



ROOKIE PRIMER

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this primer is to give the novice player a basic introduction to the sport of Rugby Union Football. If we were to include all the laws and nuances of the game (not to mention the history, tradition and social aspects) your head would be spinning within an hour. All knowledge worth having comes with time and the same applies to rugby. This primer exists to help you keep the basics in mind as you begin your long and successful rugby career. Confusion is expected. Patience is required. We've all been there.

Obviously rugby requires a certain amount of physical skill but the sport is also as much mental as physical, requiring focus, concentration, quick decision-making, communication, knowledge of one's teammates, etc. These come with time and playing experience and offer great satisfaction.

Later in this primer we'll be discussing some of the skills that you'll want to develop to fully enjoy rugby, but obviously you can't acquire a physical skill by reading about it. This is where our coaching staff comes in. The Seattle Quake is fortunate to have several experienced and dedicated coaches. They're there to help you bring out the best of your abilities and out of respect to them and their position we follow a couple of simple rules.

1. When a coach is speaking we always give them our full attention.
2. We never leave the pitch, for whatever reason, without informing a coach first.

These are not Quake-specific rules of conduct but have come down to us through years of tradition. Every rugby club does the same.

DEFINITIONS

Rugby has a vocabulary that is best learned beforehand to avoid confusion. Often these are familiar words used in a very unfamiliar way. Here are the common ones. Learn them and use them.

Pitch – the playing field.

Try – the equivalent of a goal in soccer or a touchdown in football. Worth 5 points.

Conversion Kick – after a try, the kicker attempts to gain two extra points in the same manner as in football.

Penalty Kick and **Drop Goal** – the two other ways of scoring points in rugby, worth 3 points each.

In-Touch – out of bounds, either the ball or the player with the ball.

Forwards – players 1 through 8. They tend to be bigger and more powerful.

Backs – players 9 through 15. They tend to be leaner and faster.

Scrummage (or Scrum) – a set play that follows a minor infraction of certain Laws. Opposing sets of forwards form and mass around the ball and, with heads down, try to shoulder their opponents off the ball and kick it backwards to their team.

Line-out – a formation where a player in-touch throws the ball between two parallel lines of opposing players who try to gain possession of the ball. The line-out restarts play after the ball has gone in-touch.

Ruck – an on-field tussle where the ball is on the ground and opposing players form over it and try to push their opponents of the ball to gain possession.

Maul – the same idea as a ruck except that all players are standing and the ball is in someone's hands and not on the ground.

Knock-on – a penalty incurred by moving the ball forward on the ground, however slightly, with use of the hands, either intentional or non-intentional.

Rugby Boots – shoes with cleats, not really boots at all.

Match – a competitive game played on the pitch (okay that's an easy one, but just remember not to say "Great game" to your opponent at the drinkup).

Friendly – any match that does not count towards a club's divisional standing.

Laws – the rules governing the sport of Rugby Union Football are traditionally called 'laws'.

Drinkup (also called the 3rd Half) – An unassailable rugby tradition where a club for beer and song with the opposing club after the match.

Meter – a unit of measurement used everywhere on the planet except in the United States. During a match when everyone is screaming at you to fall back 10 meters just remember that it's 39.37 inches and damn near close to a yard.

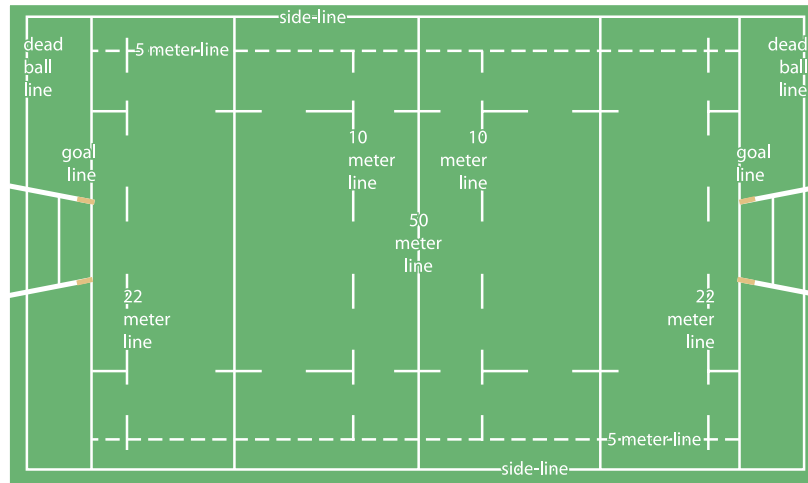
THE PITCH

The field-of-play on a rugby pitch can be no more than 100 meters long and 70 meters wide. This does not include the area between the goal line and the dead ball line. All rugby clubs endeavor to play on a full-sized pitch, smaller areas are allowed. Chalked pitch will have several different demarcations but for our purposes here, four you should commit to memory.

