

2014 Q & A Lyndon Bray SANZAR Referees

SANZAR

When rugby union went professional in 1996, the Australia, New Zealand and South Africa rugby boards formed SANZAR (South African, New Zealand and Australian Rugby) to administer an annual 12-team provincial (now franchise) based competition pitting domestic teams from the three nations against each other.

It was also decided to hold an annual Tri-Nations Test Series between the three countries, formalizing an All Blacks, Springboks and Wallabies annual tournament which would rival the then Five Nations (now Six Nations) and give the Southern Hemisphere an elite international championship outside of the Rugby World Cup.

Now SANZAR runs the flagship international tournaments of the Southern Hemisphere - Super Rugby (the Super 12, now Super 15) and The Rugby Championship (Argentina, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa).

SANZAR referees' camp; January 28, 2014.

SANZAR Game Management team:

Lyndon Bray game manager;

Referee selectors Mark Lawrence (SA), Andrew Cole (Australia), Paul Honiss (NZ);

Scrum guru Balie Swart;

Physical pillar Matt Blair.

Lyndon Bray says:

"We need to see real improvement in performance throughout 2014 and are challenging our referees to "own excellence in refereeing" as a theme for the 2014 season".

"Own excellence in refereeing" involves each referee's ability to create the right outcomes around:

- The tackle ball and contest;

- The set piece (especially the scrum);

- Space on the field;

- Ensuring a good equitable balance to the contest.

The referee squad built on the framework that enables the referees to make the game easy to play for the players and easy to watch for the fans.

"We have done a lot of work around 'what does the best game of Super Rugby look like?' during review workshops across our three Super Rugby territories which will allow us to further refine and develop our best performance model for refereeing in this wonderful competition," Bray concluded.

The main outcome for the 2014 competition would hinge upon greater consistency in application, especially around the tackle ball.

2013 Lyndon Bray 'Question and Answer' sessions

RugbyRefs.com September 10, 2013

The Rugby Championship (THC); September 24, 2013

SuperSport.com; September 25, 2013

Reddit.com/RugbyUnion; October 28, 2013

Some questions and answers have been edited for clarity.

Referees

Q:

Today as jobs in rugby increasingly go to ex-professional players, could you walk us through how you'd go about seeking employment as a ref, coach, or administrator as an average person?

Perhaps talk about your own experience, I'd be interested to hear about your path?

A:

I think the first thing is to determine in your own mind which type of career you wish to pursue.

Then, you need to sign up to all the ways in which you can build your knowledge base and experience in that field.

All sports now have qualification or accreditation courses that you can sign up to and learn from.

Seek out your local Union and obtain as much information as possible.

Align yourself formally with your local club or Association or Union.

The sooner you start doing things, the sooner you will start crystallizing the key steps to realizing your goal or dream.

For example, as a referee, I started as soon as I could.

I refereed as many games as they would give me (no matter what standard they were), I made sure I approached a top line referee and asked him to mentor me; I sought feedback (no matter how critical it was of me) and I got close to team coaches to try to learn more about the game.

Take the necessary steps and start to make it happen.

Q:

What does the elite referee of the future look like?

Will he/she move freely between countries/hemispheres or will he/she be primarily region based?

Will they be involved at club level?

Will they undertake AR duties too?

Will their ability to mentor up and coming referees be important?

What will be their key attributes and background (i.e. do ex-elite players make good referees or are the Glen Jacksons a rarity and not worth looking for)?

A:

An elite referee currently is going through some real evolution and we have got better at defining what a top, world class referee looks like.

To start with, we have a "Big 3" Referee Profile for selection:

- DECISION MAKING (whereby a top level referee needs to be both accurate and relevant with every decision he or she makes);

- CHANGING BEHAVIOUR (the ability of a referee to ensure timely interventions and the outcomes of eliminating trends that impact on the game); and

- EMPATHY (the referee's capability to understand the top level game, player technique, game trends, and the principles that help make a top game of rugby - quick ball at tackle, set piece platform for clean ball, space, contest).

A referee at the top level has to be able to be effective in contributing his/her part to what our "best game of rugby" looks like.

He/she is not responsible for the quality of the game, but he/she is responsible for ensuring the right standards and compliance are set and that those boundaries are maintained throughout the game.

We have to be able to ensure the players have confidence and trust to play.

We have an obligation to the spectators to ensure the game is easy to watch and understand.

A top referee has to be physically very fit and in good health every time he/she steps up to referee.

He/she needs to be emotionally intelligent and this means not only around his/her own maturity, but his/her ability to read others and respond accordingly.

He/she needs to be the consummate professional off the field: articulate, conscientious and professional.

Ex-players are still a rarity at the top level, but more countries (and SANZAR) are in talks and searches for other ex-players to join refereeing and potentially follow in Glen Jackson's footsteps.

Glen has been a raving success for us and that has opened up the door for other players to consider this option.

There is no doubt that these individuals can be fast tracked towards the top level, due to their excellent game knowledge and the intuition of their decision making.

They still have to demonstrate the other skills I have mentioned above, which Glen has in spades.

We are very hopeful that along with Rohan Hoffmann (Super Rugby referee who played professionally in Europe and played for Portugal in test rugby), that we will see more ex-players enter Super Rugby within the next 3 years.

Q:

How far off until we see a female referee at elite male events (e.g. Super Rugby)?

A:

Can a female referee achieve selection at Super Rugby level?

One thing I have learnt in professional sport and life in general, is that one should never say never!

What would stop this happening?

The two main challenges for female referees to date, would be:

Firstly the physical demands of the top game and whether they have the physical attributes across the physical pillar to handle the speed and continuity of the top game (no reason why not, but to date we have not secured a female referee who has been able to push on past first grade rugby, for example, to take on that challenge).

Secondly, a female referee needs to also develop the game knowledge and capacity to read the play so that at the faster tempos of the game they do not get caught out in their decision making.

