

RUGBY

Around the world, football is played in many codes. Today, rugby is played in two different codes, "Rugby Union" and "Rugby League". Union was the first version of the two. League originated from Union and is a very different game. Since Union is the version played by most clubs in North America the below material will focus on Rugby Union LAWS. (Rules in Rugby Union are referred to as laws.)

Teams & Player Positions

The most popular & the traditional version of rugby has 15 players per side and is played for two 40-minute halves. A scaled-down version with 7 players per side & 7 minute halves is common in tournament play. Rugby can also be played in an recreational (non-tackle) way by using "touch" or "flag" rules. Regardless of the number of players, the positions on the field can be divided into two categories: forwards & backs. Forwards tend to be involved in close physical play; particularly restarts. Backs tend to be involved in more expansive passing & kicking roles. However, a key aspect of rugby is that all players have similar responsibilities when in open play. Any player can carry the ball, tackle an opponent, pass & kick the ball or anything else that the game requires.

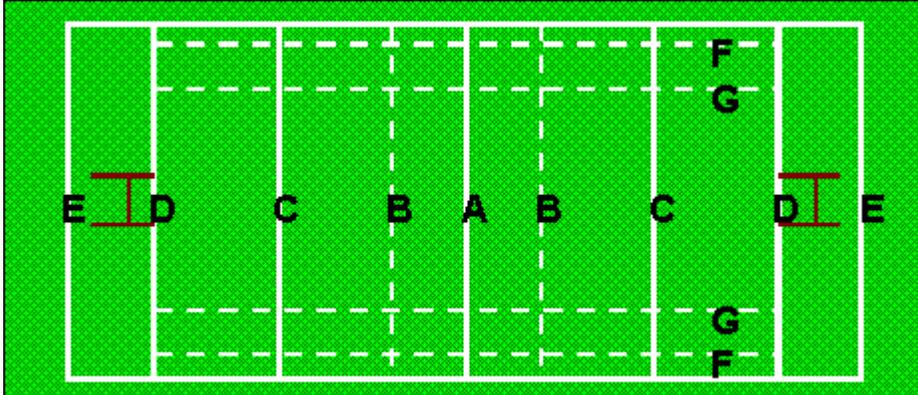
Below are the 15 positions, by jersey number, along with a brief role description.

Positions 1-8 are the forwards, 9-15 are the backs.

#1 Loosehead Prop	Supports the hooker in scrums & the jumpers in lineouts. Called loosehead because in scrums his head is outside that of the opposing prop. Their head is to the LEFT. *Loose & Left both begin with the letter L.
#2 Hooker	Hooks (heels) the ball back in scrums and often throws the ball into lineouts.
#3 Tighthead Prop	Similar duties as the loosehead prop. Called tighthead because in scrums his head fits between the oppositions loosehead prop & hooker. The Tighthead is on the right side of the scrum. *Right & Tight rhyme.
#4 Lock	Provides the main push in scrums & catches the ball in lineouts. Often the tallest players on the field. They are also known as the "second row".
#5 Lock	See #4
#6 Flanker	Pursues the ball in loose play & supports the jumpers in lineouts. Some teams designate a right & left flanker, while others designate one to always play closest to the touch side (blind side) and the other to always play the opposite side (open side). Also known as "wing forward".
#7 Flanker	See #6.
#8 Eight-Man	Guides the ball to the scrum-half at the back of the scrum & sometimes attacks with the ball from their position. They are also a key defensive player.
#9 Scrum Half	Distributes the ball out from scrums & other breakdowns, they require good hands and sharp decision-making abilities.
#10 Fly Half	A play-maker who elects to pass the ball to the backs, kick for position, or to run with the ball. Must be a communicator through-out the game & helps to call defenses too.
#11 Left Wing	A speedy runner whose job is often to finish attacking plays past the oppositions goal line. They are very important in defense as well.
#12 Inside Centre	A physical back who can carry the ball in traffic and create running situations for teammates to exploit.
#13 Outside Centre	Similar to the inside centre..
#14 Right Wing	See #11
#15 Fullback	Provides a last line of defense against running attacks & tactical kicks from the other team. Can also join their teammates in attack.

