

THE ROOKIE PRIMER

by Lisa Gartner

Courtesy of Radcliffe Rugby
[http:// hcs.harvard.edu/~radrugby/rookie_primer.html](http://hcs.harvard.edu/~radrugby/rookie_primer.html)

Chapter 1

Rugby? What?

Rugby is a sport, a passion, a disease you catch. They'll tell you it's a cross between soccer and football, but that doesn't REALLY prepare you. Rugby is its own bassackwards self. There is NOTHING like it on or off the field.

Some sports historians put forth the theory that in the olden days it was considered amusement for one town to try and carry a somewhat startled young pig to another town's village square. They would employ various methods of dodging, dashing, passing, or just plowing through in mass to achieve this. These primitive contests became refined over time and emerged as rugby, soccer, football, etc. To the casual observer, rugby seems remarkably close to its roots.

There is also the worn-out legend of William Webb Ellis, who one day during a soccer match at Rugby School in England, decided to pick up the ball and run with it. Our own research has shown that the kid's name was really Wilma and it was her ball. She was merely trying to make a point on the rampant sexism and provincial attitudes of that particular institution; besides, her mom was calling.

Wherever it came from, today's rugby is, at its best, a blend of strategy, strength, speed, and instinct. At its least, it is organized and glorious mayhem. The object is to, by carrying, passing, and kicking the ball, score more points than the other team. Simple enough . . .

Chapter 2

The Pitch, Your Kit, and Other Prerequisites

We play on a PITCH. It looks like a field and it is a field, but we call it a pitch.

It is preferably grassy and level, but we also take what we can get. All of these markings will someday make sense. For now one important thing to store in your memory banks is that the lines are included in what is beyond them (i.e. the touchline is in-touch or out of bounds, and the goal line is in-goal).

Your rugby KIT is what you wear to the pitch. It consists of a sturdy rugby jersey (not one of those polyester numbers from J.C. Penney), a pair of rugby shorts, matching socks and cleats (see us for details) and that's it! Well, maybe a little athletic tape for effect or a mouthguard so you'll look pretty in photographs. A tip for rookies: leave your jewelry at home. Literally thousands of earrings have been lost forever in the linty recesses of people's pockets.

You'll also need a ball - a rugby ball, of course. It looks like a fat football with more rounded ends. Add one referee. 15 of you and 15 of them, and you're ready for a rollicking good rugby match. Oh yeah, there are a few rules to learn . . .

Chapter 3

How to Begin and Some Strange Facts

Teams often line up on the 50 m line for cleat inspection and salutations, but the action begins with a kick-off. This is taken at center field. The game is divided into two halves, no more than 40 minutes long and sometimes less. The clock never stops, but any time taken for injury is added on to the half in which it occurs.

ANYBODY may play the ball. You may run with it, pass it, kick it, or tackle an opponent who has it - provided that you are ONSIDE. Rookies, this is key: if you are BEHIND THE BALL you are ONSIDE. If you are in FRONT of it you are OFFSIDE. You won't be in trouble if you're 50 meters away tying your shoe, but if you influence the play in any way from an offside position this is BAD, BAD, BAD - Penalty City, kids - DON'T DO IT. The concept of offside explains a lot of this seemingly convoluted game. For example: we CANNOT pass forward because that would mean that the receiver would be in front of us and thus offside. Kicking forward is permissible (and desirable), but unless you are behind the kicker, she or someone behind her passes you, or you ARE the kicker, you cannot just go for the ball. In fact, if you are offside and within 10 meters of an opponent fielding a kick you MUST RETREAT beyond that 10 and only go ahead in your pursuit of the ball after you have moved that 10 meters. If you move to touch the ball carrier or anyone else before then it is a penalty to Dartmouth. You also may NOT BLOCK in rugby. Inhibiting opponents who do not have the ball or even just sort of standing in the way is called OBSTRUCTION and it is cheating. You should never cheat unless you can cheat well.

Now that this is all perfectly murky in your mind, we will proceed with what you CAN do, how the ball does manage to move forward, and where you might fit in.

Chapter 4

Have We Got a Position for YOU!

