

# PLACE-KICKING IN RUGBY – THE CONTINUUM AND BEYOND BY JAMES BARRITT.

The author graduated in Physical Education with QTS (Qualified Teaching Status) from the University of Chichester in 2004. He currently coaches Taunton's rugby academy at Hampshire Sixth Form College and plays for Winchester RFC. The article originally started as a dissertation topic, which highlighted some loopholes in the way place-kicking is modified in rugby. The author and Tony Weaden, Principal Lecturer at Chichester, invented the 'modified kicking area' as a possible solution to the problem for grassroots players between the ages of twelve and eighteen.

The Rugby Football Union have worked hard in the last decade or so to promote youth rugby, particularly at grass roots. The result has been an increase in the number of boys and girls seeking to play club rugby at weekends and after school because they enjoy the challenge offered by the game - the running, passing and especially the scoring. The RFU recognises the importance of modification of the full game for younger players and it was for this reason that the rugby continuum was introduced. The rugby continuum was designed to make the game manageable to new performers by modifying the rules into its three stages. The continuum is divided into these sections, with the notion that each would introduce new rules and regulations to take participants one stage closer to replicating the full fifteen-a-side game via manageable progression. U7s and U8s have been classified 'Mini Tag' rugby, U9s and U10s have been addressed as 'Mini Contact' rugby and U11s and U12s are termed 'Midi Contact' rugby. The rugby continuum, as is common in many other modified invasion games, tries to develop players' learning by progressively introducing new skills. The idea of the continuum is to ease new performers into the complexities of the game through modified stages until U13 level, by which time they should, in theory, be able to deal with the full fifteen-a-side game with relative success.

## **Modified Sport.**

Modified sport is a valuable tool for developing and educating young sports performers. During the early years of modified sport's introduction, there was a less than logical connection between 'modified sport' and 'adult' versions of the same games. It only became clear in the 1980s that modifications could be made to the rules and procedures of games that 'accommodated levels of physical maturity among children.' (European Physical Education Review, 2000, pp.142.)

Up until the 1980s the alteration to pitch dimensions was deemed inappropriate, with many people holding the view that making a football pitch narrower, for example, would change the essence of the game. However, changing the pitch size enables children to enjoy the same proportionate dimensions as adults have on a full-size pitch. This does not appear to hinder the root principles of the game. It rather makes the game principles more accessible for children to understand and apply within their modified form of the game. 'Little League' has made the game of football more



digestible for children by reducing the ball size, pitch size and restricting the number of players on the designated pitch.

A large proportion of the modifications made to football within the 'Little League' is aimed towards making the demands of the game proportionate to the same pressures that adults are faced with. For example, in mini soccer for U11s, penalty kicks are taken nearer the goalmouth at a distance of eight yards. The distance has been reduced because children have great difficulty with kicking the ball as far as adults can cope with. Therefore, kicking requirements should be made more realistic in terms of distances and impact upon the game. As an example, pitch dimensions are reduced to replicate the adult game, thus enabling children to cross a ball to the far post as would happen at senior level.

### Rugby Focus.

The focus of this study is place-kicking in rugby football, with particular attention centered around converting tries. It is worth asking whether this particularly technical aspect of the game has been handled with all the care required to maximize youngsters' potential. The idea of modifying games for young performers originated so that all age groups, regardless of physical maturity, should receive success within the sport proportional to the success received by adults in the full 15-a-side game. For example, children aged eight years should not be expected to lift a jumper in the lineout, nor should the game require them to make a 'bone crunching' tackle on their line to prevent a try from being scored. Many aspects of modified rules have safety in mind, and rightly so. This being said, not all modified rules stem from the protection of health and safety. Some have been introduced to maintain the essence of the game; for example, if a child uses a ball that is too big, will he/she be able to execute the miss pass required to put the winger into space with an opportunity to score a memorable try? It is on closer inspection of this area within the rugby continuum that a key aspect of the game has been overlooked – the development of place-kicking.

