

TIME TO ADJUST THE TACKLE – REFREE PARADIGM? BY GERAINT ASHTON-JONES.

This short paper was produced as an exercise in critical thinking to support my current research on behalf of the Royal Navy at Portsmouth University. It was a time-bounded piece of work, so not all of the arguments have been fully developed. This approach, however, supports the primary objective of the paper, which is to stimulate debate and, through debate, to gain greater understanding.

The analysis of this paper was supported by undertaking a literature review of the available documentation on both coaching the tackle and refereeing it. It also involved detailed video analysis taken from games in the 2005/06 and 2006/07 Guinness Premiership, the 2006 Super 14 competition, the 2006 SANZAR tournament and selected games refereed by the author.

The views expressed are personal views of the author alone and are not an official statement by any refereeing body.

“Tackler first and foremost, then tackled player and finally the arriving players?”

This prioritising of the tackle is a mantra that is well known to referees of all standards throughout England and many parts of the world, but is it right? Or perhaps, more importantly, is it fair? Do the three components always follow in the same order? Does it over-simplify the complexity of the tackle in the modern game and consequently undermine one of the fundamentals of rugby, the fair contest?

With such a widespread acceptance in the refereeing world of the three respective priorities at the tackle, it would be a brave, or indeed foolish, man to challenge the norm. However, I would proffer that throughout history, progress has only ever been made by such a challenge and the debate that follows. So here goes.

Before proposing an alternative view of how the tackle could be refereed, in essence an adjustment rather than a fundamental change, I feel it is important to explore the framework within which the referee should operate. Such exploration will also make explicit the assumptions made within this paper, therefore making them open for debate and challenge.

The need to referee to the Laws of the Game. The Laws of the Game were first written in June 1871 as a codification to assist teams and players, who at the time were operating to a number of variations, in the playing of rugby football. Over time, we seem to have lost that basic tenet of the Laws providing a framework rather than a set of rules that can be slavishly followed in a robotic manner. Recently a valiant attempt to redress the balance has been made by the IRB¹ with the publication of a charter for the game. This charter is reproduced in the book, *Laws of the Game of*

¹ International Rugby Board who have responsibility for the Laws of the Game worldwide

Rugby Union Football and, perhaps significantly, it is placed in front of the laws. From the Charter can be extracted two guiding principles, which override the application of Law. These are the requirement for a safe environment and the principle that the game is a balance between continuity and contest. I would therefore suggest that if any priorities were to be given to referees, they should be to assist² in the maintenance of a safe environment, to protect space for the promotion of continuity and to ensure a fair contest. These are the principles that should be brought to all aspects of the game. Furthermore they are enduring and have stood the test of history to a far greater degree than any of the written laws.

Such an approach does not ignore the Law. No, it places the Law firmly as a framework within which players and officials should approach the Game. For those who get very precious about the application of the Laws of the Game, I would suggest the following. In some areas they are physically impossible to achieve whilst in others the Game itself has, ipso facto, sanctioned their wholesale ignoring. In those areas where the Laws of the Game are followed precisely, and here I include the current officiating of the tackle, they are given added meaning, which is not in either the written law or any of the rulings that have been issued by the IRB. This includes the priorities currently in use at the tackle.

Nowhere in Law does a prescribed sequencing or prioritisation appear. By the very nature of its being a book, they are written in a sequence but that does not ascribe their prioritisation. No, this component has been added by referees and those who develop them. Such an approach has merit, particularly in the early stages of a referee's development, as it provides a framework within which to operate. However, there needs to be an acknowledgement that the framework is a simplification.

By adopting this sequencing of the refereeing of the tackle, there is an implicit assumption that the tackle is a linear progression. This approach can be disproved both scientifically and also through observation of the Game.

A scientific approach can be taken by examining the various simulation software that is now available for rugby union. This exists in both the gaming market place and the technical analysis environment. The mathematical algorithms that are used to capture and/or simulate the tackle are multi dimensional and complex, some utilising techniques from particle physics to aid the simulation³. They are certainly not linear, although, as with any complex system or event, they can be decomposed into a number of linear or sequential events, which are consequential and cascade from a given assumption set or starting point.

