

Coaching Strategies for Managing Referee Influence in Rugby

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Introduction

Effective coaching in rugby requires strategic planning and preparation around how referees can influence and shape the flow of the game. Rather than reacting emotionally to decisions, teams can adopt strategies that integrate referee awareness into training, game planning and leadership development. While tactical and technical preparation usually take priority for coaches, the referee's interpretation and management style can have a significant impact on the contest.

Coaches who underestimate the influence of the referee leave their teams vulnerable for penalties, momentum shift, and emotional frustration. A well organised team will understand that managing the referee is not an optional extra, it is a necessary part of game preparation.

Acknowledging this influence is the first step towards developing coaching strategies that keep teams focused, disciplined and adaptable.

These strategies can be used by coaches and can be incorporated into your team preparation to better manage referee influence.

Coaching Strategies

- **Embedding Law Clarity and Technical Discipline**
- **Referee Profiling and Pre-Game Preparation**
- **Scenario-Based Training**
- **Preparing Leaders to Work with Referees**
- **In-Game Tactical Adjustments**

Embedding Law Clarity and Technical Discipline

Many infringements happen from misunderstandings rather than intentional foul play. When players understand why laws exist, they build better judgement and instincts.

Law education at training is crucial. Setting up meetings to focus on law clarity, reviewing law updates and video sessions, can help players understand why they are penalised and how to correct their behaviour.

Video sessions can be used as evidence to highlight examples of good and poor discipline. Moments where players make smart decisions to avoid penalties should be acknowledged by coaches.

A technically disciplined team not only avoids penalties but also builds momentum and trust with the referee. Coaches are able to plan training sessions that reinforce the technical behaviours that the referee monitors. These include

- Entry lines at the tackle contest (breakdown)
- Legal jackal positioning
- Rolling away and releasing
- Square scrummaging and binding process
- Maintaining tackle height

An example of a significant and important law update is in relation to tackle safety. Rugby Australia has confirmed that from February 2024, it will implement a new trial that will see the legal height of tackles in the game lowered to below the sternum.

Embedding law clarity and technical discipline creates a composed team that will perform better under pressure. Coaches can link technical discipline to their team's identity through phrases such as **"We stay composed under pressure."** When the team buys in, referee decisions good or bad have less emotional impact.

Referee Profiling and Pre-Game Preparation

One of the most effective strategies for managing referee influence is referee profiling. Preparing players with referee specific information shifts the mindset from uncertainty to readiness. When players expect certain outcomes or game management, they react more calmly, make better decisions and reduce penalty risk.

Where possible, coaches should review how an upcoming referee manages games. Observing patterns in breakdown penalties, tackle safety, scrum resets and advantage can help shape the weekly game plan.

For example, some referees are particularly vigilant at the tackle contest, penalising sealing off and side entry, while others are more focused on offsides or scrum alignment.

Through video analysis and team meetings, coaches can prepare players by highlighting these tendencies. This allows players to anticipate how the game will be managed and adjust their tactical approach.

Here is an example of a Referee Profile on Jaco Peyper created by Grant Doorey (Former Assistance Coach for Tonga) ahead of the match between Tonga and Argentina in the 2019 World Cup.

REFEREE PROFILE (TONGA VS ARGENTINA)



JACO PEYPER

AGE: 39

COUNTRY: BLOEMFONTEIN, SOUTH AFRICA

JACO PEYPER rose through the ranks in South Africa quickly, making his Super Rugby debut in 2008 while still in his 20s. In 2011, he refereed the 2011 IRB Junior World Championship in Italy including the final between England and New Zealand. He was quickly promoted to the International level in 2012, refereeing Scotland's 2012 tour of Oceania and was selected as one of the twelve referees for the 2015 Rugby World Cup, and again selected as one of the twelve referees and only South African referee for the 2019 Rugby World Cup.

REFEREE MATCH SUMMARY (TEST MATCHES) - AVERAGE

BALL IN PLAY TIME: 29.36 MINUTES

AVREAGE CYCLE LENGTH: 28 SECONDS

PENALTY (19)

1.RUCKS – 8.7 (45.9%), 2.SCRUM – 3.9 (20.3%), 3.OFFSIDE – 2.3 (21%), 4.FOUL PLAY – 2 (10.5%)

1.RUCKS - 7 (39%)

DEFENCE – 46%, ATTACK – 54%

1.NOT RELEASING BALL (41%) , 2.NOT ROLLING AWAY (18%), 3.HANDS IN RUCK (13%), 4.SIDE ENTRY (10%)

2.SCRUM - 4 (22%)

DEFENCE – 73%, ATTACK – 27%,

1.COLLAPSING LH (26%), 2.COLLAPSING TH (18%), 3.NOT STARIGHT LH (15%), 4.PROPS NOT STRAIGHT (12%)

3.OFFSIDE - 3 (21%)

DEFENCE – 82%, ATTACK – 18%

4.FOUL PLAY – 2 (10.5%)

DEFENSE – 74%, ATTACK – 26%

1.HIGH TACKLE (36%), 2.LIFTING TACKLE & NO ARM CHOP & OTHER (42%)

SCRUM (15)

RESET PRE/POST FEED – 10%

BALL OUT – 59% (63%), COLLAPSED BALL OUT – 17%

CROUCH-BIND – 3.34 secs, BIND-SET – 2.23 secs, SET-FEED – 2.97 secs

***On average, he awards more penalties in rucks & scrums then other referees (4%)**

*** On average, Jaco award slightly less penalties in offside, maul and open play (by 2%-4%)**

***He penalized the attacking team more than defense at ruck area (highlight)**

Scenario-Based Training

Scenario-based training is a strong method for preparing players for referee influence. Coaches can design drills that incorporate changeable “referee interpretations”. One scenario may reward fast cleanouts, another may reward strong contesting.

