



Ask the Junior Doctor – April 2012

Dear Junior Doctor

It can be a long season for Mini-rugby players, and for their coaches..! When do you think that the season should wrap-up..?

'Exhausted' of Enfield

Dear 'Exhausted'

I really empathise with you as I have often been faced with 'just one more festival' when my squad is starting to become increasingly depleted. The end of season realities of Easter holidays, the onset of cricket, the return of hard ground and dare I say it a little 'rugby-fatigue' are in stark contrast with the demands of festivals, tours, 10s tournaments and triangulars...

For me Easter represents a natural break and though this occasionally falls a little early in the year most players will have been hard at it since September and I see more downsides than upsides in persisting after this natural break. The cricket season seems to start earlier and end later every year despite a climate that doesn't encourage such and the football season seems to have become a 12 month rolling affair. Wrapping things up by Easter, perhaps with a tour over the break will ensure that we do not fall into the same trap with our sport.

On that note I sincerely hope that this season has been a successful one and that you will return refreshed and reinvigorated in time for the next one...

If you are flagging then it is likely that your players are too so don't feel bad about calling it a day...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that one fixture less may leave the players hungry whereas one fixture too many may mean that the season ends on a low note...



Ask the Junior Doctor – March 2012

Dear Junior Doctor

I'm a great advocate of 'game sense' coaching and making the whole 'rugby experience' one that is enjoyable for young participants but I find that this sometimes means that my sessions descend into anarchy and that little meaningful progress can be made. What should I do..?

'Distracted' of Doncaster

Dear 'Distracted'

As coaches, we often walk a tightrope when providing a fun, game-based training environment but for me it is worth occasionally 'taking a tumble' rather than 'playing safe' and boring the audience...

Of course it is important to retain an element of control and to deliver a rugby learning experience, (otherwise we may as well operate a crèche), but the younger the player the more important it is that they are allowed space to learn, afforded the opportunity to experiment and above all given the chance to enjoy themselves.

In practical terms the following may help in 'retaining control'...

- 1) Using Silence... is a powerful way to regain attention. Often the players will be embarrassed into listening again if Coach simply 'shuts up' and it is also quite common for the players to start telling each other to pay attention to escape an awkward silence.
- 2) Changing the Picture... moving the group's position on the pitch, changing the game or game conditions or even just adopting another approach represents another useful tool to 'rein-in' a session that is losing focus.
- 3) Checking for Understanding... is one of the most powerful coaching tools in the armoury and directly asking one of the 'anarchists' some open questions about the session that is underway will rapidly return them to rugby thoughts, identify just what has registered and what has not and also subtly remind the group why they are there. An indirect benefit of questioning one is that other players realise that they may be the next one to be quizzed...
- 4) The Shrinking Game... a final idea is to graphically demonstrate (perhaps by bringing your hands from wide apart to close together), that the period available to 'play the next game' is diminishing whilst time is 'wasted' pursuing the culprit or calming down the group.

Err on the side of fun and enjoyment even if it is temporarily at the expense of obvious progress...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that fun and enjoyment will motivate youngsters to come training every week far more than will skills development alone...



Ask the Junior Doctor – February 2012

Dear Junior Doctor

Why do you think it is that the majority of Youth team Hookers appear to be unable to throw the ball in accurately and/or straight..?

'Crooked' of Cranford

Dear 'Crooked'

Though perhaps something of a harsh generalisation I do to some extent share your view and experience the same frustration, even with the higher levels of players that I coach. Whilst not an exhaustive list, below are four factors that I believe contribute to this deficiency.

- 5) In the formative years of Mini-rugby, the Hooker's role is somewhat 'artificial' with scrums and lineouts being 'unopposed'. This often sees the best 'fetcher' in the squad played at Hooker, right up until the point when a Back-row is added. A new candidate for the number 2 jersey is then selected who has little or no experience of putting in to the lineout.
- 6) As this is a skill that will ultimately only be relevant to one or two players, it usually takes a back seat during training and is often not coached at all.
- 7) Few coaches would consider themselves as experts in this area and many will not feel confident in coaching the throw at all. Whilst specialist kicking coaches for example are often employed it is rare to find an equivalent 'throwing clinic' on offer.
- 8) When players reach the U16 age group the Hooker must substantially 'recalibrate' his throw to reach a significantly higher target. Whilst this may appear to be a trivial adjustment it is not and involves 'unlearning' and reprogramming the whole throwing action.

