

Changes in Rugby Law

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[Mr. Sewell's long and practical experience of the Rugby game entitle his views and criticisms to receive careful consideration ; it does not follow, however, that they are in every case necessarily endorsed by the " B.O.P. "-EDITOR.]

At long last the Rugby Union game in the British Isles is under one flag. Until now the Unions of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales have had their own laws. Their laws governing the game played by their own clubs were not always the same as the laws of the International Board which governs only international matches. But when wise boys who take the trouble to read the Laws of the game next buy the handbook of the Union to which their school belongs, they will find, instead of the heading : "The Laws of the Game of Football as played by the Union," the words : " The Laws of the Game of Rugby Football as framed by the International Rugby Football Board, and played by the - Football Union." Inasmuch as South Africa and New Zealand have agreed to accept these Laws, the Rugby Union game is at last one and the same game wherever it is played.

Next to that important event in its annals come the several changes made in the Laws since last season. As it is the duty of every youngster who plays Rugby to study its Laws for himself, I do not propose to do more here than refer to some of the most important changes. To start with, even the drawings on the field of play have undergone a compulsory change. The 10-yards' line is no longer of an indeterminate length just opposite the centre of the ground, but will consist of a dotted line drawn right across the field from touch line to touch line. This will help the referee whenever the useless short kick-off takes place. I withdraw the word useless when the kick-off is against the wind.

It has been found necessary to rule that the ball is not in touch unless the player carrying it has one or both feet in touch. Hitherto the touch lines and the air space above were in touch.

The legislators have omitted to state what is the decision if a player lying on the ground with the ball under his left arm places his right hand in touch. The new rule mentions feet only. A ruling on this matter appears to me necessary, and not likely to be long delayed.

In future no player may leave the field at half-time without the permission of the referee. This ruling is probably more necessary in first-class football than in school football where it is inconceivable any boy should think of leaving the field.

It is necessary to note that now referees are practically ordered by the new Law 10 (note to clause c) to award a penalty when a player after being tackled holds the ball too long. The clause says he " should award " a penalty, so that henceforward the player holding on just that shade too long which makes the

difference between playing the game and making a gift of the ball to the opposition has now no excuse if he costs his side three points.

The touch judge must now keep his flag raised if the thrower-in puts either foot in the field of play, in which case the ball shall be thrown in again. I was at the meeting of the Rugby Union when this addition to Law 11 was agreed upon for placing before the International Board. It was then said that it is not part of the touch judge's duty to interfere if the ball is not thrown in from the right place. A new ruling on this point also appears to me to be very necessary, because the referee, who is often out in the field of play, is not then in a position to see if the ball has been thrown in at the right place.

I come now to the most important changes in the Laws. Important because they concern the starting and re-starting of the game after every cessation of play. These changes may be all classified under Scrum Law, and would be, indeed, much more convenient if they were so classified in the official Laws of the Game instead of being scattered about, almost as though anything to do with the scrummage had been sprinkled out of a pepper-castor ! First comes the new paragraph (f) to Law 15, " Scrummage." This reads: The player putting the ball into a scrummage shall stand about three feet from the scrummage and with both hands from below the knee shall gently propel the ball along a line midway between and parallel to the lines of feet of the opposing front row forwards."

The value of this new rule rests on the words "gently propel." These have been used in order to do away with the hurling of the ball which has in some cases been used unfairly. A gently propelled ball gives both sides a fairer hooking chance. That, at any rate, is the expectation, and in view of what one has seen it is much to be hoped that it will be realised in practice.

Next in importance under Scrum Law comes the new paragraph (k) to Law 15, "Scrummage." This reads: "No player in a scrummage shall raise a foot off the ground or advance a foot beyond the line of feet of his front row forwards until the ball is fairly in the scrummage, and the first three feet of the front row forwards of each team on the side on which the ball is being put in may not be so raised or advanced until the ball has passed them."

In other words, the hooking may be done only by the centre front row forward with the foot further from the player who is putting the ball in the scrum, or by the player next to him on the side remote from the side on which the ball is being put in.

