



Some Practical Advice and Suggestions for New Referees

By Peter Flanagan ACTRRA

Preamble

Congratulations! You are soon going to referee your first game of Rugby, which is about the most fun you can have in short pants.

No doubt you're conscious of the fact that the emphasis must be on *safe play within the Laws and within the spirit of the game*. But do you really know what you are actually going to do, on the day —and in the days leading up to it--- and after it?

If you do, good luck and enjoy your game.

If not, these notes might just help: they're not intended to be exhaustive but hopefully they'll allow you to feel just a bit more assured during your first few games.

“Learned in the Law”

Law 6A4 (a) states that the referee is the sole judge of fact and law during a game. Effectively this means that when you are on the Rugby field, you are always right----- even if you are wrong. This is all very comforting but it places a heavy responsibility upon you, including a legal one, to ensure that you know the Laws before you ever lift a whistle to your lips. (By the way, lest you be tempted to get carried away with your new-found omniscience, it's salutary to note that the Law relating to referees comes *after* five other Laws (relating to the ground, the ball, the teams, the players' equipment and time); sort of puts our role into perspective, don't it!)

Unhappily in this digital age of MYPod and Facepad, you can't referee electronically. What's more, refereeing leaves no room for an Open Book approach. It's like driving a car: you can't consult the manual as to which vehicle has right of way as you approach an intersection--- you just have to KNOW. It's precisely the same on the paddock ---- where the collisions can be almost as brutal as on the roadway----- with thirty sweating players all looking to you for a quick and correct decision!

Regrettably, if there is any substitute for learning the Laws off by heart I haven't found it!

You simply have to study the Law book. Read the Law, know the Law. Take the Law book to bed with you, leave a copy in the smallest room in your house, read it on trips (although possibly not if you're actually driving),



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And the reading doesn't stop there: you'll also need to know the Under Nineteen Law variations, understand the special provisions for the younger age groups, and be thoroughly familiar with the game management document (GMD) issued by the ARU or ACTRU.

Lastly but not leastly, there's FLATS which is one of the major tools used by the ACTRRA in its development activities. This document identifies areas where referees may be missing infringements; highlights particular rulings /interpretations which the coaching Committees consider to be critical to the safe management of the game; and may give directions as to how referees are to handle specific occurrences. A separate edition of FLATS is prepared by the junior grades coaching committee where it is known as FACTS.

Pre game

It's a very good idea to ensure you have your kit ready, including coin for toss and SPARE WHISTLE, the night before the match: trying to put it together on the morning of the game simply leads to items being left behind.

Make sure your uniform is clean and pressed: even if you're not yet a real ref, you can at least look like one. Include a notebook and pencil for recording the score.

Check that you know where your game is to be played and how to get there. (A referee who was appointed to officiate at Trinity Christian College in the Tuggeranong valley felt just a little foolish when he turned up for his game---- at Trinity College Goulburn.)

You should arrive early at the venue to allow plenty of time for ground check, boot inspection (look for torn or jagged studs that could do somebody a mischief, and check for illegal stud arrangements---- see Law 4.3), talk to teams, etc.

Ground inspection: check markings, protective pads on goal posts (no game can start without these--- home team must provide) and look out for sprinkler heads, glass, needles etc. If there's a ground marshal, make yourself known and advise him/her of any shortcomings on the paddock.

Introduce yourself to each team coach and meet each captain. I suggest however that you do not address him/her by name, but use the more formal "Captain" or "Skipper". This is the time to arrange for a Touch Judge from each side.

What should you cover in team talk? In the first instance you might wish to emphasise any new Law variations, you may want to talk to front rows and half back regarding your engagement call (Crouch touch pause engage) so that they get the cadence of your call. For other topics you should include, it's a good idea to talk to more experienced refs and see what issues *they* address in their talks.



A word about your whistle

Your whistle is used to start and stop the game. As noted above, make sure that you carry a spare in your kit. You'll be surprised just how often a whistle goes on the fritz ---- and a whistle that doesn't blow is as much use as a light-sabre with a dead battery.

Until you are experienced enough to develop your own "style", give it a good loud blast, and keep the volume up. It's better to blow too hard than too soft as the latter allows players to pretend that they did not hear you, which can have safety implications.