The Field & Equipment

A rugby field is known as the “pitch”. It measures 100 meters long by 69 meters wide. An H-shaped goalpost is situated on each try line. The posts are 5.6 meters apart with the crossbar set at 3 meters. The height of the posts varies. Here is a diagram of a pitch with the important lines marked:



- A: Solid line 50 meters from either try line. A halfway line.
- B: Dashed lines 10 meters from half-line used to judge kickoffs.
- C: Solid lines 22 meters from either goal line. Think of the Blue Line in ice hockey.
- D: Solid goal lines. The crossbars are above this line. Called the TRY or Goal line.
- E: Solid dead-ball lines, 10 to 22 meters behind goal line. It marks the end zone.
- F: Dashed lines 5 meters parallel to the touch line are for line-outs.
- G: Dashed lines 15 meters parallel to the touch line are also for line-outs.

Compared to other contact sports such as North American grid iron football & ice hockey, rugby players need very little protective equipment. The mandatory rugby uniform consists of a jersey, shorts, socks & appropriate footwear (“boots”). Optional protective equipment includes mouth guards, soft headgear (“scrum caps”), shin guards (for hookers), and light padding (approx 1 cm thick) on the shoulders & torso. Most players forgo wearing extra equipment. However, all youth players are required to wear teeth protection.

Basic Rules & Penalties

Despite its appearance to new spectators as a chaotic game, rugby has “laws”. There are 22 laws. Below are the key laws which shape the game:

1. A player ahead of the ball can't participate or influence the game. This is known as “offside”. Therefore,
 - a. No forward passes, as the receiver would be by definition offside. The ball may only be advanced forward by running with it in hand or by kicking it with a foot.
 - b. No blocking or “obstruction” is allowed.
 - c. When the ball is kicked, any player ahead of the kick is immediately offside until they get behind either the kicker or someone who was behind the kicker at the kick. The kicker and other players can put an offside player on side.
2. Dropping or fumbling the ball forward is called a knock-on and is prohibited.
3. Only the ball carrier can be tackled. Dangerous or high tackles & tripping aren't allowed.
 - a. When tackled to the ground, the ball carrier must release the ball. The game is only played by players that are on their feet.
 - b. The tackler must release the ball carrier if they are on the ground. A tackler must attempt to wrap the ball carrier with their arms when tackling.

The complete & current laws of rugby union can be found at the WORLD RUGBY, (formerly the International Rugby Board) website. World Rugby is the governing body of rugby union, 15's & 7's, in all countries around the world.

A referee enforces the laws during the game. The referee is also responsible for tracking game time, stopping the game for injuries, signaling scores and various other duties. Two "touch judges" working from the sidelines assist the referee by marking where the ball goes out of bounds ("into touch"), indicating which team controls the subsequent lineout, the success (or failure) of goal kicks, and other procedural matters. Only when assigned, touch judges can act as Assistant Referees. Players are expected to respect the referee & officials at all times. In rugby, the referee can be thought of as the policeman, the jury and the judge in all situations. Players learn to enjoy this manner of officiating.

Minor infractions, such as knock-ons or forward passes, result in a scrum awarded to the non-offending team. The referee, however, may elect not to stop the game if the non-offending team has the ball in a favorable situation at that moment. This is known as playing "advantage". The referee may elect to halt play & call a scrum when it appears the advantage is over.

Serious infractions, such as offside & violent or dangerous play, result in a penalty. The referee will indicate a "mark" where the penalty occurred & the offending team must immediately retreat 10 meters. The non-penalized team has several ways in which to take advantage of a penalty.

If the mark is within the team kicker's range, the kicker may attempt an uncontested place kick for goal. If successful this scores 3 points and play is restarted with a kick off at half. If unsuccessful, the penalized team must still give the ball back to the other team by a drop kick from behind its own 22-meter line. This is known as a "22-meter dropout". They may "tap" kick the ball through the mark & pass it to a teammate or they may kick the ball into touch & receive the ball for the subsequent lineout.

Penalties involving violent or dangerous play can earn a more serious punishment. The referee can show a YELLOW CARD and send the offending player off the field for a time (the "sin bin" - during which his team must play short-handed) or he can show a RED CARD and eject the player from the game altogether. The offending team will then play short the rest of the match.