Again, this is no different for male referees, and we have some male referees currently in Super Rugby who are still struggling to develop this skill to an acceptable level.

The challenge for everyone is to be able to bring a female referee successfully through the top domestic levels of the game, so that she can be in a position to challenge for a professional selection.

The Women's Sevens growth is certainly going to help this cause over the next 5 years.

Q:

What is our short term goal with referees?

A:

Earlier this season I sat down with Joel Jutge (IRB Referee Manager) and Donal Courtney (ERC Referee Manager), continuing our work over the last 12-15 months around strategies that are relevant across the global referee team.

We have two strategies with our Test goals, one is to have a team for RWC 2015 – “BEST TEAM RWC 2015” (right people, right place, right time) – and the other one is a more short term strategy, growth and consistency of the team.

We need to widen our base of test referees and at the same time improve the consistency of performance.

We want to get an enhanced understanding of the tackle, set piece and the space around the field.

Accuracy is crucial for our teams and referees and just as importantly to ensure there is relevance in their decision-making.

Q:

It's been widely acknowledged that there are differences in the style of officiating between the North and the South. What steps will you be taking to eliminate these differences (or perception of differences) and will you be advocating referee exchanges between the elite competitions?

A:

Joel Jutge is the current IRB Referee Manager and I work with Joel and Donal Courtney (ERC Referee Manager) on international refereeing.

We work on the strategy we use across world refereeing as well as the test refereeing team.

We have been working together now for approximately 15 months.

Our aim is simple:

-have the best "Team RWC 2015",

-in the shorter term, grow the team and grow our consistency.

One of the major work ons for our test referees is ensuring that we are all operating to the same principles for the game, understanding what "best performance" for a test referee looks like and creating the best guiding principles across the field to ensure that we can achieve greater consistency.

We work very hard on the critical defining of accuracy of decisions versus the relevance of decisions (this is the critical link between accuracy and empathy).

Our top referees have got to be accurate in today's professional game, but that accuracy has to have strong game relevance (which requires a referee to have strong game awareness, good knowledge of current player technique and best practice and awareness of current negative tactics).

We still have a long way to go, to ensure we all understand the points above, but the work is well on the way and it is very rewarding.

We have developed a culture of learning and challenge - and this alone is an uncomfortable thing to get used to for a fairly new team!

We have just under two years to get it right for RWC 2015.

In January, we have a very important "Build Up to RWC" Camp in Dubai, with the 20 odd best referees in the world.

Q:

How are referee reviews done and are any financial penalties applied for obvious errors whereby they did not use technology available or made wrong calls which cost a team the game?

A:

The referee related review of a game is quite extensive.

We have a "Performance Management Team" at test and Super Rugby levels of the game, who are responsible for performing reviews of games.

We have one individual watch a game and work through the whole match, looking for "Errors" and "Non Decisions", as well as "Comments" that reflect very good decisions and questions around actions taken by the referee.

We build what is known as a "Playlist" (vision of all those moments in the game).

We create a set of statistics based on:

- a) Game outcomes (quick ball percentage, scrum outcomes, etc.);
- b) Number of errors and nondecisions made by the referee;
- c) The percentage of correct PK decisions and the percentage of correct scrum decisions.

The referee then views all of that data, and completes a Self Review, considering his "decision-making", how he "changed player behavior" and how he interacted with the game ("empathy" for the players' intent and approach - known as Game Awareness).

We then critique his Self Review, agreeing with the referee what his major areas of improvement are from that review, and agree on the number of errors he made.

What we are looking for is a really strong sense of self awareness from the referee, honesty in accepting what he did not do so well, and an acceptance of what he does do well.

From all of that, we then consider separately, the question of selection - how well is each referee performing against the rest of the team?

Where is his performance at in terms of the competition?

Is his error rate or level of significant incidents sufficiently high to mean we need to take immediate action around his appointments?

This is a very comprehensive process and the aim ultimately is to help improve each referee's performance levels.

Q:

What is the standard evaluation process for a referees performance after a game?

A:

The review process starts with the referee nominating a concise game plan, based around the four main principles I listed above. We have a "reviewer" (normally one of our selectors) who then completes a summary review of the game, including what is called a "Playlist" - a list of clips that the referee interacts with, based on potential errors, non-decisions and comments around the referee performance.

The referee assesses his own performance and completes a self review, interacting with the clips and the "reviewer" signs off the process with final comments.

We explore three key areas around the performance:

- DECISION MAKING (accuracy and relevance)
- CHANGE OF BEHAVIOUR (did the referee manage negative trends out of the game, did he deliver relevant yellow or red cards, etc.)
- EMPATHY (feel for the game, game awareness, credibility)

The review then makes up part of the ongoing discussion around that referee's appointments and selection.

Q:

What was your most interesting/embarrassing moment as a referee?

A:

As a very young referee (perhaps slightly shy of 25) I was appointed to referee North Harbour against New South Wales (1992).

This game was part of what was then known as the "Super 6" (for those with a long memory!).

This game was the first ever match in New Zealand (and possibly the world, for all I know) that had the referee "wired up for sound" onto the Broadcast and to the commentators.

The great, legendary Keith Quinn was the main commentator for the match.

I was both young and green at such a level, and remember being in total awe of turning up and meeting the likes of Phil Kearns and Frank Bunce.

To say that I was out of my depth would be a major understatement.

The game was a tough, uncompromising affair - a late PK to NSW saw them limp ahead and hold onto the win by something like 18-16.

I have to admit to running around catching up with the game for the entire 80 minutes - reactive and never in control! With 15 minutes to go, I ran to the front of the line out, stood at the front watching the players line up and sensed an individual player arrive on my right shoulder.

It was the great Phil Kearns.

He turned to me and said: "you are not here today, Lyndon, are you?"

With a flash of honesty and immaturity, I looked at Phil with eyes which suggested I would like to be anywhere but in this spot at that precise second, and said in a very high pitched, stressed voice: "no!"