These scenario-based trainings help players adapt quickly on game day and avoid emotional reactions when refereeing styles differ.

Trainings would include:

- Referee live tackle contest scenarios (Azone attack vs defence)
- High pressure penalty scenarios (Multiphase attack vs defence)
- Scrimmage sessions with external referees (Scrums and mauls)
- Modified games where penalties trigger immediate tactical responses

Exposing players to multiple versions of whistle management, helps the team develop and learn. This also reduces the surprise factor of unfamiliar refereeing styles in games.

Another tactic for scenario-based training can be by using qualified referees in training sessions, this enhances real game scenarios, strengthens relationships with officials and gives players access to expert explanations of decisions.

Preparing Leaders to Work with Referees

A well-prepared captain can positively influence a referee’s perception of the team. Rugby Australia’s Game Management Guidelines for 2025 states that they will see a firmer on field stance to back chat, protesting decisions and unsportsmanlike conduct amongst players.

Coaches should work with leaders, so they understand how to communicate respectfully with referees and know when it is appropriate to do so. Role playing referee interactions in training helps captains develop timing and tone. This prepares them and develops their confidence in effective communication during high pressure moments.

Key principles include:

- **One voice:** Only the captain or designated leaders should approach and speak to the referee.
- **Right time and tone:** Leaders are always to address the referee as “Sir” and ask constructive, solution focused questions rather than debating decisions.
- **Clarity:** Captains should seek simple explanations to relay to the team.



Any backchat damages a team's image and invites stricter officiating. Training environments should reinforce this to build good habits and discipline. It's important that leaders encourage a positive relationship between the team and the referee before and during matches

In-Game Tactical Adjustments

In-game tactical adjustments are essential because referee's styles can affect momentum. A referee allowing fast ruck rewards tempo driven teams, while one who prioritises structure may favour strong set piece sides.

Coaches should empower players to recognise and adapt without waiting for halftime instructions. The teams that adapt the fastest and work with the referee in real time are often the teams that control the game.

Players and leaders should be prepared to identify unexpected trends early from referees such as strict offside, sealing at the breakdown or high tackles. This reduces penalty counts and keeps the team aligned with the officiating style.

Leaders need to effectively communicate to the team during game play ensuring they "play to the referee" while maintaining strategic intention. Coaches will also adjust tactics accordingly and discuss the approach at half time depending on how the referee is managing the game.

Strategies may include:

a) Tackle Contest Strategy (Breakdown)

If the referee is strict at the breakdown, teams may reduce contesting and focus on defensive structure. If they are more lenient, teams may commit additional players to the breakdown or target slow ball.

b) Tackle Height

Early penalties for high contact require immediate adjustment. Coaches must ensure players can rapidly adapt to tackle height and technique during the match. This is currently an aspect of the game that can have varied calls due to the recent update of laws by Rugby Australia to move safe tackle level to below the sternum.

c) Scrum and Lineout Maul

If the referee favours stability over dominance, the team may alter engagement tempo or binding strategy to avoid collapses.

If the Referee favours dominant rolling maul, teams would have strategies and a process in place to stop mauls.

d) Building Emotional Control

Rugby is highly emotional, but emotion can cloud decision making. Coaches can prepare leaders to notice when an individual or the team need a mental reset and incorporate emotional skill training such as:

- Breathing technique following penalties (3 Deep Breaths)
- Emotional Reset (Team cues “Next Job”, “Refocus”)
- Controlled huddles (Team Connection “1 Clap”, “Captain Talk”)

By incorporating these into team culture, players remain focused on the controllable aspects of the game. The most disciplined teams don’t get rattled by marginal calls they move on quickly.

e) Post-Game

During a post-game review, analysing penalty patterns, tackle contest interpretations and discipline issues creates growth. Over time this forms a feedback loop that supports long term development. The focus should always be on taking learnings from the game rather than the blame.

Conclusion

To conclude, referees are a key influence in rugby. The strategies discussed above allow coaches to prepare players to be aware, adapt and instil discipline into their teams. This can significantly shape the game and influence the spirit of the contest.

While the human element of referees means consistency is impossible at times. The rugby values of respect ensure the game remains fair and honourable.

Coaches play the crucial role of getting the players ready for each match and the right guidance allows players to understand what to look out for during the game.

A team being consistent in their own play will always be the most important factor but understanding that refereeing is an underrated and often overlooked aspect of the game could be the difference between two teams.

Let’s respect the whistle, adapt to interpretations and focus on what we can control. This embodies the true spirit of rugby union.

References

- Rugby Australia, Game Management Guidelines, 2025 season.
- Referee Profile on Jaco Peyper, created by Grant Doorey, Tonga Assistance Coach, 2019