

ADVANTAGE

by

Milead Khoury

Level III Major Project

Of the twenty-six Laws of the game of Rugby, the Advantage law is the most subjective because the determination of whether or not an advantage has been gained by the non-offending team is at the discretion of the referee. This subjectivity makes the Advantage law widely discussed among participants because of the divergence of opinion as to what constitutes an advantage, and the impact that the application of the law can have on the spectacle of the game.

It is interesting to note that the Advantage law precedes all other laws related to the actual playing of the game. This, together with the obligation placed on referees by the law to not whistle for an infringement when the non-offending team gains an advantage, reinforces one of the paramount philosophies of play, continuity.

Law 8 states:

The referee shall not whistle for an infringement during play, which is followed by an advantage gained by the non-offending team. An advantage must be territorial or such possession of the ball as constitutes an obvious tactical advantage. A mere opportunity to gain advantage is not sufficient.

The Captain's Choice

Historically the non-offending team's captain decided whether or not he wanted play to continue after an infringement occurred. But having made the decision to play on, would the referee come back if the captain had made a poor choice? I think not.

In deciding whether or not to play advantage the suggestion is that the referee should put himself in the place of the non-offending team's captain and consider what the non-offending team would want. In other words would they want play to continue?

Unfortunately coaches and players want to eat their cake and have it too. They demand as much scope as possible to obtain an advantage, and if it does not accrue they want to return to the place of infringement where they will receive the benefit of any sanction following an infringement.

Leaving aside the issue of "two bites of the cherry", having the referee put himself in the place of the non-offending team's captain is sound. But it raises other issues.

How will the captain's choice be influenced by:

1. The time elapsed in the game?
2. Field position?
3. Momentum of the non-offending team?
4. Score?
5. Bonus points?
6. Weather?
7. Injured players?

The question to be asked is will the captain's choice be consistent, or vary with any or all of those circumstances? And more significantly from a referee perspective, how will those factors affect the application of Advantage?

What is Advantage?

If you ask this question the variation in answers from referees, players, coaches and even spectators would be vast. Some answers would suggest an outcome such as scoring a try, while others in contrast would say that possession of the ball is sufficient advantage.

To properly apply the Advantage law, referees need to:

1. Define and understand the concept of advantage generally
2. Understand what possession or territorial gain satisfies the test of an obvious tactical advantage
3. Identify when an advantage has been gained, or alternatively recognise those situations where advantage will not accrue

Taking a "plain English" definition, advantage is:

any state, circumstance, opportunity, or means specially favourable to success, interest, or any desired outcome.

Relating that definition to Rugby, advantage is any circumstance favourable to a desired outcome that accrues to the non-offending team as a result of an infringement by their opponent.

Noting this, consideration of what territorial gain or possession would constitute an obvious tactical advantage is needed. The construction of the Law does not distinguish territorial gain by itself as satisfying an advantage.

The territorial gain by the non-offending team, as with the gain of possession, must also be tactically advantageous. Without reference to an outcome, referees need to determine what gain of territory or possession satisfies the test of an obvious tactical advantage. As long as circumstances exist which place the non-offending team in an advantageous position, then an advantage will have accrued.

Referees also need to be aware that an opportunity to gain advantage is not sufficient. The referee needs to assess whether or not the non-offending team has gained an advantage, or alternatively recognise situations where an advantage to the non-offending team will not accrue.

Agreeing then on what constitutes advantage is difficult because of the diversity of opinions. The subjective element of the law creates an inherent potential for inconsistency in the application of Advantage.

The way the elements of Advantage are defined and understood by referees must influence the interpretation and application of the law.

Infringements

The nature of the infringement will have a bearing on the referee's application of Advantage.

Infringements fit into two (2) categories:

1. Penalty infringements
2. Non-penalty or minor infringements

Rather than looking at infringements this way, a distinction should be drawn between infringements, save for foul play, that occur when the infringing team is:

1. In possession
2. Not in possession

Generally infringements that occur when the offending team are in possession will have little effect on the non-offending team, other than to provide to them an opportunity to obtain possession. Referees should allow play to continue if the possession gained by the non-offending team is of the quality or better than that they would have received if play were stopped.

For example if the infringing team knock-on and the possession received by the non-offending team is as good as or better than that they would get from a scrummage then why stop play? The referee should allow play to continue. Indeed the infringing team may be vulnerable during the transition from being in possession to having to defend.