And of course, that response went out over national television.

The life of a referee is never easy!

Game Management

Q:

If there was one major focus for referees coming into TRC, what was it?

A:

Consistency, consistency and consistency!

Q:

The Game Measures are a general agreement from referees, coaches and teams to decide key points to work on during the rugby season, what have been in place during TRC?

A:

The key Game Measures that we focus on haven't changed dramatically.

We aim to have more than 70% of ball available within three seconds, the same percentage of scrums being completed first hit, target a high number of minutes to keep the ball in play (around 35-40), while policing offside at the ruck and turnovers at the tackle.

An important aspect is to ensure a lot of what we see at Super Rugby translates to Test rugby.

It is very important to get this alignment, as we look to get the same measures game-to-game – irrespective of the level of competition.

If that means we need to consider a small shift in some areas of the game, then we have to be prepared to do that so that test players and referees are entering into the same environment, the same playing field as Super Rugby.

The new scrum Laws means that this is new to TRC and we have not had enough 'data' yet to truly judge the outcomes.

Q:

The dialogue between referees and coaches is greater than ever before, what is emerging as this season's great positive?

A:

What we are really trying to work towards by having such open communication is transparency.

That is our key objective, the more up front we are with the coaches, the more accepting they are of what we are trying to achieve.

As a consequence, they are more forgiving of mistakes if the intention is correct, it helps as we can be honest and direct.

This in turn opens up the information back to the referee so the coaches can feed back to us what they think isn't good enough.

Sometimes coaches and players don't think passing on their observations will help, but getting their feedback is crucial as it benefits their teams in the long term and it helps the outcome of the game.

My measure is to track how often I get feedback.

As the years have progressed, I have received more calls and information - which means the coaches are working with us to create what we are trying to achieve.

We are still trying to be consistent; we aren't where we want to be yet.

We have a young team, but most of the coaches know where we are at.

Dialogue is healthy and it helps us work out where we need to get better.

Q:

What is the plan moving forward to reduce the number of almost basic errors that referees are making?

A:

What have we done to try to improve overall accuracy of decision-making?

We have worked on a "team first" culture amongst our referees.

Why is this important?

First we are trying to ensure that our refereeing team approach is aligned formally to "what the game needs" - if we do not deliver to the needs of the game, we miss the boat and will be disconnected from the coaches, players and fans.

Second we need to be ACCOUNTABLE to our performance to the game.

Accountability is twofold:

One, to be accountable for poor performance and face potential selection implications as a referee, if I make mistakes;

Secondly, to be accountable to the agreements that we make regarding "best performance" and what that looks like (for example, delivering quick ball at tackle, space on the field, set piece platform and compliance, etc.).

It is not acceptable to us, for example, if a referee was to deliberately ignore agreements that we have made, that help create the right standards and boundaries for players on the field.

Q:

What do you make of the perception that certain captains (e.g. Richie McCaw) are better at influencing the referee than others?

Who is the captain you most enjoyed working with?

A:

In any sport, the captain has a key role to play.

Obviously he is there to ensure that his own team plays to their game plan and to help ensure his team adapts on the field when things do not go according to plan.

He is also often a player who "leads from the front" (especially in rugby).

I think the best captains over time have also had the capability to look above the team and see what is happening within the game itself, and build an influence with the referee to try to ensure that what is important to his team are recognized by the referee.

Not all of this "influencing" is about "conning the referee"!

It is as much about ensuring the referee is setting the right standards at a phase that is critical to that team.

For example, you would reasonably expect the Bulls captain to ensure that the referee "keeps the defenders honest" at maul time, as this would be a critical area for the Bulls attack.

Equally, the Crusaders would want to ensure that the referee is "allowing a contest on the ball" at the tackle, as they are expert at winning turnover ball.

I personally really enjoyed working with John Smidt (Sharks and SA) and Jean de Villiers (Stormers and SA).

Both were very positive in their approach, but also challenging in the right way.

They had a presence as a captain.

Likewise, Richie McCaw, Xavier Rush and Jono Gibbes (in his latter part of his career) were very strong as individuals and at building rapport with you.

Q:

Penalty counts at defensive breakdowns and in the red zone?

Awareness of game, team and player trends in a match?

A:

We certainly want to ensure referees are aware of game and team/player trends, but at the same time, they have to be careful that they do not enter into "preconceived ideas", to the extent that they can be accused of "playing God" if they take action before a trend occurs in a game.

Some referees are definitely better at getting to a warning stage earlier in games than others - this is one area (we call it "changing behavior") that separates the best referees from the average ones.

Q:

What referees do at half time?

A:

The referee team (Assistant Referees and the referee himself) have a process they work through at half time, considering 4 key principles: quick ball at the tackle, set piece compliance, space on the field and the balance of the contest.

Some referees use the TMO to maintain some simple stats that they grab from the TMO at half time.

Others will use their referee coach to dial in at half time and provide the "key points" from the first half.

At this stage, that feedback is all "in house", and does not include specific team feedback.

The teams have a natural avenue which I think in our sport works really well at professional level - the captain.

Coaches use their own communications to keep the captain briefed on any 'concerns' that the captain then works out how to discuss with the referee.

Q:

Being from the NH it always amazes me the difference in style of club rugby between the NH and SH.

What systems are in place to ensure consistency between refereeing at both club and international level between the NH and SH?

As The SANZAR club competition looks to expand further, what do you see in store?

A:

Like any sport, rugby has tactical approaches available to coaches and teams that can differ in application. What we have worked on during the last 18 months is a standard "best performance" model for our referees, regardless of who they may be refereeing.

There are essentially four main principles associated with this model:

- SPACE on the field
- CONTEST (balance of approach at each phase/between the teams)
- TACKLE and ensuring availability of quick ball
- SET PIECE compliance: ensuring standards scrum calls and application and good management of the line out to maul phase.

