

Rugby Rookie Primer

Courtesy of Radcliffe Rugby

Written by
Lisa Gartner

Adapted by
BWRFC

RUGBY? WHAT?

Rugby is a sport, a passion, a disease you catch. They'll tell you it combines the grace of soccer, the speed of track and the power of football, but that doesn't prepare you. Rugby is its own backwards self. There is nothing like it on or off the field.

Some sports historians put forth the theory that in the olden days it was considered amusement for one town to try and carry a somewhat startled young pig to another town's village square. They would employ various methods of dodging, dashing, passing, or just plowing through en masse to achieve this. These primitive contests became refined over time and emerged as rugby, soccer, football, etc. To the casual observer, rugby seems remarkably close to its roots.

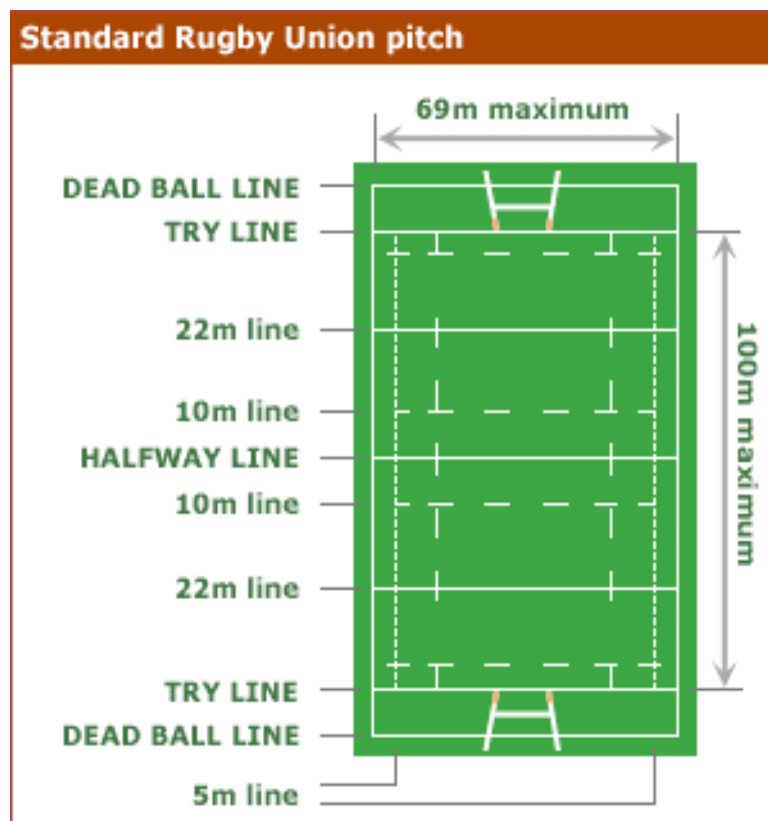
There is also the worn-out legend of William Webb Ellis, who one day during a soccer match at Rugby School in England, decided to pick up the ball and run with it. Our own research has shown that the kid's name was really Wilma and it was her ball. She was merely trying to make a point on the rampant sexism and provincial attitudes of that particular institution; besides, her mom was calling.

Wherever it came from, today's rugby is, at its best, a blend of strategy, strength, speed, and instinct. At its least, it is organized and glorious mayhem. The object is to, by carrying, passing, and kicking the ball, score more points than the other team. Simple enough . . .

THE PITCH, YOUR KIT, AND OTHER PREREQUISITES

We play on a **PITCH**. It looks like a field and it is a field, but we call it a pitch.

It is preferably grassy and level, but we also take what we can get. All of these markings will someday make sense. For now one important thing to store in your memory banks is that the lines are included in what is beyond them (i.e. the touchline is in-touch or out of bounds, and the goal line is in-goal).