Playing the Game

Game Start: The game begins with one team kicking off to the other. The ball is kicked from the 50-meter line & must travel at least 10 meters & land in bounds. From that point, the game is continuous & will restart as soon as possible after any stoppage of play. There are no timeouts in rugby.

Halftime: at the end of the first half, the referee stops the game for a 5-minute break. The teams switch directions and the team that received the ball to start the game kicks off to start the second half.

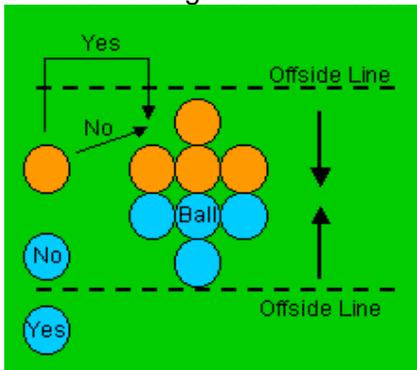
Scoring: there are only 2 ways to score in rugby; by getting the ball across the goal line & touching it to the ground (known as a "TRY") OR by (place or drop) kicking the ball through the goal posts.

A try is worth 5 points, and the scoring team is allowed to attempt a conversion kick after the TRY for an additional 2 points. The conversion kick is made from a point in line to where the ball was touched down. Therefore the total scoring potential from a TRY is 7 points. Any other kick (whether by drop kick or penalty kick) through the posts is worth 3 points. After a score, the scored-upon team kicks the ball off to the scoring team (except in Sevens matches).

Rucks & Mauls: as the ball carrier runs up field, they could be tackled. At the point of tackle, either a ruck or a maul will develop as one or more players from each team attempt to push the other team back & keep or gain possession of the ball. The primary difference between the two situations is whether the ball &/or ball carrier is on the ground (ruck) or off the ground (maul).

With either a ruck or maul, an imaginary offside line is created behind the last player from either team in the ruck or maul. Any player who is not already bound into the breakdown may only enter the play from behind this line. Failure to observe this rule results in a penalty awarded to the other team. There is also an imaginary gate within which players must join a ruck. The width of the ruck gate is determined by the ball carrier involved in the breakdown when it first started. All players at a ruck other than the initial ball carrier & tackler must stay on their feet. Players can't leave their feet.

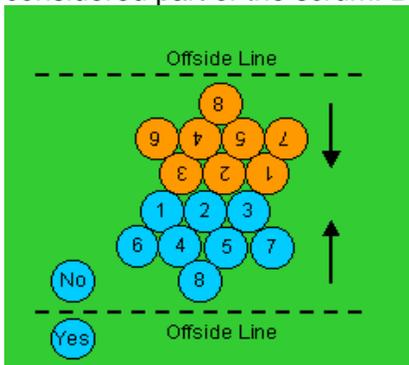
Below is a diagram of a ruck with the offside lines indicated:



The orange player in the upper left is currently offside. In order to enter the ruck, they must circle behind the hind most player and bind in from that back side. The blue team has won possession of the ball and will want to initiate an offensive phase of play. The blue player at lower left must set up for a pass behind the offside line; anyone ahead of the line cannot take a pass or influence the game. Players must be onside to be eligible to take part in play. Allowing ones self to be offside is against the law.

Scrum: if anything is the signature play of rugby, it's the scrum. A scrum can be equated to a face-off in ice hockey; it is a "restart". Done properly, it's a contest of power, timing, leverage & teamwork rolled into one. Here's how it works: the 8 forwards (known as the "pack") from each team bind together in a very specific manner (see diagram below). The other team's pack does likewise. Upon the referee's command, the two packs join into each other at the front line of each pack (the props & hookers). As the packs maintain constant pressure, the scrum-half from the team awarded the scrum puts the ball on the ground into the tunnel between the two front lines from his loose-head prop's side. As the ball enters the tunnel both packs attempt to drive the other backward while the hookers attempt to heel the ball backward. As it becomes clear which pack is winning the scrum, the scrum-half from that team will run to the back of the pack to pick up the ball & resume play, usually with passing the ball out to the fly-half.

