

## SOME THOUGHTS ON ENGAGEMENT UNDER THE NEW SCRUM LAWS BY COLIN ASTLEY

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Let me start by reproducing the introduction of a paper published by the RFU Technical Journal, entitled "Prop-Specific Strength Training at the Shove" by Conrad Comer. (Archive, March 2007)

"The scrum, like an arm wrestle, is often won and lost in the moments before the true pressure is applied. Between two equals, the competitor who obtains the upper hand usually triumphs. This applies to many competitive sporting contests, both on a psychological and physical level. The scrum in rugby is no exception; it is a battle within a battle that divides a team between those on the front line and those who can only stand and await the outcome before proceeding.

Much like an arm wrestle, the eight players that take dominance in the brief moments before the ball is put in will invariably carry the momentum and win up-front - and it's the role of the props to lead the charge. The question then is, "How can we improve our chances of increasing our dominance?"

After searching the internet looking for that "something extra" in the art of front-row play, I came across two interesting papers. The first, "Total impact method: a variation on a engagement technique in the rugby scrum," by Doug McClymount and Mike Cron (<http://www.coachesinfo.com/category/rugby/84/>), explains and instructs on a scrum engagement technique that has the intention of meeting the opposition pack on *their* side of the designated centre line of the scrum. The second paper, "Tighthead" from TurboCashWiki (<http://www.box.co.za/wiki/index.php/Tighthead.>), suggests that, if you have a weak tight-head prop, he needs to be the "fastest player on the pitch over one metre." By this it means that your tighthead needs to be quicker than his stronger opposite number to get over the centre line of the scrum at engagement to catch him in the "sticking point", allowing the scrum half to get the ball in and out before the greater opposition strength comes on.

So, after giving both these suggestions some thought and also giving some consideration into how to gain the "advantage" with the new scrum engagement, I offer the following theory and points for discussion.

On the referee's command of "pause" or "engage" your scrum performs a *quick* squatting motion to try to gain the advantage on the ensuing engagement. This, I believe, will result in a more powerful "hit" by making better use of the total mass of your pack. This needs to be a cohesive effort, with timing of paramount importance, ensuring that strong contact between each member of the pack is made at all times through effective grips.

I believe this technique is a better and safer way of engaging the scrum than other methods. The advantages are:

- When the technique is employed, the scrum is usually in a 'rising-up' position with backs flat (shoulders slightly higher than the hips) and coming up slightly under the opposition, thus allowing a split second of domination/advantage. (A good referee will negate this by ensuring that each front row is at the same height before calling an engage, it does happen very frequently.)
- The scrum is up and will not collapse.
- It creates a better position to counteract the opposition if they try to lower the scrum.
- It affords a more stable position if the opposition ease off. Collapse of the scrum is less likely.
- There is an immediate strong position from which to chase the hit.
- It helps the loosehead to keep his side of the scrum up for his hooker on their put in.
- This is a far safer, advantageous position than the 'falling forward' into engagement that is seen frequently.
- The opposition front row can be caught between phases in their 'sticking point'.

To achieve a more powerful hit at the scrum engagement, the forwards should perform a quick half squat. This utilises the stretch-shorten cycle (ssc), which releases stored elastic energy in the muscles. A demonstration of this is when you try to do a standing vertical jump without bending your knees. Now perform the same jump by descending into a half squat immediately before jumping into the air. That's the ssc at work, and a very effective action it is. It can be trained and improved, usually by using Olympic weights lifts and plyometrics.

There is some debate on the timing of when the squat should be adopted. Bruce Ross (of Myoquip ([www.myoquip.com.au](http://www.myoquip.com.au)) and Sydney University) claims that performing the squat on the "engage" is far too late and suggests that it is better utilised on the "pause". However, Ashley Jones, fitness trainer for the Canterbury Crusaders (and

www.getstrength.com) suggests that the referee's timing of the commands of crouch-touch-pause-engage could result in the loss of the stored elastic energy in the muscles.

This is quite possible at the elite level where everything happens a lot faster than in the grassroots game. However, I believe that the lower the level, the greater the chances of success by using this technique on the "engage" call. It would work to your advantage if it were practised at training, to be performed fast enough in the game situation to bring rewards, especially against a pack still using the orthodox method of engagement.