

Tackle 2000

Written by Don Morrison, USARRA

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We are now into the new season for the year 2000, and there have been two significant changes made to the Laws of the Game. First, there has been a total rephrasing and reformatting of the existing Laws in an effort to make the Laws easier to read and understand. Second, there are several Experimental Variations that have been adopted.

The rephrasing and reformatting of the Laws was not designed to change the intent of the Laws, but anytime you totally rephrase such a complicated document you are liable to have misinterpretations of the new phrases. It is not surprising that a few problems like this exist, but the IRB has made an excellent first edition of the Laws in plain English. The reformatting of the Laws has caused the numbering system to change. This is good for folks who haven't been through the history of prior Law changes. For instance, back in 1986 the IRB incorporated Law 19, which dealt with non-tackle situations involving players lying on the ground with or near the ball, into Law 18, which dealt with tackle situations. I loved this change because it afforded my tiny brain the opportunity to be able to quote a Law in its entirety. Law 19 said, "The requirements of this Law are now incorporated into Law 18." Even I could manage to quote eleven words. Oh well, we are now into a new millennium and Laws 18/19 have been rewritten and relabeled as Law 15. Gone is my eleven-word Law.

Life would be simple if Law 15 was merely a rephrasing of the old Laws 18/19, but such is not the case when we add the Experimental Variations for the tackle. Perhaps the most profound concept introduced by the Experimental Variations is the creation of what I shall call a "tackle zone." This zone is an area that extends one meter beyond the perimeter of the area occupied by the tackled player, the tackler(s) and the ball. The Experimental Variations define three types of players in a tackle situation: the tackled player, the tackler(s) and other players. Nothing has changed with regard to other players who are not on their feet; they must get on their feet before entering play. However, other players who are on their feet within the tackle zone must now play the ball from behind the ball and from behind the tackled player or tackler closest to the other players' goal line. Why was this restriction on other players in the tackle zone introduced?

This restriction was introduced to stop the innovative (yet previously legal) ploy of what I shall call "lingering runners." These runners weren't lazy; they were voluntarily entering the tackle area from their opponents' side of the tackle in order to spoil their opponents' ability to recycle the ball. This action, combined with the now popular spread defense, made attacking rugby very difficult. At first glance it may seem like the problem could be solved if the tackle law were changed so that there would be offside lines at each tackle. This concept was discussed at the IRB Conference on the Game in Sydney last December, and it was decided that such a law change would have the undesired effect of leading the Game into a rugby league style of play.

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The delegates at the Conference on the Game felt that the creation of a tackle zone would eliminate the negative impact of lingering runners entering a tackle from the "wrong" side. The discussion and demonstrations of the tackle zone concept were comprehensive and even included the difficulty for referees to apply such a Law. The referees at the Conference on the Game felt the change in Law was manageable. After all, referees have to worry about side joining at rucks, and the skills required to do this could be applied to the tackle zone. Of course every little bit of advice on how to do this is helpful. In this regard, USA Rugby's "Guidelines on the Application of Law" coach the referee to ensure players enter the tackle zone with their butts pointed towards their goal line.

USA Rugby has been playing under this tackle zone law for about a month now, and I have received several questions about the application of this law. I offer the questions and my answers below.

(1) *How do you manage lingering runners who do not enter the tackle zone but remain on their opponents' side of the tackle and get in the way of outlet passes from the tackle?*

The players are not infringing the tackle zone law because they are not in the tackle zone. Play on.

(2) *When is the tackle over?*

The tackle is over when the ball is further than one meter from the tackled player and the tackler(s). This can occur in a variety of ways: the tackled player can pass, place or push the ball away; or a properly positioned player on his feet can retrieve the ball and pass, kick or run with it.

(3) *Suppose a properly positioned player on his feet picks up the ball and just stands there. What happens next?*

First let me say that if this player wants to be a statue he can count on his opponents (I'll call them "pigeons") to dump all over him. Of course the pigeons must dump on the statue using the proper fly zones. On a more technical note, the ball has not left the tackle zone so the tackle is not yet over. Law 15 says this player must immediately play the ball by moving away or by passing or kicking the ball.

(4) *Can this player go to ground with the ball?*

Not voluntarily. The tackle is not over yet and Law 15 prohibits other players from leaving their feet in the tackle zone. Of course Law 15 recognizes that this player may go to ground involuntarily, such as when he is tackled or when he is pushed over by an arriving player. In this case, the player with the ball must immediately play the ball.

(5) *Can arriving players tackle this player from any direction?*

No. The initial tackle is not over yet so any one attempting to enter the tackle zone must do so from the proper side.

(6) *Suppose Red number 5 is tackled by Blue number 6. Further suppose Blue number 7 was involved in stopping Red 5's progress but he did not go to ground with Blue 6 and Red 5 when*

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the tackle was executed. We now have Blue 7 standing on his feet immediately adjacent to Red 5 and he happens to be on Red's side of the ball (i.e., he is between Red 5 and Red's goal line). Red 5 places the ball on his side of the tackle (i.e., towards his goal line). Since Blue 7 got to his position prior to the formation of the tackle zone, may he pick up the ball or must he first retire behind his teammate (Blue 6) before entering play?

Law 15 makes no distinction about other players' positions prior to the formation of the tackle zone. It merely says that anyone in the tackle zone must be properly positioned before he can play the ball. This means that Blue 7 must first retire behind Blue 6 before entering play.

- (7) *Suppose Blue 7 was properly positioned and standing immediately adjacent to Red 5 as Red 5 goes to ground in a tackle situation. May Blue 7 attempt to take the ball from Red 5's possession?*

The Experimental Variations to Law 15 have explicitly addressed this situation. Law 15.5(e) says, "If opposition players who are on their feet attempt to play the ball, the tackled player must release the ball." The tackled ball carrier has lost his options of passing, placing or pushing the ball. The philosophy here is that players on their feet have priority.

- (8) *What happens if the opposition player is attempting to gain possession of the ball but before he does so an arriving opponent drives into him?*

Assuming the arriving opponent entered the tackle zone properly, we now have a ruck. The player attempting to grasp the ball must stop his efforts. The referee can alert this player that a ruck has formed and prevent an infringement by saying, "Ruck formed. Hands off." The first word should be "ruck" because once players hear that word they should know what to do. By the way, we also have offside lines created for all players. If necessary, the referee can prevent offside infringements by saying, "back foot."

In my opinion, referees and players seem to be coping well with the Experimental Variations to the tackle law (Law 15). The creation of a tackle zone has facilitated quick recycle of the ball after a tackle. The only concern I have at this time is the problem of lingering players who are outside the tackle zone and in the way of outlet passes from the tackle.

If you have any further questions, discuss them with your local referee society or contact Don Morrison at: don-morrison@charter.net