- The halfway line bisects the pitch into two equal halves. Kick-offs to start match, to start the second half, and to resume play after a try happen at this
- The goal line at either end of the pitch is, obviously, the line you must cross score a try, but in rugby you may also score by placing the ball on the line touching the goal post with the ball.
- The touch lines run the entire length of the pitch and indicate the field-of-play. A player that steps on or over that line is said to be "in-touch" (out of bounds, American). If that player happens to be in possession of the ball then plays and is restarted with a set piece (or formation) called a line-out, which we explain later.
- The 22-meter lines are a special and initially confusing aspect of rugby. They are 22 meters from each goal line and figure prominently in deciding whether the ball in open play. If a player is behind his own 22-meter line he may kick the ball in-touch. While this would be a stupid move in many other sports, rugby it can be very strategic because play resumes at the point the ball went touch. Even though the opposition gains the right to control the "throw-in" ball to resume play at the line-out (and because

possession of the ball typically changes so frequently) a good kick can gain your team valuable meters.

Here's a diagram of a rugby pitch with all the various demarcations.



YOUR KIT

This is what you'll need to participate in a rugby match. Briefly these items are: a rugby jersey, rugby shorts (many of us also wear compression shorts), socks that come to just below the knee, rugby boots with sanctioned cleats and a mouth guard. The club supplies jerseys and socks for matches.

You may also wear officially sanctioned shoulder pads, as well as neoprene supports for your knees, ankles, elbows or wrists, if needed. (Please show the coach your proposed supports before a practice or match.) And athletic tape, lots and lots of athletic tape. What you may not wear is any form of jewelry. Rings, earrings or any piercing (anywhere) is not allowed and certainly not advisable.



POSITIONS

We're not going to go into too much detail about what position does what here. Rugby players are very tied into what position they play and each one has its own lore and set of biases. We know from experience that you'll learn more from coming out and watching or participating than you will from reading pages of explanation. So keeping that in mind we'd still like to give you a brief overview of the different rugby positions.

Rugby Union Football is played with 15 players and a varied number of possible replacements (usually 7 for competitive matches). The jersey number reflects the player's position. Substitutes wear numbers 16 and up. The fifteen men on the pitch are divided into 'forwards' and 'backs', thus called because of their relative positions on the pitch. Of course this changes constantly during a match. Here's breakdown of the positions.

THE FORWARDS

1 – Prop. A prop is called a prop because he props up the hooker (with the other prop) during a scrum. We'll go into what a scrum is later but just keep in mind that a prop has a lot of close contact with the opposition and are typically big powerful fellows. The #1 position is also called the 'loose-head prop' because his head is positioned on the outside of his opponent's head in the scrum. He plays on the left hand side.

2 – Hooker. A hooker is called a hooker because in a scrum he "hooks" the ball with his feet and tries to move it back towards his teammates. A hooker needs to be suspended between the two props during a scrum so therefore they tend to be smaller, yet still powerful.

3 – Prop. The other prop is also known as the 'tight-head prop' because his head is positioned inside his opponent's head in a scrum. He plays on the right hand side.

Positions 1, 2, and 3 are known collectively as The Front Row, which reflects their position in the scrum.

4 and 5 – Locks. The locks are called locks because their position in a scrum is in the Second Row. In effect they're "locking" in the Front Row and giving the whole scrum power and stability. Locks are typically taller and possess good strength.

Positions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 are known collectively as The Tight (or Front) Five.

6 and 7 – Flankers. The flankers (with #8) comprise the Back Row of a scrum. They're the guys you'll see sticking out at the back of a scrum on the left and right hand sides. They can be bound in tight if needed but typically they're only providing power to the scrum with one shoulder thus allowing them to break away for attack. Good flankers are quick and aggressive and often find themselves making tackles and supporting the backs.

8 – The 8 Man. No interesting name for him but a very important position nonetheless. An 8-man is the middle member of the Back Row and is in charge of controlling the ball with his feet until such time as the scrumhalf decides to resume open play by removing the ball from the scrum and throwing it out to the flyhalf (or whoever), or an 8-man may decide to take the ball himself and run with it. This position requires a good strategic sense.

THE BACKS

9 – Scrumhalf. The scrumhalf works closely with the forwards and is the link between them and the backs. We could go on and on about what is required to be a good scrumhalf but let it suffice for us to say he's an all-around good player who must pass, kick, tackle and run well. In addition he must be a quick thinker as most of the offensive plays originate with him.

10 – Flyhalf. The flyhalf is perhaps the most important position on any team (debates rages on). Typically the flyhalf is the leader of the backs and is responsible for making sure they are properly aligned. All backs watch their flyhalf for an indication of how a particular play will go. Flyhalves need to be quick, calm, skillful, aggressive and good kickers.

Positions 9 and 10 are known collectively as the Halfbacks.

We'll skip position #11 for now and continue down the line to...

12 and 13 – Centers (Inside and Outside). Centers are called centers because (can you see it coming?) they're in the center of the line of backs. In addition the center closest the scrum is the 'inside center' and the center further down the line is the 'outside center'. Both centers need to be fast runners, adept ball-handlers and good at tackling and managing contact.