The best advice here as ever is to invest early in the whole player skill set, not overlooking the fact that today's Flanker or Prop may be tomorrow's Hooker.

Try to find time to work with the young Hooker; it will minimise frustrations further down the line...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that at U16 and above, the lineout can represent your best attacking option...



Ask the Junior Doctor – January 2012

Dear Junior Doctor

Though a talented bunch, there still seems to be so much that my young team needs to learn... There are lots of New Year 'lists' around at the moment; what would be your Top 5 skills for 2012..?

'Swamped' of Chiswick

Dear 'Swamped'

I sometimes fear that the simple game of rugby is over-complicated by well-meaning coaches who want to make players 'run before they can walk', or perhaps more pointedly, to learn 'moves' before they are able to execute their component parts... My Top 5 appears below, one element from each of the four core skills areas and an additional perennial that should perhaps top the list...

Core Skill Area - Running

Encouraging **ABCs**, (Agility Before Contact), will at worst put the ball-carrier at an advantage as a contact situation looms, or better still, will enable them to avoid the contact completely.

Core Skill Area - Handling

Too many passing practises use players who are standing still or jogging, it's essential that players practise and perfect **PASSING ACCURATELY AT PACE** if they are to be effective at execution.

Core Skill Area - Continuity

BALL PRESENTATION is the foundation for ball retention and speed of recycling. I firmly believe that continuity 'lives or dies' according to the quality of ball presentation and work on the ground.

Core Skill Area - Defence

Most Mini/Youth players are rather self-conscious and don't communicate effectively until they become U16s or above. Clear, loud, meaningful **COMMUNICATION** will enhance every defence.

Other - Game-Sense

DECISION-MAKING is perhaps the most important 'core skill' in rugby, but also one of the most difficult to coach. Players should be routinely placed in 'game-like' situations and allowed to learn for themselves by making decisions; sometimes the right ones and often the wrong ones...

Try to build core skills into every session that you deliver; it will pay dividends down the line...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that if the foundation stones are not strong then whatever you build won't last...

Dear Junior Doctor

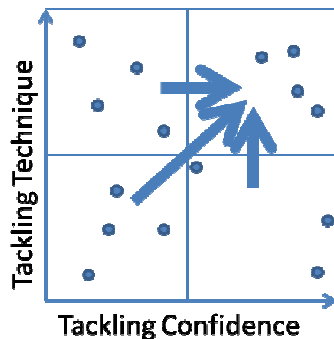
I read your 'postscript' last week about targeting a higher success rate when introducing tackling for the first time and just wondered how you would go about achieving this..?

'Challenged' of Chiswick

Dear 'Challenged'

Expanding briefly on my advice to increase the success rate when first introducing tackling, I have found that confidence is hugely important here with players who fail to make effective tackles soon deciding for themselves that they 'can't tackle' or worse still that they 'don't like the contact game'. There is too little space here to cover tackling in great detail but an extremely simple yet massively successful tip is to have the ball-carrier walk by placing his heel touching his other toe as he takes each step. This generally stops the ball-carrier making it hard for the would-be tackler and also presents a target that the tackler can see, reach and attack. Very often the ball-carrier is so absorbed in his foot positioning that he is on the ground without noticing the impending tackle...

Confidence and technique are important in achieving success here and the below matrix might be useful as players in each quadrant needs slightly different types of support from the coach.



Watch out for the player in the bottom right quadrant, he is the one who needs to be managed...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that tackling confidence is key and it is best instilled at an early age...



Ask the Junior Doctor – November 2011

Dear Junior Doctor

I coach several different age groups at my school and I sometimes worry that I don't get the balance right between challenging my players and/or expecting too much of them. How can I make sure that I get it right more often..?

'Ambitious' of Abingdon

Dear 'Ambitious'

I'm so pleased that you said 'get it right **more often...**' as none of us can expect to get it right all the time... I have encountered exactly the same dilemma as I often coach players as young as U8s in the afternoon and a bunch of adults just an hour or two later. Aside from the age difference, abilities vary massively too and I will often have a highly talented U14 team who are more advanced technically and tactically than an older group who could not cope with a similar session.

For me the key here is the 'success rate'...

