

The Evolution of the Obstruction Law

Major Project

Evolution of Obstruction Law

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When studying the evolution of the Obstruction Law, it needs to be split into two sections. Firstly, it is important to look at and summarize the physical changes that have taken place in this particular Law since the inception of the game. To do this it was necessary to study all available Law Books and to note how the wording of the Law had evolved over time. Secondly, it was necessary to examine how the interpretation of the Law has changed over time. To do this I have watched videos and interviewed current and past referees and coaches to try to understand how referees have managed this Law, especially in the past 20 years.

Changes in the wording of the Obstruction Law

1881:

In 1881, the only mention of obstruction came in Law 23.

Law 23 – “Every player when off side is out of the game, and shall not touch the ball in any case whatever, either in or out of touch or goal, or in any way interrupt (intentionally) or obstruct any player, until he is again on side.”

1897:

By 1897, the structure of the Law Book had changed and obstruction appeared in Law 11 which dealt with penalties and free kicks.

Law 11 – “Free kicks by way of penalty shall be awarded if any player-

- e) Illegally tackles, charges or obstructs.
- g) Not himself running at the ball, charges or obstructs an opponent not holding the ball.
- h) Not in a scrummage, wilfully obstructs his opponents’ backs by standing on his opponents’ side of the ball when it is in a scrummage.”

1900:

In 1900, the Laws were published in the RFU Annual and the wording was changed to do with obstruction. The Laws now included some explanatory notes.

Law 11 - "Free kicks by way of penalty shall be awarded if any player-

e) Illegally tackles, charges or obstructs. In cases where two players of opposite sides are running for the ball, a player overtaking another may not shove the overtaken player from behind, if he does it is illegal, and should be penalised by a free kick.

i) Not himself running at the ball, charges or obstructs an opponent not holding the ball. A Referee deciding that it was illegal tackling gave a free kick for a wing forward bustling the other wing forward, that is: trying to keep him on side.

j) Not in a scrummage, wilfully obstructs his opponents' backs by standing on his opponents' side of the ball when it is in a scrummage. This prohibits the habit of three-quarter and half-backs standing in front of the ball, so as to mark the opposing backs; and should be strictly enforced. It should be pointed out that it is not intended thereby to penalise a half-back who unintentionally over-runs the ball in a scrummage."

1905:

In this particular year the structure of the Law Book changed and within Law 11, obstruction had its own sub-heading. The wording of the Law did not change however.

1908:

In 1908, obstruction was first recognized as foul play and under Law 3 (Referee and touch judges) it was noted that a player could now be sent off for obstruction offences. Obstruction still appeared in Law 11 in the same manner as 1905.

1928:

For 20 years, there were no significant changes, but in 1928, 'charging and obstruction' became its own Law (Law 19). The wording did not significantly change, with the main part being section a) which read:

Law 19 a) – “No player running for the ball shall charge an opponent also running for the ball, except shoulder to shoulder. A player who is not running for the ball must not charge or obstruct an opponent not holding the ball.”

1930:

In 1930, an index appeared in the Law Book for the first time, however Law 19 'Charging and Obstruction' did not change.

1932:

In 1932, a new part was added to Law 19 which read:

Law 19 e) – “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.” All other parts of the law remained the same.

1938:

In 1938, the only major change was the numbering of the laws. 'Charging and Obstruction' changed from Law 19 to Law 20.

1939 – 1954:

I was unable to obtain any Law Books for this period of time.

1955:

The 1955 Law Book varied only slightly from 1938. A very useful note for the guidance of referees was however added. This is the first explanation of the obstruction that is so contentious in modern day rugby.

Law 20 – Notes for the guidance of referees – “An off-side player wilfully running or standing in front of another of his team who is in possession of the ball, thereby preventing an opponent from reaching the latter player, should be penalised for obstruction. Similarly, a penalty kick for obstruction should be given if a player with the ball shields himself behind one of his own team.”

1958:

In 1958, there were two major changes to the Obstruction Law. The notes for guidance of referees became part of the Law to read.

Law 20 – “It is illegal for any player

- f) who is off-side wilfully to run or stand in front of another player of his own team who is in possession of the ball, thereby preventing an opponent from reaching the latter player, or
- g) who being an outside player in scrummage, to move outwards when the ball has been obtained by his team and is emerging from the back of the scrum., thereby preventing an opponent from advancing round the scrum.”

1965:

By 1965, the structure of Law 20 had changed, however no new wording was in place dealing with obstruction. Law 20 was now called ‘Charging, Obstruction, Foul Play and Misconduct’, and dealt with all forms of foul play.