Your rugby **KIT** is what you wear to the pitch. It consists of a sturdy rugby jersey (not to be confused with Ralph Lauren's Rugby line), a pair of rugby shorts, matching socks and cleats and that's it! Well, maybe a little athletic tape for effect or a mouthguard so you'll look pretty in photographs. A tip for rookies: leave your jewelry at home. Literally thousands of earrings have been lost forever in the linty recesses of people's pockets.

You'll also need a ball - a rugby ball, of course. It looks like a fat football with more rounded ends. Add one referee. 15 of you and 15 of them, and you're ready for a rollicking good rugby match. Oh yeah, there are a few rules to learn . . .



HOW TO BEGIN AND SOME STRANGE FACTS

Teams often line up on the 50 m line for cleat inspection and salutations, but the action begins with a kick-off. This is taken at center field. The game is divided into two halves, no more than 40 minutes long and sometimes less. The clock never stops, but any time taken for injury is added on to the half in which it occurs.

ANYBODY may play the ball. You may run with it, pass it, kick it, or tackle an opponent who has it - provided that you are **ONSIDE**.

Rookies, this is key:

- ★ **ONSIDE**: you are **behind the ball**
- ★ **OFFSIDE**: you are **in front of the ball**.

You won't be in trouble if you're 50 meters away tying your shoe, but if you influence the play in any way from an offside position this is bad - Penalty City, kids. The concept of offside explains a lot of this seemingly convoluted game.

For example: we cannot pass forward because that would mean that the receiver would be in front of us and thus offside.

Kicking forward is permissible (and desirable), but unless you are behind the kicker, she or someone behind her passes you, or you **ARE** the kicker, you cannot just go for the ball. In fact, if you are offside. Furthermore, if you are within 10 meters of an opponent *fielding* a kick you **must retreat**

beyond that 10 and only go ahead in your pursuit of the ball after she has moved 5 meters, passed, kicked, or dropped the ball.

★ You also may **not block** in rugby. Inhibiting opponents who do not have the ball or even just sort of standing in the way are in **OBSTRUCTION** and it is cheating. You should never cheat unless you can cheat well.

Now that this is all perfectly murky in your mind, we will proceed with what you CAN do, how the ball does manage to move forward, and where you might fit in.

HAVE WE GOT A POSITION FOR YOU!

The Forwards:

These are a proud bunch . . . the worker bees, the relentless tide. It is their responsibility to scramble, chase, heave and ho in effort to gain possession of the ball and then take it forward or present it very nicely to the backs to do something with. They are then expected to remain in dogged support of whoever carries the ball. Their work is never done and they are also referred to as the **FORWARDS** or the **PACK**.

The scrum is the basic set formation of rugby and occurs after various minor infringements of the law. Form and timing are more important than brute strength.

SCRUM: the name of the formal conglomeration of forwards who bind together in specific positions; a face-off of sorts

The **scrumhalf** puts the ball straight into the space between the two front rows (the tunnel). By combining a **driving push** and a **quick foot strike** by the **hooker** (occasionally a prop) each team attempts to win the ball. It is then channeled back to the **#8** who lets it out to the scrumhalf (who has moved to the back) or breaks off and picks it up.

