

HEALTH AND SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FRONT ROW UNION

BY
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Contested or uncontested? That is the delicate question regarding the Rugby Union scrum. Recently I have read a number of articles that express concerns about the seriousness of injuries to front row players due to collapsed scrums and, from those articles, the inevitable conclusions are to suggest making the rugby scrum either uncontested or ban it altogether.

The changes in the laws regarding the scrum over previous years have been necessary to reduce the potential of serious injury that can emerge from the collapse of the scrum due to the impact forces generated at the engagement phase, but the ultimate question is surely this - can we go further still to ensure greater safety of our props and hookers in the heat of the action?

I pondered whether, now that Rugby Union is a professional sport, we can presume that the employer (each club's owner) and the employees (each club's players) all fall under the umbrella of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, which places a general duty on the employer (the club owner) **to ensure so far as is reasonably practicable the health, safety and welfare at work of all his employees** and, so as not to leave out the employee (the player), **it shall be the duty of every employee while at work to take reasonable care for the health and safety of himself and of other persons that may be affected by his acts or omissions at work** ('at work' could mean in the gym or out on the playing field, either training or participating in a competitive game, as well as going about one's business during paid hours.) This article is only concerned with a select group, the front row players.

In Rugby Union there is, no doubt due to the contact/collision nature of the game, an inevitable element of risk involved and to a certain extent the players will accept the risks that are associated with playing the game. So what, in the interim, can coaches, administrators and club owners do to ensure the safety of their front row players? In accordance with the Management At Work Regulations, 1999, the employer must produce a suitable and sufficient **risk assessment** with a view to eliminating the hazard completely or to **reduce the risks to as low as reasonably practicable**.

Firstly, let's take a look at some of the hazards involved (a hazard is the potential to cause harm) that *could* affect front row players during pre-engagement and engagement phases of the scrum. These scenarios may crop up singly or in varying multiples at any scrum:

- The two packs standing too far apart on engagement with the potential to go to ground head first.
- The two packs standing too close on engagement with the potential of a face-to-face collision with no protection.
- The pitch surface is (choose any from) muddy, wet, hard and/or undulating, offering the potential collapse of the scrum.
- Mismatch in the opposing front rows/pack through physical bulk or stature, leading to potential collapse of scrum.
- The two packs standing at an angle to each other, i.e. not parallel, with the potential rotation of the scrum and possible collapse.
- The impact forces when the packs engage cannot be handled by the front rows with the potential for collapse.
- Rotational forces when the packs engage due to uneven contact and wheeling, offering potential for collapse.
- Slight delay by one pack on engagement, leading to the potential for the opposition pack to go to ground.
- An imbalance of numbers when, say, one pack has 8 players and the other pack has 7 players (or fewer). Potential for collapse.
- One pack moving forward on the engage while the other pack is stationary.
- Loose/incorrect binding, offering the potential to go to ground.
- Props not binding, scrum goes to ground.
- Pre-shove before ball is put into scrum, with potential collapse or wheeling and collapse.
- Players' boots and stud lengths not adequate; nothing is gripping, which causes slipping and possible collapse.
- Poor technique, potential collapse.
- Inexperienced front row players, potential collapse.
- Lack of concentration and/or poor engagement, potential collapse.
- Substandard protective equipment (i.e. old mouth guards, worn shoulder protection padding etc).
- Foul play.
- Players carrying slight injuries, potential collapse and further injury problems.
- Props boring in on opposition hooker.
- Front row players forced upwards and lifted in the air.

Types of injuries (and areas that may suffer) that could be sustained as a result of the above hazards:

- Lower back.
- Ribs.
- Shoulders.
- Cuts to head.
- Cuts to face.
- Bruising.

- Muscle pulls.
- Neck injury.
- Spinal injury.
- Possible dislocations.
- Possible fractures.

Who would it affect? Probably all forwards, but on a sliding scale of probability, the pecking-order would go:

- Props.
- Hookers.
- Second rows.
- Back rows.

Evaluate the risks. A Risk is a chance, however high or low, that somebody will be harmed by the hazard. Decide whether the precautions taken are adequate or do you think you can do more?