THE FORWARDS:

These are a proud bunch . . . the worker bees, the relentless tide. It is their responsibility to scramble, chase, heave and ho in effort to gain possession of the ball and then take it forward or present it very nicely to the backs to do something with. They are then expected to remain in dogged support of whomever carries the ball. Their work is never done and they are also referred to as the pack or the scrum. A SCRUM is also the name of the formal conglomeration of forwards who bind together in specific positions when a scrumdown is called. It is the basic set formation of rugby and occurs after various minor infringements of the law, when the ball becomes tied up, and other times you'll learn about later. It is a face-off of sorts and a favorite among forwards. Form and timing are more important than brute strength (although we'll take some brute strength). A birds-eye diagram might make things more clear:

- 1: Loose Head Prop (sturdy and fearless)
- 2: Hooker (small, quick, ready to take control)
- 3: Tight Head Prop (see #1)
- 4,5: Second Rows (Locks) - (big and strong)
- 6,7: Wing Forwards (Flankers) - (quick, aggressive)
- 8: Number Eight (smart, foot and hand skills)

9: Scrumhalf (smart, experienced, quick) -- technically not a forward, but the link between forwards and backs - special rules apply to the scrumhalf.

The scrumhalf puts the ball straight into the space between the two front rows (the tunnel). By combining a DRIVING PUSH and a quick foot strike by the hooker (occasionally a prop) each team attempts to win the ball. It is then channeled back to the #8 who lets it out to the scrumhalf (who has moved to the back) or breaks off and picks it up. The team who gets to put the ball in has the advantages of timing and having their front row closer to the put-in point. By driving forward we not only win the ball, but give momentum to any subsequent offensive moves after the ball is out.

More spontaneous versions of this type of formation are the RUCKS and MAULS which can occur at any time. A ruck is when at least one player from each team binds over the ball ON THE GROUND. A maul is when at least one player from each team binds around a player STANDING WITH THE BALL in her possession - (remember, a maul is tall). The essential aspect that we'd like to drill into your heads is to position yourself low and drive FORWARD when engaged in these odd sounding activities. The essential no-no to keep in mind is that when there are people bound over the BALL ON THE GROUND (a scrum or ruck) there are NO HANDS ALLOWED! You may not touch the ball with your hands until it is clearly in daylight. Rucks and mauls basically give everyone a chance to collect themselves and rally the troops for the next play. Once a ruck or maul forms, players not participating (by being fully bound - with at least one whole arm) MUST REMAIN BEHIND THE LAST PERSON'S FOOT. This gives players not involved some time and space in which to set up and look for defensive holes. A really great team will be able to do this so quickly that their opponents will be caught with their shorts around their ankles.

THE BACKS:

The speedsters, the golden hands, the glamour gals of rugby. Although required to ruck and maul when necessary, tackle and do whatever to advance the ball, the backs play in a lot less traffic than the forwards. After the forwards have won them the ball, they are expected to run, pass, kick, and score lots of tries. A typical line up looks like this:

9: Scrumhalf (as you know)

10: Flyhalf (great hands, cool head)

12: Inside Center (good change of speed)

13: Outside Center (same and faster)

11: Wing (burner)

14: Wing (ditto)

15: Fullback (very good foot, able to read game)

The backline puts its strength on the roomiest side of the field (STRONG SIDE). The other side is logically referred to as the WEAK SIDE. The wings remain on the same side of the field and thus play both weak and strong. If the ball is in the middle the backs can split:

Once in possession of the ball, the backs have options galore. They might quickly pass it out to the wing who has fewer obstacles and is generally very fast. The ball might be kicked in various ways and pursued. One of our favorite ways of extending the backline is by LOOPING, which is when an inside player (often after passing the ball out) sprints behind the line bursting through to receive it again somewhere. The backs may SKIP a player along the line in order to get it our quickly or ADD an extra player like the fullback who might come crashing through. You can catch everyone off-guard by

changing the direction of movement by REVERSE passing back to the person you got it from, CUTTING back against the grain or SWITCHING with another player. A switch (or scissors) happens when instead of passing to the person outside you, she suddenly cuts back behind you to receive a handoff as you angle a bit. You can also DUMMY the defense by faking a move to a teammate and keeping it yourself. When running downfield, backs want to run STRAIGHT to leave room for outside people to do their stuff. Most importantly, a team must work together. This applies to defense as well.

