

RFU LAWS LABORATORY BY DICK TILLEY, DIRECTOR OF CAMBRIDGE LAWS LABORATORY.

The author is in charge of trialling potential law changes at Cambridge University. He also organises coaching courses in the East Midlands, does some coach mentoring for the RFU and was Director of Rugby at Cambridge University for ten years.

He is on the RFU laws sub-committee. They meet each August to discuss which laws are to be trialled and the trials take place until mid-November, when the committee meets again to watch a match under trial conditions. There is feedback from Dick Tilley, a review by the committee and the trial runs until the end of that season. In March a report is presented for the RFU and that is then offered to the IRB for their consideration.

The Laws Laboratory has now run for ten years and still continues to generate interest and enthusiasm among rugby people. The three criteria we have applied to any law trial to judge its value have remained constant over the ten years. They are:

- a) Is the law safe?
- b) Does the law increase the enjoyment of the game for players and spectators?
- c) Is it manageable for referees?

Despite the fundamental changes which have occurred in the game over the last ten years, these criteria remain essential in judging the effectiveness of any law trial.

Throughout the season we have used a more analytical approach by having observers and recording statistics for nearly all the games played under experimental variations. Mike Dimambro, Steve Cardy, Ian Minto and I have watched games and have been able to confirm the referees' views at the de-briefings following the games. In addition the captains of all Division One teams (Cambridge University leagues) have been consulted for their opinions of the variations.

The Laws Laboratory could not function effectively without the much appreciated and excellent support of Cambridge University & District Referees Society and the unstinting efforts of Glyn James, the Appointments Secretary.

The season started with four experimental variations being trialled. Following the visit of the RFU Laws Advisory Task Group in November, the trial law related to 'touch' was abandoned because it failed to meet two of the criteria listed above.



Law Trials at Cambridge University 2005-2006.

1. Maul

For many years coaches have maintained that there are only three ways to advance the ball down the field:

- Out-flanking the opposition.
- Penetrating the defensive line.
- Kicking the ball over or through the opposition.

The way the modern game has developed has lead to the maul being an equally effective method of making ground by easing the opposition backwards. Under the present laws there is no legal way of stopping a maul, other than by putting large numbers in it to arrest the forward motion.

At Cambridge, we trialled a law for four years which allowed the ball carrier in a maul to be taken down. This year we have additionally allowed any player in the maul to be taken down, irrespective of whether he has the ball in his possession or not. Both laws have resulted in no injuries but allowed a legal means to stop the maul. The keys to the success of this law are that players must join the maul as specified under IRB Law and can only take the opposition player down in a prescribed manner.

We stated, "The ball carrier or any team-mate in physical contact with an opponent in the maul may be taken to ground by that opponent who is caught in or bound to the maul. The opponent must grasp them beneath the shoulders and above the waist to take them to ground."

By definition the player collapsing the maul must go to ground as well as the opponent, otherwise he is not "taking" the player to ground.

This variation does provide a successful means to end a driving maul. The major concern related to the variation is one of fears for the safety of players. The second term has seen an increase in the number of genuine driving mauls which have been collapsed. Some of these mauls had a genuine momentum and would have lead to a try being scored had they not been brought down in the legally prescribed manner. Despite many people's reservations we have experienced no injuries from this aspect of play.

Referees have cautiously supported the variation. Their major difficulty is determining how the maul collapsed. They have been strict in penalising players who do not join in the permitted manner and have also strictly policed the correct tackling technique. In a collapsed maul where the ball is unplayable, the referee has awarded a turnover scrummage as prescribed in the current law. This in turn has encouraged teams to ensure the ball is available to be played when the maul goes down.

There is a real need to trial this variation at a higher level, because at the 'Community Rugby' level the law meets all the criteria of safety, enjoyment and management.



2. Lineout

Forming a Lineout

The management of the lineout is becoming very difficult as team tactics develop and an increasing number of lineout variations is added to a team's repertoire. Increasingly, players interchange positions before the ball is thrown in and the one metre gap is not retained. The throwing-in team varies the number of players they put in the line, causing confusion for the opposition *and* the referee. Different players take up the position of the receiver and then join the lineout before the ball is thrown. Referees need to be able to concentrate on the priorities of safety and fair competition at the lineout and not be distracted by all this type of movement.

We decided to eliminate one major area of concern and allow teams to put however many players they require in a lineout, irrespective of the opposition and their numbers. The experimental variation removed any limit on the maximum number of players either team can position between the 5 metre and 15 metre lines. However, a formed lineout needed a minimum of two players from each team.

This variation has been very well received by referees. It considerably simplifies the lineout for them by eliminating the need to count the number of players in the lineout and, therefore, allows them to concentrate on the more difficult areas of this aspect of the game. In addition, the referee is not forced to award free kicks for a relatively minor infringement of the laws.

The players' response has been disappointing, in that they have generally taken a pragmatic view and have usually put seven players into every lineout, i.e. two pods of three and a 'tailend Charlie'. Occasionally in attack some reduced lineouts have been used against seven defenders, leading to good possession and an advantage in numbers in the backs for the attacking team.

A very positive outcome of this variation is that the quality of support and jumping has improved considerably, leading to excellent, quick possession. This has been caused by the lack of movement of the pods, which has allowed players to be in the correct position to support and jump.

It is interesting to note that our comments on this variation compare exactly with those from Stellenbosch University, who were asked to look at this Trial Law by the IRB. Initially the law would appear to encourage full lineouts at all times but, given time to explore the possibilities, teams should still be able to use shortened lineouts to produce quality ball. We will continue with this variation next season.