If we can continue to improve our alignment in how we deliver these areas of our game, then we will successfully break down the perception of "different refereeing styles".

Q:

What is the biggest difference that you see between amateur referees and those at the highest level?

Put another way, what is something(s) that a mid-level ref can focus on to make the greatest improvement (be it technique or aspect of the game)?

A:

The single most important tool I use from a selection perspective perhaps best answers this question.

I see a big difference in the "time and space" that a referee has as he works within a match.

When I watch the best at what they do, they always seem to have time when they are operating in real time and they create great space, irrespective of the pace and frenetic action of the game.

I have watched Craig Joubert grow as a top, world class referee and this is something he has really developed over his career.

He always seems to glide around the field and does not look like he needs to work at 100%.

If I can use another analogy - when you watch a world class batsman, he seems to be able to deal with the fastest bowlers as though they are bowling at a pedestrian pace!

If you can relate to feeling as though you are often stretched for time on the field (physically and mentally), consider these questions: how easily do you read the play?

For example, when a ruck forms, do you easily read that the ball is going right or left?

Can you improve your fitness levels to complement your anticipation?

How well do you move over the first 5m?

Do you have relevant, effective triggers or cues for establishing what you watch at the tackle, scrum, line out, when the ball is kicked etc.?

Q:

Refereeing is often the first thing people criticize, before their own players.

As somebody who knows more on refereeing than anybody else here and has experienced this pressure, do you think people nowadays are more sensitive about referees or that something should be done to improve refereeing decisions?

A:

One of the challenges in the modern world is that people seem to be searching for "certainty" in the short term, to a higher and higher expectation.

People demand perfection or the pursuit of perfection, in an imperfect world.

Rugby is a complex sport - perhaps one of the most complex that also has physical contact.

It is not an exact science (look at how players effect tackles under time pressure and you can see how easy it is to get it wrong).

Referees are only human and they can only deal with what they see in real time.

This opens them up for criticism, especially with the high level of technology that is now used in sport and in the broadcasting of a match.

Rugby is best when it is played with fluidity and we see a game that seems to have high continuity.

The referee has to balance accurate decision-making with relevant decision-making.

We try to implement the use of technology that helps get the right decision, but at the same time, does not encroach too much on the flow of the game.

It is a balancing act.

We will never deliver absolute perfection in decision-making, but we do work extremely hard from year to year to find ways to improve consistency in delivery and to try to ensure that the game is played to its best potential.

Q:

What was the hardest part of the game to officiate for you and how did you overcome it?

A:

The hardest aspects for me - coming through into professional rugby - was dealing with foul play and player management moments e.g. calling out a captain and giving his team or a player a warning.

I was a young referee when I first broke through into "first class" rugby in New Zealand and as a young guy, I was not good at handling confrontation.

This would mean that I tended to justify not talking to a captain and not giving warnings and would therefore act too late in games.

This of course actually only made it worse for me and the players!

I recognized that if I did not overcome this, I would never make it to Test level.

I opened myself up and agreed to work through a quite confronting "behavioral profile" workshop and during this workshop I learnt a lot about how I responded in difficult situations and why I "backed out" of confrontational type scenarios.

I worked out strategies to become more assertive in such situations, but not to become aggressive (which is easy to do).

I developed really good, robust strategies for on the field, dealing with captains and also dealing with mistakes I made.

I became much more assertive and comfortable in putting myself in potentially confrontational moments.

I feel that today, as a Leader/Manager, I am far more successful in my role, thanks to being prepared to open up to that issue and doing something about it.

Q:

1) My father is a referee and will often talk about using cards as a very last resort, and that referees who use the cards often aren't good at controlling the game.

What's your opinion on card happy referees i.e. Poite in the NZ/SA game @ Eden Park?

And also what is your standing with regard to use of cards, especially in the defending 22?

2) Do you think that the current interpretation of a 'deliberate knockdown' has been abused a bit much with penalties and yellow cards?

I have seen far too many legitimate attempts at interceptions get penalized and even carded when they very nearly caught the ball and intercepted.

A:

1) I believe in the current professional era, yellow cards are an important part of the deterrent to try to stop teams from becoming overly negative in their defensive patterns (especially under pressure).

Teams are so well coached defensively now, there needs to be some real change of behavior from players when the referee demands it of them - otherwise the yellow card needs to be given.

Of course, it is equally important that we as referees do not overreact and it is critical that we issue yellow cards when it is clearly merited.

The reality is that when a referee issues a yellow card in Super Rugby, there is a strong chance that the non-offending team will score a try during the 10 minutes that player is off the field.

2) We often debate this point as referees!

When a player uses one hand to have a "flick" at the ball and there is absolutely no chance that he is ever going to catch the ball (and he knocks it forward), I am happily of the opinion that the player deserves whatever he gets when he is doing so to stop the ball from getting to an opponent who is unmarked outside him.

The tactic is too easy to use, to break down a back line move, for us to get soft on the penalty.

It is important that the referee recognizes that the player could not catch the ball and therefore the action was deliberate i.e. he never was in a position to intercept the ball legally.

Definitions**Q:**

Played and Touched.

Definitions describe played as "The ball is played when it is touched by a player".

The definition does not make it clear if the contact needs to be intentional or not.

As "touched" is not defined in law, it is not clear if the difference between "played" and "touched" is intention.

In the Laws of the Game "played", "touched" and "played or touched/touches" is used several times.

We assume that there must be a difference because of the laws stating "played or touched/touches".

If "played" were defined for intentional contact and "touched" for unintentional contact, it would be possible to introduce consistent use of terminology and application throughout the laws.

A:

Touched versus played; the Definitions provide a clear definition of the ball having been played.

A ball is played if it has been touched by a player.

This removes any requirement for the referee to read "intent" regarding these issues.

The only exception around intent is obviously around the "deliberate knock-on" which becomes a PK and foul play issue.

Law 7 Mode of Play**Q:**

Kicking, despite its value to the modern game, is often derided by fans, how significant is the boot to ball this season so far?