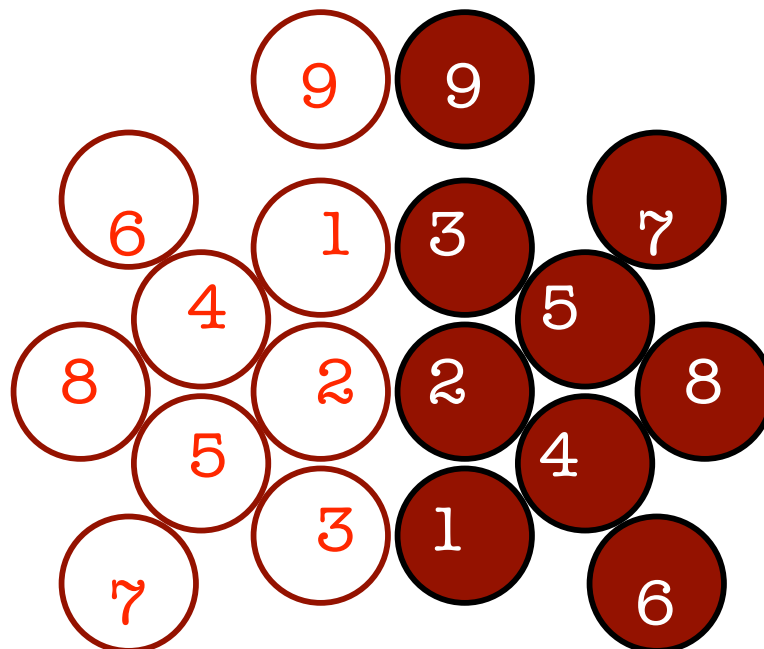
The team who gets to put the ball in has the advantages of timing and having their front row closer to the put-in point. By driving forward we not only win the ball, but give **momentum** to any subsequent offensive moves after the ball is out.

SCRUM DIAGRAM

Key:

- 1: Loose Head Prop (sturdy and fearless)
- 2: Hooker (small, quick, ready to take control)
- 3: Tight Head Prop (see #1)
- 4,5: Second Rows (Locks) - (big and strong)
- 6,7: Flankers - (quick, aggressive)
- 8: 8-Man (smart, foot and hand skills)
- 9: Scrumhalf (smart, experienced, quick) -- technically not a forward, but the link between forwards and backs - special rules apply to the scrumhalf.

OVERHEAD VIEW



More spontaneous versions of this type of formation are the **RUCKS** and **MAULS** which can occur at any time.

★ **RUCK**: at least one player from each team binds over the **ball on the ground**.

★ **MAUL**: at least one player from each team binds around a player **standing with the ball** in her possession - (remember, a maul is tall).

The essential aspect that we'd like to drill into your heads is to **position yourself low** and **drive forward** when engaged in these odd sounding activities. The essential no-no to keep in mind is that when there are people bound over the ball on the ground (a scrum or ruck) there are **NO HANDS ALLOWED!** You may not touch the ball with your hands until it is clearly in daylight.

Rucks and mauls basically give everyone a chance to collect themselves and rally the troops for the next play. Once a ruck or maul forms, players not participating (by being fully bound - with at least one whole arm) **must remain behind the last person's foot**. This gives players not involved some time and space in which to set up and look for defensive holes. A really great team will be able to do this so quickly that their opponents will be caught disorganized, and therefore ill-prepared to stop it.

The Backs:

The speedsters, the golden hands, the glamour gals of rugby. Although required to ruck, maul, and tackle when necessary they do whatever is required to advance the ball. The backs play in a lot less traffic than the forwards. After the forwards have won them the ball, they are expected to [run](#), [pass](#), [kick](#), and [score](#) lots of tries. A typical line up looks like this:

LINE DIAGRAM

Key:

9: Scrumhalf (as you know)

10: Flyhalf (great hands, cool head)

12: Inside Center (good change of speed)

13: Outside Center (same and faster)

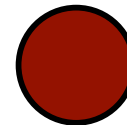
11: Wing (burner)

14: Wing (ditto)