Defense means never having to say you're sorry. The basic idea is to come at them hard in a FLAT line (a veritable wall of intimidation). The faster you're in their faces, the less time they have to think. You must come up as a unit or a good team will take advantage of the fault in the fabric.

Chapter 5

Skills to Know and Love

Backs and forwards alike need to develop certain rugby-specific abilities. These skills are the foundation of all play, simple and complex. You must never, never, never neglect them.

We will begin with the PASS. You already know that you can't pass forward. Lateral passing is OK, but a close call. What's left? You guessed - we pass BACKWARDS. This explains the odd diagonal line-up of the backs. Technique may vary, but the important concept here is CATCHABILITY. Using both hands, the ball is passed in an underhand fashion and should arrive in the receiver's hands upright and UNdiscombulatedly. You should lead the receiver so that she is BURSTING on to it and thus gaining yardage even though she starts behind you. Waist high would be nice. The distance between passer and receiver varies depending on how skilled they are, the particular play, and the weather. The receiver stays at an angle sufficiently deep to receive the ball running at top speed. The passer should always turn her body toward the receiver. Don't pass until you see the whites of their eyes. We'll practice this plenty, so don't worry if it seems awkward at first.

KICKING is another name of this game. Rookies, in general, take awhile to incorporate this aspect into their game, so don't feel retarded if it takes you awhile to get the hang of it. It does open up a world of options to you - so we'll briefly explain the range of fancy foot work.

The POP KICK is a popular item. It is a short up-in-the air kick that you can field yourself. If some menacing hulk is barreling down on you, why take the hit? If there is no one to pass to, you can just pop it over her and run onto it. You've got the momentum - she'll have to turn around to chase it and you. Remember, she cannot touch you if you don't have the ball.

The GRUB kick is like a hot grounder past the shortstop. You punch it along the ground with your foot and, as always, PURSUE it. Because of the shape of the ball, the grub kick will take some weird hops, making it hard to handle. All kicking should be done STRATEGICALLY and not in a panic. It is important to place kicks in a spot where your team can regain possession.

Longer kicks may be used too, where the ball is kicked to a part of the field that your teammates can get to first or make life miserable for an opponent who does. The ball may also be PUNTED INTO TOUCH (out-of-bounds) for long yardage. We'll explain later what happens after the ball leaves the field, but for now remember this: if you are BEHIND YOUR OWN 22 METER line and kick it directly to touch on a fly, the ball is brought back in at THE POINT THAT IT CROSSES THE LINE. Thus a long kick for touch can get you out of hot water when the opposition is breathing down your goal line. This is also true when you have been awarded a penalty kick anywhere on the field. However, if you kick it directly out when you are AHEAD OF YOUR 22, the ball comes back in from the POINT IT WAS KICKED - meaning no yardage gained. You can dribble the ball or give it a good whack with your foot anytime its loose on the ground, but possession is 9/10th of the law in rugby. It's always best to secure the ball for your side.

You've got to TACKLE. When you do, your tacklee has no choice but to release the ball, leaving it fair game for either side. No, the play does not stop, but she will. Tackling well and decisively is vital (although we always keep in mind our lack of padding). You should hit them low, squeeze their legs together, and twist them so you land on top. We will review this thoroughly in future practices. The technical definition of a tackle is when a player is held by an opposing player and at least one knee is touching the ground (falling down unassisted doesn't count). Rookies: remember, if you are tackled you MUST release the ball or its PENALTY time once again. You may pick it up immediately upon gaining your feet. You are allowed a split second to place the ball to your team's advantage when tackled. The art of tackling is one of the more reluctantly embraced skills in rugby, but when done right it can be extremely satisfying.

