

Rugby: The rules for the casual viewer

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Raymond Chen

The “minimum you need to know about a sport in order to watch a match and not be completely confused” mini-series continues with rugby, whose World Cup is currently under way.

First of all, there are two flavors of rugby: Rugby league and rugby union. The one being contested at the World Cup right now is rugby union, and that’s the one I’ll cover here.

- The playing area (**pitch**) has a lot of lines. Don’t worry about most of them. The **touch lines** run along the sides, **goal lines** are at the ends, and **dead ball lines** are beyond the goal lines. The touch lines and dead ball lines form the playing boundary. The lines themselves are considered out of play.
- A team consists of 15 players, with 8 substitutions permitted. A player who is replaced may not return, with exceptions for temporary injuries.
- The game consists of two 40-minute halves, plus stoppage time. If time expires while play is active, the play is allowed to run its course, plus any penalties that may ensue. Games can end in a draw.
- The team with the ball may run with it or kick it. The ball may be thrown sideways or backward, but not forward.
- The defense stops the advance by tackling the player with the ball. Players who jump into the air and catch the ball are safe from being tackled until they land.
- The offense may not obstruct the defense’s path to the ball. (No blocking.)
- A tackled ball carrier must get rid of the ball immediately.
- A ball carrier on the ground (not yet tackled) must get up or get rid of the ball.
- If three or more players contest a ball while standing, it is a **maul**. If three or more players contest a ball on the ground, it is a **ruck**, and the ball must be played with the feet. In both cases, players must remain standing.
- A player who announces “**mark**” and catches the ball behind their own 22-meter line is awarded a free kick from the point of catch. (Marks may not be called during the kick-off.)

Scoring: There are two basic categories of scoring: The **try** and the **kick**. Kicks must go through the goal posts.

- **try:** 5 points for touching the ball to the ground beyond the opponent's goal line. After a try, the scoring team attempts a conversion kick.
- **conversion kick:** 2 points, taken in line with the point the try was made, from any distance. (Tries closer to the center of the goal line therefore make for easier conversions.)
- **drop kick:** 3 points for kicks from the field.
- **penalty kick:** 3 points for kicks from a penalty kick.

The line-out

- If the ball or ball carrier touches the ground out of bounds, a **line-out** is awarded to the team that did not last touch the ball.
- The position of the line-out is generally the point the ball left the field, with adjustments if it is close to a goal line. Some situations result in a line-out at the point of kick.
- Both teams line up perpendicular to the touch line. The defense may not line up more players than the throwing team.
- The rules on where players may stand are complicated. Let's just assume that they are standing in the right place.
- The ball is thrown perpendicular to the touch line.
- Players are permitted to lift teammates to reach the ball.
- A team may perform a quick throw-in if the defense is slow to form a line-out.

The scrum

- The **scrum** is perhaps one of the iconic elements of rugby. It is used to restart play after a minor infringement, such as throwing the ball forward. It is also used if the ball is trapped in a maul or ruck.
- Eight players from each team form a carefully architected huddle, and the team awarded the ball rolls it into the **tunnel**.
- Each team attempts to push the other team backward so that a designated player (the **hooker**) can kick the ball backward to a teammate.

Fouls

- Fouls include obstruction, violent play, intentionally **collapsing** a maul or ruck, and improper tackles.
- The **offside** rule is complicated, but basically you may not be ahead of the ball and participate in the play. For a maul, ruck, or scrum, players who are not contesting the ball must remain behind those who are.
- The referee may decline to enforce a foul if they feel the offended team has the advantage.
- When a penalty kick is awarded, the opposing team must yield 10 meters.

- A team may elect to restart with a scrum rather than a penalty kick.
- For serious fouls, the referee issues a **yellow card**, and the player must sit out for ten minutes, leaving the team shorthanded.

The open-field portion of rugby is pretty easy to figure out after watching it for a little while. The most confusing part is when there's a crowd around the ball, because you can't see what's going on or what they're trying to do.

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