Before the kick off

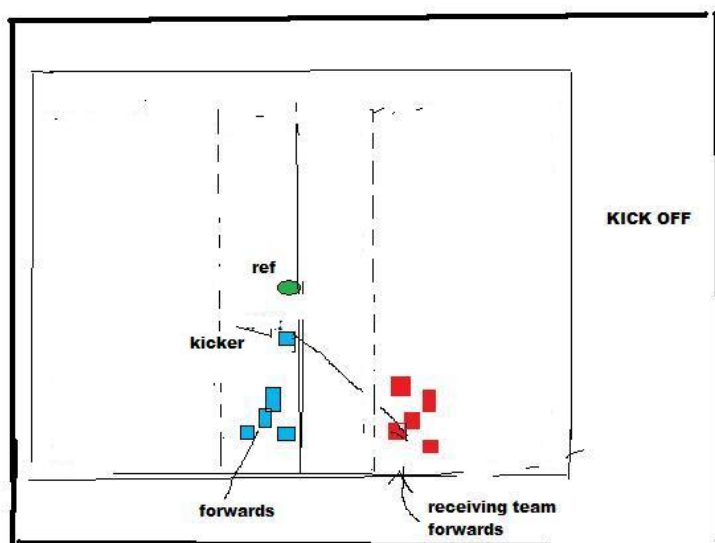
Before kick-off ensure the touch judges you requested are ready on the sideline---- and don't start the game without them.

It's our tradition to allow the teams the courtesy of taking the field before the ref: don't stand in the centre of the field blowing your whistle and waiting for teams to come out. (It can get awfully lonely out there if they continue to mill around on the sidelines ignoring you, which is a game some teams seem to enjoy playing!)

You conduct the toss, after which the winning captain gets to choose either to kick off OR which way his team will run (not both). Note which team kicks off--- the other team restarts after half time.

Position for kick off (or "starting the game")

You blow your whistle and play starts. Simple, eh? And next time you blow it, play stops (although I'd allow little football to take place first!) Most often the kicker will kick off towards the forwards, so stand on the half way line with the kicker between you and the pack. This puts you in the best position to observe the kick, to spot anyone over-running it and to observe any receiving player who may knock on in attempting to catch the ball.





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There will be some players out of sight behind you but for the time being they are of less importance. A good general principle is to focus most of your attention on the main action (almost always where the ball is) and head towards it by the most direct route.

Once you get there you can adjust your body angle to bring your peripheral vision into play, allowing you to keep tabs on players wider out, especially as offside lines come into effect.

Position for other kicks

Drop outs, penalty kicks, and free kicks: apply the same general principles: keep kicker between you and the forwards (or the sideline) ----- but at every kick be alert to the need to get out of the way if he/she decides to reverse direction.

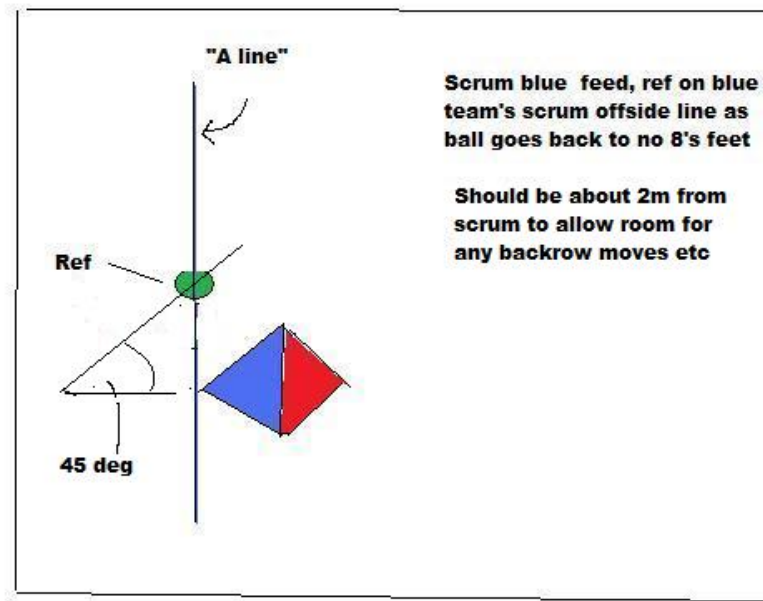
If the kick is for touch, keep kicker between you and the touchline he/she is aiming for. Again the objective is to focus your attention on where the ball is going. Stay alert in case the kicker wants to take a quick tap, and make sure you don't get in his way. If a free kick bounces into touch, or goes there directly from a kick inside the 22, be ready for a quick throw in by the receiving team.