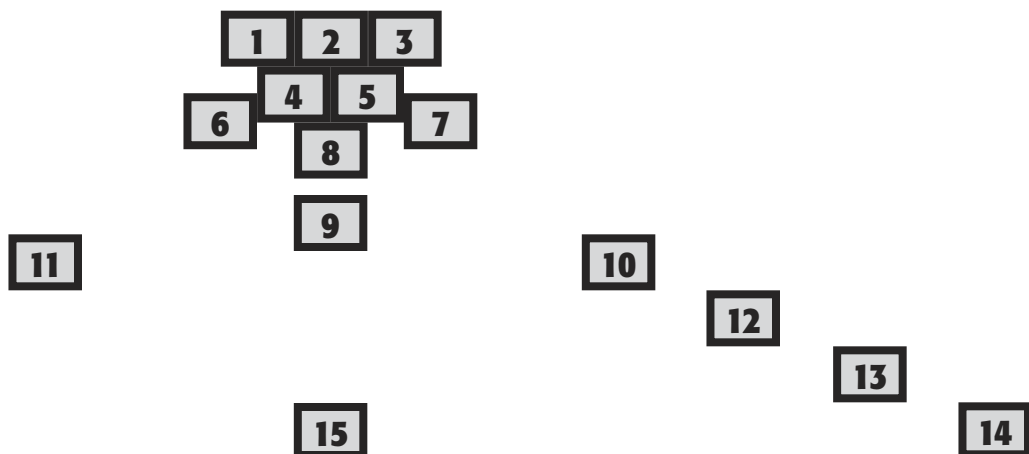
11 and 14 – Wingers (also Wings). There are two wing positions, 'blind-side' and 'open-side', and wingers will play both during a match depending on which side of the pitch the ball is located. Wingers are positioned at either side of the pitch nearest the touch lines. The blind-side winger is the lone back on his side of the play and typically has a narrow corridor through which he must maneuver up the pitch, thus the name. The open-side winger is the last man in the line of backs furthest away from the play and has more room to move. Both wingers need to be good at tackling and recovering kicked balls as they often cover for the fullback. Wingers must have speed and agility.

15 – Fullback. He's the guy behind everyone else, except when he isn't. A fullback must be wily, tough and a good kicker. When your opponents kick the ball deep the fullback is usually the guy catching or recovering the ball and running like a madman. He often comes up into the line of backs during open play in attack and is considered the last line of defense against your opponents scoring a try. Rugby clubs respect their fullbacks for all the tackles make and take.

Here's a diagram that shows the relative positions of the players at a scrum.

So that's a basic rundown on the pitch positions. You might come away from this thinking that forwards only push and shove and the backs only run and pass the ball. Not true. While some formations (or set pieces) are reserved specifically for the forwards, like scrums, backs must expect to tackle and be tackled, learn to fend off opponents, initiate rucks and mauls as well as enter rucks and mauls, if needed (more on this later from our coaches). Forwards aren't expected to be as fast and agile as a typical back but the best forwards are well served by those skills. Imagine a big prop who just pushed his opponents on their butts, clambered over them to get at the guy with the ball only this time the ball carrier can't shake him. That's a scary scenario for a back.

If you find this all confusing then you're paying attention. It is confusing. It's also intense, fascinating and a hell of a lot of fun.



PLAYING RUGBY – A FEW SIMPLE GUIDELINES

Before we get into the specifics of playing rugby we'd like to familiarize you with some very important rules (or Laws) that you must understand upfront.

PASSING

The passing is one of the things that seems so strange to rugby newbies. How can someone run forward at full speed and yet pass the ball backwards and actually have their teammate catch it and gain ground? Well it can be done and done beautifully. We'll show you how.

But first, please remember there is no forward passing in rugby. Forward passing is not allowed. Do not pass the ball forward. If confused, run like hell.

Lateral passing is allowed but we've found that what the referee thinks is lateral and what you think is lateral is inevitably different. It's an easy way to get a penalty. Don't do it.

Also carrying the ball in both hands allows you the maneuverability to pass the ball either left or right or to kick. Later you may tuck the ball for a full speed dash down the pitch or to fend off opponents who want to tackle you but for now we require you to use both hands, even when running.

BEING 'ON-SIDE'

Rugby looks like anarchy but it really isn't the free-for-all that it appears to be. Case in point is the concept of being 'on-side', and its evil twin, being 'off-side'. Being off-side in rugby is a bad thing and may result in a penalty against your team. There are countless ways of being off-side which you will learn over time and at the expense of much cursing and frustration. Typical examples are: 1) at a scrum, ruck or maul a back stands in front of an imaginary line made by the hindmost foot of the players involved in said scrum, ruck or maul or, 2) a teammate behind you kicks the ball forward – you are off-side and may not play the ball until being made on-side by him running in front of you or by various other actions of your teammates or the opposition. Like we said, there are many other examples of how to be off-side which you will learn on the pitch.