A:

First and foremost we all know that defense in the modern game is a major factor.

In terms of how long they spend on defense, it is taking up more time at training, so it is more pivotal to a team's success than ever before.

Great defense includes the capacity to turn the ball over and score from turnovers, and as a consequence it can become very difficult to simply score tries from ball in hand.

In the modern game teams score quickly off set piece, generally you find within two to three phases of the set piece, or scoring comes off a turnover, when the team who then cough up possession is backtracking or disorganized.

When teams do not have quick ball, or good attacking options (e.g., defense is organized and in place), the attacking team needs to use ways, like kicking, to find space.

That is where the kick is crucial; it is very relevant in the modern game.

There are two aspects worth considering, for when teams kick these days:

Kick for the contest - that is to kick for space and create pressure on the opposition.

Second, kick to put pressure on the opposition - that is to get out of your own defensive area (territory) or create uncertainty in the mind of the opposition, as to what to do with the fielding of the kick.

Kicking is used quite tactically, and a lot of people may underestimate the value of it to improve field position and increase chances on attack.

Law 12 Knock-on or Throw Forward

Q:

Law 12 definition: Knock-on.

“A knock-on occurs when a player loses possession of the ball and it goes forward, or when a player hits the ball forward with the hand or arm, or when the ball hits the hand or arm and goes forward, and the ball touches the ground or another player before the original player can catch it.

‘Forward’ means towards the opposing team’s dead ball line.”

a) If a player does a drop kick, it is accepted that the ball touching the ground is not a knock-on, even if it travels forward and even though it would be classed as a knock-on should the player then not kick the ball?

b) If a player punts the ball forward, the ball will generally have been released forward before the kick takes place. This is not to be classed as a knock-on even though it would be classed as a knock-on should the player then miss the kick?

Considering the above please clarify the following scenarios where a player accidentally loses control of the ball, the ball travels forward and the player manages to kick the ball forward with their foot:

a) Deliberately before the ball touches the ground or any other player, is this a knock-on?

b) Accidentally before the ball touches the ground or any other player, is this a knock on?

A:

a) If a player accidentally loses control of the ball, and the ball travels forward, but the player manages to kick the ball forward with their foot deliberately before the ball touches the ground or any other player, is this a knock on?

YES it is a knock on.

b) If a player accidentally loses control of the ball, and the ball travels forward, but the player manages to kick the ball forward with their foot accidentally before the ball touches the ground or any other player, is this a knock on?

YES it is a knock on.

Law 13 Kick-off and Restart Kicks

Q:

Law 13 carefully distinguishes kick-offs and restart kicks, but then forgets about the latter except in Law 13.2 and in relation to drop-outs.

In practice referees assume the provisions of Law 13 apply to both but there is one problematic case: Law 13.4 for a restart kick - does the kicking side have to wait for their opponents to get into position?

Law 6.A.7 (a) “The referee must carry a whistle and blow the whistle to indicate the beginning and end of each half of the match.”

It is well understood that for restart kicks the referee will say "In your own time, gentlemen".

A team that has just gone a point behind with only a few minutes remaining will be keen to restart as quickly as possible.

The opponents cannot deliberately waste time, but why should the kicking team wait for them to jog back?

A:

This law is probably a good example of where the over simplification of the writing of the law could be considered too simple?

It is generally accepted in rugby that when a team scores and a restart from the halfway line is imminent, the referee ensures that such a restart is going to be orderly - this means that the kicking team is ready and onside, and that the receiving team is 10m back.

Where a player or players from the receiving team are unfairly wasting time retiring to such a position, the referee has available the Law 10.2.b, whereby a free kick can be awarded if player(s) deliberately waste time.

Of course, a drop out restart is totally different, whereby the defending team awarded a drop out can take it quickly.

Law 14 Ball on the Ground-No Tackle

Q:

In the Law 14 Definitions is the sentence (third paragraph, first sentence) "The Game is to be played by players who are on their feet."

However the previous sentence (second paragraph) is "It also occurs when a player is on the ground in possession of the ball and has not been tackled."

Some people interpret this as allowing a player to play the ball when he is already on the ground and the ball subsequently comes to him.

Others argue that Law 14 only permits two exceptions to the general principle:

- 1) A player who falls on a loose ball to recover possession;
- 2) A player who falls over when in possession of the ball e.g. tap tackled or merely slipped.

Which is correct?

A:

I think the law is quite clear in this case.

There are two instances whereby a player can legitimately be on the ground with the ball in his possession:

- a player is already carrying the ball and goes to ground (tackled or falls over), or
- a player dives onto the ball which is on the ground, in order to gain possession.

It is clear to me that if a player is already on the ground he cannot then "play the ball" without first getting to his feet.

Law 15 Tackle/Law 16 Ruck

Q:

If you had the power to change one rugby law what would it be and why?

A:

The Law which I would focus on next is the tackle and ruck Laws in symmetry.

I would be wanting to try to ensure we worked to a principle of "same law for all players" wherever possible (for example, why should the tackler have different rights to all other players arriving at the tackle - including the tackler assist).

These variations make the tackle law confusing for players, spectators and referees alike.

I would get all the Tier One Head Coaches, some top referees and some top players in a room and workshop how we can enhance the tackle and ruck laws to meet with our mantra: "that the game is easy to play, referee and understand." I would seek to clarify the way in which the game has evolved at these phases of the game and change the law to suit the way in which it has evolved.

This law covers more events than all the other laws put together!

We need to ensure that the players and referees can play the tackle and ruck laws with confidence and clarity and that as a result it becomes easier and more logical for spectators to watch and understand.

The speed with which we now have a player on his feet, over the ball carrier, has put real pressure on the ball carrier and pressure on the effectiveness of the clean out by the ball carrying team.

It also puts the referee under pressure to determine how legal the defender is (i.e., is he on his feet/has he beaten the ruck?).