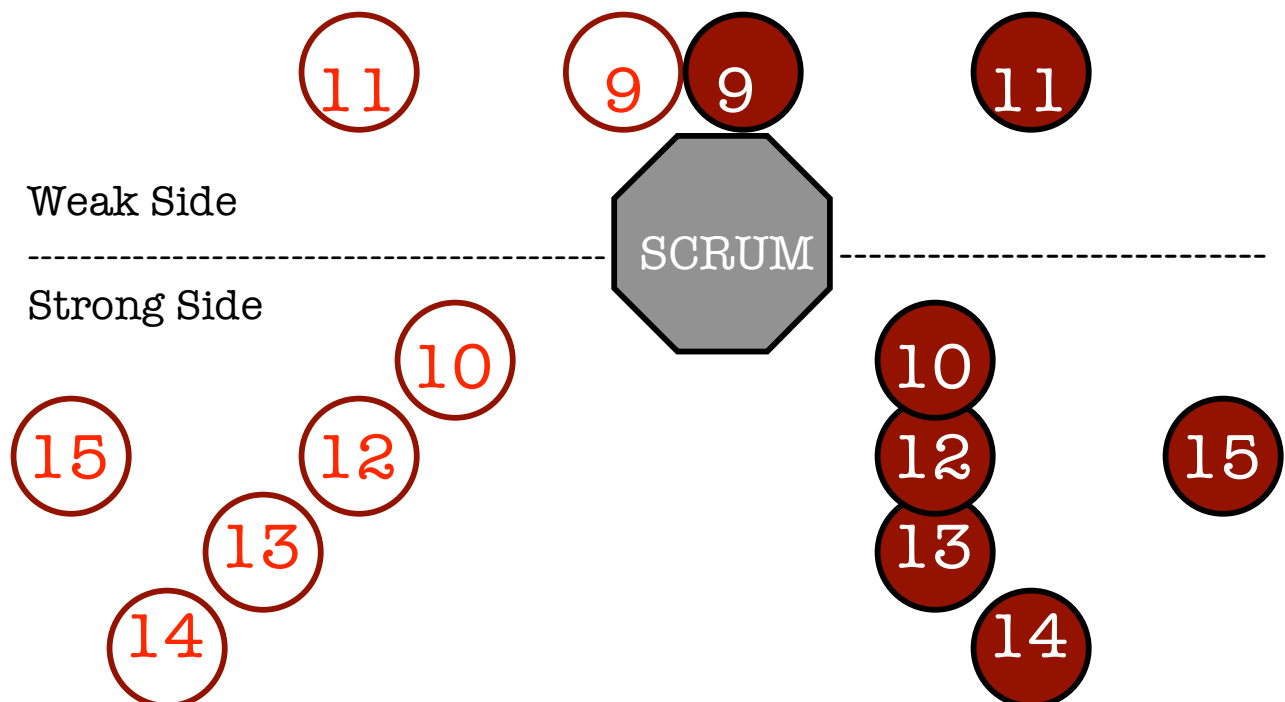
15: Fullback (very good foot, able to read game)



Offense



Defense



Once in possession of the ball, the backs have options galore.

1. They might quickly **pass it out** to the wing who has fewer obstacles and is generally very fast.

2. The ball might be **kicked** in various ways and pursued.

3. One of our favorite ways of extending the backline is by **LOOPING**, which is when an inside player (often after passing the ball out) sprints behind the line bursting through to receive it again somewhere.

4. The backs may **SKIP** a player along the line in order to get it over quickly or add an extra player like the fullback who might come crashing through.

5. You can catch everyone off-guard by changing the direction of movement by using a **SWITCH** (or scissors). This happens when instead of passing to the person outside you, she suddenly cuts back behind you to receive a handoff as you angle a bit.

6. You can also **DUMMY** the defense by faking a move to a teammate and keeping it yourself.

★ When running downfield, backs want to run **straight** to leave room for outside people to do their stuff. Most importantly, a team must work together. This applies to defense as well.

★ Defense means never having to say you're sorry. The basic idea is to come at them hard in a **FLAT** line (a veritable wall of intimidation). The faster you're in their faces, the less time they have to think. You must come up as a unit or a good team will take advantage of the fault in the fabric.

SKILLS TO KNOW AND LOVE

Backs and forwards alike need to develop certain rugby-specific abilities. These skills are the foundation of all play, simple and complex.