Note re kicks in general play: Don't look at the ball, too much is happening at ground level. (You can judge where the ball is going to land by the actions of the players.) First check safety of kicker, then look for offside players in kicker's team and penalise them if they move forward. Be especially alert for offside players within 10m of where the ball is going to land: they **MUST** move back towards their own goal line. Oh, and did I mention: don't look up at the ball?

Position for Scrums

Stand on the centerline of the scrum on the loosehead side and manage the engagement, then step aside and let the half get on with the business of feeding the scrum. (You may need to "coach" younger half backs to feed from the correct side.) Set a good standard for straight scrum feeds and stick to it.

As the ball moves back towards the No 8, stay level with it while moving a little away from the scrum (say about 2 m). You should now be level with the last feet in the scrum on what's called the A (for "attacking") line. Turn your body to an angle of about 45 degrees facing *up* the field. This opens up your peripheral vision and brings more players into sight.

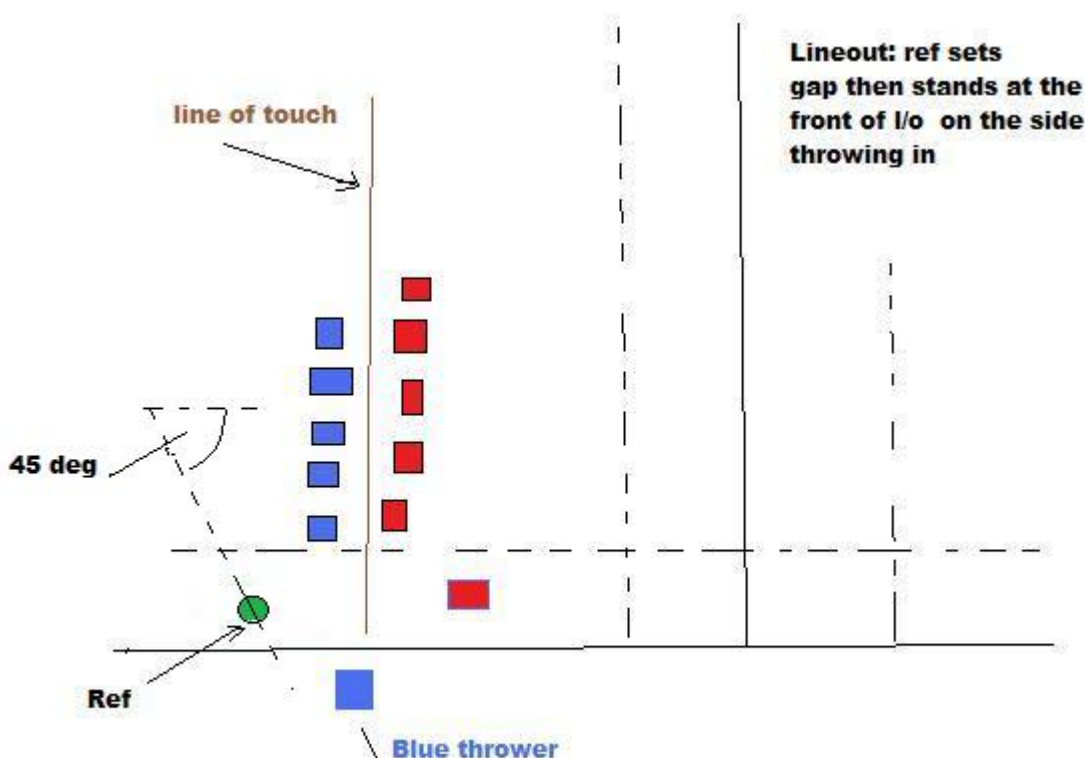


Until the ball is cleared, stay on the A line and maintain your distance from the scrum (to leave space for any attacking moves from the scrum-base). You can still keep tabs on the ball but you can also observe what the backs are up to further out. The A line is also the preferred position at other phases of play such as tackle ruck and maul, where it's defined by the last feet of the team in possession.

