Shaping the Scrum

The rise and fall of the 2-3-2 formation, and its indelible impact on the modern scrum.

Introduction

Law 20 Scrum

“The purpose of the scrum is to restart play quickly, safely, and fairly, after a minor infringement or a stoppage” – Laws of the Game

Law 20 is made up of a total of over 90 separate definitions, clauses, and exceptions – a far cry from its origins in the Rugby School game of football when a tackled player would call “have it down”, place the ball on the ground, and the 2 opposing packs closed around it and attempted to shove and hack the ball towards the goal line.

Until 1931 - almost 90 years after the original rules of the Rugby game were codified by 3 senior pupils in 1845, and 60 years after the Rugby Football Union was formed in 1871 - the rules governing the scrum were barely defined.

In the early days of the game “heeling out” was considered to place forwards ahead of the ball in an offside position, and “straight ahead propulsion” was seen by most the only practical means of advancing the football. It was not until the late 1880’s that the first real tactical revolutions occurred, and the scrum became seen as a means of winning the ball rather than the main means of moving it.

Without doubt the most controversial innovation, and arguably the most influential in ultimately regulating the modern scrum was the 2-3-2 formation that was the trademark New Zealand of rugby for 40 years.

The success of this system, or more specifically the heated reaction to the famous wing forward position central to it, would eventually lead to legislative reform in 1931, and an evolution of scrum regulation that continues today.
2-3-2 and the New Zealand game

‘The public don’t want to witness only scrimmages nowadays but fast, open play... the public want a game where they can see plenty of the ball,’ unidentified player, Northern England, 1891. (‘The Evolution of the Scrum’ by Tony Collins, 2012).

While the 2-3-2 formation and the accompanying role of wing forward probably originated at Thornes, in Yorkshire, it was Tom Ellison who introduced both to NZ rugby. Ellison is thought to have seen this system deployed while captain of the epic 1888-1889 NZ Natives tour, and set about developing it whilst playing halfback at Poneke Football Club in Wellington.

In his coaching manual, The Art of Rugby Football, Ellison described the role of the wing forward being to both feed the scrum and protect the halfback: “the protected halfback of the wing game can send all, or nearly all, of his passes out to the backs, whereas the pestered and utterly unprotected halfback of the other systems is lucky when he gets half of his out”. He argued that if used properly it provided the best opportunity for fast open play.

The success of both the Poneke club and Wellington provincial sides saw the 2-3-2 scrum soon adopted throughout NZ rugby.

By the time the 1905 All Blacks embarked on their historic Northern tour, the 2-3-2 scrum system was the cornerstone of the NZ game.

The 1905 Originals – shaping the argument

“A Scrummage, which can only take place in the field of play, is formed by one or more players from each side closing round the ball when it is on the ground, or by their closing up in readiness to allow the ball to be put on the ground between them” – as described by the laws of the day.

Penalties could be awarded for picking the ball up, a crooked feed, and foot up, but there was no regulation concerning numbers, how they packed, or from which side of the scrum the ball was fed (or by whom).

The 1905 New Zealand tour to UK, France, and North America is of course famous as the birth of the All Black story, but it is perhaps equally famous for its controversial sub-plot – the debate that raged over the role of the wing forward.

Following the opening match against Devon, The Morning Post railed: ‘There is one blot on the game as played by the New Zealanders and one which is against every canon of rugby union football. This is in the work allotted to the ‘wing’ forward’.

It was the captain Dave Gallaher who played wing forward in 26 of the 32 matches played, and was variously described as an “offside abomination” and an “obstructionist”. He and vice-captain Billy Stead would later state that the wing forward was “simply a detail of the natural development of the New Zealand game in the direction and with the object of the greatest possible economy of speed and power in the team, and for the purpose of exercising the full measure of its resources in every contingency” (The Complete Rugby Footballer, Gallaher, D and Stead, WJ).
The controversy surrounding Gallaher’s role so ruled the attention of the public, the media, and the RFU that the dominance of the NZ scrummaging itself has been largely overlooked.