Chapter 6

You Gotta Score if You Want to Win

OK, so how do we pile up points? Well, first in our hearts is the TRY. It has similarities to a touchdown (in football), but with a significant difference. A try is accomplished by bringing the ball into your opponent's in-goal and TOUCHING IT TO THE GROUND. Control, downward pressure, and simultaneous hand/ball/ground contact are essential. Woe to the rookie who gleefully gallops over the line and in her excitement forgets these key factors. A try is worth 5 points. The priority is to get the ball over and down, but if possible, you want to place it near the middle. The reason for this is that after a try, you have a chance to make it 7 points by kicking the ball through the posts (uprights). This is called a CONVERSION. The kick is made from any distance back, but in line with where the ball was touched down. It is far easier for a kicker to make a conversion when she is in front of the posts as opposed to at an angle. The kicker may use a PLACE KICK or DROP KICK (a drop kick is where she drops it first and kicks it on the rebound).

The game starts up again with a kick off (a drop-kick) to the TEAM WHO HAS JUST SCORED. In either case it's back to the 50 meter line as quickly as the kicking team can collect itself. There is no official game stoppage.

The other way to score is BY GOING FOR POST (kicking a field goal). This is worth 3 points. Most commonly it is made when a penalty is called within the range of your team's best kicker. It may be place kicked or drop kicked from the point where the penalty was awarded (the MARK). Rarer in women's rugby is a spontaneous drop kick through the posts during play. This is allowed at any time but is very difficult to do.

If a team should touch the ball down in its OWN in-goal (better you than them), two things can happen. If your team is responsible for bringing the ball in, a scrum, 5 meters back from the try line, will be awarded to the other team (meaning their scrumhalf gets to put it in). If the ball traveled into the in-goal on the other team's impetus, your team will be awarded a 22 meter DROP OUT. A drop out means that your team may drop-kick the ball from any point behind the 22 meter line. The other team must RETREAT IMMEDIATELY to the other side of the 22. REMEMBER this retreating business when the drop out is against us. Also learn to run backwards. You should never take your eyes off the ball!

Chapter 7

Take a Break (this means you!)

Feel better? You may be feeling a little saturated with rugby facts and figures at this point and as you might suspect, there is much, much more. Don't worry if it seems confusing or even ridiculous. Someday that light bulb WILL pop on, miscellaneous ideas will click and in spite of yourself you'll be a rugby player.

RANDOM THOUGHTS: Rugby is a continuous, flowing game with natural ebbs and surges, but no real time-outs except for injury. It has both premeditation and spontaneity. The faster you can make things happen, the more likely you will be able to score. All sizes and shapes of people can play. It is an aggressive and physically demanding game. FITNESS is mandatory. A couple of little catch words in rugby are MOVE FORWARD and SUPPORT. Confusingly enough, you often have to back up or pass back to support the surge forward. The overall team direction should always be lustfully aimed toward the goal line. This is a team game. The collective effort of 15 people is far more powerful than the individual. When everyone on the field is in sync, it's the coolest feeling in the world (or at least the top 2 or 3). The best score is when everyone contributes.

Chapter 8

What Happens After the Ball Goes into Touch and Other Stories

If the ball is kicked, carried, or otherwise escorted into touch, its re-entry onto the field is by way of a LINE OUT. A line out is a little like a jumpball in basketball. Two columns of forwards (one column per team) line up 5 meters in from the touch line and perpendicular to it. A player from the team who DIDN'T touch it last before it went onto touch gets to throw the ball down the tunnel. IT can be thrown any distance as long as it flies STRAIGHT between the columns. Teams use signals to let their players know where the thrower intends to throw it. Certain players in the line out are designated as JUMPERS (usually 2nd, 4th, and 6th in line). The rest support and protect them in a variety of ways that you will soon be learning. The ball may be thrown beyond the line out or drilled to the first person, but it must travel the initial 5 meters before before it may be played. The line out can extend out to 15 meters. During a line out the backs line up in much the same way as during a scrum, with one notable exception. In a scrum they must only remain behind the #8's or last person's foot. In a line out they (or anyone not participating directly) must remain 10 METERS back until the line out is completely over (NO CREEPING UP OR IT'S A PENALTY). The thrower from the team not throwing in and both scrumhalves stand where indicated on the diagram. There are short line outs, quick line outs, and other variations, but that's all for now, folks.