Fortunately though, the Game has far more subtleties than currently appear in its simulated form. If a tackle is observed from a playing aspect then it quickly becomes apparent that the tackle is part of a continuum that exists between some form of open play at its source and either a return to open play or the formation of a maul, ruck or pileup unplayable at its conclusion.

The type of tackle is dependent on a number of variables, which include the situational awareness of the players involved in the tackle, the tactical awareness of the players, the relevant physical attributes and skills of those involved, the numbers involved⁴, the state of the pitch and indeed the

² The safe environment is also the responsibility of players, coaches and administrators within the Game

³ Utilises results from collision theory which highlights the non-linear sequencing of events

⁴ video analysis shows that many supposed tackles are mauls before the 'tackle' is completed

predisposition of the referee. These variables ensure that the behaviour sequence of those participating in the tackle follow different pathways. These pathways can then be catalogued into a number of groupings, which in turn should characterise the approach taken to refereeing the tackle.

A literature review of the subject exposes a bias in favour of 'the need for continuity'. Historically there has been significant criticism against officials who are too frequent on their whistles, particularly at the tackle. The contrary argument, often espoused, is by being particularly hard at the tackle frees up the game. Both arguments are simplistic and are often based on a misunderstanding of corporate responsibility; i.e. the players have to take a responsibility for their contribution to continuity and the fairness of the contest and the referee has to take a responsibility to understand the nature of the contest in all its forms.

Teams and individual players have very differing attitudes about continuity and contest. For some the easiest way to the ultimate goal of scoring more points than your opposition is through a confrontational approach that seeks repeated contests which will eventually either cause the opposition's defence to become weakened or for the opposition to concede a penalty from which points can be scored. For others, the approach is based on attacking space and seeking continuity from avoiding direct contest. For most teams it is a hybrid of both.

To ensure the fairness of the contest at the tackle, the referee needs to remain aware of which team is on the front foot, whether there is a physical mis-match, who would benefit by the ball not moving from the tackle zone, the team in possession having done enough to secure the right to maintain possession.

To answer these questions the referee will need to take a more holistic approach to the tackle zone and weigh up the relevant contributions that each player is making in either a constructive (fair contest) or destructive (unfair contest) manner. The result of this calculation would then determine whether play continues, a scrummage awarded for an unplayable or who is penalised.

Asking a referee to referee the tackle in a more holistic way is quite a nebulous request and does not provide the framework within which the concept can be developed. Therefore, more guidance is required - but guidance that acknowledges the differing potential sequencing that is required.

At the highest levels of the game the guidance starts before the match through analysis of preferred defensive systems of the teams and tackling styles of the individuals. This is then contextualised with the likely scenarios that will occur in a game between the two teams being analysed. The referee will formulate a number of pre-conceived images of how the tackle will be contested, where the tackle will be contested and who (and what) will be the key agents in the fairness of the tackle contest. These are taken into the game as potential triggers to be acted upon if required.

Whether pre-analysis has been undertaken or not, the tackles appearing during the game are those that must be refereed. First and foremost the referee should be aware of the 'shape' of the tackle that is taking place and, just as importantly, the benefits of the next move to either team that could flow from it. This is done by not getting too close to the tackle and remaining cognisant of what is happening in the wider zone all around the tackle⁵. There is not such a stringent requirement to

⁵ Would propose to concentric circles as target views – inner circle 2-3m diameter, outer circle 7-8m diameter

focus on the ball, though it naturally remains a key (rather than *the* key) focus of attention. By taking such an approach, a number of tackles will be categorized as neutral.

A neutral tackle is one where both sides are content to allow the tackle to take its course. The attributes of this tackle are that neither side has achieved a step change in dominance so options will remain for both offence and defence. Both teams will remain composed and are content to wait until the next phase. If the neutral tackle involves few players there would be an expectation that the ball would be available quickly, even if it were subsequently played slowly. However, if, due to the dynamics of the tackle induced through the decisions made by either offence or defence, a number of players is involved before the 'tackle' goes to ground, then the continuity balance is shifted towards contest and the referee should not expect the same speed of ball presentation. At neutral tackles the referee would be looking to do nothing more than passive game management.