The big question for the theoretical workshop is:

Is the Law keeping up with the playing of the game in this critical area?

Q:

Super Rugby 2013 (especially in the latter half of the season) we have seen a tendency for referees to rule that the ball is "out" of a ruck when the halfback has a hand or hands on the ball.

Not only has this led to some messy play around the ruck area with defending players diving on the ball in the back of the ruck as the scrumhalf (#9) puts their hands on the ball, it also directly conflicts with what we are taught at grass roots, that the ball is out when it is "out" i.e. lifted off the ground or clear of the hindmost foot.

In my opinion this action of players diving on the ball could be construed as being an infringement of Law 16.4 (e) (a player must not fall on or over the ball as it is coming out of a ruck).

Has there been a directive concerning when the ball is to be regarded as out, and if so why is it different from what referees are taught at grass roots?

If there has not been a directive, then why are elite referees ruling it this way?

A:

Law 16.6 regarding a successful end to a ruck simply states, "A ruck ends successfully when the ball leaves the ruck..."

So it is a very open ended question to ask "when do you consider the ball has successfully left the ruck?"

We debated this very point a couple of times during Super Rugby 2013 and will do so again in the build up to the 2014 competition.

For me, there are two key points to this discussion:

- The definition of the ball having successfully "left the ruck" and does this include the #9 putting his hands on the ball?

- the timing of when a defending player can break his offside line and compete with the player at the back of the ruck and when can he do so by leaving his feet?

Firstly, I believe the ball needs to exit the ruck past the last foot before it is deemed that the ruck is over.

The only practical issue then relates to a #9 who puts their hands on the ball and leaves them there, on the ball, without moving the ball on.

We rule that in practice, once this occurs and he has not immediately cleared the ball, he becomes "fair game" to a player who comes from an onside position and is on his feet.

Secondly, I am a firm believer that Clarification 8 (2006) (a ruling regarding Law 16 Ruck) stipulates quite clearly that a player cannot "dive through over players and onto the ball, nor can he hit the arm of the #9 lifting the ball."

This defender must in essence come from an onside position and compete with that player (which can include hitting his arm).

The only time it becomes relevant to dive at the player removing the ball is once it has been lifted away from the confines of the ruck.

This is a really important area for consistency that we will be debating at our next Super Rugby Camp in January 2014.

The biggest reason this is such an important area of the ruck phase at Super Rugby level (and professional rugby generally), is that the vast majority of rucks at this level are both very shallow (often only involving a minimum of players) and have started and ended very quickly.

This makes the interpretation of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable around the clearance of the ball more important.

Q:

Quick ball at the tackle is a priority for SANZAR, with the 'use it' five second rule crucial, how is this element tracking so far?

A:

I think it is a fantastic rule to get the ball out, a really good initiative.

What is really good about it is that if anything the referee is saying 'use it' less and less since the law came in, proving it is evolving as part of the game.

Teams understand this and it is becoming rooted in their behavior - so the referee isn't needed to police it as much.

It is a rule that suits our game vision really well.

To beat defenses you need quick ball to attack while the defense is still slightly disorganized and the new rule suits us as it works in tandem with getting players off their feet away from the tackle area.

Q:
Many teams like to creep forward at the ruck, are referees still policing this as strictly?

A:
It is an area we have always felt we could get better at.
There has been a little change that we have identified that infringing player, either side of the ruck, are being successfully pushed back, suggesting their behavior is becoming more compliant.
The exception to this where a ruck is cleaned out by a team in possession in a collapsed ruck scenario, as a consequence we have to push back to the last feet on the ground – adjusting the off side line.
When players are on their feet, it can be very shallow between the ruck and halfback, meaning defending players can attack the nine more easily.
We used to have a deeper ruck which afforded the nine better protection, but in the modern game, outside of the “pillars” who stand either side of the ruck, we need to be aware that at times we allow the backline defense to be too flat.
I’ve been an advocate of a one meter offside line at the ruck, if all you need is one foot a meter back from the ruck - that would get all the players back off the last foot of the ruck.
We have to keep being vigilant as teams will always try their luck in this area.

Q:
In your own option and experience what is the toughest part of "reffing" a game?
Is there any specific law you would like to see changed/alterd at the moment which would make the game "quicker".

A:
For me, the single most important area of the game is the tackle and ruck.
This is simply for two reasons; the game is made up of literally hundreds of tackles and rucks, and it is a dynamic phase of the game (scrums, line outs and mauls are far more set or structured phases allowing the referee to 'manage' the set up and process).
Getting your own consistency of approach at the tackle is the hardest area to perfect.
In today's game it is made harder by the fact that we are generally dealing with a ball carrier, a tackler and a "man on feet" from the defending team, getting on the ball almost immediately the ball carrier has hit the ground.
I would look to simplify the Laws between the tackle itself and the ruck - try where possible to make the Law the "same for all".
For example, I would love to see us revoke the "tackler" Law which allows the tackler to stand up 'on the wrong side of the tackle' and immediately contest for the ball.
Everyone else has to come "from his own side of the tackle" (known as entering 'through the gate').
This is an example of two different Laws for different players.
Our aim is to help make the game "easy to play, referee and watch (understand)".
The more we can do to simplify the playing, refereeing and watching of the tackle and ruck, the better for the game!

Q:
Some teams have spoiling the ball down to an art form on their blatant infringements at the breakdown.
Teams are also much more willing to give away three points in their own 22 through breakdown penalties, than taking a chance on defending their goal line and possibly conceding seven.
Does Sanzar at all see this as a problem, do you foresee any steps being taken to clamp down on malicious ball spoiling, especially in your own 22?

A:
One of the discussion points from 2013 is exactly the issue you have raised.
The coaches have certainly given us a clear steer that as a referee team, we need to get stronger on the "red zone" infringing and be prepared to take quicker and strong action against teams that enter into this sort of infringing.
The Laws allow us to take perfectly good action - we just have to agree as a team of referees what we are prepared to collectively do, then communicate to the teams before the start of the 2014 competition and then deliver it on the field!