When you're off-side you may not play the ball or interfere with the player with the ball and should immediately retire to an on-side position. If you don't do so you are considered off-side and your team will receive a penalty. Not a good thing. You won't, however, receive a penalty for being on the other side of the ball. It's only if you're playing the ball or the player with the ball, and if you aren't in a position to play the ball then what are you doing out there? So you may ask "What if an opponent runs past me with the ball? Technically I'm on the other side. Can I run after him and tackle him?" To which we reply, Yes! We insist.

This rule of being on-side ties in directly with gaining possession of the ball through a ruck or maul, which we'll go into later. In the meantime stay on our good side by being on-side.

IT'S ALIVE!

During a match if the ball is on the field-of-play it's alive. Alive meaning, pick it up and run! The exception to this rule is if the referee has blown a whistle and then all play stops. The referee will indicate how play will be restarted. (Sometimes we don't hear the whistle and have scored imaginary tries, which is always good for a laugh). So if you see the ball sitting there you may kick it down the pitch (like in soccer) or pick it up and run. Just be sure you don't do a...

KNOCK-ON

You might remember from the rugby definitions that a knock-on is a penalty whereby a player moves the ball forward on the ground by use of his hands. It doesn't matter if it's a centimeter or a meter. Also if you miss a catch and the ball bounces off your torso and forward, yup, it's a knock-on. Either way you will be penalized. This makes picking up the ball with any speed a very tricky matter. We'll show you techniques of scooping up the ball that significantly cuts down on this infraction. You may also fall on the ball and then immediately get up and run with it. This is actually the preferred method of gaining the ball. The key word here is immediately.

RELEASING THE BALL

Just because you've been tackled doesn't mean you get to keep the ball. When you go down (and you will) you have about two seconds to release the ball, hopefully towards your teammates, before the referee will call a penalty. Once you have released the ball you are allowed to get up and regain possession, but only if you are on both feet.

PHASES OF PLAY

A rugby game is characterized by the phases of play. Phase play involves stringing together a series of the things described below where you retain possession throughout and gain ground.

SET PLAYS

First off are the set plays. Aside from a kick-off, these are the formations that are unique to rugby. If you've ever seen a rugby match then you most likely have seen a scrum with all the grunting and pushing. According to the laws of rugby "the purpose of the scrum is to restart play quickly, safely and fairly, after a minor infringement or stoppage." Forming a proper scrum is a big part of a forward's job and it takes patience and effort to do it well. The stronger you are the better. After the two sides have formed their respective forwards the referee will call for the two sides to engage at which point the scrumhalf from the non-offending team, who is positioned at the side of the scrum, rolls the ball in between the two front rows (supposedly in a straight line) where the two hookers (usually) battle to gain possession and move the ball back through their scrum using only their feet. Once the ball has moved through the scrum a scrumhalf may pick up the ball and run with it, kick it or pass it out to one of the backs. There are many laws governing a scrum and referees will call a restart if not properly executed. A scrum is serious business.

The other set play is the line-out. A line-out is called if either the ball or ball carrier go in-touch. We'll go into where the throw-in takes place later, but as with soccer, the throw-in is done by the non-offending team, meaning the team that didn't last touch the ball before it went in-touch. Two parallel lines of opposing players line up perpendicular to the touch line. The number of players in a line-out is determined by the non-offending team and can consist of two players per team (the thrower and receiver) or as many as 14 players per team. The player throwing in the ball (usually the hooker) must throw the ball over and between the two rows of opposing players, again supposedly in a straight line. At this point a team may lift a player, or two, into the air to receive the ball. Each team has its own signals that indicate where the throw is going. After possession is determined play continues with either a pass out to the backs (who are patiently waiting at least 10 meters back) or a charge up the pitch. As with a scrum there are laws governing a line-out and a referee can call a restart at his discretion. Too many restarts and a referee will allow the other team the throw-in.

LOOSE (OR OPEN) PLAY

Loose play is all the running and passing which is typically the job of the backs, but be warned, all players will be involved in loose play (forwards are often involved in “rolling mauls” from a lineout for example). This part of the game receives all the ‘oohs’ and ‘ahhs’ from the spectators because if done well it involves the speed and intensity of a 100-yard dash and the beauty of a choreographed dance.

So what if you’re “dancing” down the pitch and you get tackled? That’s called a...

BREAKDOWN IN PLAY

A breakdown in play takes the form of a ruck, maul or tackle. You’re running with the ball and suddenly you’re confronted by an opponent who seems determined to take you down. What should you do? You have options. First of all, try avoidance. Weave, cut and fend him off if necessary. If tackled, try to stay on your feet. Secondly, always remember your teammates. They’re the guys running behind you, hopefully, screaming “Ball!” “With You!” or your name. This means they’re in position and ready to receive the ball. Once you execute your perfect pass you must position yourself to return the favor. This means slowing down or stopping altogether, whatever is necessary to get behind and in support of the ball carrier. You are no good to anyone if you are in front of the ball carrier.

Okay, so you can’t avoid your opponent and no one’s screaming for the ball. What now? Again you have options. Four, in no particular order.