Pass:

★ We will begin with the **PASS**. You already know that you can't pass forward. Lateral passing is OK, but a close call. What's left? You guessed - we pass **backwards**. This explains the odd diagonal line-up of the backs.

Technique may vary, but the important concept here is **catchability**. Using both hands, the ball is passed in an underhand fashion and should arrive in the receiver's hands upright and UNdiscombulated. You should **lead the receiver** so that she is **bursting** on to it and thus gaining yardage even though she starts behind you.

Waist high would be nice. The distance between passer and receiver varies depending on how skilled they are, the particular play, and the weather. The receiver stays at an angle sufficiently deep to receive the ball running at top speed. The passer should always turn her body toward the receiver. Don't pass until you see the whites of their eyes. We'll practice this plenty, so don't worry if it seems awkward at first.

Kick:

★ **KICKING** is another name of this game. Rookies, in general, take awhile to incorporate this aspect into their game, so if you feel like you look awkward, you probably do. It does, however, open up a world of options to you - so we'll briefly explain the range of fancy foot work.

1. The **POP KICK** is a popular item. It is a short up-in-the air kick that you can field yourself. If some menacing hulk is barreling down on you, why take the hit? If there is no one to pass to, you can just pop it over her and run onto it. You've got the momentum - she'll have to turn around to chase it and you. **Remember, she cannot touch you if you don't have the ball.**

2. The **GRUB** kick is like a hot grounder past the shortstop. You punch it along the ground with your foot and, as always, **pursue** it. Because of the shape of the ball, the grub kick will take some weird hops, making it hard to handle.

All kicking should be done **strategically** and not in a panic. It is important to place kicks in a spot where your team can **regain possession.**

3. Longer kicks may be used too, where the ball is kicked to a part of the field that your teammates can get to first or make life miserable for an opponent who does. The ball may also be **PUNTED INTO TOUCH** (out-of-bounds) for long yardage. We'll explain later what happens after the ball leaves the field, but for now remember this:

if you are **behind your own 22 meter** line and kick it directly to touch on a fly, the ball is brought back in at **the point that it crosses the line.**

Thus a long kick for touch can get you out of hot water when the opposition is breathing down your goal line. This is also true when you have been awarded a penalty kick anywhere on the field. However:

if you kick it directly out when you are **ahead of your 22**, the ball comes back in from the **point it was kicked** - meaning no yardage gained.

4. You can dribble the ball or give it a good whack with your foot anytime its loose on the ground, but possession is 9/10th of the law in rugby. It's always best to secure the ball for your side.

Tackle:

★ You've got to **TACKLE**. When you do, your tacklee has no choice but to release the ball, leaving it fair game for either side. No, the play does not stop, but she will.

Tackling well and decisively is vital (although we always keep in mind our lack of padding). You should **hit low**, squeeze their legs together, and twist them so you land on top. We will review this thoroughly in future practices. The technical definition of a tackle:

when a player is held by an opposing player and at least one knee is touching the ground (falling down unassisted doesn't count).

Rookies: remember, if you are tackled you **must release** the ball or it's **penalty** time once again. You may pick it up immediately upon gaining your feet. You are allowed a split second to place the ball to your team's advantage when tackled.

YOU GOTTA SCORE IF YOU WANT TO WIN

★ OK, so how do we pile up points? Well, first in our hearts is the **TRY**. It has similarities to a touchdown (in football), but with a significant difference.

TRY: bring the ball into your opponent's in-goal and **touch it to the ground**. Worth **5 points**.

Remember:

- control
- downward pressure
- simultaneous hand/ball/ground contact

are all essential in order for a try to be awarded.

The priority is to get the ball over and down, but if possible, you want to place it near the middle. The reason for this is that after a try, you have a chance to make it 7 points by kicking the ball through the posts (uprights).

CONVERSION: the kick made from any distance back, but in line with where the ball was touched down. Worth **2 points**.

