

## **Level 3 Assignment:**

**Is the ‘jackal’ (a player contesting for the ball at the tackle situation; on their feet but contesting the ball with their hands) a positive or negative aspect within the modern game of rugby union?**

Most fans of rugby union wish to watch a contest between two teams that display skill, demonstrate physical and mental toughness, advertise athletic ability and hopefully show a diversity of playing styles. There are, however, two particular aspects of the game, and the manner in which they are managed by on-field officials, that appear to cause confusion and frustration (for spectators, coaches and players alike). They are the management of the scrum, and the contentious management of the post-tackle situation; namely the actions of the defensive player who attempts to ‘play’ the ball with his/her hands (for the purposes of this paper, this individual will be referred to as ‘the jackal’). This paper will propose consideration of an adaptation to the law surrounding the post-tackle situation that may lessen the burden upon on-field officials and also create greater attacking space on the field; ultimately leading to (hopefully) a better spectacle and more even contest.

In attempting to ensure that there is always a genuine contest at the breakdown, decision-makers within the International Rugby Board (IRB) have repeatedly modified the management of the contest over the past decade. At certain periods of time, the management of the contest has favoured the attacking team; at others, the defending team. The approach to be delivered for consideration in this paper may create a more even, albeit different, contest at the tackle situation. At the very least, it will provide ‘food for thought’ in relation to the issue, as I believe the greatest issue relating to the rights of the Jackal is whether or not an actual ruck has formed at the time that they make a ‘grab’ for the ball.

I am of the belief that the current management of the tackle situation allows for defenders (particularly those defenders close to the tackle situation, often referred to as ‘tackle assists’) to have greater access to the ball on the ground than supporting attacking players. This is because those ‘close’ defenders not immediately involved in the tackle (but still within ‘the gate’, or with the ability to quickly step in to it) have far less distance to travel to contest the ball. In the case of a ‘tackle assist’ (who is already inside of the gate), he/she is often in a position to merely arch to ground over the ball carrier and ‘drag back’ scooping the ball up in the process. While this action by the player is both incredibly skilful and courageous (in a lot of situations), I believe that it unfortunately has a negative impact on the game.

Conversely, supporting attacking players (particularly those that are attempting to participate with an expansive mindset, and are not simply operating as a ‘pod’) have to travel so much further to enter the contest. I believe this has the adverse effect of stifling attacking enterprise on the field. While there is obviously a requirement for close support of the ball carrier going into contact, I believe that there is too much advantage for the defensive side – particularly in regards to the management of ‘the Jackal’ by the referees

This aspect is very difficult for referees to manage accurately. While the main issues of concern are whether 'the Jackal' has fully released the ball carrier and/or the ball whilst participating in the tackle, whether the Jackal has used the player on the ground to leverage themselves back onto and over the ball, and whether the Jackal has legally entered the contest, there are other more intricate aspects that require considerable attention to ensure an accurate interpretation of the Jackal's actions; namely, whether the Jackal has actually grabbed onto the ball for an appropriate period of time and whether the Jackal is supporting his/her own weight (or whether they are kneeling on/being supported by the player on the ground). This is a complex and demanding interpretation that has to be carried out by the referee in addition to their management of the greater ruck contest. To that end, I put forward the following proposed adaptation to the current management of the post-tackle situation:

*.....that a player from either side (attacking or defensive) has to win the 'space' past the ball before an arriving player from their team can pick the ball up and play it.....*

The question could rightly be asked – what is the desired outcome from this proposed amendment to the current interpretation of the law? Put simply, the expected outcome would be to create a more 'even' contest for both attacking and defending teams at the post-tackle situation.

