

# The Building blocks of a successful scrum

Elwee Prinsloo

In this document I will discuss the following:

- Objectives of the scrum and coaching philosophies
- Scrum trends and changes over recent years
- Important building blocks to build a scrum from the base up
- Problem solving made easy

I think it is fair to start with my perception of a scrum and it's objective. The scrum is an 8v8 contest. It is an intimidation process where the forward pack has an opportunity to stamp their physical and psychological dominance or authority on to the opposing pack and team. It gives us the ability to build a platform to attack from and to take away the quality of our opponent's attacking platform.

Philosophies are clearly different all across the world with some countries preferring the technical and speed component over the traditional power and strength approach.

The above mentioned approaches understandably contribute to our scrum coaching but the simplest philosophy I believe in is to have **16 feet on the ground roughly square**.

If we have a look at the scrum in recent years it will be safe to say that although the objective remains the same the process of reaching that objective has been influenced by a couple of important factors such as:

## 1) Change in law and application thereof:

This factor has brought in more emphasis on the pre engage process. The importance of players and packs now having to have better conditioning to get and maintain a stronger body shape for longer periods has drastically increased.

It also brought more attention to the speed of engagement. By doing this it has taken away players ability to get an "unfair" advantage on the engage.

Lastly the change in law (the 5 metre off side) has produced more attacking space than in previous years when players had to create their own at this facet of the game.

## 2) Change in referee's management of the scrum

Timing and synchronisation are now of utmost importance as a result of the timing and calling sequence by referees.

This has also led to more scrum collapses in recent years although in 2011 it decreased slightly as a result of referee's expecting the front rowers to be closer (head to head) and also managed the set-up height (hips lower than shoulders) a lot stricter.

Some teams now seem to get away with more scrum feeds that are not straight. This can be as a result of the hookers putting more emphasis on scrummaging than hooking. In the process they find it challenging to get their hooking foot to the middle of the scrum coming from the pressure of having their feet back to scrum in a stronger body position. (The movement of the hooker is naturally limited by the scrum pressure)

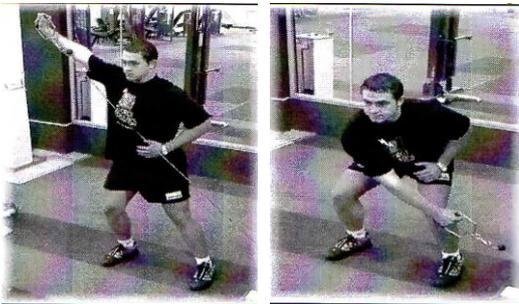
With the above mentioned in mind I broke down what I believe are important building blocks to a successful scrum.

***a) Physical and mental preparation***

A successful scrum starts with functional conditioning and physical preparation. In my opinion this is where we, as coaches, or conditioning staff sometimes get it wrong. I believe the simplest way to look at it is by determining what players do in a scrum and in what position they are when doing it. Our conditioning programs should include specific work for specific facets of the game and not just for the game in general. The following are some important points to consider:

- Players doing strength and explosive work in those specific positions that they will be in at scrum time
- Core stability is a key factor and should be a focus point in most conditioning sessions
- Reaction time should be done with weight load put on players to combine the strength and speed component into power
- Engagement calls to be included into some of the above – this will enhance the awareness of players and their reaction time on engagement

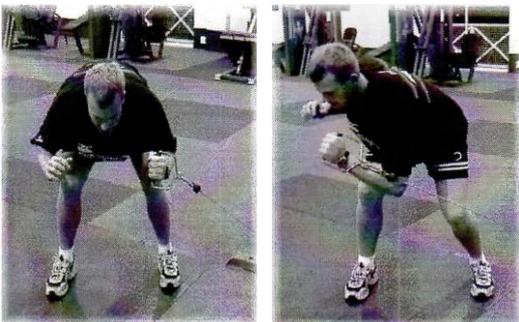
I have included some examples as scrum specific conditioning exercises as mentioned above:



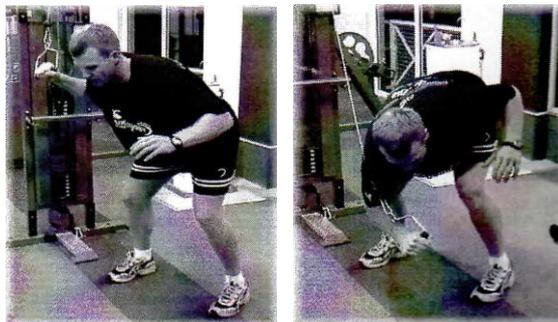
**Reverse single arm woodchop**



**Boxing in forward standing position**



**Cable trunk twist – loosehead prop  
(do other side for thighhead prop)**



**Single arm woodchop**



**Cable twist crunch**

Most players and coaches believe, that mindset is most important when it comes to scrummaging. It is important to justify the importance of a scrum to players (it's a contest for quality attacking ball) and make sure they know the feeling and consequence when on the losing end of the scrum. After all it is like Matt Tink (former Western Force scrum coach) once said "the scrum is the purest contest in the game and all it takes to be successful is a pack of mentality". Without the correct mindset our behaviour or actions will be unsuccessful.

After establishing a solid base with our mindset and physical preparations we move on to the second of our building blocks which I believe is the most important – **Body shape or body position.**

### **b) Body position**

The following is a short checklist to ensure strong and affective body position for all players:

- 1) Feet square and shoulder width apart (think of what generates the most power in the gym – lunges or a squat)
- 2) Neck short and head neutral (when you shorten your neck you activate your trapezius "traps" muscle group that is important for strength and stability)
- 3) Chest in front of knees. You should always dip hips first then knees to follow. This will ensure your weight is on the balls of your feet rather than on your heels.



