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# Managing the Scrum



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## Introduction

### Pre-game brief about scrum

Before the game talk to the scrum-half and the front row whilst the team is in the changing room. This is so that their peers know what they have been told and they cannot claim afterwards that you did not tell them something. It also helps you on the field because if they give away a number of penalties or free kicks it is highly likely that someone will say "He told you about this before the game - why didn't you listen". To the front rows I would say that I will make a long mark where the engagement has to take place and they should use it because from the mark I will be judging whether they or the opposition have pushed over it before the ball is put in.

Regarding the "Crouch, Bind, Set" (CBS) sequence I would tell them that they must listen to the timing and do the phases when called. I would also explain that I have to check certain things are right on each stage and I have to have time to do this so the call will not be rushed, but I would try and make the calls without long pauses.

I would tell them that on the engagement I will not allow them to drive on impact and they will not be allowed to drive until the ball is fed by the scrum half.

The final point I would make is that the law states binding is on the other prop's shirt and that I want long binds. If I catch them binding on the arm they will be penalized, even if the scrum does not collapse.



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## Pushing over Mark

Regarding the mark and one pack going over it. As far as I am aware under the laws, the only responsibility a pack has is to engage on that mark and not do anything to move away from it. It does not have a responsibility to engage as hard as the other pack and certainly not to match any illegal early push - which is what is actually meant when referees say 'take the hit'.

It is actually almost impossible for a whole pack to walk backwards and make it look natural, but as far as I am aware a pack does not have any responsibility to resist an early and illegal shove that comes before the ball leaves the scrum half's hands and which moves it backwards.

What many seem to fail to realize is that it is perfectly possible to engage with considerable force and not advance over the mark; even if the other pack engages meekly. You might get a six inches or a foot of movement forward, and I stress might, but this would be distinguishable from the early push which almost always starts and continues until the whistle or collapse or the scrum running all over the place.

Therefore I equate a pack going over the mark by anything more, than 6-12 inches (15-30cm for the young) as an early hit and most of all from a referees point of view, if you have made a clear mark you can simply point to it and the fact that the pack you are penalizing is over the mark. They will have to adjust the force with which they hit. If that means they cannot hit and drive early so much the better, however much they complain and do not like it.

## Marginal Calls/Issues in the scrum



With regard to the marginal things that occur in the front row, I could produce what I consider to be a useful guide to who is more likely to be at fault when scrums collapse, wheel etc, but this is all dependent on certain things being equal - like all the laws being enforced as fully as possible. The following is my rough guide to guessing (because we all do , it is just that some of us do it with a bit more knowledge - only the two props know which one was responsible and they will both lie when you ask

them anyway) which I stress is not absolute.

**These rely on you ensuring that there is no pushing until the ball is fed and that it is fed along the middle line.**

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## Why Feed must be straight

The reason for the above is that if you force the Scrum Half to feed the ball straight the hooker has to put his weight on the non-striking foot, dive forward when he sweeps his leg and complete the hook in a roughly round



movement. He cannot do this or will not do this if the scrum is moving. Therefore, it is safe to assume that he and his pack will, at least before the ball is fed, want a stationary scrum. In fact, unless they go for an eight man shove they will want it still until the ball leaves the scrum; with the possible exception of wheeling slightly one way or the other to move the defending flankers away from the pass or run.

## Collapse on put in

If a scrum collapses on the put-in side before the ball is put in I look to see if either prop has lost his bind.



This is not always the cause of a collapse but more often than not it is, and is done when under pressure. If the other prop is legally bound I would ping the one losing his bind. Even if you are not right at least you can point to some offense and the prop knows he should have been bound and cannot argue. You will get more right than wrong.

If the scrum has not moved much and by this I mean a yard (meter) or so look at the position of the two props on the floor. If the Tight Head is turned and on his side it is because he was twisting in (boring) before the collapse and it is likely to be his fault. Again you can point to his position and he cannot really argue.