Q:

My question is regarding the "going off the feet when cleaning out" law.

Has the rule changed in the last couple of years or is it just one of those things that referees are more lenient on (e.g. as it was with putting the ball in straight into the scrum, before this season)?

For me it seems that in every game there is multiple cleanouts with the player cleaning out going directly off his feet. This makes it even more difficult for scavengers to compete for the ball on the ground, considering that the law changes over the last couple of years have already made it more difficult for them to contest the ball.

A:

Firstly, what we need to be aware of is the pace at which the game is played at the professional levels of the game.

Secondly, we need to consider the typical tackle picture that we now see in the game.

Normally, we have a ball carrier and a tackler, plus potentially a second tackler, who stays on his feet as the ball carrier is brought to the ground (this player is known as a tackler assist).

Or, we have a ball carrier and a tackler with a man on his feet waiting to get over the ball carrier on the ground.

The referee, at high tempo action, needs to identify the difference in this picture!

This picture puts real pressure on the ball carrier's team, who need to support the player on the ground very quickly.

The temptation is to "seal over" the ball carrier on the ground, without actually cleaning out a player first.

Again, the referee needs to identify whether a player who supports the ball carrier actually first contacts a defender and "cleans out".

If he does, and they then fall over past the ball, we deem that as okay.

If he slips under a defender who is on his feet, and seals off over the ball, he should always be penalized for this action.

This is one of the techniques that we have identified in reviewing Super Rugby that we did not consistently handle well.

Q:

What are the rules of the tackle area?

The ruck seems to have disappeared, no pro teams stay on their feet, has the ruck been given up on?

A:

The ruck has not disappeared out of the game and it remains a critical aspect of professional rugby.

The game at the top level is applied at an incredibly fast speed around the ball and tackle area has evolved so quickly.

The main challenge now for the attacking team versus defending team, is the quality of the contest for the ball (defender on his feet, getting his hands on the ball), versus the quality of the "clean out" (the attacking support players binding onto the defender who is on his feet and trying to drive him off the ball).

This last action is the moment when a ruck is formed.

The issue for the attacking team is that if the defender gets onto the ball before they form onto him, he does not have to let the ball go - hence the clean out has to be very effective.

If he "survives the clean out", he will either successfully take the ball with him (turnover) or he will most likely win the penalty (for the ball carrier holding onto the ball).

At the top level, this happens so fast and the referee has to make a good, relevant decision.

The issues are: if the attacking team is "late" they tend to go off their feet early, to try to get under the defender - which is illegal.

Sometimes defenders try to have a "crack at the ball" after a clean out or ruck has happened, thus they become illegal. It is a really dynamic and fast-paced phase at the top level.

If done right, the referee can be taken out of the equation (for large parts of the last SA v NZ match, the players were so effective and positive at these phases, that the referee could sit back and be a non-issue for the game, at that phase).

Here you go:

- Tackle;
- Ruck.

With players getting more and more stable on their feet, lower to the ground, you need to look at intent when looking at rucks with not many people on their feet.

If the team mate of the ball carrier goes into a ruck low to the ground and goes off his feet, but successfully cleans out an opposition player, then he has been positive and should be allowed to do so.

However if he just dives over the ruck creating a mess and is not at all "positive" then he is liable to be penalized. It's a tough one, and it's one I sometimes struggle with, however when you start judging intent then it becomes easier.

Law 19 Touch and Lineout

Q:

Law 19 is riddled with uncertainty when a player is in the air.

“If a player jumps and catches the ball, both feet must land in the playing area, otherwise the ball is in touch or touch-in-goal.”

1) Red kicks from outside his 22.

Green catches the ball before it crosses the plane of touch, but lands with a foot in touch.

Who put the ball in touch, Red or Green?

2) A player in touch leaps to catch a kick and lands in the field of play.

Is the ball in touch because he was in touch to start with?

Does it matter whether the ball had crossed the plane of touch before he caught it?

3) A player leaps from the field of play and taps the ball back into play after it has crossed the plane of touch.

He lands in touch.

Is the ball in touch or not?

My rule of thumb is to treat a player in the air as though he was on the ground directly underneath him, though I know there has been an argument that what should count is where he lands.

A:

1)-Green took it out, as the ball and player was not over the plane of the touch line, when he first took possession.

2)-According to current law: no.

Play on. (Needs changing!)

3)-no, play on.

The key in the current law is whether he is "in touch", which requires him to have a foot on the ground.

Law 20 Scrum

Q:

Last season aimed to ensure over 70% of scrums were completed after engagement, has the new Crouch, Bind, Set scrum sequence enhanced this?

A:

At this point the results are similar.

I think the real positive is from the engagement sequence and how well the two front rows are coming together, into the engagement.

The coaches have a real positive vibe after the first few weeks from the actual sequence, and teams are adjusting and responding accordingly.

It is interesting to note since the change to ‘bind and set’ that the chance of teams ‘beating the hit’ has almost completely disappeared, which was a negative factor for early scrum engagements.

The new calls have shown there is little value in winning the early hit on the call.

It has taken out the race to force that early hit.

With the new laws, once the team’s engage, they have to then present a steady platform.

In the old days, we had an aspect called ‘hit and chase’, where teams tried to out push each other - immediately trying to get momentum.

Now they cannot do that and that has been a major win for us.

There has definitely been a settling period.

The last weekend of TRC saw us all go backwards a little on this point, so the next two weekends it is important we win back that stability post the engagement.

But the All Blacks v Argentina Test in the first half showed what we can do – with just one reset scrum and one scrum penalty - with a very good engagement, contest and cooperation between referees and packs.

It is about the contest and teams being able to exert pressure on each other.

We don't want to lose that, but at the same time it has to be both legal and effective to still having scrums completed, and ensure that teams can still launch attacks off scrums.

