

THE TOUCH JUDGE

BY

PAUL DIX.

The author played at hooker for Stroud RFC 1976-94. His playing career was ended by a facial injury and he admits to 'dabbling' in coaching for a while. He started refereeing in November 1994.

I started to referee in 1994 at local society level then soon went on to the South West Group of referees, which handles exchanges across the country. In 1999 I received the invitation to join the Panel of National Referees and I was on that till Christmas 2005, handling National Division 2 and 3 matches. During this period I got used to being a touch judge, as we had to run touch occasionally. To be able to carry out the duties of a touch judge, an examination has to be passed on Law and Foul Play Protocol.

To be honest, I had never consciously seen the touch judge route as one for me, but my appraisal at Christmas 2005 suggested to me that I might not be advancing as a referee as quickly as I wanted – if at all. We need challenges, just like players, and that is when the subject of being a specialist touch judge came up. I decided to go for it, became a specialist touch judge and have been an Elite Touch Judge since August 2005.

The first games were at National 1 level and I was generally number one touch judge who can take over if the referee is injured. Once I got to Elite Touch judge, that is my sole responsibility as the reserve referee is on the touchline at these matches. There are, of course, plenty of local matches that need a referee in this area and I help the society with as many games as I can manage. Weekend priority, though, is now touch judging at Premiership and European games.

This level of involvement has definitely given me back the buzz. My schedule is a minimum of one Premiership venue each week and there have been trips to Italy and France in the European Challenge Cup. The next stage in my development and progress, I hope, is exposure to Heineken Cup matches and that is something to look forward to.

There were some initial difficulties with the move from referee to touch judge. When you referee, you are making decisions throughout the game at roughly twenty-second intervals; concentration is not a problem. As a touch judge, you have long periods of total concentration but decisions are far more spread out than they are for a referee. It could be so easy to lose concentration then miss a big decision.

The touch judge, I feel, has a list of priorities. The first is to be vigilant in looking for foul play of any sort and there is a microphone system of communication with the referee. The second priority is to run the touch regarding ball in play or in touch (or foot in or out) and

to adjudicate on penalty kicks and conversions. The third area is assisting the referee in his management of the game.

We all have to work hard on our physical fitness and it has to be on a par with the standards set by referees. There is a triangulation test that takes place annually in August and this is a fifteen minute endurance test that, if failed, has to be passed before the start of the season. This is an aerobic test and there are also flexibility tests and sprint monitoring over ten and forty metres. I am in favour of such stringent testing, as we have to be seen to be fit as well as competent in the professional era; there is accountability.

Touch judges have to see their role as an extra pair of eyes to assist the referee and there are some main areas where we do not look at the same part of the game as the referee.

- Scrum. The referee usually watches the scrum half, props and their bind and the ball. The touch judge will look carefully at the bind on the far side from the referee, possible collapses, back row binding and offside lines from the defence.
- Lineout. The referee usually watches for not straight and across-the-line offences at shoulder level and above. The touch judge will usually step away from the mark and look at things from an angle that is different from the referee's. He will monitor across-the-line offences from the shoulder down, especially props taking out the opposition's lifters.
- Tackle. It is very rare for us to get involved as things are usually happening too quickly. We can, however, pick up important trends and can assist the referee by reporting these trends to him at a suitable opportunity.
- Ruck and maul. The referee follows the ball and generally stands on the side of the team that is likely to win possession. The touch judge will monitor the side that the referee is not standing on and this is where there are likely to be arms and legs exposed to possible foul play; offside is carefully watched at the same time.
- Restarts. We are definitely not watching the ball. Our main role is to monitor obstruction from a different angle from the referee and to look for tackles in the air.

It is difficult to give a list of areas of expertise in an order of importance. However, I feel that the following are big areas for us touch judges.

- Concentration. My first few games left me totally exhausted with concentration levels/intensity rather than the physical demands.
- Prioritising. In foul play, for example, we have to be part of a process that manages the problem. First we have to spot what goes wrong and report it to the referee, but we also have to learn from experience and be able to spot potential flashpoints before they turn into a problem.
- Management of players. When you are officiating with top players and internationals at the elite end of the game, you have to concentrate on your own professionalism. At the lower levels of the game, you can safely discuss various aspects of the game with the players. At the elite level, that has to be left to the

referee if he wishes to discuss anything. Too many messages can be dangerous so it is best left to the team leader.

- Communication with the referee. We do get guidelines on the proper use of communication and we have to be concise, accurate and emotionless - then we have to get the information in an appropriate tone to the referee at a suitable time. The right advice would probably be to say little but make sure you get it right when it matters.

There are pressures and the crowd can be a major influence if you let it get to you. We must not react to any verbal outbursts, however personal they seem to be at the time. If there is a reaction, they have won. The players themselves will subtly question the touch judge's decisions, not in an in-your-face manner, but they do try to intimidate the decision-making process. The only answer is not to respond in any way and get on with the job. Television has undoubtedly added to the pressure as every decision is scrutinized over and over – with, of course, the benefit of hindsight. Then there is the big screen in the ground, supplying plenty of ammunition to the crowd if a decision is proven to be wrong. However, these pressures just add to the enjoyment – they are part and parcel of the job.

There is a great deal of mentoring, help and coaching. We aren't just thrust into the arena on a wing and a prayer.

- Touch judges can and do help each other by tapping into each other's experience(s).
- We have Clive Leeke as the Elite Touch Judge Coach. He sees us two or three times a season (minimum) and he monitors our performance(s) and produces a written report. He also contributes to our technical back-up with such things as DVDs of case examples of current trends that are developing at the highest levels of the game (e.g. obstruction at restarts and taking out players with the rush defence).
- Senior referee management (Messrs Campsall, Morrison and High) are available for analysis/feedback from what they have heard from the referee and seen on DVD of the game(s). We can phone them at any time, knowing that we will get good information/advice.

There is a foul play protocol that we must follow at all times, even though things may *seem* haphazard because of the disorganization that often follows foul play. Once there is a foul, we must:

1. Hold the flag parallel to the ground and point it infield.
2. Communicate with the referee.
3. Take the flag down and carry on with watching play if the referee has not blown straight away, concentrating on remembering precisely what occurred so that it can be passed on to the referee when the game stops.

4. When the referee is ready to hear the report at a suitable time, we hold the flag in two hands across the groin and walk fifteen metres infield to report the incident.
5. Never touch a player.

I am sure that the advances in the skills of the touch judges will make officials better, leading to a better game. I personally try to keep on learning more by doing 'homework' on teams that I am likely to see in the season and television and newspapers are a great help. Touch judges also talk to each other all the time and there is usually not a lot that can happen that we are not prepared for.

I have thoroughly enjoyed the role that I am in now, especially the feeling of being an integral part of a team of three. My own code of conduct within that team of three is simple: do as you would have done to you. Follow that and you won't go far wrong on the touchline.



Touch Judge Paul Dix at Northampton Saints v Bath.