If you target a 70% success rate for what you are trying to achieve then you will avoid a) the activity being perceived as too easy and thus meaningless and b) the activity failing completely and not being understood. You can vary the rate of success by simple changing the conditions on the game, a smaller/larger area, more or less players, walking or running etc.

Players will be challenged to achieve and motivated by their success.

You should sometimes vary the targeted success rate to suit the situation though... with first-time tacklers for example I would ensure a higher success rate in order to develop confidence.

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that if you get it right most of the time then you are doing very well...



Ask the Junior Doctor – October 2011

Dear Junior Doctor

I have been following the recent debate concerning 'injuries' in Youth rugby and would like to know your 'top three tips' for injury prevention..?

'Anxious' of Anglesey

Dear 'Anxious'

I too have been reading such articles and whilst I do not concur with some of the damning conclusions it is right that we look for every opportunity to make our game safer for all who play it.

In terms of a 'top three', how about these..?

1) Nurture quality Officials...

A knowledgeable referee with empathy for the game can have a massive impact on player safety.

2) Manage 'contact' appropriately...

Many skills and behaviours can be introduced and practised in non-contact or slow-paced formats.

3) Consider player confidence not just physique...

The call of "find someone your own size" alarms me and I would far rather see players 'streamed' according to their confidence and attitude rather than just their height or weight.

I would urge you to read between the lines in these articles and to filter out the sensationalism but also to recognise that rugby is a physical game and needs to be managed appropriately.

Player welfare is critical... do all you can to develop a safe environment for these young players...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember the old adage that prevention is always better than cure...

Dear Junior Doctor

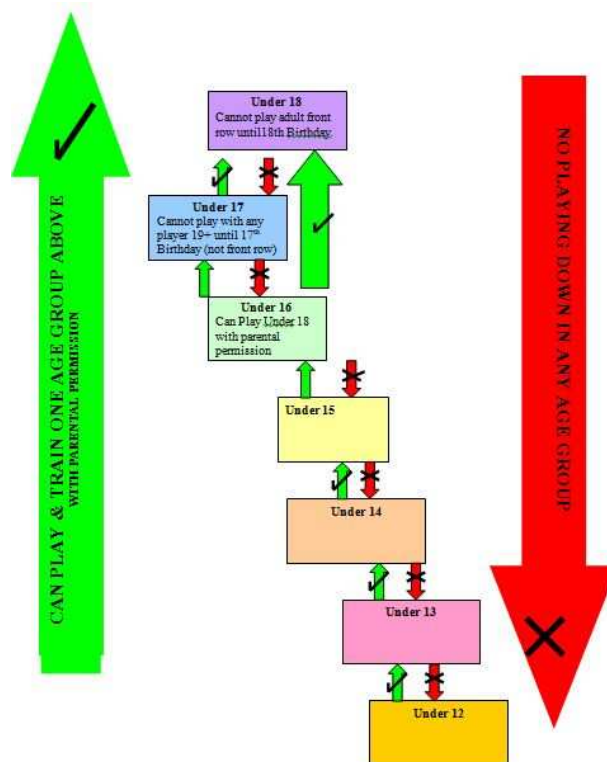
My Club is often short of players in one Youth age group but with a surplus in others, are we allowed to let players switch age groups and fill the gaps..?

'Law-Abiding' of Lewisham

Dear 'Law-Abiding'

Whilst this is a perfectly understandable problem you must be extremely careful in mixing players of different ages and have a 'duty of care' that must be strictly enforced.

I have seen many explanations of what is and what isn't allowed but recently received the below illustration which I find to be a simple, graphical summary. I reproduce this with full recognition and acknowledgement to the originator, (E & OE).



Keep up the good work... try getting your players to bring a mate down to plug those gaps...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that even within age groups children mature at different rates, look after them...



Ask the Junior Doctor – April 2011

Dear Junior Doctor

I think I'm getting it Doc, but could you provide some simple examples..?

'Funster' of Finchley

Dear 'Funster'

Great to hear... Please take a look at the below simple examples of a Game Sense approach...

Example 1)

Before - A simple shuttle passing drill... where players run at their chosen pace, unopposed, passing the ball at their convenience.

After - A 4-on-2 game... where players must make decisions about if and when to pass, isolate and 'fix' defenders in addition to passing accurately and effectively in order to exploit their numerical advantage.