Hitherto the referee has had to watch only four feet, those of the first two front row forwards on either side. The new rule compels him to watch not only two more feet to see that they are not raised before the ball has passed them, but also the two further feet of both front row centre forwards to see that they do not infringe by being swung across to meet the ball before it has passed six feet on the two sides. This new law has increased the referee's burden in a task which often proved quite beyond the capabilities of many referees. Frequently I have seen referees, even in international football (there was one notorious case

last season), allow the outside forward to hook. How this new law is going to improve matters must be left to actual games to show us. A referee who disregarded the old law, in administering which he had only to watch four feet, does not seem to me to be likely to be enthusiastic about this new law when he has to watch six feet besides being obliged now to pay more attention to the actions of the scrum-half. Far be it from me to decry these new laws without trial. They may be all and more than their sponsors expect of them, but I cannot help thinking that the already harassed referee is now being asked to do too much.

Still on the subject of Scrum Law there is now another clause to Law 15. This is clause (j), and it reads as follows "No player shall prevent the ball from getting fairly into a scrummage." This clause I should imagine is not of much use in school football, which is constitutionally fair. The object of this clause is to prevent malpractice on the part of any player, not necessarily a forward, who might suddenly take it into his head to spoil sport, and the particular match, by interfering with the ingress of the ball into the scrummage. The football of a school would be of poor tone if ever such a thing disgraced the school field.

I come now to an important rule which concerns more the immediate vicinity of the Scrum than the Scrum itself. This is the new paragraph of clause (b) Law 17, "Off-side." It reads: "If whilst the ball is in the scrummage he, not being in the scrummage, remain with either foot in front of the ball." This rule is aimed at that loafing adjunct of so many teams, the so-called wing-forward. Time and again in first-class football one of this species has resented being penalized for off-side on the flimsy pretext, "but I had one foot behind the ball." Without doubt some referees held that a player with one foot behind the ball was not off-side. This new clause (b), Law 17, places this matter beyond all argument by requiring every player "not being in the scrummage" to have both feet behind the ball or risk the whistle, and possible penalty, for being off-side. Our peripatetic pest the wing-forward will have to watch his gait hence forward. He is at all events now shorn of his favorite excuse. He will have to study football and not the art of excuse in future.

There is one very important new Note to Law 16, "The Tackle," which every boy must learn by heart. It is this: "If, however, while so held he comes to rest in the field of play with the ball beneath his body, he shall be considered as tackled. "Here it is essential to note specially the words 'comes to rest' and the six in italics. The mere fact of the ball touching the ground while in the player's grasp and he rolling about does not deprive him of the right to pass it or placing it across his opponent's goal line to score a try. But, come to rest, even if only momentarily, with the ball under his body, he cannot after that pass it or roll over the line for a try or get up and go on. This new clause depends the "coming to rest" part of it; and, that being so, I can,

see this being a possible cause for dispute. Of course, the referee, being the sole judge, can settle anything of that kind summarily and sibilantly.

Readers must very carefully observe the new Note to Law 19, "Charging and Obstruction." This Note deals with pulling "any part" of the clothing of an opponent and specifically orders the referee to penalise a player who "in

grasping an opponent, is in such a position that he is not able to see whether such opponent has parted with the ball, and who immediately releases him when he finds he has not the ball in his possession."

The same Law has a new clause (e) which reads: ".No player with the ball in his possession after it has come out from a scrummage shall attempt to force his way through his own forwards." The intention here is to stop a scrum-half who, using his own side of the scrummage as a shield, "bores" his way for several yards where no opponent can tackle him. A try has been scored that way more than once, and it is so obviously an unfair method that the wonder is, firstly, that any player should attempt it, and, secondly, that, a such attempts have been made in first-class football, it is we until now a law has been framed to illegalise the practice. But there must be no confusion about this in the minds of my readers. This clause (e) is not meant to prohibit such an act as that of a stand-off half, or centre, who, by reason of such a circumstance as a sudden change of direction, finds himself plunging bang into the ruck of his forwards. Having got where he has with the ball in his possession he must carry on until tackled. Nobody convicts a stand-off who runs into the ruck of anything more serious than not playing the correct game. He is never suspected of ulterior motive, and indeed guiltless of any such thing.

