly into touch, the lineout is where the ball crossed the touchline.

Contact Area:

1. Immediately the tackle occurs there are offside lines.
2. The offside lines run parallel to the goal lines through the hindmost part of the hindmost player at the tackle.
3. If the ball is unplayable at the breakdown, the side that did not take the ball into contact will receive a FK.

4. If the ball is received directly from a kick and a tackle occurs immediately, and the ball becomes unplayable, the FK is given to the team who received the kick.
5. There are only 3 penalty offences (not including dangerous play) at the breakdown.
 - a. Offside for not coming through the gate.
 - b. Offside where defenders are in front of the last man on their side of the breakdown, i.e. the offside line.
 - c. A tackled player must immediately play the ball and may not be prevented from playing the ball by any player who is off his feet.
6. All FKs are tap kicks, including a mark, and a scrum option is available for all FKs.
7. Dangerous play will not be tolerated, e.g. diving over the breakdown.

To my mind, many of these changes sound very exciting and anything that makes the game and its laws more transparent cannot be a bad thing. As long as we can maintain the identity and credibility of the Game then the 'Law Makers' will have done a good thing. Making too many changes too quickly will be difficult to manage; it's all well and good deciding on which changes to make but implementing them is, ultimately, a different kettle of fish and still down to a referee. But then, going back to Machiavelli, change isn't easy. Machiavelli also said, "It is best to be both feared **and** loved, however, if one cannot be both it is better to be feared than loved." Maybe he was a referee after all!?



The author is second from the left at the Hong Kong 7s.