3. Scrum

Scrummaging plays a major part in most rugby matches. Unfortunately, the advent of professional rugby and the increased publicity the game is now receiving has resulted in this area of the game gaining a very negative image. Serious injuries, resulting from this aspect of the game, are on the increase. Uncontested scrums are appearing with alarming regularity at all levels of the game and recruitment of front rows is an issue. The law makers will need to



make changes to the present IRB law in the near future if the game is to retain a fully competitive scrum throughout the game.

The present laws and interpretations have virtually taken away the contest for the ball in the front row. Coaches now concentrate on the engagement to gain an advantage and then on creating pressure as the back row tries to clear the ball. These concepts lead to 'big hits' and wheeling or moving scrums. All of these approaches create great pressure on the bodies of front row forwards. In turn, they can suffer instant injuries or progressive damage, leading to the need for remedial operations. The law makers have a duty of care to the players and should quickly seek ways to make the game safer.

Our variation this year concerned the engagement process and mainly involved bringing the front rows close together and giving referees an additional check point.

- First, the referee marks with a foot the place where the scrum is to be formed.
- The two front rows must bind in a standing position facing each other and apart.
- When the ball is in the scrum half's hands, ready to be thrown in, the referee will call, "Crouch and hold".
- The front rows must crouch so that their heads are level with their opponents' and each player's head and shoulders must be no lower than his hips.
- Before the front rows come together from the crouched position, they must be no more than an arm's length apart.
- Each scrum must form up independently, remain steady and not make contact with their opponents before the call of, "Engage".
- When, the front rows are in the crouched position, the referee will call, "Steady" so that the front row players can focus on the target area where their heads and shoulders will make contact with their opponents.
- The front rows come together *only* when the referee calls, "Engage". This is not a command but an indication that the front rows may come together when ready.

There is no doubt that by moving the two front rows closer before the engagement, the hit has been de-powered. Players have stated there is less pressure on their necks and backs. Fewer games have gone uncontested because players have stepped up into the front row if required. Front row players have also commented that serious scrummaging can still occur despite the de-powered hit. Another big, positive outcome is that the weaker team is not as exposed under this variation in the early stages of the scrum.

The closeness of the front rows before the engagement also ensures that a higher tunnel is created with very few collapses. Generally, scrums are over quicker and safer than under IRB Laws.

Referees initially expressed reservations about the variation. However, over the season their management technique has evolved to eliminate any negative comments. Front rows are set with their heads close (approx 15 cm apart). They must not be brought up so close that they are unable to look up and see the gap for their heads.

The "touch" aspect of the engagement sequence has been removed because if did create flareups. Another word, "steady", has been added to the sequence between "hold" and



"engage". This addition gives the referee a useful tool to retain control of the engagement and it appears to take some of the aggression out of the process.

This variation has proved popular with players and referees alike, despite initial reservations by both groups. It passes our criteria and needs to be taken onto another level.

4. Touch

The IRB asked Cambridge to look at a variation which re-defined when the ball went into touch. Their proposed definition was:

- "The ball is in touch when it has been propelled and it crosses the plane of the touchline or lands on or across the touchline. The plane of the touchline is the vertical space above the touchline.
- The ball is in touch if a player catches or plays the ball and that player has a foot on or over the touchline, even if that player's foot is in the air.
- The ball is in touch when the ball carrier, or the ball, touches the touchline or the ground beyond the touchline.
- The place where the ball carrier, or the ball, touched or crossed the touchline is where it went into touch.
- 'Kicked directly into touch' means that the ball was kicked into touch without landing on the playing area and without touching a player or the referee.
- The line-of-touch is an imaginary line on the field of play at right angles to the touchline through the place where the ball is thrown in."

This variation has not received any support from either players or referees. There have been few occasions where the variation has applied and there is no doubt that a referee would have little chance of policing this law if he is on his own or with untrained touch judges. One incident is recorded from the games where the ball may have crossed the touchline in flight but then came back into the field of play. The referee, touch judges and observers were not in agreement on what was to happen next.

Stellenbosch trialled this law and stated, "The idea behind this was to eliminate uncertainty in this regard – whether the ball is out and if it is, whose ball it is. There were no incidents of this. At first glance it would seem silly if the ball carrier is out if just a hand or arm crosses the plane of touch". We agreed with Stellenbosch on this as this variation does complicate a relatively straightforward existing law and should not be pursued.

Following the visit of the RFU Laws Advisory Task Group to Cambridge in November 2005, this variation was rejected on the grounds it was not easy to manage for referees and did not increase the enjoyment of the game for players.

Conclusion

It has been another interesting season of looking at these experimental variations. The areas of maul and lineout need to be addressed because they are key areas of the modern game and are evolving and changing every year. The laws of the game must evolve too and the two



variations we have trialled related to these areas are both positive and functional in dealing with these areas of concern.

The scrum should be a major cause for concern, considering the problems of recruitment of front row forwards, injuries and the increase in the use of uncontested scrums at all levels of the game. The IRB have instigated Law Trials in a number of countries recently but they do not include anything related to this aspect of the game. We have produced a possible solution to de-power the scrum but there is a genuine need to look at the implications of any proposed new Law at a higher level.

The RFU and IRB should examine ways to trial Law variations at the highest levels of the game, where law interpretations and attitudes vary considerably from the "Community" game. If we have a seamless game it is important to establish where the game is going and how it can be helped by rewriting parts of the Law Book.