Rugby Union is a very complex sport which brings together 31 bodies and brains on the field, all in accordance to the Laws which are enforced or dispensed by the referee. Every player has a clear and specific position to cover and contribute within the team. So, we can clearly say that players are ‘the actors’ on stage, the referee is the enabler of the match and the conductor of belligerences from both teams. The coach or coaches are ‘the trainers, mentors, administrators of talent and a big part of HOW the team ought to play (strategy and tactics).

A rugby team is not an automated pre-programmed machine of 15 parts, is it not? – Primarily, the Law is fixed (and at least for the next 80 minutes will be consistent and constant). But during the match three variables will influence the progress and outcomes and it will make the rugby game change its structure, complexion, the strategies, and the tactics. Those three are: a) Opposition; b) Referee; and c) The weather. Thus, we may conclude that the brains of coach, captain and vice-captain are constantly working at being part of the solution and not part of the problem. Tactics and strategies in every facet of the game are very important for the 15 players to play efficiently and effectively which means always endeavouring to beat the opposition within the Laws for at least 1 point difference.

Moreover, we must remember from the outset that we could win, lose or draw. Any of the three results are feasible and possible, we have no rights to question the referee or the opposition or the weather after the 80 minutes of play. Our energies should always be channelled towards preparation on each one of its different aspects. This means the win, lose or draw are the result on the day. Either us or the adversary may reverse the result any the time. When we are winning by 20 points we never have ‘a problem’ with the referee, so we respect it equally regardless of the result.

Rugby has been said is a ‘thinking men/women game’ and it is. Whilst one team proposes or presents difficulties to the opposition the later must counter, neutralise, counter attack or engineer a favourable response, good enough to defend itself stopping the adversary and if possible attack, or re-gain possession and counterattack. This simple process can be put in practice from the outset from:

i) Kick offs  
ii) 25 metre re-start  
iii) Scrum; and  
iv) Lineouts  
v) Penalty kicks  
vi) Free kicks

Therefore, I’m going to concentrate on SCRUMS which has been proven in the whole 146 year of history of rugby union have the ability and potential of influencing the execution of all facets of the game, thus besides re-starting the game (both teams) it may provide a platform for better attacking opportunities or a very efficient attacking defence.

Apart from the control of playing territory, a team can dominate psychologically dominate not only the opposite forward pack but place the whole backline in disadvantage by having to retreat and receive the ball ON THE BACK FOOT while the opposition is sprinting forward.
As I stated, Re-start, Defence and Attack may take place in a quick succession of well executed technique, and smart tactics anticipating, thinking, and outsmarting the adversary. Nothing stops any team from applying these practical initiatives.

It is a well-known fact that to play scrums all players must have sound individual techniques, appropriate physical, mental, and emotional preparation. Furthermore, the collective unison and togetherness of a well drilled ‘orchestra’ are necessary to succeed. The emotional component relates to the ‘Controlled Aggression Attitude that must prevail in a forward pack.

2. An unsettling background and history

Not enough has been written about Scrummaging but too much has been said about it in the last 21 years and more particularly since 2005. Rugby on the field gives you no time for reflexion or trial and error, we must be decisive with what we do, how we do it and when we do it. Nonetheless, off the field everyone has an opinion and not always ‘the best option’. The Rugby Union Scrum has been subjected to all sorts of experimentation by Law makers, Law enforcers and Law avoiders (Coaches).

