



X-LEAGUE COACHING NOTES



HOW BEST TO USE X-LEAGUE AS A TRAINING GAME

X-League Rugby League has been devised as a version of Rugby League that includes, and therefore improves, the practice of most of the skills of Rugby League, apart from the tackle.

So as well as being an enjoyable variant of RL. Open to everyone, across age groups, genders, fitness and skill levels, it can also be used as a 'stepping stone' for players preparing to step up to the full contact version of the game.

Even though the full Rugby League tackle is not part of X-League, the fact that defenders need to get close enough to get a hand to the ball, and that by wrapping the ball the defender buys time for the rest of the defence to reset, X-League can be a valuable tool for improving the skills that are required to defend well in the full contact game. Significantly more so than Tag or Touch.

The level of contact in the game reduces the risk of injury that is inherent in a collision sport, but it keeps most of the key elements that make Rugby League such an enjoyable sport to play. The generally accepted physical and skill attributes that are required to play RL well, are still all relevant. However, X-League is a small-sided game, usually played on a smaller than full-sized pitch, over a shorter period of time, than a full RL match. If a player has high levels of Speed, Endurance, Flexibility, Agility, and even Strength, they will have some advantage over their competitors, but not to the same extent as they would in the full version of the game, i.e Full-tackle, full-field, Full-80 minutes.

X-League teams win games by scoring tries, just as is the case in the full version of RL, but try scoring situations are created and exploited through the execution of skills, rather than by an over reliance on physical battles or miss-matches. A novice teenager, an aged 50+ ex-player and a current professional player at the peak of fitness, could easily play with and against each other and each make valuable contributions to the game. This is so

obviously not true of the Full-Tackle version of the game, but one could argue that it is not true of Touch Rugby either. Touch can be disheartening for older and bigger players as they are too often an easy target. Of our three types above, the novice teenager may actually be at an advantage over the current pro player, (particularly if the pro player's full tackle position was in the forwards) or the 50+ ex-player, (despite his knowledge, experience and skills), if the teenager had good speed and agility.

We have tried to keep as true to the full game as possible with our Modified Rules for X-League, but there are some key differences, and we shall explain why we introduced these changes as they crop up in the explanation below. Perhaps the best way to explain the game is to describe what happens in a game. We will point out the RL skills required, and also indicate where coaches may make adjustments to the Codified Rules if they use the game as a training game for preparation for the full-tackle game.

As we said earlier, the game is played on a pitch, smaller than full size (i.e 100m long x 65m wide) The dimensions can vary dependant on what is available. The ideal playing numbers per team are a minimum of 5, maximum 8 or 9, so therefore 6 or 7 depending on the age of the players, the space available and the fitness and skill levels of the players.

The game starts with a Tap at the centre of half way. The rules governing the RL Tap are that the ball can either be on the ground, touched with the foot then picked up - or it can already be in the hands of the player and they can touch the ball off any part of their lower limb, below the knee. This is quite distinct from the Rugby Union 'Tap' that must be released from the hands and kicked with the foot and re-gathered. This method is actually a legal way to Tap the ball in Rugby League too (and X-League RL), but as there is a higher risk of losing control of the ball, (and therefore possession) by using the Union style tap, the simpler, League method should be encouraged.



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The Tap is used to start the game, restart the game after halftime, restart the game after a try has been scored and restart the game after the ball has gone dead. All handling errors, knock-ons, forward passes and dropped catches or passes that hit the ground, result in the game stopping and the ball being turned over to the other team, who will restart the game with a Play-the-ball. The play-the-ball is unique to RL, and deserves to be preserved and practiced in all modified versions of the game. The initial play-the-ball takes place when the referee is satisfied that both teams are ready to play. A player must put the ball down at the side of their standing foot, and then, by rolling the ball back with their hand and assisting the roll, if necessary, with their non-standing foot, propel the ball behind them to the Dummy-Half. This description isn't exactly what it says in the rules, but neither is it exactly what happens in the full game, where referees seem to be content to allow illegal play-the-balls to go unpunished. If you are using the game to teach and practice the skill of playing-the-ball from the standing position, then the ref should give a penalty turnover for illegal play-the-balls, but a warning and reinforcement of the correct method may well be the preferred coaching response.