You can form a ruck. You, the ball carrier, go into the tackler in such a way that you go down and are able to place the ball towards your teammates, at which point one or more of your teammates form over you (you’re on the ground covering your head if you have any sense) and try to push the opposing player(s) off the ball. No one can pick up the ball until it comes out beyond the hindmost foot of the hindmost player involved in the ruck. In fact, no one may touch the ball with their hands until such time, just like a scrum. No hands allowed.

You can get up and grab the ball. If in the previous situation both you and the tackler go down then it’s a free ball for whoever gets on their feet first or whoever gets to the breakdown first. If there are two tackled players on the ground and the ball is on the ground then it is in open play and therefore may be played from any direction by any player who was on-side at the time of the tackle. A tackled player (or the tackler) may not interfere with anyone on their feet attempting to play the ball until they themselves are on their feet. No one may tackle an opponent with the ball from the ground.

You can pass the ball to a teammate immediately upon being tackled. This is a tricky one and we don’t recommend it at first. We just thought we’d let you know for future reference.

You can form a maul. A maul is the same idea as a ruck except that everyone is on their feet and the ball is in someone’s hands. Not all fights for the ball involve being tackled to the ground and a maul is an example of this. The opposing player has his arms wrapped around you and is trying to turn you towards his teammates so they can “strip” the ball from you and continue play. You, of course, are fighting this move, trying to

guard the ball and waiting for one of your teammates to come to your aid by either pushing back or stripping the ball for your side. What makes it a ‘maul’ is if at least one player from each team is bound in around the guy with the ball. A team can make significant ground by pushing the opposing player(s) down the pitch and all the while you’re in the middle wondering when it will all end. It’s great fun.

A note about rucks and mauls. All participants must be bound in. For now just remember

that you can't just stand there, in fact, if you're not participating you must be behind the hindmost foot of the ruck or maul. In addition, you can only enter a formed ruck or maul from behind the hindmost foot of a player on your side. And there's more to it than that. Our coaches will have plenty to say about rucking and mauling.

OFFENSE AND DEFENSE

Rugby is about offense and defense and you'll be doing both interchangeably in quick succession. You've been tackled with the ball, now they have the ball, but they make a crappy pass and your teammate recovers the ball and passes it out to your winger who gets involved in a maul which the opposing team wins...on and on. It requires quick thinking and an ability to switch modes on a moment's notice. All this comes with experience but for now there are a couple tips that should get you through your first couple practices.

OFFENSE (OR ATTACK)

For offensive play your team must have possession of the ball. The next steps are to insure your team retains possession and gains ground by running with the ball, passing to a support player and regaining possession after a kick forward. Obviously all this has in mind that by keeping possession of the ball and gaining ground you will eventually score a try.

If a teammate has the ball you are a support player. To be useful you must be behind the ball carrier at all times. If you're not, get there! You'll notice the angled (or wing) formation with the backs spread across the pitch. It's all about being in support and being able to pass the ball backwards to gain ground, as strange as that sounds. Ground is gained by the pass receiver sprinting forward onto the pass. Also a kick may be made into a gap in the opponent's defenses.

Naturally, you don't want your open-side winger running over to support your flyhalf when he has an inside center there doing his job. Clumping up together, even in support of the ball carrier, is not a good idea. If your opponents get the ball they'll simply run around your little party and score a try. Being a good rugby player requires patience and an ability to react to open play in a decisive manner. Keep all this in mind but also keep

in mind that there are plenty of situations where these rules are broken to confuse and avoid the opposition.

Forwards in support – a good rule of thumb is that forwards sprint to where the ball is in open play. They may be in support of each other, advancing the ball up the pitch as a unit, or in support of the backs, but generally need to be where the ball is or to get to where it's going to be.

Beware the counter attack – you can't always retain possession of the ball. What happens if an opponent gains possession and begins a counter attack? Every opponent must be marked at all times. That means at least one player on your team has to be keeping an eye on and ready to respond to one player from the opposition team in counter attack. This will not always be your opposite number.

For example, a winger gets involved in a ruck and cannot get out. His opposite number is standing nearby ready to receive the ball in a counter attack unopposed. Someone approaching the maul (say a forward) needs to notice this and cover the opponent winger to make his life a little more difficult. All this requires an awareness of where the ball is, where your opponents are, where your teammates are and instantaneous decision-making. As we've said, this comes with time.

We realize this is all very confusing but if there is only one thing you should take away from this it is: Support! Support! Support!

DEFENSE

As one of our original coaches is fond of yelling, “Tackle the buggers!” Defense is about regaining possession of the ball and keeping your opponents from moving up the pitch towards your goal line. Most commonly, we use a man-on-man defense. This means you are responsible for keeping your opposite player from gaining ground if he has the ball. You must mark your man and his position and keep an eye on the ball and move accordingly. Don’t think that guarding one player means your job is done. If the teammate next to you lets the ball carrier through you don’t wait around to see what your opposite number is doing. He’ll be running after the ball and you should be too. You are allowed, no required, to tackle any opponent who has the ball, if possible. This is all about keeping the pressure on and forcing the opposition to pass the ball or form a ruck or maul, which with any skill, your team will win.