In an era when it was common to see 50-60 scrums in a game (most of which would now be left as rucks), the real innovation was in fact the development of specialised roles or positions. For the first time each man would take the same place at each scrum according to his physical characteristics and skills. The terms ‘hooker’ and ‘lock’ are both derived from this original set up.

British teams at this time generally formed up in 3-2-3 or 3-3-2, with players packing down in order of arrival. The New Zealanders by contrast packed in their specialist roles – 2 hookers, followed by a lock and 2 ‘sidemen’, then 2 back row players. On engagement, the 2 hookers fought to win the loosehead position, and once achieved could drive their ‘wedge formation’ against just one side of the opposition pack.

The diagram above illustrates the tactic as described in the match against Middlesex. By winning the loosehead (in this case feeding the ball from the right hand side), the All Blacks 7 are effectively pushing against only 5 players, and able to advance or wheel the scrum more easily to their advantage.

Gallaher and Stead would later reveal their secret of having only the hookers and lock pushing forwards, with the side and back rows driving into the wedge. They believed the British system with all 8 men pushing forward to be a waste of power.
Beating the System (i)

The only defeat on the 1905 Tour came against the Welsh, who put significant resources into analysing the NZ scrum tactics in lead up matches and played 2 trial matches experimenting with and against the NZ system.

From the first scrum the Welsh set to pack down with only 7 – 4 in the front row, 3 in the second, and no back row. Only the 2 middle front rowers looked to engage the NZ hookers, and upon engagement the Welsh player outside the NZ loosehead bound on his hooker and closed in to steal the advantage. The 4th front rower then came around behind him to join the 2nd row.

All Blacks engage to the right, Harding packs down in the front row while Jones retires and packs down with the remainder of the pack in the second row, there was no back row.
All Blacks engage to the left, Jones packs down in the front row while Harding retires and packs down with the remainder of the pack in the second row, there was no back row.

(Images from World Rugby Museum).

The Welsh had outthought the All Blacks, and for the remainder of the match denied NZ not only the scrum dominance that had been the backbone of their attack, but also negated the influence of Gallaher at wing forward.

When the All Blacks returned to Britain in 1924, there had been no change to scrum law – international matches were still played under host country’s laws, a situation that would remain until 1930. The wing forward was again the focus of much debate, and again the actual technical detail of the scrummaging took a back seat to this controversy.

**Beating the System (ii)**

Controversy over the wing forward followed the All Blacks to South Africa in 1928, but the South African players applied themselves to the more practical task of winning the scrums.

The South Africans had developed the now standard 3-4-1 formation. They had also developed specialist positions, and the shifting of the 2 breakaways from the back row to the side was originally devised to more rapidly pressure opposition kickers.
Having perfected their own 8 man system, the South Africans dominated the NZ scrum throughout the Tour. South Africa repeatedly beat the All Blacks to the loosehead on engagement, ensuring they had always to shove against the entire opposition scrum (compared to one side only). The South African props were able to pressure the 2 NZ hookers to the point hooking became almost impossible, whereas their specialist rake could strike freely without the burden of having to push.

Counter Punch

“For about a week prior to the second Test we trained seriously and hard. We evolved the loose head and practised it secretly. Our idea was to have the loose head on every possible scrum; for having a loose head meant that we were certain to get a great deal more of the ball from set scrums than we did at Durban.” All Black great Mark Nicholls (History of South African Rugby Football by Ivor D. Difford).

Whenever a scrum was formed during the 2nd Test, the NZ wing forward (Ron Stewart) would pack down in the front row on the side the ball was to be fed, thus taking the loosehead away from South Africa – cleverly echoing the Welsh tactic from 1905.

Beating the System (iii)

In what was a fascinating tactical battle, final order was established when the Springbok scrum half (Daunce Pretorious) eventually countered by waiting for Stewart to engage, then simply throwing the ball to the flanker opposite (Nic Pretorious) to feed the scrum from what was now the NZ tighthead side.