Infringements occurring when the infringing team is not in possession are more sinister. Usually they occur because the infringing team is attempting to destruct any flow that the non-offending team has been able, or are trying, to generate or they are trying to maintain an advantageous field position. The most common infringements in this situation occur at the breakdown or relate to offside.

In these circumstances the referee needs to look at how the continuity of the non-offending team has been interrupted.

Materiality

Before deciding whether or not to apply Advantage, the referee should determine if the infringement has affected play.

If the referee determines that the infringement has affected play he will stop play as prescribed by the Laws, subject to advantage.

If the infringement has had no affect, play should continue notwithstanding that an infringement has occurred.

Where play has been affected by the infringement the referee will then look at whether or not the circumstances following the infringement will allow the application of advantage.

Immediacy

Referees are guilty of waiting an opportunity to gain advantage rather than recognising circumstances where advantage may accrue. Often referees simply wait in the hope that some advantage may eventually come to the non-offending team.

The referees' thought process seems to be preoccupied with the 'penalty' following an infringement rather than with advantage. Evidence of this is where the referee signals advantage yet stays at the place of infringement while play continues.

Rather than thinking about the penalty, the referee should initially focus on the circumstances of play following the infringement and assess whether there is scope for advantage to accrue to the non-offending team:

After assessing this, the referee should then decide whether or not to stop play or allow play to continue.

If there is scope for advantage to accrue then the referee should allow the potential advantage to be realised by letting play continue. This is distinct from waiting in hope for advantage to accrue without assessing whether the circumstances allow a continuation of play.

If there is no scope for advantage play should be stopped and restarted in the appropriate way.

Proximity

In addition to the element of immediacy, the advantage must be proximate in time to the infringement. We often see play following an infringement pass through several phases before being brought back to the place of infringement. If for whatever reason we decide to apply Advantage, there comes a time where other events influence play. The infringement no longer has a bearing on what is happening.

Referees need to understand that the Advantage law is not intended to achieve an outcome for the non-offending team, but rather to allow a continuation of play where that team has favourable circumstances to achieve that outcome.

The referee is required to quickly determine whether or not advantageous circumstances will accrue to an actual advantage. Generally if an advantage has not been realised within the phase immediately following the infringement, then referee should stop play.

Consistency

Referees are often criticised for inconsistency when playing advantage. Players and coaches want to know that during a game the referee will rule on similar circumstances in a consistent manner.

Assume the following circumstances:

Team "A" (attacking) is in possession of the ball on their opponent's (Team "B") 22m line and 15m from the touch line to their right. At that point a ruck forms following a tackle. A player from Team "B" joins the ruck from the side and in front of the hindmost player of his team. This action slows the passage of the ball from the ruck to Team "A". The ball is passed along the Team "A" backline and the outside player is tackled into touch 3m from his opponent's goal line. The outside player received the ball from the player immediately inside him after that player had made a short break, beating his immediate opponent.

Noting these circumstances let us further assume that this scenario occurs in the *first ten (10) minutes* of the game.

1. Has the non-offending team gained an advantage? If the decision is that there has been an advantage gained, is it territorial or based on the gaining of possession? If the decision is that there has not been an advantage gained, consider why this is.
2. Should play have been allowed to continue as long as it had?

In this scenario the possession and the field position gave the non-offending team an advantage. A player was able to beat his man and this was unrelated to the infringement. If the referee had decided to play advantage then a decision to return to the place of infringement would be questionable in the circumstances.

Further assume that similar infringements occur on two other occasions during the game and in similar field positions. At both times the ball is put through the hands of the non-offending team's back line. On one of those occasions a try is scored by the non-offending team, at the other time the outside man is tackled into touch. There is now less than five (5) minutes left to play and Team "A" is two (2) points behind Team B. Team "A" have similar field position to that earlier outlined and are again attacking. Team "B" infringes as they had done previously, resulting in slowed possession to Team "A". Should the referee:

1. Play advantage?
2. Penalise immediately?

If the referee does not play advantage on this occasion, is that decision inconsistent given that advantage was played at other times in similar circumstances? Or are we able to distinguish these circumstances, having regard for the score and the time remaining to play?

Factors such as time in the game and score must affect the application of Advantage and should bear little on the issue of consistency.

What will be of importance regarding consistency is the soundness of the criteria established to determine what constitutes an obvious tactical advantage.