It is far easier for a kicker to make a conversion when she is in front of the posts as opposed to at an angle. The kicker may use a

PLACE KICK: a kick using a kicking tee

or a

DROP KICK: a kick where the ball is dropped and kicked on the rebound

The game starts up again with a kick off (a drop-kick) from the 50 meter line to the team who has just scored. There is no official game stoppage.

The other way to score is **BY GOING FOR POST.**

KICKING FOR POST: a kick through the posts at any time, excluding the conversion. Worth 3 points.

Most commonly it is made when a penalty is called within the range of your team's best kicker. It may be place kicked or drop kicked from the point where the penalty was awarded (the **MARK**).

Rarer in women's rugby is a spontaneous drop kick through the posts during play (worth 3 points). This is allowed at any time but is very difficult to do.

★ If a team should touch the ball down in its OWN in-goal (better you than them), two things can happen.

1. If your team is responsible for bringing the ball in, a scrum, 5 meters back from the try line, will be awarded to the other team (meaning their scrumhalf gets to put it in).

2. If the ball traveled into the in-goal on the other team's impetus, your team will be awarded a 22 meter **DROP OUT**. A drop out means that your team may drop-kick the ball from any point behind the 22 meter line. The other team must **retreat immediately** to the other side of the 22.

TAKE A BREAK

Feel better? You may be feeling a little saturated with rugby facts and figures at this point and as you might suspect, there is much, much more. Don't worry if it seems confusing or even ridiculous. Someday that light bulb will pop on, miscellaneous ideas will click and in spite of yourself, you'll become a ruggger.

RANDOM THOUGHTS:

- **Rugby is a continuous, flowing game** with natural ebbs and surges, but no real time-outs except for injury.
- **It has both premeditation and spontaneity.** The faster you can make things happen, the more likely you will be able to score.
- **All sixes and shapes of people can play.** It is an aggressive and physically demanding game. **Fitness**, however, is mandatory.
- A couple of little catch words in rugby are **MOVE FORWARD** and **SUPPORT**. Confusingly enough, you often have to back up or pass back to support the surge forward. The overall team direction should always be lustfully aimed toward the goal line.
- **This is a team game.** The collective effort of 15 people is far more powerful than the individual. When everyone on the field is in sync, it's the coolest feeling in the world (or at least the top 2 or 3). The best score is when everyone contributes.

CHAPTER 8

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE BALL GOES INTO TOUCH AND OTHER STORIES

If the ball is kicked, carried, or otherwise escorted into touch, its re-entry onto the field is by way of a **LINE OUT**.

Out-of-Bounds:

★ A **LINE OUT** is a little like a jumpball in basketball. Two columns of forwards (one column per team) line up 5 meters in from the touch line and perpendicular to it. A player from the team who **didn't** touch it last before it went onto touch gets to throw the ball down the tunnel.

It can be thrown any distance as long as it flies **straight** between the columns. Teams use signals to let their players know where the thrower intends to throw it. Certain players in the line out are designated as **JUMPERS**. The rest support and protect them in a variety of ways that you will soon be learning.

The ball may be thrown beyond the line out or to the first person, but it must travel the initial 5 meters before it may be played. The line out can extend out to 15 meters.

During a line out the backs line up in much the same way as during a scrum, with one notable exception. In a scrum they must only remain behind the #8's or last person's foot. In a line out they (or anyone not participating directly) must remain **10 meters back** until the line out is completely over (**no creeping up or PENALTY... again**).

The thrower from the team not throwing in and both scrumhalves stand where indicated on the diagram.

There are short line outs, quick line outs, and other variations, but that's all for now, folks.

Penalties:

★ Let's talk a little more about **PENALTIES**. For minor infractions of the law a simple **scrum down** will do. A **forward pass** is one such infringement. The infamous **knock on** is another.