- 4) Duck bum (pelvic twist) – by doing this we ensure our back is straight and our core is on
- 5) Big chest and "scaps" on – this means by contracting your Scapulas (shoulder blades) your chest will push out and activate muscles such as your trapezius "traps" and Rhomboids that are important for upper body strength and movement during the scrum process
- 6) Eyes on target

### **c) Binding/assembly**

We now move on to the binding or scrum assembly. A few important points in my view, include:

- 1) It is important for the hooker to take control of the scrum assembly as he provides the stability at pre-engage
- 2) The process has to be the same at each scrum
- 3) Break the binding process up in modules before combining the lot. This makes it easier for players to understand their roles within the pack and also for coaches to problem solve. Start with the front row followed by the locks then combine the two. Bring the no 8 in and lastly the flankers
- 4) Spines in line – pre and post binding all players' spines should be inline. This is to ensure power is directed in the same direction
- 5) Bicep flex on the bind to tighten up as a pack – if all players flex their bicep of the arm that's bound to another player the pack will be considerably tighter than usual
- 6) Encourage players to give each other as much detailed feedback as possible between sessions and on the run.
- 7) Practice good habits not bad – it's better to do 5 quality scrums than 30 scrums with bad habits and shape

## Front row

Loosehead to bind first. He should be tight at the shoulders between him and the hooker therefore most coaches prefer him to bind over the hooker under the armpit. Ensure the hooker's hips are not affected and are still square. Traditionally opposing tightheads focus on splitting the opponent's loosehead and hooker so as this is a target area we have to make sure our 1 and 2 are tight with our 3 allowed a bit more room for movement.

Tighthead to bind second. The tightness between 2 and 3 varies with different teams but the most important point is that he understands that he is the anchor of our scrum.

Hooker is the assembly manager. He sets the mark, manages the binding process and is also responsible for set up height. The hooker is the handbrake for the pack keeping them steady on the front foot until the engage. He is also responsible for hooking and channelling the ball to the back of the scrum.

***It is important to understand that the front rowers are not the guys generating the power but mainly directing or transferring the power that's generated from the back 5.***

## Locks

Same basics apply as per normal in relation to being comfortable and square. The taller lock will bind over the shorter lock. Many also say your tallest lock should be the tighthead lock to assist with the mechanics of a right shoulder scrum and the support of the scrum's anchor which is the tighthead prop

Some coaches prefer locks to have their inside foot up but personally I think that the focus should just be on them being square with both feet on the ground on contact and their back height the same to make it easier for the 8 to scrum. When they bind through the legs of the props it is important to use the bicep to generate tightness and tension by flexing it and bringing their thumb as close as possible back to their ear. To practice this you can use a boxing glove so that players cannot rely on their hand grip but instead on the tension of their bicep.

## No 8

The no 8 play a very important role in our scrum as he is the key to our timing at engage. He triggers the power to be transferred through his locks and front row onto the opposition pack. He is obviously the first player to act on the ref's engage call by applying pressure from the back. As speed is of utmost importance many coaches prefer him to have a split stance pre engage. This position is the same as any sprinter would start a sprint and ensures a faster engagement. The process is called "the domino affect".

## Flankers

They should know that the scrum determines the success of any post scrum involvement therefore their focus should be on contributing to this facet of the game first. Flankers in the past use to scrum on the 45 degree angle to keep their prop's hips in, tight and square. I think it is very important for them to be straight with their spines in line so that all 16 feet are working in the same direction which is in line with my philosophy.

### ***d) Power generation***

Power is obviously of extreme importance in an affective scrum. We should never sacrifice power for speed.

We generate power by pushing the grass back with our toes and straightening our knees down and forward. By doing this we ensure our hips to follow and our backsides to stay low when we fire in or pushing in the scrum. The focus should always remain on having both feet on the ground. We can do this by making sure when players push they chasing their hips with 1 or 2 very short and fast steps to get into the starting 120 degree pushing position to repeat this step again if needed.

### **e) Synchronisation/timing**

This step could be challenging if done correct. Many coaches focus on engagement and trigger calls to scrum. (e.g. set and 1,2,3) This can be to a team's disadvantage as opponents use these calls as a trigger or sign to apply pressure when our team is reloading to push again.

Instead of focussing on trigger calls we should focus on our player's body awareness of themselves and players that they are bound to. Mike Cron (All Blacks scrum coach) does this by eliminating any trigger call and getting the pack to scrum with their eyes closed. (Please note that the pack has their eyes open when engaging into the scrum machine)

#### **Our Goal**

I think sometimes less is more and our focus should simply to ***applying pressure on our opponents so that they give in on their good body shape whilst we maintain ours.*** If their front row is unable to maintain good body shape it will flow through to the locks, no 8 and ultimately the entire scrum.

This is why there is such a massive emphasis on "win the hit and you'll win the scrum." If we can win the hit and maintain good and strong body position as a pack we will drastically increase our chances of quality fast ball or pressure on the opponent's ball.

#### **Problem solving**

Many coaches over complicate this process. At the end of the day it comes down to assessing our execution of the various building blocks and making sure we apply these basics fundamentals. If the basic principles have been drilled into players and they are given responsibility for the process, they should be able to solve the majority of issues amongst themselves on the run. Simplicity is the key. Break it down in the various building blocks and it all seems to make a lot more sense.

#### **Final words**

This confronting part of the game is what really separates us from other codes and makes our game unique. As the saying goes "it's our bread and butter" and so we should approach this facet of the game. We should always want to work hard together for the same result in every scrum. Quality is more important than quantity and it takes a pack of mentality for any chance of success!!

***I believe success is neither magical nor is it mysterious. It is the natural consequence of consistently applying the basic fundamentals because the only thing that changes is our attention to them. The fundamentals will never change!***