In my view, the chronological story and variations that have taken place in the scrums in the last 12 years approximates to something like this:

- 1971 – Commencement of power scrums where hooking or pushing were optional tactics and pushing
- Scrum height became about 20 cm to 25 cm lower than before, creating a great difficulty to hookers
- 2005 - From the C-T-P-E (Crouch-Touch-Pause-Engage) engagement sequence devised by a group of referees commissioned by the IRB to review the Laws and met at the Lensbury Club, London.
- In authorities trying to control ‘the scrum forces’ and negligence, also known as ‘the emphasis shifted from one step to the other and back
- In March 2013, the IRB Scrum Steering Group chaired by Graham Mourie changed the engagement sequence to C-T-E (Crouch-Touch – Engage). These changes were very effective in stopping ‘the nonsensical dangerous ‘charging’. Yet, also produced disadvantages particularly for younger and weaker front rowers, who were submitted to the ‘craftsmanship and why not gamesmanship’ of more seasoned players.
- In 2014 appeared an even more controlled sequence: Crouch-Touch-Set which is being used today with mixed results. Many times, lack of follow through, or lack of expertise, on-going myths, heresay do conspire against the spectacle and the orderly development of matches. Furthermore, it is very complex and difficult to pin-point ‘fault or responsibility’ in scrums. It is no surprise to me that in some collapsed or crooked scrums I found six players doing the wrong thing! (Thus, fault apportioning could be sometimes very unfair and dumbing down.
- Referees need more DISCRETION (e.g. Good is good enough…)
- More concentration of referees on POSITIVE OUTCOMES would be a great contribution from referees.
- Less PROCESS and more OUTOMES (is in my opinion) a very smart and sound proposition to improve the game, the spectacle, and the business.

3. The Four Fundamental Principles of Rugby

Rugby in the last 21 years has changes its face, it is more popular TV audiences much bigger than during the amateur days. Yet, the ever present four principles of rugby are still vital to play effectively, efficiently and to win, those are: a) Go Forward; b) Continuity; c) Support; and Pressure (When in defence and without possession, we must apply Forward Pressure through TACKLING)

Unfortunately, these days between scrum collapses, video referees (TMO’s decisions) and on field referees’ lectures... we are not servicing (b) Continuity too well? Spectators 21st century are frustrated with this Rugby 2017 trait and turning to other sports with less rigmarole!
In the last 21 years in rugby have coached an array of schools, clubs, and representative teams. Have also Captained National University Club, Cordoba Province XV, The Wallabies in 1987 vs Mendoza Province, the Barbarians FC (UK in 1991) and the Italian barbarians also I have authored three scrummaging books, as follows:

i) A Rugby Scrum Treatise, self-published, Sydney July 2011

ii) The ART of Scrummaging, self-published, Sydney August 2012

iii) RUGBY – The ART of Scrummaging, published by Meyer & Meyer Sports, Germany September 2015

From personal experience, and having talked with many spectators, I can confidently assert, “the most exciting passages in a rugby match” are: the counter-attack, the unrelenting continuity, as well as the uncompromising tackling and a collective pushover try, the epitome of teamwork.

Rugby scrums have morphed from being a ‘terrorising weapon of submission’ (read: both front rows charging stupidly) from 2000 to 2012 with the anomalies, injuries and time wasted in countless resets.

I will not enter any philosophical arguments of Why? and Why not’s? – I am not interested in guilt apportioning but merely reflecting on the origins of those problems had, on the current Law as dispensed, the necessary techniques, facts and data, and the available options for coaches and players to choose from. All those interested in the betterment of scrum technique, and to expand their knowledge for them to apply and experiment with their own ideas, tactics, and strategies (a real trial and error).

Hence, I can confidently say that professionalism has brought into the game a mixed bag of “urgency, curiosity, inventiveness, and gamesmanship” that not always has given a positive outcome for the Law administrators and for the enabling referees. It has also caused over the years a significant angst for injured players and their families and friends.

World Rugby at times has managed this ‘beast’ but as time ticks away the scrums which are not a perfect science but more an ART that needs to be managed with the contribution of its stakeholders, by taking responsibility for their actions and consequences. The unlawful scrums have the potential to upset the viewing public, the enabling referee, the speculating Coaches, and the impassive Administrators too upsetting the balance of the sport. This is a No-win-situation, so corrective action is and will be mandatory, but this job should be given to someone or a group of people with no vested interests!