'Mini Tag' does not have set plays and a breakdown in play is restarted from a free pass. There is no kicking whatsoever at this stage. 'A player may not kick the ball. If this happens, possession goes to the non-offending team for a free pass restart at the point which the ball was kicked.' (Law 10.16 RFU) The final stage of the continuum, 'Midi Contact', has placed more significance on set piece moves as a larger number of players are involved in scrums and lineouts. The most significant alteration is the introduction of kicking. Players can now restart the game with a Drop-kick from the half way line and after a try has been scored a conversion kick is allowed to be attempted. (This kick occurs from under the post regardless of where the try was in fact touched down.) However, following the award of a penalty, a kick at goal is not permitted. Drop-goals during play are not permitted. (Law 12.16 RFU)

Beyond the continuum the RFU continues with aspects of modification in a limited form. By the U13 level, players should be playing the full fifteen-a-side game. The only restrictions placed on players playing at this age, and for all youth rugby, are solely concerned with health and safety issues. The only exceptions are the size of the ball, the duration of time spent playing, and encroachment of the defending scrum half at the base of the scrum. Examples of modified rules addressing health and safety issues would include eight-man scrums, which have the safeguard of a



maximum of one and a half metres 'push' and no lifting is allowed in the lineout until U15. These are all valid modifications to safeguard young performers against injury. However skills such as kicking, for example, have no restrictions to help bridge the gap from U12 (the end of the Continuum) to full adult rugby.

The removal of place-kicking within stage 1 and 2 of the continuum (tag and mini-contact) has been justified and clearly helps to promote a running game, where young players become adept at attacking gaps in the defence while they run with ball in hand. The introduction to the use of kicking in stage 3 (midi-contact) of the Continuum is also logical. Players need the opportunity to master a new skill in a controlled and modified environment. However, the current laws surrounding the transition from stage three of the Continuum to full fifteen-a-side rugby (U13, U14) demand too much of a step for the players to progress successfully in some aspects of the game; in other words, they are at a disadvantage when compared to performance in the adult game. Children progress through the rugby Continuum with very limited experience of place-kicking. Once out of the Continuum at twelve years of age, these players are then expected to deal with kicking in all its forms, thus replicating adult success. The kicker will have to adapt from converting tries underneath the posts to attempting conversions from the whole width of a pitch in line with where the try was scored. Prior to this age group, great care has been made to ensure that children understand the basic concepts so that success and enjoyment rather than failure are the norm. But this has not been systematically applied to place-kicking within the game above and beyond the Continuum. The RFU has left too wide a gap for place-kickers stepping up from stage three of the Continuum to early fifteen-a-side play.

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that the majority of younger children cannot kick conversions from certain areas of the pitch and further modification to the rules would help these players achieve a realistic chance of success. The aim of this study is to explore the success rate of different age groups at place-kicking across all areas of the pitch. The outcome is to offer a recommendation to reducing kicking complexity for young performers in the form of a 'modified kicking area'.

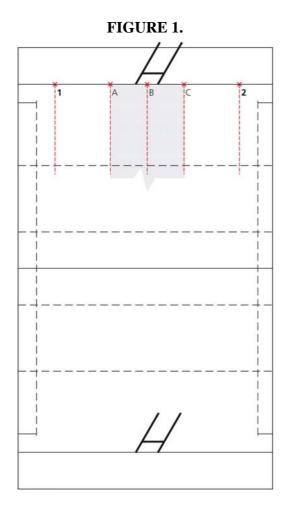
#### **Procedural Methods.**

The question being asked is - does place-kicking require further modification above and beyond the rugby Continuum? If the answer is yes, what form should it take and to whom should it apply?

To explore this idea a range of rugby players from U13 to adult (21+) status was tested. Some had place-kicking duties within their team and some did not. Ten players from each of the following age groups were tested; eight did not have any kicking responsibilities in their team while two did. The age groups included: U13, U14, U15, U18 and adult status. Subjects were numbered from 1 - 50 in chronological age order with ten players in each age group. The U13s started with 1 – 10 etc.

Each subject kicked from five set positions: 1, A, B, C and 2 as pictured in Figure 1.





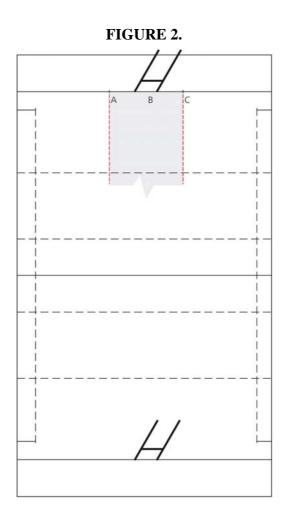
Each subject had five conversion attempts from each position, making a total of twenty five place-kicks. To standardise the tests, kicking positions were given specific locations on the try line and marked clearly with cones. Positions were fixed using the only constant variable available between pitches, the goal posts. All positions were taken from a centre point between the posts that was located by measuring the distance between the posts accurately to 0.1m and halving it.