FIVE ESSENTIAL SKILLS (AND MORE)

We’ve already touched on many of the things we’re about to discuss here but we’ve found it never hurts to drill an important concept into a rookie’s brain.

PASSING

An important thing to remember about passing the ball is that if your teammate doesn’t catch it it’s the same as throwing the ball in the air and yelling “Free ball!”. Of course this a two-way street. Passing and catching go hand in hand, no pun intended. Don’t make sloppy or “panic” passes. If you can’t pass well in a certain situation, make contact and stay on your feet driving forward or take the tackle or form a ruck or maul.

So how should you pass the ball? Put at its most simple: underhand and with both hands in a scooping motion. (Attention ex-American footballers, that’s underhand using both hands.) Use your fingers to control the ball, not your palms. If your teammate has called for the ball his hands will be up and ready to receive. Twist your torso towards him and let ‘er fly! Aim for his hands, which should be at chest level and a little forward. The point is that your teammate should be “bursting on” to the ball, in other words, running at full speed to gain ground. If you lead the receiver he should be there to catch your pass. You want to deliver the ball upright and stable. It isn’t necessary to bullet or spiral the ball when a lob will do. This is a skill that comes with repetition and a little fine-tuning. Don’t be discouraged.

CATCHING

Okay, so you’re in support of the ball carrier who’s about to get tackled. What to do? Call for the ball, that’s what. Rugby is a very vocal game. The ball carrier supposes that his teammates are behind him but he can’t always be glancing back to size up the support. That’s why it’s absolutely required that you let him know where you are, that you’re coming up, and that you’re ready to receive the ball with your hands up. Typically, you’ll be yelling either “With You!” “Ball!” or “Comin’ up!” Very loud and very repetitive. Some people don’t like yelling or being yelled at. Word of advice: get over it. It’s part of the game and it isn’t changing for anyone.

A word about “tucking” the ball. Save it for later. There’s a good reason rugby players carry the ball with both hands. If there wasn’t we wouldn’t do it. It seems awkward but it’s something you’ll get used to. Once you’ve played for a while and you’re running down the

pitch 10 meters in front of the opposition, sure, tuck the ball and fly, but until then it's both hands.

So what about trying to catch a crappy pass? It's something you'll learn to play by ear but in the meantime here's a couple tips. If the pass is too low to catch, fall on the ball and get up immediately. Or, simply pick it up or kick it (but not into the hands of an opponent please). Trying to catch a low pass often results in a knock-on, and thus a penalty. If you're good at this sort of thing then go for it, but generally anything below the knees is too low to catch safely. If the pass is too high you need to think quickly and

carefully about what to do. This is known as a 'hospital pass' (nuff said) and you need to size up the defense before you undertake your brilliant catch. You've been warned.

How far behind and to the side should you be? A general rule of thumb is about five meters in a diagonal (or wing) formation. Of course that changes with the flow of play. Sometimes a passer will skip the nearest player in support and go for the outside player. Other times you might come in close for a pop pass or handoff. It all depends, but for now just think 5 meters.

What else? For starters, get your own ball. Move it around in your hands. Get a feel for it. Toss it against a wall and try to catch it. Always use the proper passing technique until it becomes second nature. Place it on the ground, run up and plant one foot to one side of the ball and then scoop it up and toss it backwards in the other direction. Find a grassy spot and practice running up and falling on the ball and then getting up quickly (with the ball of course). Find a buddy to practice with. And remember, you have to pass both left and right, short and long, vary your routine. These simple exercises will serve you well.

TACKLING AND MANAGING CONTACT

There it is, we've said it. Tackling. But it's really not as bad as you think. It's actually a lot of fun. Does it hurt? Ah, yeah sure, sometimes, but not as much as you'd imagine. And guess what? Only the ball carrier can be tackled. Quite a difference from American football. It's all about proper technique and proper technique means coming in low and hard, wrapping around your opponent's hips (or thereabouts), sliding down, squeezing the knees together and Plop! over he goes, hopefully with you on top. We'll show you how to twist so that you do land on top.

There are a couple other things you need to know about tackling an opponent and they involve what's called 'dangerous play'. First and foremost, you are not allowed to tackle above the shoulders. It hurts, it's dangerous and it will get thrown out of the match. You are also not allowed to "fly" at your opponent, meaning you must have at least one foot on the ground during the tackle. You can't trip a player or "spear" him. That's considered tackling without binding. On the other hand, all sorts of funky tackles are allowed. You may grab onto an opponent's jersey and drop to the ground, hopefully bringing him with you. You may grab and wheel him to the ground. There's a whole list of what you can and cannot do. You'll eventually learn the ropes.

As far as being tackled, do it on your own terms. First, try to stay on your feet. If you are tackled to the ground, don't just lay there. Get up on your feet, play the ball or tackle back! And remember to release the ball if you're on the ground. We spend a lot of time on tackling technique because it will keep you from being injured. We don't want to whitewash rugby and tell you people don't get injured, they do. But serious injury is rare. If the coaches see you playing in an unsafe manner they will let you know.

