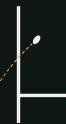


COMMON REFEREE DECISIONS

Understanding Rugby



Why the whistle blew, who got the penalty, and what happens next in plain language.

Based on the World Rugby Laws of the Game (2026)

FIRST, WATCH FOR THE REFEREE'S SIGNAL

When the whistle blows for a penalty, the referee raises one arm at a steep angle, pointing toward the team that has been awarded the penalty. (Not the team that infringed the law.) That team then chooses how to restart:

TAP AND GO

Quick restart to keep attacking; defense must retreat 10m

KICK TO TOUCH

Gain territory, then throw into the lineout

KICK AT GOAL

Worth 3 points if the ball goes over the crossbar

SCRUM

Instead of the kick, at the same mark

A free kick (arm bent at the elbow) is for minor offenses — no shot at goal is allowed.

THE TACKLE & THE RUCK — WHERE MOST PENALTIES HAPPEN

NOT RELEASING THE BALL ("HOLDING ON")

You may hear: "Release!" • "Holding on!" • "Let it go!"

A tackled player must immediately release, pass, or place the ball once they are tackled or go to ground.

- Ball carrier goes down and clings to the ball too long
- A defender is on their feet, legally trying to win the ball
- Referee often warns "release" before blowing the whistle

WHY IT MATTERS: The tackle must create a fair contest for the ball. Killing the ball or slowing it down is not allowed.

TACKLER NOT RELEASING OR NOT ROLLING AWAY

You may hear: "Roll away!" • "Tackler, move!"

After making a tackle, the tackler must let go of the ball carrier and immediately move away or get to their feet.

- Tackler stays wrapped around the player on the ground
- Tackler's body blocks the ball from coming back
- Tackler ends up on the attacking side and slows the ball

WHY IT MATTERS: The attacking team must get a fair chance to play the ball after every tackle.

ENTERING FROM THE SIDE ("THROUGH THE GATE")

You may hear: "Side entry!" • "Gate!"

Players must join a tackle, ruck, or maul from an on-side position; from the direction of their own try line, not from the side.

- A player flies in at an angle instead of from straight behind
- A player loops around the back foot and attacks sideways
- Referee's signal may sweep sideways to show the illegal angle

WHY IT MATTERS: Side entry is unsafe as players' ribs and knee joints may be exposed. And it's a shortcut, a cheap way to reach a ball the other team has fairly won.

HANDS IN THE RUCK

You may hear: "Hands!" • "Hands off!" • "Ruck's formed!"

Once a ruck forms (one player from each team on their feet over the ball), players may no longer use their hands.

- Players from both teams bound on their feet over the ball
- Someone reaches in and grabs the ball after the ruck forms
- A defender who had hands on the ball before the ruck formed may keep contesting (the "jackal")

WHY IT MATTERS: After a ruck forms, teams compete by driving over the ball, not by grabbing it. Or sneakily playing it back toward their side while the ref isn't looking.

OFFSIDE — PLAYERS NEED SPACE TO LAUNCH AN ATTACK

OFFSIDE

You may hear: "Offside!" • "Get back!" • "Hindmost foot!"

A player is in front of where the law allows them to be and gets involved in play. The offside line at a ruck or maul runs through the hindmost foot of the last player.

- Defenders creeping up in front of the back foot of a ruck or maul
- A defensive line moving up before the ball is out of a scrum or the lineout is over
- A player in front of a teammate's kick who joins play too soon

WHY IT MATTERS: Offside steals space and time from the team with the ball. It's one of the most frequently called penalties at every level because it kills the excitement of the attack.

NOT BACK 10 METERS

You may hear: "Back ten!" • "Keep going!"

After a penalty or free kick, the defending team must immediately retreat 10 meters toward their own try line (or to their goal line, if closer).

- A defender loiters near the mark
- A defender interferes with a quick tap
- Referee may march the penalty forward 10 more meters

WHY IT MATTERS: The team awarded the penalty has earned space to restart. Cynical play can lead to a yellow card.



DANGEROUS PLAY – SAFETY FIRST

HIGH TACKLE OR DANGEROUS TACKLE

You may hear: “High!” • “No arms!” • “Late!”

Tackles that make contact with the head or neck, contact above the legal tackle height, shoulder charges, no-arms tackles, or lifting a player dangerously.

- Any contact with the head or neck
- No clear attempt to wrap the arms; shoulder charge is illegal
- A player lifted past horizontal or dropped in a tackle
- Referee may stop play instantly for safety

WHY IT MATTERS: Player welfare comes first. Dangerous tackles bring a penalty at minimum — and often a yellow or red card. In the USA, tacklers must contact the ball-carrier below the line of their sternum.

OBSTRUCTION OR BLOCKING (“CROSSING”)

You may hear: “Obstruction!” • “Crossing!” • “Playing the man!”

A player without the ball may not block a defender from tackling the ball carrier. Nobody may tackle a player who doesn't have the ball.

- An attacker runs a line that shields the ball carrier
- A defender is held or bumped while chasing the ball carrier
- Unlike American football, blocking for your runner is illegal

WHY IT MATTERS: Defenders must always have a fair chance to tackle the player with the ball.

OTHER CALLS YOU'LL HEAR

DELIBERATE KNOCK-ON

You may hear: “Deliberate!”

A player intentionally knocks the ball forward with a hand or arm by slapping down a pass to stop an attack.

- A defender reaches out one-handed and bats the ball down
- No realistic chance of catching it
- A genuine attempt to catch or intercept is legal, even if fumbled

WHY IT MATTERS: Killing a promising attack this way is a penalty — and often a yellow card. (An accidental knock-on is only a scrum.)

CARDS

YELLOW

10 minutes in the sin bin; the team plays a player short.

RED

Sent off for the rest of the match (high-level competitions allow a replacement after 20 minutes).

SCRUM PENALTIES

You may hear: “Crouch – bind – set” • “Stay square!” • “Use it!”

Scrum carry strict safety and contest rules. Collapsing, driving at an angle, standing up, early pushes, or illegal binding can all be penalized.

- Front rows dropping to the ground or popping up
- A prop boring in across an opponent instead of pushing straight
- Pushing before the ball is thrown in
- Referee often resets the scrum first if it's a stability issue

WHY IT MATTERS: Sixteen players pushing at once must be safe, stable, and a fair contest for both teams.

WORDS YOU'LL HEAR FROM THE SIDELINE

- **RUCK** — players from both teams on their feet, bound over a ball on the ground.
- **MAUL** — the ball carrier is held up (not on the ground) with players from both teams bound on.
- **BREAKDOWN** — the contest for the ball right after a tackle.
- **KNOCK-ON** — losing the ball forward off a hand or arm. Accidental = scrum to the other team; deliberate = penalty.
- **ADVANTAGE** — after an infringement, the referee allows play to continue to see if the non-offending team benefits. If not, play comes back for the penalty or scrum. Watch for the referee's arm held out horizontally.
- **MARK / ON THE MARK** — the spot where a penalty is taken.

QUICK REMINDER – WHEN THE WHISTLE BLOWS

- ① **Which way is the referee's arm pointing?**
That's the team that has been awarded the penalty.
- ② **What words or signals does the referee use?**
Listen for “offside,” “holding on,” “side entry,” “hands,” or “high tackle.” Good referees narrate the game.
- ③ **What does the non-offending team do next?**
Quick tap, kick to touch, shot at goal, or scrum. Their choice tells you where they think their team is stronger.

The more you watch for these patterns, the easier rugby becomes to follow and the more you'll enjoy every match.



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