The scrum establishes the same kind of offside line as does a ruck or maul. That is, any players not in the scrum must be behind the last player involved in it, which is typically the 8-man. A scrum-half is considered part of the scrum. Below is a diagram of a scrum with the offside lines indicated:



The blue player in the lower left must set up for a pass by being behind the Number 8 player.

Lineouts: the lineout restart is used only when the ball travels into touch. It is usually a situation involving forwards. They line up in two rows perpendicular to the touch line at one-metre apart. The number of players in the lineout may vary. Once the lines are established, the hooker from the team who did not take the ball into touch controls the lineout. The team throwing in might call a signal indicating which person on their team is to receive the ball. They will then throw the ball straight through the air between the two lines. Once the ball is in the air, all players can compete for it.

Back Play: players not involved directly in a breakdown or restart constantly prepare and adjust for a next phase of play, which may be offensive or defensive depending on which team possesses the ball.

In a defensive alignment, the backs form a straight line across the pitch with each player lined up across from an attacking back. When the ball is passed out from the forwards, the defending backs challenge the attackers while maintaining a straight defensive line. The idea is to shut down the attack as quickly as possible while avoiding the creation of any gaps in the defensive line that the attackers can exploit.

In an offensive alignment, the backs often form a (slightly) diagonal line across the pitch. The idea is that when a ball carrier runs up field, they will have teammates running with them to whom they can pass the ball, all passes must be lateral or somewhat backward. Ball carriers & their teammates can also use stunts to advance the ball. The two most common stunts are the loop and the switch. In a loop, the ball carrier passes the ball & then immediately runs behind & around the receiver in order to receive another pass themselves. In a switch, the receiver makes a hard cut toward & behind the passer, effectively reversing the flow of play. Both plays attempt to catch the defenders off-guard & create a gap in the defensive line.

Below is a diagram of two opposing back lines in a scrum situation. Notice the offside lines.

The blue pack is winning the ball, so the blue backs line up to attack in a next phase of play. Notice the fullback (15) has moved into the attack line to create an overload. The orange defenders have moved out to cover each attacker from the outside in. Now orange must rely on its flanker to take out the blue fly-half (10). Orange's fullback must remain back in case blue runs through the defensive line or kicks the ball over heads.

Kicking: the game calls for kicks in certain situations, such as the start of the game & after tries. A team will designate a kicker for these situations. However, rugby also permits kicking in open play – and by any player! Here are a few examples:

Grubber – the ball carrier will kick the ball forward on the ground past the defenders who are rushing toward him. Remember, they can't be tackled without the ball! After the kick, they & their teammates will attempt to outrun the defenders to recover the ball. Since the attackers have forward momentum when kicking, this is sometimes an effective way to break through the defensive line.

Chip – this has the same tactical purpose as a grubber, but the kick is booted in the air over the defenders instead of on the ground. The kicker will attempt to catch the ball before it hits the ground or on a bounce so that they can maintain full forward momentum.

Up & Under – the ball carrier will kick the ball high into the air but not very far. This puts a great deal of pressure on the defenders to catch & hold the ball in the face of the onrushing kicking team.

Defensive kick – if the ball carrier is within their own 22-meter line, their team is relatively close to their own goal line. Therefore, the ball carrier may kick the ball away to lessen pressure. If the ball goes into touch without contact from any players, the other team will get a lineout at the point that it went out. So

a kick from behind the 22-meter line will turn the ball over to the other team, but hopefully at some distance away. The same play can be made anywhere on the field, but if it's done ahead of the 22-meter line & goes out of touch without contacting the ground or another player, the other team is awarded the line-out at the point of kick, thus negating any advantage from the kick.

Drop kick at goal – a ball carrier may attempt to drop kick the ball through the goal posts while running (a drop kick means the ball must hit the ground before the kicker's foot touches it). If successful, this scores 3 points. This is difficult to do for many players.

After the Game

Despite its intense & competitive nature on the field, rugby is a very friendly & social game off the field. Any hostilities developed during the game are left on the field. In rugby, it's traditional for the home team to host the visitors for food & refreshments after the game. During this post-game social event, players talk the game over with teammates, referees and opponents alike.