1969:

In 1969, obstruction fell under Law 26, ‘Obstruction, Foul Play, Misconduct, Repeated Infringements’ with its own sub-section with six parts:

Law 26 – “It is illegal for any player:-

- a) who is running for the ball to charge or push an opponent also running for the ball, except shoulder to shoulder,
- b) who is in an off-side position, wilfully to run or stand in front of another player of his team who is carrying the ball, thereby preventing an opponent from reaching the latter player,
- c) who is carrying the ball after it has come out of a scrummage, ruck, maul or line-out, to attempt to force his way through the players of his team in front of him,
- d) who is an outside player in a scrummage or ruck to prevent an opponent from advancing round the scrummage or ruck,
- e) wilfully to knock or throw the ball from the field of play into touch, touch-in-goal or over his dead-ball-line,
- f) wilfully to waste time or wilfully to infringe any Law for which the penalty is a scrummage.”

1977:

In 1977, the format of Law 26 changed slightly. The Law was now called 'Obstruction, Unfair Play, Foul Play, Misconduct, Repeated Infringements'. With the introduction of Unfair Play, this took points e) and f) away from the 1969 Obstruction Law and put them under the heading of Unfair Play. This left just four points in the Obstruction Law.

1991:

From 1977 to 1991 there were no changes in the Obstruction Law. By 1991, Law 26 was called 'Foul Play' and 'Obstruction' was a sub-heading. The same four points still remained under this heading, however some explanatory notes were added at the end to help referees. These notes were:

“i) There are no circumstances in which a player carrying the ball can be penalised for obstruction.

ii) The referee should note that:-

- a) The intention of this Law as regards the penalties to be imposed for serious forms of obstruction must be applied.
- b) If a player is guilty of charging or obstructing or holding an opponent who is not carrying the ball or any other form of foul play, before any other action is taken the player must at once be cautioned or ordered off. If he offends a second time, the referee has no alternative to ordering him off. If the offence prevents a try which probably would otherwise have been scored, a penalty try must be awarded.
- c) The intention of the International Board is that if the referee has any doubt as to the balance of probability, he should give the benefit of the doubt in favour of the non-offending team and award the penalty try.”

2000:

In 2000, 'Foul Play' was now Law 10 and the wording of the Obstruction component changed slightly, with the explanatory notes being removed and an extra point e) being added. The Law now read:

Law 10 – Foul Play

1. "Obstruction
 - a) Charging or pushing. When a player and an opponent are running for the ball, either player must not charge or push the other except shoulder to shoulder.
 - b) Blocking the tackler. A player must not voluntarily move or stand in front of a team mate carrying the ball, so that an opponent is prevented from reaching the ball carrier.
 - c) Ball-carrier running into team-mate at a set place. A player carrying the ball after it has left a scrum, ruck, maul or line-out must not run into team-mates in front of the player.
 - d) Flanker obstructing opposing scrum-half. A flanker in a scrum must not prevent an opposing scrum-half from advancing around the scrum.
 - e) A player carrying the ball cannot be penalised for obstruction under any circumstances."

2001:

In 2001, the Obstruction component of Law 10 grew from five points to seven points, however, not a great deal of new material appeared. The Law now read:

Law 10 – Foul Play

1. "Obstruction
 - a) Charging or pushing. When a player and an opponent are running for the ball, either player must not charge or push the other except shoulder to shoulder.
 - b) Running in front of a ball-carrier. A player must not voluntarily move or stand in front of a team-mate carrying the ball, thereby preventing opponents from tackling the current ball-carrier, or the opportunity to tackle potential ball-carriers when they gain possession.
 - c) Blocking the tackler. A player must not voluntarily move or stand in a position that prevents an opponent from tackling a ball-carrier.

- d) Blocking the ball. A player must not voluntarily move or stand in a position that prevents an opponent from playing the ball.
- e) Ball-carrier running into team-mate at a set place. A player carrying the ball after it has left a scrum, ruck, maul or line-out must not run into team-mates in front of the player.
- f) Flanker obstructing opposing scrum-half. A flanker in a scrum must not prevent an opposing scrum-half from advancing around the scrum.
- g) A player carrying the ball cannot be penalised for obstruction under any circumstances.”

From this study it can be seen that although there have been numerous changes to the structure and wording of the Obstruction Law, since 1955 the intention of the Law has remained fairly similar. Since then this Law has been refined, broken down and simplified to make it clearer for referees, players and spectators alike.

Interpretation of the Obstruction Law

The second part of this project has been to study how the interpretation of the Obstruction Law has changed, especially in more recent times (the last 20 years). To do this I have interviewed referees, player coaches and referee coaches to obtain an understanding of any changes in interpretation that may have occurred.

