

THE SCRUM

By

MARTIN HYNES

Martin presented the 'bare bones' of his subject to a broad spectrum of coaches at a coaching session for the Midlands Conference 2005. He played at prop at Northampton Saints for six seasons, three of them as a professional, and played for England 'A' as well as being in the full England squad. He blames Jason Leonard for being so injury-free and exceptionally able for his not getting a cap. He is now retired from the game and runs a company in Northampton, Front Row Environmental Services.

Martin started by suggesting that 95% of any scrum is about getting all eight forwards to adopt the best mental and physical preparation. They must be ready to get quickly across the gap on the referee's signal, "Engage" so that they can dominate the collision. The scrum cannot be successful if it is in reverse. The 5% after that is down to personal preferences but the 95% must dominate the agenda.

Squat weight-lifting principles are very important in scrummaging and a player's basic technique can be checked in weight training (if he is old enough to carry this out) or simply by getting the player to hold a stick across his shoulders so that he can demonstrate his squat style/technique.



The basics to sound technique are:

- Feet at shoulder width apart.
- Flatten the back.
- Slightly stick the backside out.
- Look forwards but not so far that the neck is straining and uncomfortable. Address the opposition and imagine that you are peering over a pair of spectacles.

- Use the legs so that there is stability and the body does not rock back and forth. Holding this strong position enhances core stability.

Once the player is comfortable, ask him to twist when he is at the bottom of the squat and he will notice that he is not in a strong position. This message can be transferred to the scrummage technique.

GENERAL RULES FOR THE SCRUM.

- Sort out any issues of scrummaging *before* the match. The worst possible time to try to sort out any aspect is during the heat of battle.
- Problems are best solved ‘dry’, well before a scrummage machine or opposition is contemplated. Always check out the players’ technique before they go against anything and mirrors and/or video can be very useful. Once players come up against weight, things are more likely to go wrong; even simply learning and practising how to join-up can lessen any danger factors when the players go against a machine.

(A) PROPS.

- Safety is a key element for all, but especially for young players.
- All players should be encouraged to get across the gap between them and the opposition quickly. It does not have to be rushed, but a slow engagement can lead to problems.
- The front three players should be encouraged to work together and they should mirror-image each other at all stages of the scrum.
- Actively discourage any signs of twisting by any player at any stage.
- All three must be square and the props should be encouraged to hold their outside shoulder up to allow the square shape.
- Discourage hookers from leading with their right shoulder at the engagement. They believe it aids the strike but it is only de-powering the unit. It is far better to go in square in a strong position *then* concentrate on the strike.
- A practice can be used to help props to get into a toe stance early. A ball is placed on the tackle bag two metres away from the props and they leap out for the ball on the coach’s command.



You will soon spot if they are allowing too long a delay between call and movement and the delay is usually because they are too late or too early with their knee bend. Another common fault is not getting onto the front of the foot early enough. This drill will get them into an effective starting position for the scrum and encourages quick movement across the gap.

The players are likely to get naturally into the scrum start position. Next, hold the waist of one of the players in the start/set position so that he is up on his toes like a swimmer waiting for the start of a race.



He will win the race for the ball because his quads are already underneath him and he does not have to bring them there. It is a valuable visual lesson for all props.

(B) SECOND ROW.

- Always form away from the front row but stay close to them.
- The second rowers can easily cause unsettlement when the front three are tight and ready as they add an element of push and pull to get their heads in. Get the locks to tap the props on the way in so that they can move slightly to allow the heads through.

- Once bound onto the props, adopt a racing-start stance. There is no ‘only’ method at engagement so allow players to find out what suits them (and the rest of the scrum) best. They may start with one knee on the floor or with no knee on the floor; whatever is chosen, they must end up self supporting and there must be no wave of differing pushes.
- The support of the flankers is very important to help the locks with their binding strength. They should also always talk to the props and help them into a good starting position
- Some players grasp the prop’s shorts at the nearest point to their outside hand. This is inherently weak and a triangle can be seen when it happens.



Make each lock bind further around his prop’s leg, which strengthens the grip and eliminates the weak triangle.



(C) FRONT-FIVE HIT.

- If the scrum moves forwards, coach players to take small steps with the movement so that their feet do not end up in a weak position too far away from the shoulders. Always ‘chase’ the movement.
- Once the players ‘feel’ that the movement is over, the knees should drop slightly to lock out the scrum.
- The whole back row has to be part of this.
- If the second row bind is loose, they will push with the bicep and not the shoulder.
- Heads and knees work together with *knees down, eyes up*.

(D) FLANKERS.

- The props should be allowed to worry only about their own job. The flankers are key to this happening.
- The flankers should be level with the locks and must have the ability to drive forwards.
- Once the props are proficient at getting on their toes and are ready to get across the gap, the flankers can restrain them by getting their outside hand onto the prop’s shorts/upper leg area to hold him in the starting position.
- This has to be balanced against the flanker’s need to be in a racing stance and ready to engage the opposition with his prop.
- Each flanker should squeeze his inside ear against his prop’s shorts so that he is in a strong position to assist the “Engage.”

To finish the session Martin demonstrated the importance of effective body height. He pushed 1v1 against a young prop and let him push, drive and twist at will. Martin then let his knees come down and the opponent was powerless to try any of the previous movements. This is the way to counter twisting from an opponent; the body height nullifies most possible movements when it comes down.

The scrum is simply a means of winning the ball but it can be complex. Make sure your players have mastered A before B is allowed to start.