Although NZ drew the series 2-2, the South Africans had demonstrated a superior formation winning the scrums on average roughly 2 to 1 throughout the 4 games.

Ruling Innovation out of the Scrum

In anticipation of universal (Empire-wide) acceptance of standard International rules, in 1930 the NZRFU agreed to suspend use of local law variations for the upcoming British and Irish Lions Tour.

However, this did nothing to rule out the wing forward as there remained no law prohibiting it.

Despite being badly exposed in South Africa, NZ retained its 2-3-2 formation in the stubborn belief it was essential in producing fast, open play. Unfortunately, any argument concerning the merits of the system with regards actual scrummaging would again become irrelevant as soon as the opening match (v Wanganui) was played.

“I do not like, I distinctly dislike your wing-forward. I am sure the gentleman who had the misfortune to play there today does not like it himself because he knows that it is not near the border line but over the border line. He must be discouraged. I say, he must not only be discouraged but that he must be stopped. The wing forward is an irritation to both sets of forwards and he is contrary to the spirit of rugby football” – James Baxter, 1930 Lions’ manager (and former RFU President (1926-27) as
well as then IRFB committee member) speaking at post match (Wanganui) dinner (New Zealand Herald, 22 May 1930).

“The ordinary man who tries to play wing forward is nothing more nor less than a cheat. He is deliberately trying to beat the referee by unfair tactics” – James Baxter, following match v Taranaki (New Zealand Herald, 26 May 1930).

The IRFB then consisted of 6 representatives of the RFU (of which Baxter was one), and 2 each from Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa merely had observers.

Following the tour, in 1931, the IRFB made the first moves to eliminate the wing forward from the game, and the path they chose was to attack the 2-3-2 formation.

Adjustments were made to the offside law, but these would have had little impact on the wing forward as already in NZ neither he nor the halfback were permitted past the halfway point of the scrum. However, it was now stipulated that the “centre player” in the scrum could initially strike for the ball only with the foot furthest from the scrum half putting the ball in. While not explicitly banning a 2 man front row, it did render it untenable, as a 2 man front row would now be completely unbalanced if legally striking for the ball.

The 1931 hooking regulation effectively meant NZ rugby now needed its 8th forward permanently packing in the front row. After a quarter of a century of vitriolic debate, the wing forward was squeezed out of the game, and with it a golden age of scrum innovation came to an end. Although a 3 man front row was not explicitly required by law until 1950, it was now the only practical formation.

The 3-4-1 formation as a whole has similarly since become the only possible formation, again not through explicit stipulation but the specific detail of binding restrictions.
It is debatable, in the light of the success of South Africa’s 3-4-1, how much longer NZ could have realistically stuck with 2-3-2 in the International game.

It must also be debatable, however, how much more tactical (if not technical) innovation may have shaped the future of the scrum had the impasse over the wing forward’s role been addressed differently.

In describing the British game he encountered, Tom Ellison observed: “I never played against a team that made any radical change of tactics during the course of a game. They all seemed to have bumbled into a groove and stuck there”, (A Game for Hooligans – The History of Rugby Union, by Huw Richards).

Perhaps it is time to stop adding to Law 20, but to at least re-examine all the possibilities available to the game were we to strip it back and start again.
Reading

1. James Baxter and the Demise of 2-3-2, The Rugby History Society
2. A Social History of English Rugby Union, by Tony Collins
4. A Game for Hooligans: The History of Rugby Union, by Huw Richards
5. The Evolution of the Scrum, by Tony Collins
6. History of the Laws of Rugby Football, RugbyFootballHistory.com
7. The Art of Scrummaging, by Enrique Topo Rodriguez
8. The Secret of the Scrum, Auckland Star, 27 October 1906
9. Our National Field Game – Why We Win, NZ Truth, 28 February 1925
10. The History of Wales v New Zealand, The Rugby History Museum