As a training game the rules could be changed so that tackled players have to go to ground and go through the full game play-the-ball process. (Snap, Sweep, Touch). As this would slow the play the ball down, it may be advisable to increase the onside line for the defenders to more than 5m.

The tackle is made by a defender touching the ball. In the codified game we assume honesty by the defender, and give them the benefit of the doubt, that is, if they claim to have made a tackle, even if it wasn't obvious to the ref, the tackle is awarded. There is quite a lot of scope at the tackle for coaches to modify the rules for training purposes. For instance, a simple touch on the ball may not be considered enough. The defender may have to completely wrap the ball up, and the attacker can play on until the wrap is complete. Coaches could also insist that the tackle is only complete when two defending players are in contact with the attacker and

the ball is wrapped, and even that a third defender has to come in and touch the held up player on the legs, before the tackle is completed, to simulate the 3 man tackle that is such a big part of the full game these days.

In the modified game we have adjusted the rule for when the ball is considered to be back in play at the play the ball. Because the defender hasn't actually had to make a real tackle, there is a chance that they could interfere with the dummy half pick up. So we have said that the marker must stay square, until after the ball has been picked up by the dummy half, rather than just when the ball has cleared the ruck. The codified game allows 1 marker, but again as a training tool, coaches may wish to use two.

Unlike other versions of Touch, we don't have any restrictions on the dummy half. They can be tackled without turning over possession, and they can score. As in the full game, Kicking is allowed on any tackle, however, we have put in some conditions aimed at preventing kickers getting easy repeat sets, and ensuring safety in the in-goal area.

If a player kicks the ball, they can regather it and play on, they can even score. But in order to defuse a kick, all a defender needs to do is touch the ball with a hand. That touch makes the ball dead, and the non-kicking team gets awarded a zero-tackle play the ball. If, however, a defender fails to touch the ball with a hand, and kicks the ball, they are then regarded as the kicker, and the above rules apply to their kick.

A clean catch in the in-goal area by an attacker results in a try (even without the ball being touched down) Again, there is scope for coaches to apply either the normal RL rules, or other modifications that they may want to focus on in a training situation. ie, only grubbers, or only bombs, only kick on the last tackle etc.



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The 'overhead' rule was put in because we found players were holding the ball out of the reach of the defenders as they ran with the ball, to prevent the ball being touched. We have found that initially players are tempted to do this, and to stop this we have made it a penalty turnover. The more experience of the game a player gets the less likely they are to do the 'overhead' or if they do lift it overhead they pass it from there, which is allowed.

The final rule to consider is the distance that the defence must retreat after a tackle has been made. To cater for the older and less fit players, we have set the onside line at 5m. In the codified rules the play the ball will be done pretty quickly and we have found that 5mtrs works, as it doesn't put too much pressure on the defenders, but it gives the attack enough space to keep getting over the gain line. Obviously there is broad scope for adjustments for coaches using the game for training purposes, i.e. The 2 players wrap, making tackled players go to ground and get back up to play the ball, etc. As we said earlier more activity at the play the ball adjusts the speed of the restart, and the distance the defence has to

go back can be adjusted accordingly.

Our videos show teams playing off-the-cuff RL. We have found the game to be very good for ball-players and runners to experiment and find out what works for them, but without the threat of being on the receiving end of a heavy tackle should they get their timing or positioning slightly wrong.

The game gives club teams a chance to practice their set plays in a game-like environment, with a significant level of pressure from defenders, but with little injury risk. Using X-League enables the Dummy half pass, timing of the run, lines of carry, lines of support, dummy half jumping out and 1st receiver plays to be practiced and improved in a real game like scenario. It enables coaches to demonstrate, in a game like situation, rather than just describe, what they want their players to do.

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