

League and Union: What's so different?

The teams

Unlike Rugby Union where 15 players make up the team, League has just 13 players on the field at any one time.

Union has 15 starting players with 7 substitutes who can be used tactically (but only once per game, like football) or as injury replacements. League has 13 starting players with four substitutes who can be used for a total of twelve substitutions or interchanges.

Scoring

League awards four points for a try, two for a conversion following a try, two for a penalty goal and just one point for a drop goal.

Union awards five points for a try, two for the conversion kick following a try, three for a penalty goal, and three points for a drop goal.

Positions

Unlike Union, League has just six forwards not eight. Both codes have two half backs and five backs. In League the halves are known as the scrum half and stand off, as opposed to scrum half and fly half in Union.

Forwards in the two games have immensely different roles. For instance, a hooker in Union is judged primarily on his ability to scrummage and to throw the ball accurately into the line out. In League the hooker is generally the first person to distribute the ball from 'dummy half' at the 'play-the-ball', often controlling the direction of the attack, and very important defensively in the middle of the field. The League hooker will cover more ground during a game than any other player in the team. It is very unlikely a Union hooker would play the same position in League, and vice versa, the skill sets just don't overlap.

In League the two props and second rows are largely responsible for getting the team moving forward or gaining the 'hard yards' in attack. The loose forward is generally more mobile with more of a roving role in attack.

Scrums

Once upon a time (about 20 years ago) the League scrum was very competitive with 'specialist' hookers trained to win the ball and with referees vigilantly enforcing a correct feed in the centre of the scrum. These days it is extremely rare that a scrum can be won against the head or when the opposition scrum half is feeding the ball. While League scrums are no longer much of a contest for the ball, they do provide the only occasion in a game where each backline is directly opposing the other. Scrums are really just a means of restarting the game.

In Union the scrum is a key part of the struggle for dominance and territory. The scrums are fiercely contested and enormous weight and power is brought to bear collectively. The most difficult position to survive in Union is at tight head prop - very few men have the iron strength needed to play here. As a result the good ones can command salaries as high as all but the most high profile backs. In the old days the scrum battles were between the hookers who tried to heel against the put in, nowadays the battle is for the control of the angle of the scrum and quality of ball. It is very difficult for a side to win a game of Union if they are heavily out-scrummaged.

Line outs

In League, when the ball is kicked into touch in general play as a means of gaining field position, the game will restart with a scrum. If the ball is kicked from within the attacking team's 40 metre and bounces first before going into touch beyond the defending team's 20 metre line (known as a 40-20), the attacking team will be given the feed or put-in. If the ball is simply kicked across the touch line on the bounce, the defending team will feed the scrum (and 99% of times) win the ball.

In Union when the ball is kicked off the side of the pitch (which happens a lot more than it does in League) the game is restarted with a line out. In this set piece each team puts between two and seven players in their line - the exact number is determined by the side throwing the ball in. The intricacies of the line out are incredibly complex. This facet of the game explains why at least two or three of the Union forwards are usually over 6 feet 6 inches tall. Without an effective line out it is very difficult to control field position in Union.

Kicking

Kicking in general play in Rugby League is becoming increasingly important as teams search for new ways to break down a defence and/or improve field position. More and more tries these days are scored from accurate offensive kicks; more often than not executed by one of the half backs. Various kicks include the short grubber or chip kick, the high bomb, or when close to the try line the cross-field or banana kick. If a try does not result from a short range attacking kick the next best result is forcing a goal line drop out. This is achieved by tackling the man with the ball in his own in-goal area and thereby attaining another set of six tackles, commonly referred to as a repeat-set.

Longer range kicks downfield are used to improve territory. The kicker will generally look to land the ball in space, to allow his team-mates time to chase the kick. The 40-20 very difficult kick which is rewarded by a scrum feed to the attacking side.

In Union, offensive kicks are part of the game but not as common, because if the ball is not recovered from the kick possession is lost. More common in Union are clearing kicks from within a team's own 22 metre line in order to relieve pressure and 'clear your lines'. Some teams with a good line out kick the ball off the pitch - others just go for length. Like League, most of the kicking is done by the half backs.