Example 2)

Before - A shuttle passing drill with a pre-determined 'loop' move... where players pre-determine their role and movement and are generally only active in their small part of the drill.

After - A 4-on-4 game... where 'loops', 'switches' and 'option runners' are needed in order to create an advantage and where all players are actively involved at all times.

Example 3)

Before - A 3-on-2, or 4-on-3 drill with players queuing to cycle round trying to take advantage of their mismatched numbers.

After - A 'loaded' game, (eg 6-on-3), where players must make good decisions about how to exploit their numerical advantage, that results in tries or learning opportunities and at the same time may be used to work on defensive tactics when a team is out-numbered.

Keep up the good work... you will enjoy it when your players first find the answers for themselves...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that children readily adapt to new Laws every season, so new games will be easy...



Ask the Junior Doctor – March 2011

Dear Junior Doctor

Thanks for last month's reply but is simply 'playing rugby' allowing me any opportunity to coach..?

'Funster' of Finchley

Dear 'Funster'

I'm sorry, I fear that I haven't explained myself at all well... Game Sense is not simply 'playing a game instead of using drills' which may be a consequence of, or indeed lead to, lazy coaching... Rather, game parameters are changed to encourage development of a particular skill area.

Listed below are some 'game conditions' or 'modifications' which may be implemented in Game Sense sessions to achieve desired tactical outcomes:

- Modify the dimensions and shape of the playing area
- Change the position and size of the area that may be scored in
- Condition the number of passes allowed
- Limit or promote certain techniques, (eg kicking)
- Alter the number of players in attack / defence
- Adjust the scoring system
- Vary the risk and / or rewards
- Amend the time allowed
- Specify particular roles for players
- Add or suspend certain game rules

The Coach still 'coaches' but focuses upon facilitating the session – allowing players the freedom to learn for themselves and encouraging them to discuss and learn from their errors. He should question the players, helping them to come up with the answers rather than to 'force feed' them..

Keep up the good work... try alternative game-sense conditions to determine which work best...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember to check for understanding at the end of a session, it is a powerful coaching tool...



Ask the Junior Doctor – February 2011

Dear Junior Doctor

I hear a lot of talk in rugby circles about 'Game Sense' coaching... what does it mean..?

'Funster' of Finchley

Dear 'Funster'

Game Sense is an approach to sports coaching, (not just rugby coaching), that may be employed to guide players to discover solutions for themselves and to develop skills in a realistic and pressurised environment. Game Sense involves the use of game variants to achieve desired coaching outcomes and stems from work carried out by Rod Thorpe ("Games for Understanding").

Using a Game Sense approach is strongly supported by the RFU and in my opinion rightly so...

Game-based training is appreciated by players of all ages as it is more FUN and is more effective as it simulates a live-game situation. A Game Sense approach should lead to increased motivation, improved individual skills and greater tactical awareness, because:

Modified and conditioned games challenge players to think about what they are doing and, perhaps more importantly, why they are doing it...

Coaches may create situations where players find the solutions themselves, and experience suggests that self-discovery is most effective for long-term learning...

Games are fun... so engagement and learning may be maximised when experiences are worthwhile and enjoyable.

Give it a go and let me know how you get on...

Keep up the good work... condition your game-sense sessions to achieve your coaching goals...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that children love to play games, even grown up children...



Ask the Junior Doctor – January 2011

Dear Junior Doctor

Hi Doc, 'Sir' here again... I'm about to start the 'rugby term' at my Prep School and I wondered what you thought the main priorities should be for Y3 and Y4 pupils..?

'Sir' of Cirencester

Dear 'Sir'

It's good to hear from you again so soon Sir and may I take the opportunity to wish you an enjoyable rugby term... There are of course many generic answers to your question, the most important being to make all lessons FUN and focused upon the development of core skills rather than on complex and irrelevant laws, over-complicated game plans or any 'win-at-all-costs' mentality...

On a more specific level I have just completed a major report on 'rugby development' for a local Prep School and chopping this down to just a few words and priorities I would suggest the following:

- Y3 Promote agility, balance and speed which will be useful in all of the sports that they play...
 Develop ball skills, particularly encouraging the ability to catch and pass whilst running...
 Improve awareness of where the try line is and encourage players to run towards it...

- Y4 Build on what you have achieved in Y3 so that there is continuity between seasons...
 Develop rugby's core skills but using a 'Game Sense' methodology...
 Introduce contact skills, promoting confidence alongside sound technique...