Let's talk a little more about PENALTIES. For minor infractions of the law a simple scrum down will do. A forward pass is one such infringement. The infamous KNOCK ON is another (a knock on is where you drop or bump the ball forward with any part of your upper body). The scrum is awarded to the non-offending team. A scrum may also be called when a ruck or maul goes too long without the ball coming out or if the referee judges it to be dangerous. There are other occasions for scrums, as you may have guessed, but later...

It might behoove you to (at some point) learn the signals a referee uses to indicate what he or she has called. After the whistle she will usually give the MARK with her foot and indicate, with her arm angled DOWN toward one team or the other, who gets to put the ball in. The hookers then usually line up at the mark and the rest of the pack comes in around them.

A FREE KICK is awarded for slightly less secure infractions than a penalty kick (hooker striking too early for the ball, for instance). The difference is that you are not allowed to go for post. The referee indicates a free kick by extending a bent arm toward the team who gets to take it.

For a PENALTY KICK, the referee extends his arm UPWARD toward the team to whom he's awarding it. A penalty kick is given for obstruction, offsides, hands in a ruck, play deemed dangerous by the referee, or any number of things that are extremely naughty. A penalty kick is awarded at the place the infraction occurs (usually). A mark will be given and that is the point through which the kick MUST be taken. To execute a penalty kick you must move the ball visibly through the mark with your foot. This could mean anything from a short tap (after which it may be picked up and moved in any legal way) to a long punt (the space directly above the mark counts as the mark). The opposition must RETREAT 10 meters immediately when a penalty kick is awarded -- giving you quite an advantage. If you ever hear

your teammates screaming at you to get "back 10" it is probable that the other team has just been awarded a penalty kick. Remember: keep facing the ball!

Now we will briefly ponder the vast gray area of ADVANTAGE. In rugby, a referee does not have to call a penalty if she feels that no advantage was gained by the offending team or that the other team was able to capitalize on it. For example: a referee may see a knock on occur, but wait to blow the whistle until it becomes apparent who has made subsequent gains. If the NON-offending team scoops up the ball and gains 10 meters, the penalty may never be called at all. This is called "playing the advantage." The advantage law helps to keep the game flowing. File this for another day, but keep in mind that even if you do spot an infraction, DO NOT STOP UNTIL YOU HEAR A WHISTLE! The referee may not have seen it or may be playing the advantage.

As long as we're on the subject, let's talk about the REFEREE. There is only one ref and this is a very significant fact. With 30 people careening around the field, one person cannot possibly see everything and thus some unscrupulous players have been known to cheat. Our team was of course very shocked to hear this. Since you're new, it's wise to follow the rules. When the referee does call something, her word is LAW. In fact, she cannot change a call once made. It is no use arguing -- in fact, you can even be penalized if you do. If you do need to make a comment to the referee, for any reason, do so through your captains. Different referees have different styles. It is a smart rugby player who learns to "play the ref." Many calls in rugby are completely up to the referee's judgment -- especially those concerning FOUL PLAY. This may be the grayest area of all. Basically, there is a spirit of fair play that governs rugby. With all those people running around, you could do things that aren't nice and not get caught, BUT DON'T! These things have a way of escalating in a game as physically intense as rugby and it's also distracting. If something gets out of hand, go to your captains who can speak to the referee. The referee is the sole determiner of what constitutes foul play and a good one will keep things clean. A player can be ejected from a game as the most severe resolution of a problem. Should this happen, her team may NOT bring in a substitute, leaving them to play short.

Chapter 9

Last but not Least, The Party

If there is one thing that sets rugby apart from all the other sports you've seen or played, it is that after a match, you lay differences aside and have a party. There is a spirit of camaraderie among rugby players. After all, it is a weird sport -- nobody gets paid, you travel all around, and get bruises for your trouble. You've GOT to have a passion for it and despite all rivalries, it is a passion shared by everyone who plays it. As the sport is unique and intense, so are its players. Meeting people of all varieties, from all parts of the country, is one of rugby's greatest delights.

Rugby is a lot of things to a lot of people. It is challenging and playful, exuberant and exciting. There are always new things to learn and old limits to push aside. We hope you will love it as much as we do. Thanks for reading.

THE END