It is possible for the Loose Head to have gone down but as the Tight Head was not in a legal position - i.e. he was twisting or boring in, then you can rightly say that the

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Loose Head should not be expected to hang on for grim death when being twisted illegally, and even if he does collapse it you can say that he wouldn't have had to do any of this if the Tight Head was square. Almost always when this happens the Tight Head has shifted his bind to the arm, sleeve or under the armpit. He would not end up in this position if he were bound on the shirt with a long bind. Also bear in mind - if the put-in side is not under pressure, what have they to gain from collapsing a stationary scrum before the put-in?

If the props go down square it is more likely to be the Loose Head's fault. There is no reason for a Tight Head who is not going backwards to collapse chest first as he is not being shoved. This is what is now called 'hinging' - where the Loose Head bends from the waist and sends the Tight Head down. This is usually evidenced by the bend coming from the waist and not involving much leg bend.

If the scrum goes down on the far side before the ball is fed it is likely to be the put-in sides Tight Head. The Loose Head on that side would be either seeking to keep it still for his hooker to strike against the head or pressuring the Tight Head in advance of a shove. A collapse before the ball is in is not any real advantage to him whereas it is for the Tight Head, if he knows that the pressure is likely to send him backwards when the shove comes on.

**After the feed note!** If you go around the other side you can see this more clearly. And let us just clear up one thing - **it is perfectly possible to see how straight the feed is from this side** - if anything it is easier because you don't have the scrum halves to look over. I would stand on the far side more often than not as you have a



a better view of the tunnel and are nearer the breakdown, if, as is usual, the ball is passed the normal way. The only problem is a number eight pick up; but you can avoid getting in the way by standing 5 -7 yards away as he is likely to drive reasonably close to the scrum so that he is not an easy tackle line. And yes, you can still easily see what is going on with binds, the feed etc.

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## Collapse while moving

If a scrum is moving when it collapses - bear this in mind - of what advantage is it to the advancing pack to take it down? Ignore this rubbish about double bluffs and trying to con penalties; it rarely happens and if they do con you then good for them.



You can be reasonably sure that it is not in a front rowers psyche to collapse when he is in the dominant position. This is why players like playing in the front row. Shoving your opposite number is the equivalent of side-stepping for a back only much more satisfying for entirely justifiable macho reasons. Furthermore, it is dangerous to collapse when you are advancing for several reasons:

- Unlike when the retreating prop collapses you cannot be sure your back 5 will stop pushing; they may not be able to recognize immediately that you have gone down.
- If they keep pushing your neck can get bent or extended, neither of which are much fun.

Many times when this happened to me I would be screaming so that the back five could see we were on the floor and stop pushing. For the retreating prop - OK he might get driven over, but getting trodden on might be painful, it is not the same as above. Also, when this happens see which prop ends up in the more comfortable position. If the retreating prop has both feet back and lands square on that is good sign he has collapsed because he has been able to end up in a decent position (all relative I know).





## Wheeling

A scrum cannot wheel quickly without being pulled illegally one way or the other. The natural way of achieving a wheel - where one prop stays still and the other drives means that it cannot be done quickly unless there is such an imbalance that there is a complete mismatch in the two front rows - in which case you have to ask why are they wheeling rather

than simply shoving their opponents off the ball?

Any quick wheel penalize the non-put-in side even if it happens after the feed. A side hooking the ball may want a slight wheel to put the other back row further from the tackle area, but they would not do this before the ball is controlled by the number eight because if they do whilst the ball is making its way there, there is every possibility that one of dullard and clumsy 2nd rows will kick it through. Also the number eight is not in a position to pick it up and do the back row move whilst it is not at his feet or very close.

Similarly they (put in side) would not wheel the scrum quickly even if the ball is at their number eights feet because it makes it much harder to control the pick up if the second rows feet are tap-dancing about.

Scrumms that wheel slowly are not usually dangerous and provided they do not collapse I think you just play on making sure the back rows are legally bound etc.

Also make sure you are consistent with how far you allow the scrum to wheel before a reset - players get really annoyed if the other side is given more time.

Finally, one thing with the flankers bind. Watch out for which player he is binding on. He may stay shoulder and upper arm engaged but simply move up from his prop to their prop and this number eights do the same going from their second row to their prop. surprisingly the Kiwis are masters at this.



