

A GUIDE TO RUGBY

For anyone reasonably familiar with American football, rugby should be an easy game to understand. The purpose of the game of rugby is to carry a blown up pigskin over a goal line, or kick it over a goal post with more consistency than one's opposition.

Unlike American football, the laws of rugby are few and simple. Rugby action does not stop until someone scores, the ball goes out of bounds, or a rule is broken. Rugby teams don't huddle to prepare strategy since no platoons for offense, defense, and special teams exist. A good rugby team or side, as it is called will respond instantly to a number of defensive and offensive situations, each member of the team moving independently within his role, but collectively for total effect.

FORWARDS AND BACKS: Each rugby side is composed of eight forwards and seven backs. Each player on the field, or pitch, may pick up the ball and run with it, pass it, or kick it at anytime. Everyone is also responsible to play defense when the other team has the ball. It is generally the assignment of the forwards to secure possession of the ball and then either advance it themselves or pass it out to the backs. The ball can be advanced or moved three ways; it can be carried forward, passed laterally or backward, or kicked. If the backfield attack breaks down, rugby forwards, unlike football linemen, may handle the ball and become a dynamic offensive force themselves.

THE DEFENSE: Rugby play goes on when American football play stops because rugby has no "first downs." Rugby players keep on going until the whistle blows, but when a ball carrier is tackled (and actually brought to the ground); he must release the ball. Either a teammate or one of his opponents may then gain possession and continue the action. Or the tackled player himself may again play the ball once he has regained his feet.

OFFSIDES: The football scrimmage line is called the offside line, or game line, in rugby. It is an imaginary line that runs across the field through the ball while the ball moves. To qualify to take part in the actions, a rugby player must play from behind the ball, both defensively and offensively. That's why the forward pass is futile (and illegal) in rugby. A player cannot chase a ball that has been kicked up field by a teammate who is behind him. The player must wait until the person that kicked the ball, or someone behind the kicker, runs up field, passing the others and thus putting them onside so that they may play. A player may also be put onside if the player catching the ball either drops it or runs at least five meters with it. What the defender cannot do, is play the person waiting to catch the ball until the defender has been put onside either by the actions of his own team or the actions of the person receiving the ball.

THE SCORE: The game begins with a kickoff from mid-field that must travel at least ten yards. When one side is successful in crossing the opponent's goal line and actually touches the ball to the ground, this endeavor is called a try and is worth five points. The ball must be placed on the ground, crossing the goal line is not enough for a score. If a player runs out of the goal area, or is held up and unable to get the ball to the turf, there will be no try allowed. Once a try is made, a conversion kick is awarded representing a chance to add two more points. The kick is attempted from the ground, anywhere along a line perpendicular to the goal line from the place where the try was scored (the ball was touched down). Two other kicks can put points on the scoreboard at any time during the game. A dropkick can be kicked through the goal posts anytime during play and it brings three points for a successful effort. If the referee finds a team breaking a rule, he may award a penalty kick at the point of the infraction to the opposition. A place kick may be taken from that point and if it goes through the uprights (goalposts) it is worth three points.

BLUNDER AND YOU'LL SUFFER! One of the secrets of good rugby is to be aware of all the rules and to be able to take advantage instantly of any opportunities that may arise. An unalert player may ruin the effort of his entire team by either hesitating when he should spring to the advantage, or by violating a law, thus giving the opposition a free kick. We have already discussed one of the infractions, which may bring about a penalty kick; being offside. Other major blunders include holding the ball after a tackle, intentionally lying on the ball, blocking or obstructing an opponent, or dangerous tackling methods (you must make a grasp at the person you intend to bring down, and may not tackle him about the shoulders or head). Fans will be able to recognize the guilty side by the ten-yard retreat they must make from the point of the infractions.

Minor violations of the laws such as a knock-on (fumble forward) or a forward pass result in a scrum.

THE SCRUM: When the whistle blows and the referee calls for a scrum, the eight forwards on each team bind together in a formidable pack and come together head first against the opposition, aligned in the same manner. The team that did not commit the infraction is awarded the ball. The scrumhalf from that side sends the ball in between the two struggling masses. They push and try to use their feet (but not hands) to heel the ball back through their own scrum. A penalty is assessed for reaching into the pack for the ball. Once it is out, the scrumhalf takes the ball and passes it out to his backfield. This type of scrum is known as a set scrum or set play since each player assumes a distinct position in the formation.