At the Rugby Union meeting at which delegates were empowered to present the new Laws for the approval of the international Rugby Football Board, Law 23 was discussed in regard to its bearing on the short-kick sometimes taken instead of a long punt into touch. This short-kick was referred to as a Trick-Kick, and the mere reference to it at the meeting as anything savouring of trickery gave birth to a diversity of opinion so that a vote had to be taken. By a narrow majority of only three votes it was decided to recommend the deletion of the words " travel in the direction, etc.," in Law 23 " Free Kick," and substitute " reach a line through the mark parallel to the goal lines." The object of this is to prohibit what was referred to as the Trick-Kick.

Inasmuch as this particular kick is that peculiar thing, a thing openly done but at the same time depending for results wholly on unexpectedness and surprise, and not on trickery or subterfuge, it is indeed difficult to see what possible objection there can be to the practice. As one of those who voted in favour of its retention asked, "Are the opposition all playing with their eyes shut ? " Every season we hear and read about the need for keeping the game lively and the ball in play, yet in this particular case the voting at a representative Rugby Union meeting was in favour of kicking the ball into touch and thus causing a cessation of play, and against keeping the ball in play by means of that always interesting move, a surprise passing advance. Truly there are some things that pass comprehension !

A new definition has been added to the one defining "Goal," and seems rather out of place, placed where it is, but it has to be put somewhere. The new definition runs : " GROUNDING THE BALL. Grounding the ball is the act of a player putting his hand or hands on the ball when it is on the ground." This definition received its genesis in the act of an Irishman who was refereeing a

match. One of the defending side picked up the ball in his own In-goal and instead of kicking it or touching it down in the usual way, he proceeded to run behind goal, out into the field and start a profitable passing advance. Judge of his surprise when he heard the whistle. The referee awarded a touch down in defense on the ground that the player had been the first to place his hand on the ball on the ground in his own In-goal. Now, of course, it is possible that in the act of picking up, the player put one hand on the ball and the other under it, but normally not only in picking up a Rugby ball is the hand, or are the hands, put under the ball, but by his immediately subsequent acts the player proved that he had no intention to touch down in defence but, on the contrary, nothing was further from his thoughts. Whatever the actual facts of this case the result of it has been this new " Grounding the Ball " definition ; which, I suggest, would be better placed in the Laws next to the definition of a Try, in which the words " grounds the ball " have been substituted in the new Laws for " puts his hand on the ball on the ground."

A most important new paragraph has been added to Law 10, " Functions of Referee." This is of interest to school football. It reads : "He shall not give any instructions or directions to either team prior to the game." After the words " prior to " there might well have been added the two words " or during." I write from experience. I had once the pleasure of coaching a School XV. Among the things I had endeavored, not unsuccessfully, to instill into the scrum-half was the need to hurry up and get the ball into the scrum, not waiting for the lazy ones on either side to arrive, and form down for a scrum, thus carrying into effect the Law which denotes that a scrummage " is formed by one or more players from each side . . . closing up in readiness to allow the ball to be put on the ground between them." If this Law does not mean that there is no need to wait until sixteen players have "closed up in readiness " and that " only two " suffice it is meaningless. Our scrumhalf in a certain inter-school match played his role very well-until the referee stopped him, quite illegally, and explained he was not to put the ball in until all sixteen were ready ! Thus my pack, which was the quicker of the two and was always ready the first, was bereft of its superior quickness and my scrum-half was converted into an unwilling dawdler because the referee either did not know the Laws, or didn't care about being obliged to run fast !

Previous to this new paragraph to Law 10 there was a paragraph of the same Law stating that the referee may not contract out of the Laws of the game by agreeing with both sides to vary or not to recognise any Law . That paragraph is still in Law 10, and, combined with this new one, silences the interfering and fussy type of referee, of whom fortunately there are not many.