Keep up the good work... make the rugby experience of your Y3 and Y4 children a positive one...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember not to focus on winning; rather instil the skills that will allow success in later years...



Ask the Junior Doctor – December 2010

Dear Junior Doctor

I'm a Prep School teacher and I heard a rumour that the RFU are considering changes to the Continuum. Do you know anything about this..?

'Sir' of Cirencester

Dear 'Sir'

Forgive me for the brief explanation but just to be sure that all are clear, the Continuum is the document published by the RFU that defines the conditions under which rugby up to the Under 12 age group should be played in England, (other territories have their own rules and regulations).

It is true that the RFU are trialling some changes to the Continuum, though these are not expected to be adopted or dismissed for some time yet.

One of the key proposals is that team sizes should be reduced at the younger age groups. Whilst I feel that this is an excellent concept, (one that I use extensively to ensure that no-one is left out, no-one can 'hide' and that engagement and involvement are maximised), it does none-the-less present problems in terms of the ratio of staff/coach to players.

Another area under review is the age at which 'contact rugby' is introduced and how this is best achieved, (potentially delaying the introduction of scrums and using a 'grab tackle' as an intermediate step towards full contact). This is a more complicated area and here I choose to reserve judgement until the details and findings of the trial are made available.

Keep up the good work... children of Prep School age will seamlessly adapt to any new rules...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that player development is at the heart of any of these proposed changes...



Ask the Junior Doctor – November 2010

Dear Junior Doctor

I coach an U9 team and I am having difficulty with the introduction of 'Contact Rugby' with some of my squad. Any simple tips..?

'Cuddles' of Croydon

Dear 'Cuddles'

I note in your question that you mention difficulties with just '**some**' of your squad. This is only to be expected with certain players adapting to the new playing conditions more quickly than others and it is important that you 'stream' training in an appropriate way.

I hate it when Coaches ask players to 'partner up with someone of your own size' as this blunt division method ignores key parameters such as strength, experience, technique and confidence so my first advice would be to take aside those players who are taking longer to warm to the 'contact' side of the game and to provide them with some separate tuition.

One of the first barriers to break down at this age is the very subject of contact itself. In almost every other walk of life and in the majority of their sport to date, contact will have been forbidden, discouraged and even penalised. I find that using wrestling games can be a safe and fun way to overcome this hurdle. Two players kneeling and facing each other will quickly get the idea of wrestling their opponent to ground in a very safe and controlled environment. Before long the 'contact taboo' will be broken and you will be able to continue the progression to proper tackling.

Keep up the good work... your contact-shy U9 may be a rampaging open-side in a few years' time...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that players develop at different rates and it is our role to manage this responsibly...



Ask the Junior Doctor – October 2010

Dear Junior Doctor

Like 'Youthful' last month I have just moved into the U13s and my team played our first ever Youth rugby match last weekend. We were totally annihilated and lost very heavily. We didn't expect to be so overwhelmed, is it common for Youth games to be so one-sided..?

'Battered' of Battersea

Dear 'Battered'

Commiserations on your result but please don't despair...

The change to full sized pitches can lead to some 'cricket scores' particularly early on and often one particularly quick or remarkably big player can trouble early-season defences and have a disproportionate impact on the score-line. The longer games can also lead to high scores even when the mismatch between the two teams is not that great.

Youth rugby is considerably more 'grown-up' than what you have been used to in recent years and it is vitally important that you quickly learn to operate as a 'team'. Individual talent is fantastic but it will rarely prevail in rugby over a group of 15 players who truly understand and operate as a single entity. It is also important for everyone to understand their individual role and that of their unit (forwards, backs, back-row, back-three etc). Positional failings are often masked in Mini-rugby but now that you are playing the grown-up version of the game these may be cruelly exposed...

As an aside, I hope that your opponents won 'with good grace'... It is no fun to be on the receiving end of such a result and the 'spirit of rugby' insists that we are gracious when we win and optimistic when we lose...

Keep up the good work... failing to prepare is like preparing to fail, so train hard...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that it may be your team delivering the battering next weekend...



Ask the Junior Doctor – September 2010

Dear Junior Doctor

After several years as a Mini I have my first Youth rugby match next weekend. What will be the biggest differences for me..?