In Union, once the kicker is outside their 22 the ball must bounce at least once before going off the pitch in order to gain territory. In League, all kicks other than penalty kicks for touch, must first bounce before crossing the touchline. A kick out on the full will revert to a scrum from where the ball was kicked, with the feed given to the non-attacking team.

Penalty kicks for touch in League are generally quite conservative in terms of distance gained. In Union the very best kickers will attempt to make 50 or 60 metre gains from penalties to touch, whilst kicks at goal are far more common. There are generally more penalties awarded and fewer tries scored in Union, and because a penalty goal is worth three points (against just two in League), it is a vital aspect of the game. Few top class Union sides would take the field without a goal kicker boasting a 75-80% success rate.

Rucks and mauls

These are the Union equivalent of the play-the-ball - the means of recycling possession. There are many laws surrounding rucks and mauls which can make this aspect of Union difficult to understand. The key point is that if the tackled player goes off his feet then he must release the ball immediately and nobody else can touch the ball with their hands until the ball emerges from the ruck (defined as a situation when at least one player from each side is bound over the ball). If the ball-carrying player stays on his feet he can keep hold of the ball and be assisted by his teammates. Whilst the player and ball remain off the ground this is a maul - which can be driven forward or back by either side. At times, an attacking side can drive over the try line and score direct from a maul.

Six Tackles

In League a team has six tackles with which to move the ball forward or score. Most teams will attempt to complete their 'set of six' tackles without surrendering possession as often as they can. Teams will always avoid being caught with the ball on the last tackle as this will result in a turnover of possession. Rather than die with the ball on the last tackle, a team will either aim to score a try or to improve field position.

Another common play on the last tackle is the short kick in-goal aiming to force a goal line drop out and a repeat set of six.

The referee will signal the fifth and last tackle with his arm held directly in the air. Defenders expecting a kick will often pressure the kicker to lessen the effectiveness of the kick and/or force an error. The key difference in Union is that a team can retain possession for as long as it wishes (or is able to). Therefore you do sometimes get continuous passages of play with up to fifteen or even twenty rucks/mauls with the same side having possession. It is difficult to retain possession for this long when every ruck or maul can be contested (it also usually means you are having trouble breaking down a well organised defence).

Play-the-ball

In League, once a tackle has been completed, the game is restarted by the ball carrier regaining his feet and then playing the ball back between his legs to his teammate (often the hooker) standing at dummy half. Two defenders (or markers) are

permitted to remain at the ruck and not back up the ten metres required of his team-mates in the defensive line.

It is a great advantage in League to have a quick play the ball as this gives the defending team very little time to set its defence. Attaining a quick play-the-ball is a pivotal skill in League. Once the tackle is complete, defenders must release the tackled player and allow him to play the ball. Preventing a quick play-the-ball (without getting penalised) is a skill in itself, in order to give your defence the opportunity to set its formation.

In Union there is no real equivalent to the play-the-ball, although the evolution of the 'mini-ruck' in recent years has some similarities.

Offside

Offside in League and Union can take a number of forms. Both games have an imaginary line at the play the ball and the ruck/maul situation which the players not involved at the tackle area must not cross. In League the offside rule is often enforced when an attacking player is in front of his own kicker. Another simple example of the offside rule in both codes is the forward pass; the player receiving the ball must not be in front of the man passing the ball.

Both codes have offside rules surrounding the tackle area itself, the scrum and chasing kicks. Union also has offside or encroachment rules for line outs. In essence, offside laws cover all those places on the pitch where players could interfere with the opposition or seek to gain an unfair advantage.

Summary

In summary, it is easy to see that both codes of Rugby have common roots but have diverged over the years. Some fans love one code, some the other, and an increasing number enjoy watching both games. At the Twickenham Stoop in 2006, Harlequins will give all supporters a world of choice and, with both codes, the enjoyment of twelve months of live Rugby.

This is a beginner's guide to both codes of rugby and is written for ease of understanding. For the complete rules of each governing body consult either rfl.uk.com or rfu.com. More information can also be found at quins.co.uk.