

A Two Minute Guide to Rugby

Rugby football is a game in which two teams of fifteen players each attempt to score points by carrying, kicking, and passing the ball until they ground it in their opponent's goal. Play is fluid with the transition from attack to defense occurring quickly. The fast pace of the game requires frequent anaerobic (muscle strength) bursts within a constant aerobic (running and jogging) effort. Games are played on a "pitch" the size of a soccer field and last from forty to eighty minutes of a running clock.

The rapid transition from offense to defense occurs most often at the tackle, when the ball carrier is held to the ground by the tackler. The tackled player must release or play the ball "instantly" and the tackler must immediately let go of the ball carrier and get to his/her feet. The first player to arrive from either team can secure the released ball. Transitional elements around the tackle are called "rucks." A ruck requires at least one player from each team in contact with each other and on their feet with the ball on the ground between them. Rucks establish an off side line at the last foot of the deepest player on each side of the ruck, and the ball must be "heeled back" out of the ruck with the feet before a player can pick it up. Players in support of the tackled ball carrier often create rucks with arriving defenders as a means of keeping possession of the ball. It is this transition of attack from the point of the tackle that gives rugby its exciting continuity. In American football, play stops with the tackle. In rugby football, the tackle is a transition to more play.

As an alternative to a ruck, instead of allowing himself to be taken to ground, a ball carrier may sense that he/she is about to be tackled and set up a "maul." A maul requires at least one player from each team in contact with a standing ball carrier. Once a maul is established, all attempts to tackle must stop and players must not do anything to collapse the maul. Once established, the maul may be driven forward by either team. Similar to a ruck, the maul establishes offside lines at the feet of the deepest player in the maul. At both rucks and mauls, players must either join in or stay behind the last foot. Rucks and mauls tend to concentrate players in a focused area, opening up attacking space. When a team is able to cross their opponent's goal line and ground the ball, it results in a "try" similar to a touchdown in American football. Tries are worth five points. A conversion kick following the try is taken on a straight line from where the ball was grounded and is worth two points.

When the ball leaves a ruck or maul, it is said to be in "open play." In open play, there is no blocking or other obstruction allowed between a potential tackler and the ball carrier. The ball is carried forward by elusive running and transferred from one player to another by means of lateral passing, or it may be kicked forward creating a race to be first to the ball. Good rugby requires all players to be competent in all aspects of play, but typically bigger players are involved in rucks and mauls and faster and quicker players are involved in open play. These units are called forwards and backs, with eight forwards and seven backs per team. In open play, the ball is the offside line. Players often find themselves in front of their own ball carrier, but are not penalized unless they attempt to influence play. They can be put on-side by running to a point behind the ball or allowing the ball to pass them.

An important aspect of rugby is "advantage." This means the non-offending team is allowed an opportunity to gain advantage from their opponent's infraction. If the referee thinks advantage has been gained, play continues. If advantage is not gained, the referee stops play and awards the original penalty. The advantage law helps keep the game fast moving and fluid. For minor infractions where no advantage is gained, the referee awards a "scrum" to the non-offending team. A scrum involves the eight forwards of each team bound together against each other in a unique contest to win possession of the ball. Like a ruck, the ball may not be handled until it leaves the scrum. More serious offenses (like a dangerous tackle) result in a "penalty" being awarded to the non-offending team. The team awarded a penalty may start a quick running attack, kick the ball out of bounds and gain ground, or, if close enough to their goalposts, attempt a penalty kick worth three points. If the ball is kicked out of bounds at a penalty, the kicking team is awarded the throw-in at the lineout. Like a scrum, a lineout is a set piece that allows restart of open play. A line out involves forwards from each team in a jumping contest to secure the ball as it is thrown in from the point where it "touched" the sideline. (That is, it is thrown in along the line of touch.)

There! Now you know all there is to know about rugby! Well . . . not quite, but it is the essentials. If you are interested in more information, USA Rugby publishes a law book that explain all the finer points, or you can attend a referee certification clinic and join in the game as the 31'st participant!