KNOCK ON: drop or bump the ball forward with any part of your upper body

The scrum is awarded to the non-offending team. A scrum may also be called when a ruck or maul goes too long without the ball coming out or if the referee judges it to be dangerous. There are other occasions for scrums, but you'll learn those reasons as you play...

Referee Signals:

It might behoove you to (at some point) learn the signals a referee uses to indicate what he or she has called.

After the whistle she will usually give the **MARK** with her foot and indicate, with her arm angled down toward one team or the other, who gets to put the ball in. The hookers then usually line up at the mark and the rest of the pack comes in around them.

A **FREE KICK** is awarded for slightly less secure infractions

than a penalty kick. The difference is that you are not allowed to go for post. The referee indicates a free kick by extending a bent arm toward the team who gets to take it.

For a **PENALTY KICK**, the referee extends his arm upward toward the team to whom he's awarding it. A penalty kick is given for obstruction, offsidess, hands in a ruck, play deemed dangerous by the referee, or any number of things that are extremely naughty.

A penalty kick is awarded at the place the infraction occurs (usually). A mark will be given and that is the point through which the kick **MUST** be taken. To execute a penalty kick you must move the ball visibly through the mark with your foot.

This could mean anything from a **SHORT TAP** (after which it may be picked up and moved in any legal way) to a **LONG PUNT** (the space directly above the mark counts as the mark).

The opposition must **RETREAT** 10 meters immediately when a penalty kick is awarded -- giving you quite an advantage. If you ever hear your teammates screaming at you to get "**back 10**" it is probable that the other team has just been awarded a penalty kick. Remember: keep facing the ball!

Now we will briefly ponder the vast gray area of **ADVANTAGE**. In rugby, a referee does not have to call a penalty if she feels that no advantage was gained by the offending team or that the other team was able to capitalize on it.

For example: a referee may see a knock on occur, but wait to blow the whistle until it becomes apparent who

has made subsequent gains. If the NON-offending team scoops up the ball and gains 10 meters, the penalty may never be called at all.

This is called "[playing the advantage](#)." The advantage law helps to keep the game flowing. File this for another day, but keep in mind that even if you do spot an infraction, [do not stop until you have heard a whistle](#). The referee may not have seen it or may be playing the advantage.

the Referee:

As long as we're on the subject, let's talk about the **REFEREE**. There is only one ref and this is a very significant fact. With 30 people careening around the field, one person cannot possibly see everything. When the referee does call something, her word is law. In fact, [the ref cannot change a call once made](#). It is no use arguing -- in fact, you can even be penalized if you do. If you do need to make a comment to the referee, for any reason, do so through your captain.

Different referees have different styles. It is a smart rugby player who learns to "[play the ref](#)." Many calls in rugby are completely up to the referee's judgment -- especially those concerning foul play. This may be the grayest area of all.

Basically, there is a spirit of fair play that governs rugby. If something gets out of hand, go to your captain who can speak to the referee. The referee is the sole determiner of what constitutes foul play and a good one will keep things clean. A player can be ejected from a game as the most severe resolution of a problem with the issuance of a [yellow or red card](#). Should this happen, her team may NOT bring in a substitute, leaving them to play short.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST, THE SOCIAL

If there is one thing that sets rugby apart from all the other sports you've seen or played, it is that after a match, you lay differences aside and have a party. There is a spirit of camaraderie among rugby players. After all, it is a weird sport -- nobody gets paid, you travel all around, and get bruises for your trouble. You've got to have a passion for it and despite all rivalries, it is a passion shared by everyone who plays it. As the sport is unique and intense, so are its players. Meeting people of all varieties, from all parts of the country, is one of rugby's greatest delights. So after each game, both teams come together over food and drinks to sing traditional rugby songs in a venue known as the **SOCIAL**.

Rugby is a lot of things to a lot of people. It is challenging and playful, exuberant and exciting. There are always new things to learn and old limits to push aside. We hope you will love it as much as we do. Thanks for reading.

The End