## Lifting in scrum

Lifting - one of the reasons I have a poor opinion of certain referees is that they are unable to understand that it is not possible for a prop to stand up and suspend himself in mid-air, three feet off the ground. You don't have to be a prop to get this, try standing up and getting to where Phil Vickery found himself against the so-called

Beast. You might do it if you're David Blaine, but not otherwise. Very dangerous-hyper extension if still bound is dangerous, and is NEVER the liftee's fault. It is technically possible for a retreating second row to stop the drive by diving under his front row and shooting them up, but this is so cynical and difficult it might occur once in whenever.

## Standing up

Finally with standing up - you are allowed to ping the first player you see pop-up, but I think that is not right. Standing up dissipates a drive because the pressure goes up and not back. If a pack is retreating it can do this to stop it; if you are going forward you do not want to stand up because you cannot drive anymore. You could decide that the player must not have been driving straight but that may not be the case and given that he has weakened his position I don't think you should ping - you should restart if necessary. I would carry on because the player is not in any danger and the scrum is likely to have become static because of his standing.

## Leg lifting

Some props try to lift their opponent's leg during a drive. If I saw this I would be considering a YC straight away. This is highly dangerous and the prop doing it knows it; it cannot be accidental and I would at least leave the player in no doubt about how lucky he was not getting a card.

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## Prop going down



This is an example that is often put to me - there is no definitive answer to this but you should consider the following: If you do not allow pushing from either side before

the ball is fed you get a lot less bugging about with binding. The present trend for going down at top level is a direct result of the elite referees wrongly allowing shoving straight after the engagement. I have no idea why they chose to allow this, other than thinking they know best and not understanding the consequences but what that does is make getting into the best position you can as early as you can, very difficult. That is why you see the frantic grabbing and wrestling or delays to get the last bind.

If you don't allow a shove the props have time readjust and even re-bind before it makes a real difference and hence you get less bugging about.

This is also being made worse by the elite referees wrongly telling the scrum halves to put the ball immediately after the engagement. They presumably are doing this thinking that the longer the scrum goes on the more can go wrong. What they actually do by doing this is concertina all the elements of the scrum so that props and hookers have to get in the best position as fast as they can, and whilst you want them to do this reasonably quickly anyway it is stupid to ask them to do it almost as soon as they have engaged.

In any event the law does not say the ball has to be put-in like this. It says it must be put in without delay as soon as the scrum is stable and square. The elite referees all know the laws and are experienced I can only therefore consider that they are being willful when they pursue a strategy like this; it absolutely clear that what they are doing will hinder the already unacceptable situation and yet they propose it; discuss it and carry it out - I am genuinely aghast at how these things come to be formulated in the brains of experienced officials - absolutely aghast.

So no early pushing = less important to get a good bind, more time to readjust and fewer problems.

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Then it comes to the fear of getting shoved and so it is difficult if a Loose Head is going down before the feed. What I would say is that if a Tight Head is sufficiently good to exert sufficient pressure for the Loose Head to fear this, then he is probably good enough not to allow the scrum to go down.

If a pack is dominant it is able to virtually dictate how a scrum goes. It can choose not to hit over the mark; not shove early; keep the front row off the ground and still rag its opponents.

Another of the results of what the elite referees have done is that weaker packs do not get hammered all day long and only because of brute force.

Consider this - a put-in side has an inherent weakness anyway when scrums are refereed properly because their hooker has to get into a striking stance which means he is not square and any push he exerts is lessened because of this. It gets worse when he has to take weight off his striking leg and hook the ball. For the time he is performing the hook he can transmit little or no shove at all. Thus, the non put-in pack has 8 against 7 and 1/2 for the beginning and 8 against 7 during the strike. Only when the hooker has got the ball back can he try and readjust into a proper pushing position and if a shove is well timed he never gets to that position.

However, there used to be a catchphrase - 'scrums are only 5 seconds long'. When the shove from a superior pack wasn't allowed immediately the other pack could get ready - engage, lock out for a few seconds and the ball would be hooked into channel one and away. After that it didn't matter whether the rest of the pack got shoved back. With proper technique and concentration even weaker packs could compete, although it was very hard work. What we have at the moment is one pack that can simply roll over the other because it uses the advantage and the momentum of the engagement. The obvious time to look out for the rare double bluff is near the end of a game etc.