'Youthful' of Yeading

Dear 'Youthful'

Congratulations on graduating from the Minis and on becoming a Youth player. Your game will now resemble the adult-game much more closely and I have listed up below some changes for you this season... I have also noted down a few areas where you will still differ from the senior game...

Youth rugby – some differences from Mini-rugby

- 1) You will be playing on a much bigger pitch than you have been used to, (and for longer). This will not only require greater levels of fitness and stamina but will also introduce tactical issues particularly with kicking and defence.
- 2) You will have two extra players in the scrum and the Number 8 may now pick up
- 3) The number of players in the lineout can be varied and the 'long throw' is now OK
- 4) Conversions will be taken in line with the point that a try is scored
- 5) Drop-kicks and penalty kick at goal are allowed
- 6) Fly-hacking and fending is permitted
- 7) Offside lines increase from 5m to 10m

Youth rugby – some differences from Senior rugby

- 1) For a couple more years, your scrum-half must still remain at the line of the scrum
- 2) You may not wheel the scrum through 45° nor drive it more than 1.5m
- 3) Scrum numbers must remain balanced
- 4) The ball should not be unnecessarily held at the Number 8's feet
- 5) You may not use the squeezeball technique

Keep up the good work... enjoy the transition to Youth rugby and have a great season...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that everyone that you will be playing against faces the same challenges...



Ask the Junior Doctor – May 2010

Dear Junior Doctor

I coach Mini-rugby and my group is about to progress from U8s to U9s where 'contact' is allowed for the first time. What should I focus upon first..?

'Collision-maker' of Clapham

Dear 'Collison-maker'

The traditional answer to your question would be 'tackling' and of course this will represent an important new skill for your players to develop, but in addition to this I outline below a few other areas that I would encourage you to focus upon...

- 1) Passing before contact... I worked with a talented group of Tag-players a few years ago who had unusually taken on-board the idea that a pass prior to being 'tagged' was a useful tactic but miraculously this was totally forgotten when 'contact' became an option... Frustratingly it took a further couple of seasons to reinstate the inclination to pass before the tackle rather than to consider such only once enveloped in a contact situation.
- 2) Maintaining possession... At Tag level players are pretty much assured of retaining possession when 'tagged' yet when moving to U9s and above the 'tackle area' is contested. It is important for players to understand the importance of teamwork and that whilst a mazy run in Tag may gain valuable yards, it now presents an opportunity to become isolated.
- 3) Few Mini-rugby players really get the idea of rugby being perhaps the greatest example of a 'team sport' and it is crucial to instil the understanding that creating a try by securing the ball at the tackle area, or by driving opposition players away at the ruck is just as important as the act of grounding the ball beyond the try-line.
- 4) Rugby, (including Mini-rugby), is a simple game when played well and 'decision-making' has a huge impact on the success/failure ratio. It is hard to elaborate in such a short format but do encourage your players to make decisions on the field and please take time to explain the positive and negative outcomes of the decisions that they make.

Keep up the good work... enjoy 'contact' but remember that avoiding contact is the real skill...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that rugby is perhaps the greatest team game of them all...



Ask the Junior Doctor – April 2010

Dear Junior Doctor

I coach Mini-rugby and I would like to ask you if you feel that it is worthwhile to spend valuable coaching time working on the lineout..?

'Lanky' of Lensbury

Dear 'Lanky'

I sense in your question that you are feeling the pressure of introducing the many different aspects of Mini-rugby in such a limited amount of training time. I fully sympathise with this challenge but in response to your question I do believe that it is a worthwhile investment of your coaching time.

Without doubt the most neglected area of lineout coaching is the throw... Probably because this is a skill that will ultimately only be relevant to one or two players, it usually takes a back seat and is often not coached at all. This is a big mistake and I would encourage you to work on the throw with all members of your squad. This doesn't need to be in the format of lineout practise but rather it can be coached as another handling exercise or way of passing the ball. There is no way to tell which Mini-rugby player will be the hooker of the future so try to equip all your players with this skill.

Options in the Mini-rugby lineout are restricted but there is no excuse not to try some movement and might I even suggest some jumping to get off the ground... So many lineouts at these age levels simply rely on a tall player standing at the front with his arms stretched up into the air... It is never too early to introduce a bit of movement backwards and forwards to distract or deceive the opponent, and even when players start to be lifted at U16 it is imperative that they have the physical ability and coordination to jump, prior to the lift/support.