Remember to adjust your body position to maximise your view.

Position for Line out

You can choose to stand at any of the "four quarters" of the lineout, but the front on the throwing side is generally preferred. From there you can set the gap, manage the throw, keep tabs on the backs and, like a lion tamer, affirm your authority through eye to eye contact with the forwards.

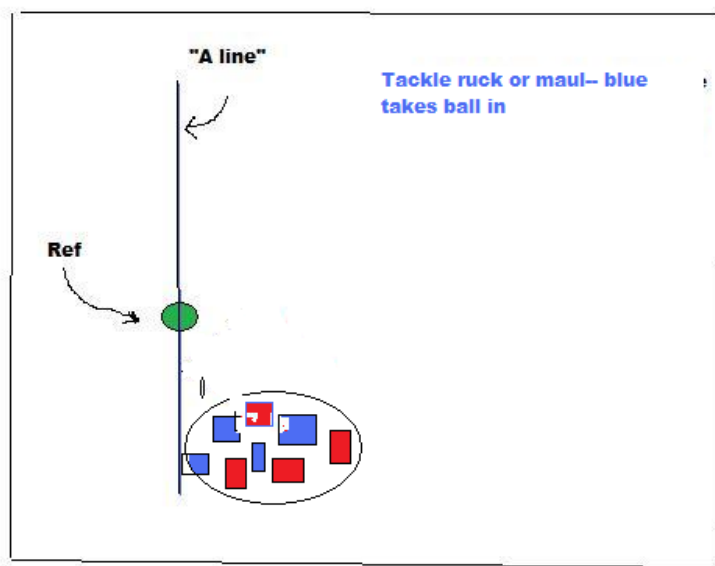


Standing on the zipper (at the rear on the line of touch) is almost always a poor choice (backs out of sight, offences at front of line out undetectable, etc). Save this position till you have the luxury of an appointed touch judge. And maybe not even then!

Watching the position of the catcher's hands relative to his body helps you judge the straightness of the throw. Know when the lineout ends (at which point the backs can move up).

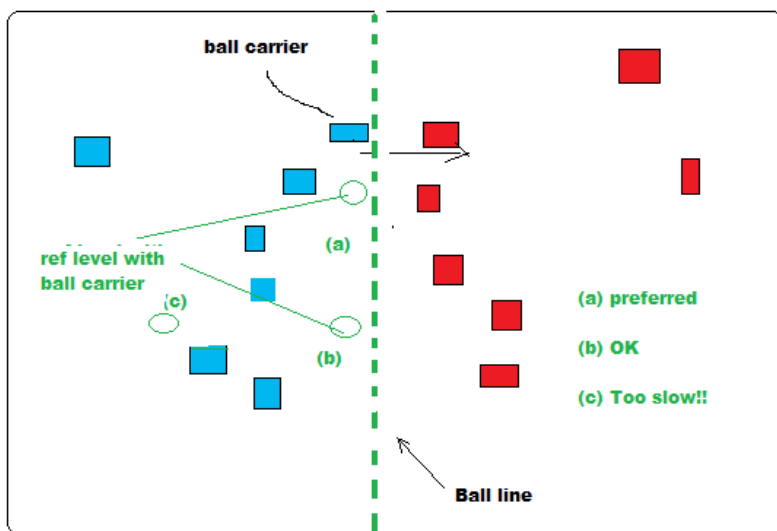
Position for Tackle/Ruck/Maul

Get to the breakdown and onto the A line quickly, to manage first offences: watch first for tackler not releasing, thus denying the tackled player his legal options. Then watch for tackled player failing to release or play the ball. Remember that an opposing player, legally in position and on his feet, has rights to the ball which the tackled player may not frustrate. Watch for players diving over and sealing off. And keep an eye on those pesky backs!