The key here is to ***remove the hazard altogether*** i.e. do away with scrums per se. Now that will immediately solve a lot of the problems. But because scrums are a fundamental part of Rugby Union then one has to look to ***control the risks so that injury or harm is unlikely***.

Controlling the Risks.

- **Try a less risky option.** Uncontested scrums are utilised at certain age groups and are used in the senior game when no other recognised front row player is available due to injury, suspension or dismissal during the game (Law 3.13 a, b, c, d).
- Ensure all front row players are suitably qualified, experienced and trained, including any replacement player(s).
- Use of personal protective equipment, (i.e. mouth guards, shoulder protection, shin guards, ankle protection, head protection plus any other equipment) is that which is approved as specified under Law 4.1 and 4.2.
- Structured training programme for front row players, taking into consideration the main muscle groups in the back, upper body, legs and core muscles and neck.
- Constant education of front row forwards on technique, such as binding, general scrummaging through use of mechanical aids (scrum machine) and live controlled scrummaging, (reinforcement of Law 20, 20.1, 20.2, 20.3, 20.8f, g, and i, 20.9a and c).
- Physically fit players.
- Regular fitness testing.
- Adequate injury-management programmes.
- Medical assessments.
- Dietary programmes.
- Phased return to active play programmes after injury.
- Taking account of the administration controls such as insurances, Laws of the Game, qualified specialist coaches, constant review of the Laws of the Game and constant re-education programmes for coaches.
- Adequately maintained playing surfaces.
- Suitably qualified referees plus continuous education programmes.

- Medical attendance at all games, i.e. doctor, physiotherapist, First Aid assistants - all suitably trained for sport injuries.
- Match video analysis.
- Club disciplinary procedures for foul play.
- Suitably qualified touch judges, plus continuous education programmes for them.
- Effective communication between referee and players, referee and touch judges, touch judges and players.
- Regular feedback after the games.
- The types of documents that would be consulted would be the law book, RFU guidance documents, Health and Safety documentation and IRB guidance notes.
- Suitably trained and experienced replacements.
- Practise the timings of the new law regarding Crouch, Touch, Pause, Engage.
- Front row heads and shoulders must not fall below the hips during the scrum phase.
(Law 20. 1 (g))

Records.

A club must produce relevant records of things like maintenance of mechanical aids, playing positions, training, medical records, and previous clubs played for, etc. There should be a section on experience of other positions played.

The records must be kept, probably for the lifetime of the club. Risk assessment should be reviewed annually and archiving would occur only when/if scrums were not to be part of the game.

Inform.

Players must be made aware of the hazards and potential risks, then they must consent to participate in the sport and this information is recorded.

Review and Revise.

The club must review its procedures and amend/update as required in line with current legislation/laws and changes of circumstances.

Laws are constantly reviewed and numerous law changes are trialled over a period of time in various countries. The outcomes, if relevant, are added to the updated laws.

Conclusion.

So, should we ban all scrums or make all scrums uncontested? The answer I think is **no**, providing all front row players understand what their objective is and that they owe a duty of care to their fellow participants. They must play within the laws of the game and they have to adhere to the referee's and touch judges' decisions. They need to be effectively trained and competent for the position they play in and, most importantly, they must be adequately insured.

Can we go a step further for scrum safety? Under present playing conditions it is possible, but would it be practical?

Given the new scrum law of 'crouch touch, pause and engage' I believe we get a safe entry into the engage position. I believe the problems of scrums going to ground is caused

mainly because the props still try to disrupt the opposition hooker's strike/sight of the ball coming in.

The referees at the top level are suitably qualified and aware to be able to manage that situation. However, my main concern would be at grassroots level where there is a major difference in the players' strength and fitness levels. Also, I wonder if the referees at this level are adequately experienced to recognise and cope with the offending front rower. Injuries around the front row are usually accepted as part of the job and, invariably, the player will recover back to full fitness in a short period of time. However, if the injury is serious enough and puts paid to the earning capacity of the player then, and only then, do the fingers point to who may be responsible for the cause of the injury.

This may be the time when the quality of your evidence is your 'get out of jail free(ish)' card.

References

IRB Laws of the game.

Five steps to Risk Assessments.

Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974.

Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations, 1999.

Essentials of Health and Safety at Work.

Numerous articles relating to injury in sport.