Tackling is the skill that rookies are most concerned about but we can guarantee you that a good tackle is one of the most satisfying things you'll do. We start learning about tackling at walking pace and on our knees. We then practice on tackle bags and eventually each other.

RUNNING AND FENDING

Running. Everyone does it, but not everyone does it well. You may be one of the latter but we can guarantee that after a couple months with us you'll be running faster than you ever have. We do a lot of running. A rugby match consists of two 40-minute halves with no time-outs. A lot of that time is spent running. Of course, as we mentioned earlier, there are breakdowns in play and penalties and setting up scrums and line-outs, and these are opportunities to catch your breath, but in general the better you run the better you'll do at rugby.

Speaking of which, imagine running down the pitch with the ball and here comes a pesky opponent determined to put an end to your moment of glory. We already discussed some options for managing contact but you have another. Push the f***** out of the way! It's called fending and you do it by tucking the ball under one arm and using your other arm to shove your opponent, hopefully to the ground. As with everything else in rugby there are laws that govern what is and is not allowed. For now just remember you may not fend off an opponent above the shoulders and may not use a clenched fist or elbow.

KICKING

Everyone loves kicking the ball and doing so with accuracy is essential to the sport. So why would someone give up possession by kicking the ball? There are lots of reasons. Remember we discussed kicking the ball in-touch from behind your own 22-meter line. Play resumes at the point the ball went in-touch. If you kick the ball a good 50 meters than that's 50 meters further from your goal line. Your team may not gain possession after the line-out but you'll get the ball back somehow. It happens all the time.

Another kicking option is the pop kick. The idea here is to kick the ball up and over your opponents and catch it yourself. You have the momentum. Your opponents have to turn around and chase you. This takes practice but it can be done. Accuracy under pressure is the key.

Not all kicking involves the ball sailing through the air. There is also the grub kick (or grubber). You may kick the ball along the ground and through a hole in the defense. This is done to best effect if your opponents are close in. If they're too far away they'll simply pick up the ball and run with it. Oops. Also remember not to have a knock-on when recovering the ball and to get up immediately if you fall on the ball.

Both the pop and grub kick are fairly short distance kicks but there are also long distance kicks that are done for different reasons. At this point we won't go into the various scenarios but let it suffice to say that the kicker is always trying to get the ball to a place that is advantageous to his team. Again, accuracy.

Soon you'll learn that a rugby ball bounces erratically and can be difficult to recover. Regardless you must be prepared to pursue the ball wherever it goes. And not just when you kick the ball. When your teammate kicks you must run on to the ball as well. After all, that is the point of the sport, gaining possession and scoring.

This pretty much sums up any kicking you'll be doing anytime soon, however there's much more kicking in a match and this is usually done by your team's best kicker. A match begins with a kick-off from the halfway line to the opposing team. The same with the second half.

In addition, there's the penalty kick. If your kicker gets the ball between the goal posts that's 3 points. These kicks are taken from where the penalty was awarded. There's also the conversion kick. After either side scores a try (which is 5 points) a team has the opportunity to rack up another 2 points by kicking the ball through the goal posts. The tricky thing about the conversion kick is that it's taken lengthwise anywhere down the pitch from the point your teammate touched the ball down in the opponent's try zone and scored. A kicker will figure out where along this imaginary line he has the best chance of scoring a conversion. Thus, if you score a try, attempt to do so close to the middle of the pitch (between the goal posts) – it makes for an easier conversion kick.

SCORING A TRY

You can be a good player and never have scored a try. Backs most often score tries by dodging or outrunning their opponents, always looking for a gap in the defense. Forwards are fond of muscling the ball over the goal line against all odds. Either way it's worth 5 points. Unless, however, you forget one important thing and then it's worth squat. You must touch the ball down in a decisive way. You can do this by falling on the ball with your upper body as long as you are in control of the ball or, more commonly, you can touch the ball down so you have simultaneous hand-ball-ground contact. Brushing the ball along the ground won't do. You have a referee, however far away, who needs to see that decisive contact. If an opponent can keep his hand between the ball and the ground while you're attempting a try it's incomplete.



In rugby you can't score against your own team. And luckily too, because you might very well find yourself behind your own goal line with the ball. Let's say an opponent nearing your goal line is facing some fierce defense and decides to kick the ball past your teammates and in-goal. If he gets there and falls on the ball he scores a try. But what if you get there first? What should you do? You should touch the ball down. In this case it's not a try, it's a 22-meter drop-out. If the other team is responsible for bringing the ball in-goal and you touch it down then your team gets a kick from anywhere behind the 22-meter line. The other team must retreat immediately to the other side of the 22.

If your team is responsible for bringing the ball in-goal and you touch it down the other team is awarded a 5-meter scrum, meaning it's their put-in 5 meters from your goal line. A bit too close for comfort, but there are reasons for this and it's better than them scoring a try.