Though neutral tackles are statistically the most frequently occurring, they are over-shadowed in their effect on games by the determinant tackle⁶. A determinant tackle can be in favour of either the attacking or defending side. Defensive determinant tackles would lead to turnovers or force the attacking side into a retreating situation. Attacking determinant tackles would lead to overload situations of clear defensive line breaks. Determinant tackles are often preceded by one of a half-break, an over-load (isolated) situation, a poorly organised defence or a mistake. Over-load situations include the isolation of the ball carrier, the over committing of the defence at the tackle leaving a clear overlap available, limited protection of the secured ball opening the opportunity for a counter drive and also a clear physical mismatch at a tackle, which allows the tackle to be dominated by one participant.

By recognising the type of determinant tackle, the referee becomes aware of the tactical options that are available following the successful execution. It must be remembered that a successful execution would be a turnover in the case of a defence biased determinant tackle. With an understanding of the tactical options available following success, the referee can then focus on the actions that are likely to be 'unfairly' deployed to deny a successful outcome. In many determinant tackles this will be the tackler failing to meet his obligations under Law, i.e. no change from the current refereeing model. However, there will be times when the key agent will be the tackled player needing to hold on and here the priority sequence could well be: tackled player holding, support players of the tackled player undertaking side entry (attempting to remove a player over the ball), then tackler and finally side entry by the tackler's side. In this case the first two priorities focus on the ball carrying side. This type of determinant tackle occurs when the ball carrier becomes isolated from support.

The referee also needs to recognise that a neutral tackle can become a determinant tackle if a mistake is made during its execution. Similarly, a determinant tackle may switch from one team's ascendancy over the others following a mistake.

For those who like sequences, the approach to this style of refereeing would be as follows: pre-game analysis, point in time tactical awareness, tackle recognition, 'likely unfair agent' focus then referee intervention (includes the option not to intervene). All of these can be developed through a coaching environment. Tackle recognition would be based on an agreed taxonomy, which may change over time. The expected frequency of tackle types would change as the game develops. However, the key to understanding the whole and, therefore, applying the holistic approach, would

⁶ Author's terminology – a tackle occurring where one side or other (even both) can see a clear tactical advantage coming immediately after a 'success'.

be tactical awareness. This understanding has an experiential quotient, which needs to be attained whether through time spent as a player, coach or referee. Fortunately the holistic approach is scaleable, so can be developed from a limited start point which would probably show little difference from the current model for refereeing the tackle.

This alternate approach would also achieve other benefits. Firstly, by being based on the requirements of a fair contest it is naturally congruent with the concept of materiality⁷. The second notable benefit is it would lead to an appearance of simplification. This simplification would be achieved through communication that is linked to fair contest rather than the technicalities of Law, though the Law would still provide the detailed framework for players, coaches and referees. With the approach linked directly to an understanding of the Game and an awareness of 'fairness', the other key requirement of consistency can also be achieved, but achieved from within an environment that promotes and rewards game management by the referee.

I do not believe what I am suggesting is new. When undertaking the video analysis of the very top referees in the world it became evident that:

If they are following the priority-based model, they are refereeing inconsistently

Or

They are already refereeing in a holistic way with an innate appreciation of neutral and determinant tackles.

Naturally, I believe the latter to be the case and would therefore ask how much more could be achieved if the development process acknowledged the de-facto standard to which most referees aspire.

As a final thought I would concede that the approach offered is more complex for the referee, though this is mitigated by a scaleable approach to its development. However, conceptually, it is no different from refereeing the Advantage Law whereby successful application is clearly linked to understanding the Game.

⁷ Concept of materiality is founded in a belief set that a referee should not blow for an offence unless it is material to an outcome with-in a game. The concept does not attempt to define what or what is not material.

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