#### **Scenario to be considered:**

*A ball carrier and a tackler go to ground in the tackle. A supporting attacking player (SAP) clears out over and past the ball, uncontested. Defending players, sitting to the left and right of the tackle in the defensive line, choose not to contest the SAP as he/she goes over and past the ball. The proposal is that the attacking team is the only team with 'rights' to the ball, as the defending team have chosen not to contest the ruck/tackle, or have not committed numbers to the contest. Defenders cannot simply choose to contest the next arriving attacking players or wait until the SAP has cleared the contact zone. For the defensive side to engage in the contest they must engage the SAP; driving him/her back off the ball, or they could beat the SAP to the ball and go past the ball on the ground first. This requires the defending team to commit players to the tackle/ruck; therefore, opening up space elsewhere on the field for attacking opportunity.*

In creating a contest that requires players to go past the ball (in order to maintain or secure possession), there will inevitably be a greater requirement to commit 'numbers' to the post-tackle contest if a side wishes to win the contest. I believe this would have a desired effect of opening up 'space' elsewhere on the field. To support this concept, use of the feet in and around the ball to get past the ball should be allowed within the laws of the game. As long as the feet are in the immediate proximity of the ball, and the foot is moving in a forward-to-back motion, as opposed to 'up and down' (stomping), it should be allowed to remove the issue of 'hands on the ball' and tacklers deliberately rolling onto or over the ball in attempt to, at the very least, slow down play of the ball. Additionally, Stricter application from the referees in regards to players supporting their own body weight (within the laws of the game) should be applied.

By removing the Jackal's ability to play the ball on the ground with his/her hands, management of the post-tackle contest should be limited to:

- The tackler releasing and rolling away
- The tackled player releasing the ball
- Arriving players entering through the gate
- Arriving SAPs and defenders attempting to win the space 'past' the ball – most importantly, on their feet and supporting their own body weight.

In the event of 'unplayable' ball, the team that wins the space past the ball (or at the very least is going forward) gets the feed to the scrum. While this proposal is a return to a previous application of law, it would seem to me to be a more sensible approach than the current methodology, which rewards defensive teams whose main focus is on suffocating (making the ball unplayable) the post-tackle contest in order to win the right to feed the ensuing scrum.

Argument could be made that this proposed management of the post-tackle contest would lead to an approach that saw attacking teams send trailing SAPs after the ball carrier, with the express intent of 'sealing off' over and past the ball. While there were teams in the past (particularly in the then Super 12 competition) that, under slightly different management of the post-tackle contest, looked to adopt this approach (and subsequently 'string' together multiple phases), I believe that teams with an 'offensive' approach to their defensive system could contest this approach through an effective counter-rucking strategy.

Opponents of this approach might also argue that with the focus being on players winning the space 'past' the ball, players arriving at the ruck might recklessly 'launch' their bodies into the contest as torpedoes, creating potentially dangerous situations. I don't believe this adjustment to the contest would significantly alter the approach of players (or coaches) to contesting the breakdown; the key to management of this adjustment would be that arriving players 'keep their feet' and don't 'dive in' (attempt to seal off). Similarly, harsh penalties for players that leave their feet to ensure violent contact at the contest would ultimately prove a deterrent to this type of foul play.

The point may be raised that if a team defending is soundly beaten to the contact zone by SAPs, then how would 'late' arriving (defending) players enter the contest (particularly if the SAPs have blown 5-10 metres past the ball)? I would suggest that they couldn't. They can set a new defensive posture (including closing off the attacking channel straight through the middle of the ruck), but as they haven't participated in the initial contest, and have no desire to enter the gate some 5-10 metres behind the contact zone, they have no option but to set for the next phase of play in defence.

There is no doubt that the concept proposed in this paper is a contentious matter; particularly the element relating to the use of feet in the ruck to ensure the gaining of

space past the ball. That said, the concept as a discussion point is an important and ongoing element in the modern development of the game of rugby union, where the post-tackle situation has always been a 'point-of-difference' with other contact/collision sports. A focus on winning the space 'past' the ball, rather than the often-arbitrary management of the contest in its current application, would appear to be a positive move for the game.

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