Many coaches try to introduce complex calls at the lineout but in my opinion it is too early for this. I would much rather see some movement from the jumpers and an understanding between them and the thrower such that the ball is propelled to an area of the lineout that the opposition is not covering and provided it is then caught by the throwing team the lineout has been a success...

Keep up the good work... try to boost the odds of winning the lineout, on your throw or theirs...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that standing still with your hands in the air is not the way to win a lineout...



Ask the Junior Doctor – March 2010

Dear Junior Doctor

I read last month's reply on the limitations on playing times for youngsters and wholeheartedly agree with such controls and the need for a dialogue between concerned parties. Being involved in the Youth side of the game I would just like to extend the discussion by introducing further demands on the players in terms of representative games, schools of rugby and even junior academies. With the best will in the world it is surely a huge task to monitor the playing and training records of individuals involved in one or more of these streams..?

'County-Cap' of Kensington

Dear 'County-Cap'

Once a player reaches the Youth rugby stage the demands of Schools' cups, local leagues and the possibility of representative rugby all put great pressure on our young players.

The RFU's approach to this potential issue is to publish what is called the 'Youth Structured Season' which defines which weekends during the season may be used by which interested party... for example when representative County games may be played, when Schools' cup games are scheduled and where in the season club league games are arranged.

To quote the RFU direct, "The structured season provides a framework for participants at all levels in clubs and schools, to develop their involvement in the sport through a balance of matches (competitive and friendly) and development (skills and training). The overriding principle is that the needs of young players should come first".

Whilst it is almost impossible to cater for every eventuality the Youth Structured Season provides an excellent framework upon which schools, clubs, CBs and others may build a programme that develops individual players whilst minimising the risk of over-playing or burn-out. The RFU have laid the foundation upon which all other interested parties should plan their programmes, and once again an open dialogue between all parties will be to the eventual benefit of all.

Keep up the good work... please take time to read the Youth Structured Season document...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that no single body has the 'rights' to any individual young player.



Ask the Junior Doctor – February 2010

Dear Junior Doctor

I'm a Prep-school teacher at a two-term rugby school where several of my players also play Mini-rugby for local clubs. I would like to know if there is a limit to how much time they spend playing rugby each week, particularly now that they are involved in 'contact' games..?

'Sir' of Sidcup

Dear 'Sir'

There are indeed clearly stated limits to both the length and frequency of training sessions and games and also to the maximum number of fixtures or festivals played in a season. These limits vary by age group and rather than reproduce them here I would refer you to the RFU's Continuum, (available on www.rfu.com) or to my summary which may be found on the 'Ask the Doctor' page of www.therugbydoctor.com under 'The Laws of Rugby (A Mini-Guide)'.

Most well administered schools and clubs will adhere to these controls which are put in place to avoid over-playing or burn-out but it is not uncommon for these limits to be exceeded if schools and clubs are 'unaware' of the other's playing and training workloads, (or choose to be so...).

The relationship between school and club should be symbiotic with the development of the player's rugby abilities at the core but this is not always the case, particularly once competitive fixtures, festivals and leagues come in to play. It is understandable that clubs and schools want their players to be available for *their* matches but in my view it is far more important that they are fresh and fit when they come to play and that they are still keen to play rugby when they leave school.

Co-operation between rugby-playing schools and clubs can truly be mutually beneficial and will lead to talented, motivated players in good condition to play for the school and club sides alike.

Keep up the good work... please start an early dialogue with your local rugby clubs...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that we should be developing young players and not just focusing on results.



Ask the Junior Doctor – January 2010

Dear Junior Doctor

Lots of my friends are talking about 'spin passing'... could you please explain what this is and how to do it..?

Dizzy of Dulwich

Dear Dizzy

'Spin passing' is simply a way of passing the ball. The ball is *rolled* out of the hands and rotates on its long axis as it travels through the air. It is most useful when passing the ball a long distance, perhaps for a miss pass for example...

Spin passing can be a very accurate and powerful way to move the ball but it has its downsides too. In Mini-rugby I prefer players to use a simple 'push pass' which is perfectly adequate to move the ball around on the small pitches that are used. Mini-rugby players sometimes get obsessed with trying to spin the ball and end up wasting time adjusting their hand position and artificially spinning the ball when a nice, firm push pass would have got the job done just as well. When the ball is spun incorrectly it can also be very difficult to catch.