Officials were used to adjudicate the accuracy of each conversion attempt. A successful kick was decided by the agreement of two officials; one was positioned behind the kicker, who also had the role of recording the data, while the other was behind the posts in line with the ball's trajectory. Agreement was established via a visual cue. No sudden movements or loud noises were made by either of the two officials, or indeed the fellow subjects, while each kicker was in the motion of kicking.

Rugby balls were standardised and checked before testing commenced. The appropriate ball size was also used with accordance to RFU regulations. The modified kicking area consisted of positions A - C only. By collecting data from each of the five positions, through 1 - 2, comparisons between success rates from the whole pitch and *just* the modified kicking area were made. These



findings were recorded and presented for interpretation. Position 1-2 represented the full width of the try line and so could be represented as an even spread of tries expected within the full game. The modified kicking area (position A-C) represented a much more confined area, giving an alternative to having to use the whole try line as a target. See Figure 2.





## Results (Table 1)

Age	Av. Success Position (1-2)	Av. Modified Positions (A-C)
U13	50%	84%
	33%	48%
U14	56%	94%
	32%	52%
U15	48%	80%
	36%	59%
U18	54%	77%
	47%	77%
Adult	72%	91%
	61%	90%

Average kicking success rates comparing designated kickers with non kickers.

A significant improvement in kicking success rate was seen by the introduction of a modified kicking area when looking at all subjects from every age group. There was no significant difference found when U18 kicking success was compared with that of adult kickers.

U13s, U14s and U15s also proved to be too similar in their percentage success rates when compared with each other to produce a significant difference. The results, therefore, produced a clear division between U13, U14 and U15 age groups when compared with U18 and adult kickers.

### Discussion.

The results indicate that, by introducing a modified kicking area, all kickers improved in accuracy. All fifty subjects tested showed an increased kicking success rate when confined to the modified kicking area.

When restricted to the modified kicking area, U13, U14 and U15 age groups achieved a success rate that closely resembles the unmodified kicking success rate achieved by the adult subjects tested (the results they score using the whole width of the pitch). The statistical analysis of SPSS showed that the subjects within the U18 age group were not significantly less accurate when compared to adult kickers. These results would imply that U18 players need not be subjected to a modified kicking area. The evidence collected would suggest that the cut-off point for enforcing kicking modification lies somewhere between U15 and U18 age groups.

It is worth noting that many of the younger kickers (U15 and below) had very accurate kicking techniques, but were let down by their relative lack of power; this is a factor that is simply determined by their physical maturity and, consequently, beyond their control.

An example of this would include subject eleven. This U14 subject was extremely accurate in terms of executing a smooth technique that propelled the ball in a straight line towards the target. Yet, despite his best efforts, he only achieved a 60% success rate across the whole width of the



kicking area (1-2). Within the modified kicking area, 100% success was achieved because the distance required was within his range. Subject thirty seven (U18) had a less accurate technique but achieved greater overall success simply because he was older (U18) and physically mature enough to kick the distance required from the wide positions.

The results show that there is a connection between the age of the kicker and success rate. This is true for U13, U14 and U15 age groups where designated kickers easily out-perform non-kickers of the same age. When looking closely at individuals, it was made apparent that some subjects had little or no experience of place-kicking. Non-kickers within the U13 to U15 age bracket showed a learning effect from the start to the finish of the testing. Subjects had no feedback in terms of coaching tips but still adapted the way they kicked to achieve more success. This was particularly visible within the modified kicking area, where posts were still within each subject's range.

A modified kicking area has been tested and shown to be a positive help in improving U13 to U15 kicking success. By restricting conversion attempts to three main areas on the pitch, success for these age groups rose to a point which mirrored the level of success experienced by adults using the whole pitch. The addition of a modified kicking area can be achieved with minimal changes to normal pitch markings. The suggested modified kicking area works as follows:

The pitch is divided into three channels (see Figure 2). The shaded area is exactly twenty metres in width.

