

EDITOR'S NOTES

13.11.07

I asked for any comments on last week's article by Alastair Hignell, who offered his own thoughts on RWC 2007. There were some bits and pieces, but only one reader went to any great length in reply.

Philip Llewellyn was the reader who responded – and he admits “stumbling across” the Technical Journal! Where are all the ideas from our regular readers?

“I am a new reader of the Journal after stumbling across it whilst browsing the RFU website. After reading that you have not received much feedback, I thought I would send you some of my thoughts on the contact area.

Alastair Hignell stated in his article that New Zealand captain Richie McCaw was the undisputed king in this (contact) area; it was perhaps significant that when referee Wayne Barnes ruled that the flanker's efforts at the breakdown in the quarter-final against France were just the wrong side of the law, the All Blacks' game fell away.

I firstly have to agree with referee Barnes' interpretation, but how many times do we see it go unpunished by other referees? I would hate to think how many times I have heard Stuart Barnes, Dewi Morris or even Brian Moore talking about players killing the ball at the breakdown. How it has ruined many potentially good games! But how are players allowed to continually get away with it? I am certainly not blaming the referees. Their job is hard enough without having to deal with the all the goings-on at the breakdown - but something *has* to be done.

Yes killing the ball is a hugely effective tool, which, when used properly, can be the difference between winning and losing a game. But if the IRB and the RFU want to see this pretty, fast-flowing game that everybody seems to love so much, why did they virtually outlaw rucking with the feet?

Let me clarify a big grey area here. I am not talking about stamping. Stamping is a cheap tactic used to deliberately try and injure players and remove them from the game.

I am talking about players being allowed to use their feet to encourage opposition players to move out of the way at the base of a ruck. It would certainly help defending players to realise that the referee has called hands away and that their hands still seem to be on the ball.

It seems that, for some players and officials, there is a distinct lack of clarification over which is which. The law used to say that rucking was a backwards motion of the foot and that a downward motion was a stamp. Surely it isn't too hard to distinguish between the two? If you couple this with the idea that only players who are lying on the wrong side or who are directly slowing the ball down can be rucked, then I don't see a problem.

Why do the RFU not put together a coaching curriculum on how to ruck? If the skill (and it is a skill) was taught to players at the age of sixteen, then (1) they would have time to develop the skill alongside the rest of their game and (2) they would also see the benefits of not cheating and slowing the ball at the breakdown.

I personally remember a junior coach taking us for a rucking session when we were about fifteen. We used big sausage tackle bags laid on the floor, took our boots off and had to ruck the bags out of the way. We then progressed this to players being on the floor and rucking them. At no point were there any safety concerns as we had no boots on and were being taught how to move them out of the way, not how to stamp on them. As a result we were extremely good at rucking opposition players who tried to kill the ball and so we played off a lot faster ball than we might have done previously.

I always knew as a back row player what I was in for if I found myself lying on the wrong side or if I kept my hands on the ball for too long. It will always be part of a player's mentality to do as much as he possibly can to disrupt the opposition, no matter what rules are in place, but if he knows that the tackle area will be to some degree self-governed by the players involved, then perhaps this mentality will change somewhat and we will start to see fewer players trying to break the rules.

I feel the only way for the contact area to be speeded up is to allow rucking again. Not just a random combination of stamping and rucking, but a strategic, controlled programme added into the foundations of rugby to allow players to understand the contact area, the benefits of it and how to stop teams who wish to slow the game."

So, readers and coaches – do you agree? Is this the way forward? It would be going back to a situation that used to exist, but is it something that would improve the current game?

The ball, as they say, is in your court. What do *you* think? Has Philip Llewellyn put his finger on a simple truth about the game?

The Editor, who can be contacted by email at keithrichardson@therfu.com