Q:

The three stage call for the scrum, is it producing the numbers that suggest it is working?

A:

The two key areas is that there is now almost no early engagement, the process from forming the scrum to engaging is very rarely requiring teams to break up and reset.

Scrums are setting well, simply because there isn't the same urgency to dominate the hit, and as they aren't rushing, ironically teams are setting themselves with more precision.

We are not quite where we want to be with the contest, as we are still getting penalties and free around the contest of the scrum, especially as teams fight to secure their own possession.

We are starting to see some better contests simply because we are getting better first engagement.

But so much still relies on the positivity of the players at scrum time.

Q:

Many scrum coaches preach front and square, but already front rows are trying to angle themselves to create a better tunnel for the number nine, what are your views on this?

A:

Under the new process there are two correlating issues.

Front rows are often being forced lower due to the pressure of the 'raking' strike.

While this may assist the hooker in theory, needing to rake the ball it is actually the height of the shoulders at the front row which is critical.

If you can get them higher when they set, you open up the chance to hook the ball more comfortably.

Then you need to get the non-feeding pack as straight as possible, as any angles makes the feeding team's job nearly impossible.

When you crouch, the front row forwards and the hooker literally connect ear to ear, now truly interlocking the front rows - this makes it far more obvious to referees if illegal angles are being used.

Loose head prop has become a lot straighter, we need to keep the tight head straight, but we also have to watch that once they are set, we don't allow them to use angles post engagement.

Straight engagement makes it more challenging for a prop to create a real angle.

Q:

What's your opinion on the new scrum engagement laws will it make it easier for the refs to control?

A:

The new scrum engagement; we still have some settling to do with the teams, post the engagement.

The crouch (ear to ear by the front rows), the binding up prior to the engagement, and the reduction in the old "hit" (now a more controlled engagement) is making a big difference - no early engagements in contrast to the old system, better position of the props on engagement.

The big work on area is around the stability of both scrums after the engagement.

We are working to get rid of the "hit and chase" that used to exist.

Teams are adjusting to having to truly "hook for the ball".

Q:

How difficult is it to blow on the scrummaging rules?

A:

Scrum management is a really challenging area for referees, very few referees played in the front row!

We do significant work with scrum experts to try to help the referee have the right tools in his bag to be able to handle a difficult scrum night.

The challenging nights is when front rows simply do not "gel well" and you have to deal with problems between both props - both from a collapse and a stand up perspective.

Referees look to understand "which team is dominant" at scrum time, but this is not the only part of any decision - you have to ensure that teams dominate legally!

In 2014, within the Super Rugby competition, we are using Balie Swart, an ex-top South African prop, to help us work on our technical accuracy as a referee team and to help pinpoint player and team issues that I can then address with them off the field.

We hope this will give us another improvement, in what is essentially a very positive competition at scrum time (Super Rugby).

Q:

Are scrum penalties reviewed at the end of every game, and how accurate are the original calls?

A:

We do measure every scrum decision (PK, FK, RESET and PLAY ON) and the referee receives a total mark for accuracy in decision-making at this phase.

We are not as accurate as we would like to be - the biggest challenge is the picture between the #1 and #3 props - especially when the scrum is either collapsed or angles in.

The referee needs to make a real time decision as to who caused the issue. Generally, we track around 80-85% accurate.

We would like it to be up over 90% (notwithstanding it is a tough area for the referee to get right all the time).

We have had performances where we have dropped to 70% or less and this is one of the measures that we use to isolate good versus bad performance.

Q:

What is your opinion on the current scrum laws?

Do you believe any more changes should be implemented?

What differences have you noticed in the scrums since the law changes?

A:

The scrum desperately needs time and space to now settle and grow with the new changes.

November will enable all Test nations to play under these new Laws and it will give us a lot more data to work with (especially regarding the management of the stability after the set and the timing of the feeding of the ball).

These are quite fundamental changes to the process and teams and referees need time to settle into it.

I am very positive about the changes for the benefit of community and schools rugby.

I am sure it is going to help the technique and welfare of players in the front row.

Q:

It seems like with the new laws (early bind, etc.), that scrums aren't taking as long as they used to. However, it seems like scrums are far more even as a consequence - i.e. weaker scrumming teams are doing better in scrums, and stronger scrumming team's advantage has been hugely reduced.

Do you agree with that observation, and do you consider that a problem?

A:

I actually think at the top level that some dominant scrums are now in a position to take advantage of a weaker scrum, after the scrum has settled (as the ball then comes in).

One of the things we do need to watch and consider is the potential issue that the team feeding the ball becomes "at risk" of a big eight man push by the non-feeding team.

If this becomes imbalanced and greatly impacts ball clearance at scrum time, we will need to revisit that.

Q:

Does the iRB recognize that there is a conflict between 20.1(j) [scrum to remain stationary and parallel until the ball leaves the scrum half's hands] and 20.5 [#9 must feed the scrum as soon as the front rows have come together]?

If so, does it recognize that this conflict contributes to the issues with scrums at elite level?

And if so, does it believe that the current trial of "Crouch, Bind, Set" is adequate to resolve that conflict, or does it need to change the law to ensure that "stationery and parallel" takes precedence over the immediate feed?

A:

The new scrum process means that Law 20.5 is not relevant to the process.

The key four steps are:

-Crouch and then Bind with the front rows "ear to ear" as best practice (this removes any issue with head to head and gets them interlocked);

-SET call requires the front rows to come together and then remain steady and square (as possible) - this gets rid of the old "hit and chase" language and mentality;

-the referee waits for the scrum to be stationary (steady), before he then calls "Yes 9" (instruction from referee to #9);

-#9 then feeds the ball straight and so that his #2 has to hook the ball without delay.

This new process has been really well supported by the international head and scrum coaches and obviously, there will be a sorting period as everyone gets used to it.

The early signs around the engagement and the contest are very encouraging for the future of scrums in our game.