- If a try is scored within the shaded area (A-B-C), then a conversion attempt is taken from the centre of the pitch, in line with position B.
- If a try is scored to the left of marker A, then a conversion attempt is taken in line with marker A.
- If a try is scored to the right of marker C, then a conversion attempt is taken in line with marker C.

By placing two small markers (A and C) on each try line, the pitch can easily be divided into three channels and a modified kicking area can be established.

The notion of restricting the kicking position and angle has been considered by the New Zealand RFU who recommend that '...kickers should practise kicks from the 22 and between the two 15 metre lines, giving a maximum range of about 30-40 yards. This builds the confidence of a kicker since, over this range, a decent kicker (professional) should hit 90%.' The argument of the NZRFU is that if a kicker can guarantee success at this range/angle, the more difficult kicks will 'fall into place'. The worst thing for a kicker to do is practise 'monsters' from the half-way - the chances are that these kicks will be missed and the kicker will start to question his/her ability.'(<a href="www.andydixon@rfu.com">www.andydixon@rfu.com</a>) By restricting younger performers to the suggested modified kicking area, these 'monster' kicks will not exist - nor will the negative feedback that is associated with them.

The introduction of a modified kicking area improves performers' kicking accuracy and it will affect designated kickers and non-kickers. The idea of using a modified kicking area in U13 to U15 rugby to improve kicking success could be taken a stage further. A radical stance would be to



restrict the number of conversions any one individual can attempt within a game. This would force more players to be included in the otherwise specialised duties of the place-kicker. Each designated kicker that was tested played within the backs of their chosen team. The statistics show that non-kickers of the same age group received approximately the same amount of success from each kicking position, irrespective of whether they played in the forwards or the backs. If players are restricted to the number of conversion attempts they can make each game, more players will be involved and encouraged to participate in place-kicking. Perhaps then, talented kickers who happen to play in the less traditional kicking positions (forwards) will be given a chance to be recognised.

By making place-kicking easier and more inclusive, the general quality of youth place-kicking must surely improve. Currently, U18 and academy players (U21) find the move into place-kicking at adult level particularly demanding. If these young adults had been exposed to progressive coaching allied to kicking success from U7 status (stage one of the rugby Continuum) all the way through to adult rugby, then perhaps the transition would appear less onerous. There would also be more potential place-kickers emerging through the system. By introducing place-kicking not only in a progressive way, but within a logical and well structured system, young performers will improve at the grassroots levels of the game. This will cause the quality of future adult kickers to improve as a result.

## Summary.

The results have produced conclusive evidence to suggest that children below the age of fifteen lack the potential to kick a successful conversion from the corner of a rugby pitch. *Not one subject within this age bracket in the study found success from set positions 1 and 2.* In today's modern professional game, the role of the place-kicker has never been so important. It is my view that youth rugby has not addressed the problem with any original thinking; rather, attention has been focused on the few who have shown a degree of early aptitude. This approach has hindered the development of not only successful place-kickers, but also the development of potential kickers who are denied the opportunity for success. There should be recognition that a modification to the rules is necessary to meet the needs of youth players, bridging the gap from the Continuum to the full game. A modified kicking area has proven to be effective in raising youth (U15 and below) kicking success rates to the same level experienced by adults in the full game.

It is clear from the evidence generated in this study that the age bracket from U13 to U15 requires modification of place-kicking. It is also clear that U18s do not require such help. What has not been highlighted is where the cut-off point occurs. A detailed look into these age groups may help answer the question. The initial modified kicking area (A-C) serves the purpose of linking those performers who have outgrown stage three of the rugby Continuum to the new kicking challenges that await them at the full fifteen-a-side game. It does not, however, offer any more help in terms of developing older children above the U15 age group. An idea that might be tried could include a modified kicking area that physically grows as the players move through the age groups. For example, the range of kicking angle available to U16s would be wider than that offered to U15s, and so on.



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### **Editor's comments:**

This article and its research took a while to compile and the RFU's approach to coaching has developed in that time, with continuing emphasis on core rugby skills in the Continuum. There would be concern at too many players practising kicking to the detriment of handling and evasion skills. That said, however, it is acknowledged that the concept of variable kicking positions, put forward in this article, for the U13-15 age group, may well be explored in a Task Group in the very near future.