The main two areas of concern that arise in the interpretation of the Obstruction Law come from Law 10 1(b) and 1(c). The first of these, 1(b) caused a lot of concern during 2000 and more recently 1(c) has caused concern as more and more teams were placing players in the 'post' position at the rucks and mauls. This 'post' position is a place in front of the last feet, right beside rucks and mauls that stops possible defenders getting to the attackers. There has not really been a disagreement about whether this should be tolerated, but rather there has been a problem in that referees have not been effectively identifying these offending players. These offending players caused a lot of problems throughout 2001 but since then, referees in general have trained themselves to look for these players and either manage them away from these positions or have them penalized accordingly.

The bigger of the two problems, 1(b) came to a head in 2000 when many teams were placing a lot of players, some as decoy runners, in front of the ball-carrier during back-line play in an attempt to confuse opposition defenders.

As I interviewed more and more experts the same themes began to emerge. According to Peter Fenton, the use of 'decoy runners' did not come into the game until the time of the Ella's and so obstruction as we know it today was not as much of a problem. However, consensus has it that since the early 80's, the use of 'decoy runners' and the placement of attacking players in front of the ball in order to impede/distract possible defenders has risen dramatically. According to most interviewed, including Jeff Sayle and Roger Higgins, obstruction was at its greatest just prior to 2000. In 2000, referees saw it as a huge problem and probably over penalised this area of the game. Any player that ended up in front of his/her ball-carrying team-mate was penalised, whether he/she impeded a defender or not.

The views of the aforementioned gentlemen were spot on, as it was in 2000 that the IRB, after much pressure from England and France, released a directive to referees on how to referee this law. The IRB believed that Rugby was becoming too much like Rugby League in that attacking runners were 'taking out' players who may not only have been possible defenders of the immediate ball-carrier, but they may perhaps have been possible defenders of support players (ie: future ball-carriers). To support its' directive to crack down on obstruction offenders, the IRB produced a video with 20 examples of 'so-called' obstruction that referees should be dealing with.

Unfortunately, in most of the examples (about 15 of the 20), no real obstruction had taken place and the IRB was directing referees to move away from the written law and start to penalise any player who got himself/herself in front of the ball-carrier.

Even though many test referees, such as Wayne Erickson and Peter Marshall didn't agree with the IRB's directive, it did have the effect of making them give the benefit of the doubt in favour of the defender which was a definitive change in interpretation which was observed by all and commented on by Jeff Sayle, Peter Fenton and Roger Higgins.

Since this crackdown in 2000, referees have stepped back slightly and have generally got the interpretation correct, according to those interviewed. Referees have realised that it simply comes down to the question: 'Was a tackler impeded?' Peter Fenton raised an interesting point here by saying that although referees are generally getting this area of the game correct still, too often they favour the attacking side when in doubt. He posed the question that how does a referee know if a defender has been impeded? He claimed that a good player, although impeded, will change his line to try to reach the ball-carrier with a less direct route rather than hoping that the referee will penalise the obstruction offence. In this case he believes that referees often play on rather than giving the benefit of the doubt to the defender.

Overall, it was agreed that in the past 15 years, coaches have used ‘decoy runners’ more and more and only in this time has obstruction been an issue. It reached its highest levels in 1999 at which time there was an over-zealous crackdown by referees after a directive that was issued by the IRB. This has eased since then, and it is widely believed that at present, the refereeing of obstruction in terms of back-line play, is generally very good.

In summary, the major problems that have always occurred in the refereeing of obstruction are:

- a) Should a player in front of a ball-carrying team-mate always be penalised for obstruction?
- b) Should any decoy runner that does not receive the ball be guilty of obstruction, or should he only have to be in a position to take the pass to avoid being penalised?

After studying the evolution of the Obstruction Law and the way that it has been interpreted in recent years, I believe that this law is a simple one, and should not be seen as confusing. The simple fact of the matter is that if a player, who is in front of a ball-carrying team-mate gets in the way of the defender, who is trying to get to the ball, ball-carrier or possible ball carrier, then he/she should be penalised for obstruction, if no advantage follows. If this is still too confusing, referees can think to themselves the following:- In a possible obstruction scenario, who has initiated contact? If it is the attacker, then obstruction has occurred, and if it is the defender, then obstruction has not occurred. I do however believe that this test sometimes complicates the issue and may encourage the ‘milking’ of penalties and all that a referee really needs to be sure of is that if an attacker, in front of the ball-carrier, impedes a defender, stopping him/her getting to the ball, ball-carrier or potential ball-carrier, then obstruction has occurred.

Bibliography:

- All of the available Rugby Union Law Books from 1881 to 2001.
- ‘Why the Whistle Went’, E.W. Kann, 1947.