MIT Sports Insight

Of scrums, mauls, and rucks...

By Charles Cox

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With a little history and background under your belt (see The Tech, October 10, 1975 for the opening article of the series), you're ready to go into the game itself.

Play begins with a kickoff from midfield to the opposite team, ten yards away, hence the ten-yard lines on either side of midfield.

During the game any man may kick, pass, or carry the ball in accordance with the rules. No man may pass the ball forward toward his opponent's goal nor interfere in any way with play if he is in front of the ball while it is being played by another member of his own team. If he should be in front of the ball as it is being kicked by his teammate, he must wait until his teammate catches up to him or for an opponent to play it in some way (a muffed catch, a fumble, etc.) before he can get into the play (onside).

The player of the ball goes forward with the ball, which is now the same as a football except that the game is continuous. If the ball touches the ground as its carrier is tackled, or if the carrier is held so that he cannot play the ball, said carrier must release the ball. Only those men on their feet may play the ball, and if it is contested by members of opposite teams a "tack" or "loose scrum" enters.

In the ruck, players known as forwards grab or "hand on" to each other and try to push each other away from the ball. If a ball carrier remains on his feet in any fashion, he can play the ball, and if his forwards are quick enough to support him, then a "munt" occurs.

The ball may be played by hand in a maul, but must emerge from a ruck by foot before such a play can occur. Usually nothing happens because masks and rucks are mangled disorderly messes that separate the men from the boys but not the ball from the middle.

If nothing organized comes from a ruck or maul, the referee orders a "set scrum." Eight men from each team are forwards, and they participate in the actual "scrumming." They hold tight to their teammates in an organized fashion and push against their opponent's formation.

The front row of every scrum must have three men, two "props" and a "hooker." The hooker is supported on either side by a prop, the "loosehead" prop to his left and the "tight-head" prop to his right. The loosehead is so named because the front rows of both teams dovetail and he is on the outside at all times.

The only player of the remaining seven (backs allowed) by side of the scrum is the scrum halfback, who puts the ball into the middle of the scrum. The hooker battles to scrape the ball into the second row of their team's formation, which consists of two second-row forwards inside and two loose forwards outside. The ball is then scraped by foot to the third two where "number eight" either helps it to the scrum half, or disconnects from the scrum and carries the ball himself. In some scrums, one or both loose forwards may drop back to the third row.

As the forwards are so often characterized as once timbering about, the seven backs are thought of as the skilled speedsters dashing here and there, kicking long and accurately, and at the crucial moment... dropping the ball.

When the ball emerges from a scrum, maul, or ruck, the scrum half must be there to field it and coolly play the attack in a split second. He can run or pass back to his "stand-off" or "fly-halfback. Rarely will a standoff do anything but kick and pass off the ball (to one of the four "three-quarter" backs (kicks to the ends, centers in the middle). This position is responsible for most of the scoring. They form a line and each man in turn draws his tackle and passes off the next or fakes with the ball and continues his run.

The fullback is a lonely man who must have a strong kick and a quick eye as well. He is in the safety behind the other fourteen players, and must kick the ball upfield toward his opponent's goal if it should come dangerously close to his own.