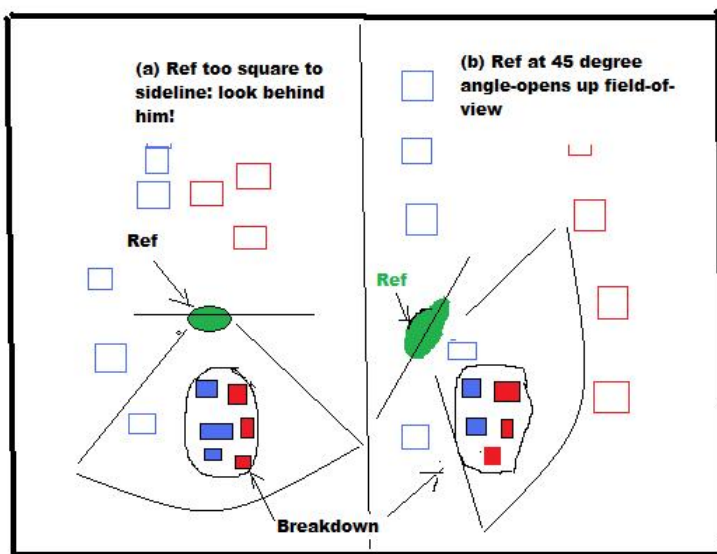
Ball line running

This means being level with the ball-carrier, or no more than a metre ahead or behind. If play gets away from you, try to get back in line with the ball as quickly as possible. In the case of an intercept, for example, go straight up the centre of the field like the clappers; then as you catch up, you can veer in closer to the action.



Position at breakdown

Never become so fixated on the breakdown that you end up facing directly across field: too much will be going on *behind* you.



General:

- Uncontested scrums are unfortunately becoming more and more common so you need to study the laws relating to them (see Laws 3.13 (d) and (f); 3.14 (d); and the definition on P9).

Be aware that, apart from the specified exceptions, all other scrum laws apply to uncontested scrums. These include maintaining offside lines, full binding (especially flankers), prohibition on early detachment etc

Note that if a team tells you that they do not have a properly trained front row (i.e. they ask for uncontested scrums) it's an ACTRRA directive that you MUST comply

- When awarding a PK or FK don't turn your back on the offenders at any stage. Once the penalty process is complete (i.e. Whistle, signal, speak) ensure that offenders are back 10m or are moving there. Don't tolerate the opposing captain who tries to slow things down by constantly querying your decisions (should be unnecessary if you have used "whistle signal speak"). Again, be ready in case the team receiving the penalty wants to take a quick tap. Make sure you yourself don't prevent the quick tap through your inattention
- A good maxim is that you can only referee what you see. Thus ***the absolute priority is to know where the ball is, whether in the scrum, or at tackle, ruck or maul.***
- Be strict on high (dangerous) tackles by setting a standard early and sticking to it. Remember that it's not where the impact *starts* that matters: if it ends up above the line of the shoulders, it's high (IRB/ARU ruling).



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- If you find yourself in “heavy traffic” and it looks as if several players are going to run into you, just stand still and let *them* avoid *you*. If this happens too often (say twice) ask a coach about your running lines from phase to phase.
- Remember to stay alert when ball is out of play (e.g. after a try has been scored or when ball has been kicked into touch): always keep maximum number of players in your field of view and be alert for niggles.
- At the end of the game, allow players to leave the field before you (another courtesy).
- Be prepared to have a brief and friendly chat with a player or coach after the game if you are asked politely to explain a point of law but do not be intimidated. Dealing with abuse from either players or spectators: know what support is available from the ACTRRA/ACTRU.
- Do not engage in criticism of another referee’s performance, especially when you are in your ACTRRA uniform. Even if you think an error may have been made, remember that it is quite possible the referee has seen something that was not obvious from the sideline.

But what if I make a mistake?

And you will, Oscar, you will!

There are several options: you might try pulling your jersey over your head and running off the field; you might attempt to bluff it out; or you can do the right thing and apologise briefly and get on with the game. **Don’t** stew on it, **do** learn from it: after the game be sure to refer back to the Law book so that you never repeat the mistake!

A Last word of advice Above all, remember that both you and the players are there to enjoy the game,

An absolutely last word of advice You’ll know you’ve arrived the day someone from the *losing* team (player, coach or parent) says “Good game ref.” It’s a day worth savoring.

The author is a Level 2 Referee Coach and a long-time member of the ACTRRA. Formerly a Level 2 Player Coach with Royals Juniors, career highlights include refereeing a couple of Junior Grand Finals; being appointed chief technical official (in charge of referees) for the South Pacific Games Rugby Tournament in PNG; and three years as Director of Appointments for the ACTRRA. Come to think of it, maybe scratch that last highlight