Does the application of advantage change?

The subjectivity of Advantage lends itself to its application being varied to suit game circumstances.

When discussing the captain's choice, issues that would influence the captain's decision were identified. If referees query themselves as to what the non-offending team want to do, then the referee's application of advantage must be influenced by game circumstances.

Advantage will not be applied in the same manner in all game circumstances. This is not to say that we abandon the decision making process in determining whether advantage has accrued, but rather to look at the appropriateness of how Advantage should be applied, if at all, given the circumstances of the game.

How will the application of advantage change with:

- (a) The early minutes of a game
- (b) Score (and Bonus Points)
- (c) Field position
- (d) Momentum of the non-offending team
- (e) Player Skill
- (f) Weather
- (g) Injured players

The Early Minutes of the Game

Referees will try to set the parameters within which they will allow the game to proceed in the early part of a fixture. Without limiting real opportunities for the non-offending team to gain an advantage, referees should be more discriminatory in deciding whether or not to apply the law, bearing in mind that there is no obligation under the Laws to play Advantage following an infringement.

Score (and Bonus Points)

The score will in certain circumstances affect the application of advantage. If the attacking team is behind by two points in a game and have field position enabling a kick at goal, will you play advantage if their opponents infringe or will you award a penalty kick? Would the non-offending team want to play on?

Teams now play in tournaments that allow bonus points in certain circumstances. Undoubtedly if a team is aware of its position on a competition table it may choose to play in a certain style.

Referees should be conscious of this and referee in a manner sympathetic to the general objective of the team. The referee should be aware of what the players are trying to achieve. This does not mean that the referee favours one team over the other.

The referee in preparing for game will become aware of team objectives. It is not the place of the referee to specifically ask prior to the game what the teams are trying to achieve..

Field Position

Advantage can be influenced by field position. Where the non-offending team is the defending team, especially where they are under pressure, we should either not wait as long for an advantage to accrue or alternatively not allow play to continue. This is especially the case where the non-offending team is inside their twenty-two (22) metre area.

Conversely where the non-offending team is the attacking team, especially where they have maintained continuity for several phases, the referee should be minded to allow play to continue following the infringement.

Momentum

The momentum of the non-offending team should influence the referee's decision on whether or not to play advantage.

If the non-offending team has been able to sustain continuity that forced their opponents to infringe, the referee should be eager to have play continue through the use of advantage. Conversely, where the non-offending team is under undue pressure the referee should generally stop play for the infringement.

Control

The nature of Rugby means that from time to time in the game players' temperaments will be compromised. Confrontations will arouse players, elevating the risk of foul play.

Referees should keep advantage in their pocket to give the players an opportunity to settle down, except where there are clear opportunities for advantage to accrue. The referee must bear in mind that safety is of paramount importance and shall not be compromised.

Player skill

Referees should not be sympathetic to players who through poor skill or poor decision-making are unable to realise an advantage opportunity.

The Law says that a mere opportunity to gain advantage is not sufficient. However how are referees responsible for the action or inaction of the players?

Where circumstances are favourable to advantage, the referee needs to look at the accrual of advantage without reference to the skill of the players, but with reference to what is actually happening where pressure from opponents will effect whether or not the non-offending team can realise a potential advantage.

Assume that Team "B" has possession of the ball at a maul in their opponent's (Team "A") twenty-two (22) metres area after several phases of play. A player from Team "A" collapses the maul that was moving forward. Team "B" had an overlap of four (4) players on three (3) players to the right. The ball emerges quickly from the collapsed maul to Team "B" who move the ball to the left for no apparent reason. The referee had signalled advantage following the collapse of the maul.

Should the referee return to the place of infringement?

In this case the non-offending team had an obvious tactical advantage that accrued when they received possession. The referee should allow play to continue and not come back to the place of infringement. Coming back would be giving "two bites of the cherry". It was the player's fault that the advantage was not realised. The circumstances provided an obvious tactical advantage, which accrued when the possession was received.

Weather

The weather conditions during a game may affect the application of Advantage.

Generally where the ground conditions are fast there is an opportunity to allow advantage especially in situations where the ball is being run. On the other hand a team that is geographically defending on a heavy field will not want to be provided with advantage opportunities to run the ball ordinarily. They would want relief from a penalty kick or a platform of possession that would enable them to kick down field.