RUCK OR LOOSE: The set scrum is not the only scrummage that can occur on the field. When a player is tackled or the ball is free in a crowd of forwards, a loose scrum or loose ruck occurs. No whistles signal this variation and no set positions are required. Whoever gets to the ball first forms a ruck. Players get to the spot, bind into a pack and attempt to step over the ball to secure possession. The same rules apply to loose scrummages as to set scrums; no hands, the ball must be completely heeled or stepped over before the scrum-half can pass the ball out to his team. The defense will try to stop the rush by packing against the bound mass or by taking the ball from the person carrying it.

LINEOUT: When the ball goes into touch or out of bounds, play is restarted by a lineout. A player from the team who did not touch the ball last throws the ball from out of bounds between two parallel lines of forwards standing perpendicular to the point where the ball left play. The nearest player in the line must be at least five meters from the touch line. The thrower attempts to loft the ball to the apex of the leap of his team's best jumper. The jumper does his best to secure the ball and deliver it cleanly to his scrumhalf. A well-timed transfer assures the players in the backfield of getting a good pass from their scrumhalf. A ball that is tipped down or passed sloppily puts the scrum-half in terrible straits, vulnerable to the break-through of the charging opposition forwards with malice on their minds. The forwards of a scrambling scrumhalf do their best to shield their teammate by binding tightly to prevent an opposition break-through.

OPTING TO RUN: Those who enjoy American football like nothing better than a player who tucks the ball under his arm and scampers a long distance for a score. At first glance, rugby appears to be the broken field runner's dream, man for man coverage all around. One slight variation in the game turns a potential dream into a nightmare, no blocking. A runner may beat his opposite, pick up ten, twenty, even thirty yards, then suddenly get clobbered by the covering defense. The absence of blocking, and the loss of possession after a tackle quickly get the most powerful runner looking for more options than just putting his head down and pounding forward.

CHOOSING TO PASS: A competent rugby side will make a great effort to never allow a teammate to be isolated without someone to pass to. Even when the open side wing finally receives the ball, he will be looking back inside for supporting members of his own squad. A well-coordinated team will tie the opposition in knots by continually changing the direction of the attack with good passing. It might appear that passing is somewhat limited by the elimination of the forward pass. But the variation in distance, speed and delivery is endless. Good squads will exploit all possibilities, even using the forward pack as a rushing group of huge option quarterbacks.

KICKING: The final option of a triple threat-attacking rugger is the kick. It's much easier to boot the ball forward thirty yards than it is to carry it the same distance. The kicking game is the backbone of a rugby side. Good kicks set up the good pass or the good run. The punt (for touch): This is a long kick in American football style. Used by a team defending its own end, it gets the pressure off by advancing the ball from behind the team's twenty-two meter line and out of bounds. The Pop-kick: Here is another method of beating the opposite player. In this case, when the opponent approaches, the ball carrier uses a short stab of his leg and foot to literally "pop" the ball over the head of the opponent. If the ball isn't kicked too far, the kicker should be able to field it coming down or on one of its first bounces and continue up field. The Up-and-Under: In this kick the player with the ball gives it a tremendous taste of his foot, not for distance, but for height. He aims to drop it several yards down field from his own forward pack, where they descend with increasing speed and bloody intentions on the hapless soul who parks in the spot to try to field the falling "red cross." This kick is often taken by the scrumhalf from the lineout or in a penalty situation.

THE FINAL GOAL, A BLEND: No rugby team will win many games if they rely too heavily on a single facet of the game, the run, pass, or kick. Variety is important. For example, a player that has been passing all day may 'sell the dummy', fake the pass and keep the ball, catching his opposite number helplessly off balance. Or a team that has been going to the open side of the field consistently may take the ball blind side to the chagrin of their opposition. These are all tactics that contribute to winning rugby.

Once you learn the basics of rugby and give the game a chance, you'll be able to appreciate the finer points. There will be no doubt in your mind, however, that rugby is a delicate true blend of strength, finesse, speed and stamina.