It is my opinion, that the solutions will be found or engineered by Professional Law Makers, when all stakeholders agree to respect Law, Intent, Attitude, and Execution. Nobody should be over or above ‘the Game’, ‘the Spectacle’, and ‘the Business’. These three very important and defining aspects of professional rugby 2017 must interact and assist each other. They must be fully inter-dependant similarly to the Forwards and Backs, complementing each other while pursuing their common objectives.

4. “Teamwork”

Such a magic word and philosophy which may multiply the energy of a team or deplete it! – When a team ‘clicks’ is phenomenal, artistry but when teamwork is lacking it becomes devastating. Cooperation in every constructive step and solidarity during adversity times. Teamwork must be omni-present all the way, from punctual attendance to training with the proper attire to playing with passion, concentration, and commitment. From resting to eating or travelling. The more together a team, the less injuries occur and more efficient the team becomes. A positive attitude and respect for adversaries and referee are paramount. A true competitor will always measure himself or herself to a wholesome, well prepared and well respected opposition. No ifs, No buts, No shortcuts.

5. Tactics and Strategies

As mentioned above, this is an intelligent game of constant decision making, played individually and collectively, of constant challenges and difficulties presented by the adversary within the Laws of rugby.
Therefore, captains, vice captains and coaches may alter them to obtain incremental advantages and ultimately the ‘upper hand’. We can ‘play’ with the ball and without the ball. However, in scrums “we must always push”.

The outcomes or resultants of our tactics in scrums, also influenced by the opposition’s tactics are likely to be:

a) A team may win possession and position (ball and territory)
b) A team may win territory only; or
c) A team may win possession and relinquish territory
d) A team may lose the ball and the territory

Thus, our captain or coach may decide beforehand which way or option we would like to press onto the adversary. Of course, we may vary it, we may mix it up, and may alternate different tactics of scrummaging either (a), (b), (c) or (d) or others in order to unsettle the adversary scrum.

6. Player Safety and Scrum Safety

Obeying the Laws + Technique + Preparation = Diminished Risks and Improved Safety

Metaphorically speaking, similarly to ‘wearing seat-belts when driving a car of taking a flight, or a hard hat in a construction site, the thorough preparation for scrummaging must be taken very seriously by everybody involved in contact sports.

When we play ‘outside’ the Law, we enter the world of unknown risks (either for us, our team players and for the opposition also). Prevention is always much better than cure, particularly when there is no cure for a severed spinal cord. In today’s professional or amateur game there are no excuses to Not prevent the preventable. Full attention to obeying the Law and to all the processes must be given. Two motivating phrases come to mind in this area of safety and prevention:

“We are as strong as our weakest link”

“No amount of enthusiasm after an accident will ever compensate for the apathy in prevention”

7. Conclusions

I have no doubt that the training of the scrum (scrummaging sessions) whether with a scrum machine or live scrums pack vs pack provide the practitioners with lots of discipline, strong will, sense of team, camaraderie and the solidarity in adversity. The sum of the parts always means +1 or +2. Mental application to ‘get it right’ is necessary, timing and togetherness are sought by the coach or the captain. Spirit of Corps is the common language.

Therefore, we should never TRAIN THE TIGHT FIVE SEPARATE TO THE BACK THREE! – This is a common misconception and a bad one. You may practice your violin or piano at home but when the orchestra assembles, all instruments come together as easy as they come, no effort! It should be more a WANT than a necessity. In a good scrum, all the credits and the debits must go to the eight forwards on the field.

The modern demands for a faster game, supposedly more attractive have hampered the scrums. Also the stubbornness and pedantic pursuit of ‘making every scrum perfect’ has killed the ‘golden-hen’. Today a lot of people that do not know about scrums, people that have no idea about what takes to produce a good prop, hooker or full eight, they are comparing rugby with basketball, American football, or football soccer.

- Rugby is the only sport that accommodates people of many different shapes and varied fitness conditions.
- Rugby also is the only sport where you have THE RIGHT to contest possession.
- Rugby is a smart game for people to use all their attributes whether physical, psychological, or cognitive.
- Rugby is to me one of the best Universities for life!

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