Injured players

Injuries will also have an effect on Advantage. Where a team is geographically attacking and their opponent knock-on, would the non-offending team want to have a scrummage if their scrum had been significantly weakened by the absence of a player through injury, and where the opposition could exploit that weakness?

Conversely where a team is attacking and their opponents who infringe, and who have less numbers through injury or are in a weaker position because of an injury to a player who is still on the field, the non-offending team are likely to want to exploit the advantage of the numbers or weakness through the continuation of play.

Advantage and foul play

The question is often asked whether advantage should be played when there has been foul play. The general consensus is that it should not save for circumstances where a try is likely to be scored.

The problem with playing advantage following foul play is that play proceeding the incident may continue for some time. The referee's focus goes from the incident to the continuing play. Ultimately this may affect the way in which the foul play is dealt with.

Take for example the situation where Team "A" who has an overlap of five on four executes a passing movement. The second of those players from Team "A" is tackled

late and dangerously. However the passing movement continues quickly and Team "A" scores a try, getting the ball to the outside man.

The referee inadvertently may not be able to identify the tacker. He may also lose the opportunity to effectively deal with the incident, as the impact of immediacy is lost. Indeed the delay in acting may signal tacit acceptance of the incident to other players who may then chose to retaliate, ultimately bringing greater problems for the referee.

Two Bites of the Cherry

The Laws of the game provide sanctions for infringements during the game. Referees should not apply advantage so that the teams are potentially penalised twice for the same infringement.

The referee needs to be decisive in the application of advantage. If the referee is minded to play advantage following an infringement then he should gamble on that judgement. Advantage may not always accrue but it will help provide the referee with the experience to better recognise advantageous circumstances in future.

The referee should make the decision to penalise early. In this way wasted playing time is limited. The last thing anyone wants to see is play that continues which is wasted and irrelevant to the outcome of the game because the referee returns to the place of infringement after a long continuation of play while he waits for an advantage to accrue. This is not to say however consideration of advantage be abandoned.

Referees should remember that they are not refereeing for an outcome but rather allowing play to continue where circumstances exist for the non-offending team to be in a tactically advantageous position following an infringement by their opponent.

Conclusions

Referees should be minded that Advantage simply provides the non-offending team with an opportunity to achieve an outcome following an infringement, rather than the advantage being an actual outcome.

Referees need to be more judicious in deciding whether or not advantage situations exist. There is no point in "hanging the arm" in the hope that advantage will accrue. The referee should make an early decision about whether to stop play or to play on given the playing circumstances following an infringement.

Referees should ask themselves, "Would the non-offending team want to play on?" Always be conscious of what the players are trying to achieve. Referees need to judge what circumstances will allow the application of advantage.

Any advantage needs to be proximate in time to the infringement and the application of advantage will vary to suit game circumstances.

Many factors will influence the application of advantage. Be conscious of these but also remember that the referee cannot be responsible for the skill of the players, except where those skills are under undue pressure as a result of the infringement.

The Laws provide sanctions following an infringement. What the referee needs to do is decide early whether or not to penalise or to play on by looking at the game circumstances. Referees should not referee in a manner that potentially doubly penalises the infringing team. Either penalise or play on, but not both.

The referee should not apply Advantage safe in the knowledge that he can return to the place of infringement, but rather assess what is happening and make an early decision about whether to stop play or let it continue.

Ultimately agreement needs to be universally reached on:

1. What constitutes an obvious tactical advantage
2. What gain of possession or territory satisfies the test of an obvious tactical advantage
3. When is an obvious tactical advantage realised

Comment

Notwithstanding the earlier opinions, referees must remember that there is now a broader audience to cater for. Fortunately or unfortunately Rugby is now a business. People want bums in seats and the way in which the game is refereed impacts on the game as a spectacle, and the financial viability of playing organisations.

Players and coaches want referees to allow play to continue for advantage to accrue, and want us come back to the place of infringement after being given as much opportunity as possible for an advantage to be realised.

If this is wanted, do referees provide this? The question then is where do we stop? The fall back to advantage should be the sanctions provided in law and not opportunities to double dip.

However should we look at advantage differently so that we meet the needs of the players and coaches who often want outcomes? Does our philosophy need to change?

I hope that it does not need to change, but rather that it be fine-tuned so that consistency in application of Advantage is achieved from referee to referee and country to country. It is not for the referee to remove the tactical contest from the game through the application of Advantage.

But ultimately we are not the customer.