PENALTIES AND THE REFEREE

THE REFEREE AS GOD

There is only one referee on the pitch during a match and he is the sole judge of what is and is not allowed. If an infraction happens and he doesn't see it, then it didn't happen. If he thinks an infraction happened that didn't, then it did. There is no talking to the referee.



The only players allowed to speak to the referee are the respective captains of both teams. Even the coaches on the sidelines are not allowed to talk to the referee. You will see none of the screaming and arguing (hopefully) that takes place in baseball or football on a rugby pitch. Talking back to the referee can be penalized, solely on his (or her) discretion. Most referees aren't this strict but they can be. If so, you better listen up. Naturally, different referees have different styles. Some are faithful followers of the laws of rugby. Others show more leeway. In general they're good guys who love the sport and they deserve your respect.

PENALTIES

A referee will indicate a penalty by blowing his whistle and pointing his arm towards the non-offending team, meaning they are awarded the put-in or the kick. His arm angled horizontal indicates a scrum-down. His arm angled upwards indicates a penalty kick. His foot will mark the spot the scrum or the kick is to take place. Either way you want the referee pointing towards your half of the pitch. In the case of a penalty kick awarded against your team, you and your teammates are required to retire 10 meters behind the mark. This should be done quickly.

A scrum is usually awarded for a minor infraction, most commonly a forward pass or a knock-on. If a ruck or maul is showing no progress one way or the other the referee can call for a scrum-down.

A penalty kick is awarded for various reasons, commonly: being off-sides, using your hands in a ruck, dangerous play, obstructing a player who doesn't have the ball, among many, many others. One of the reasons the referee deserves our respect is his vast knowledge of the multitude of laws that govern every aspect of the game. Pay attention what the referee is calling and what his hand signal is and it will eventually come to you.

PLAYING ADVANTAGE

Another interesting aspect of the sport is called 'playing advantage'. A referee may see an infraction yet choose to ignore it if the non-offending team gains advantage anyway. In this case the penalty will not immediately be called. Advantage can be either gaining ground or a tactical advantage. If it becomes apparent that no advantage will be gained the referee will call the original penalty and play is brought back to the place of the infraction. Referees have wide latitude in this regard.

Please remember to keep playing until you hear the referee's whistle. You may have seen an infraction or even committed one yourself. The referee may not have seen it or may be playing advantage. There is nothing more pathetic than seeing a player standing still, pointing at a spot and whining "forward pass" while the play passes him by.

FITNESS

Rugby is a physically demanding sport, of that there is no question; it is also a mentally demanding sport. How well you meet the demands of rugby is dependant on your level of fitness. As you develop and mature as a rugby player, you will begin to learn a great many new skills and phases of play. In order to learn these well, you have to be able to keep up. It is hard to learn how to pass on the run if you are having trouble running. This is true of all the skills you will be learning in the coming months; nothing hinders concentration and skill development more than fatigue, you cannot learn if you cannot concentrate. Fitness is not fun, but being fit on the pitch is. When you can run well for eighty minutes, then you will be able to have fun for eighty minutes.

There are several aspects of fitness a rugby player needs to master (or at least constantly improve upon) in order to play their best match. These are: endurance, strength (explosive and sustained), flexibility, speed, and mental fitness. The first of these, endurance, is of the greatest importance. Eighty minutes can seem like an eternity, or it can pass in the blink of an eye depending on one's endurance. Strength is important for all players, especially so for forwards, as they are expected to be involved in most of the rucks and mauls, as well as scrums and line-outs. Flexibility will allow you to achieve your other fitness goals easier, as well as help prevent injury. Stretching is crucial to good exercise, take it seriously. Speed is required in the backs and encouraged in the forwards. Getting to the break down in play (i.e. rucks and mauls) and running the ball up the pitch, are all crucial to advancing the ball, and maintaining possession. Finally, mental fitness is what in the end will allow you to excel at rugby. Intensity, knowledge, and a winning attitude will only result in an improvement of play for yourself and your teammates.

Your overall fitness is, in the end, your responsibility. The coaches will provide ample opportunity for you to improve your fitness, but practices three days a week is not sufficient to accomplish your goals; you must pursue fitness on off days as well. If you are currently being coached by a fitness trainer, inform him/her that you are playing rugby, and change your fitness regimen accordingly. If not, then QuakeRFC offers non-practice cardio opportunities Monday and Wednesday, take advantage of this, as it is often easier to workout with others who will inspire and encourage you.



CONCLUSION

Wow! What a lot of information to assimilate. Please don't let it scare you off. As we said at the beginning of the primer it just requires a little patience and a willingness to learn. Most of us on the Quake came to Rugby Union Football as complete novices, and regardless of whether we've played in one match or fifty, we're now enthusiastic proponents of the sport. Remember that your coaches are there to help you. They want you to do well (we all do) because you'll be representing an organization that we all take great pride in.

As for all the social aspects of rugby, we didn't cover any of that here because we assume you already know how to drink beer and sing.

Thanks for your time and interest.