I don't know if you watch any Rugby League but their players almost never use a spin pass yet their handling skills, at pace, are amongst the best to be seen. When delivering a push pass try to keep your hands above your waist at all times and point them at the target after you have released the ball. Practice passing to both left and right and gradually increase the length of the pass, you may be surprised at just how powerful and accurate a push pass can be...

If you want to learn the spin pass technique it is best to start by holding the ball on the palm of one hand before gently *rolling* it out with your hand coming from underneath, around the side and then 'flicking' the ball away towards its destination. Practice this until it feels natural and then add the other hand to act as a guide. When passing to the left the passer's right hand provides the power, and the left hand aids the accuracy of the pass, (and vice versa). Most people find that it is easier to spin pass one way than the other but it will be a huge advantage if you develop your technique until you can pass powerfully and accurately off each hand, ideally without changing your hand position on the ball so that opponents do not know which way you plan to move the attack.

The spin pass is useful, but keep it for when it is really needed.

Keep up the good work... whatever the type of pass used you should make it easy to catch...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember to show a target when receiving a pass and catch in your hands not on your chest.



Ask the Junior Doctor – December 2009

Dear Junior Doctor

Thanks for last month's reply about the Maul... another question though, what is a 'Ruck'..?

Baffled of Balham

Dear Baffled

As with the maul there are lots of complicated definitions of what a ruck is but basically a ruck occurs when at least one player from each team is in contact with each other competing over the ball which is on the ground.

In Mini-Rugby, this happens a lot, usually after a tackle has been made... Once the ball-carrier has been tackled they must release the ball and when it is placed on the ground players from each team can try to drive their opponents backwards so that their side can secure possession.

The most important point for the ball-carrier is to place the ball back towards their supporting players and to get it into a position where the opposition will struggle to reach it. Supporting players must then get into strong body positions, with heads above hips, and try to drive forward and upwards from a low starting stance. In this way they are more likely to get past the ball and to win the battle for possession. Once the ball is clear of the ruck and available at the back, a player (usually the scrum-half) may pick it up and start to play once again.

The ruck is a powerful weapon to keep possession after a tackle and to produce quick ball for your team. It would not be uncommon for thirty or forty rucks to take place during a Mini-Rugby match; that's thirty or forty opportunities to keep the ball for your team or to steal it from the opposition...

Keep up the good work... Rucks can yield fast ball but better still to find a gap and avoid contact...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember to place the ball back carefully; this is key to winning the battle of the ruck...



Ask the Junior Doctor – November 2009

Dear Junior Doctor

What is a 'Maul'..?

Baffled of Balham

Dear Baffled

There are lots of complicated definitions of what a maul is but basically a maul occurs when players from both teams are in contact with each other competing for the ball which is off the ground in someone's hands/arms.

In Mini-Rugby, most mauls happen by accident, most frequently when players run into a tackle with the ball facing forwards giving an opponent the chance to get their hands on it. A big wrestling match usually takes place with neither side being able to get the ball free...

The best way to avoid these 'wrestling matches' is for the ball-carrier to anticipate when he is going to be tackled or grabbed and to either pass/offload to a team-mate before this or to protect the ball by getting it into a position where the opposition cannot reach it, (by protecting it with their body or by going to ground and placing the ball to start a ruck).

The maul is not all bad though and if the ball is well protected and the supporting players get into good positions with their bodies low and their legs driving then the maul can be a powerful attacking weapon as there are very few ways to legally defend it...

Keep up the good work... Mauls are hard work, much easier to release the ball prior to contact...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember to look after the ball at all costs; you cannot score without it...



Ask the Junior Doctor – October 2009

Dear Junior Doctor

What is a 'Scrag Tackle' and is it something I should practice..?

Tenacious of Thamesmead

Dear Tenacious

The RFU definition of the 'Scrag-type Tackle' is "swinging the player round by the shirt".

In Mini-Rugby this is interpreted as 'dangerous play' and will be penalised by the referee, so it is definitely NOT something that you should practice...

Much better to work on your general tackle-technique using the shoulders rather than the hands and arms to do the hard work...

Interestingly this term disappears from the Law book at U13 (Youth) level, though such a tackle may still be deemed to be 'dangerous play' and as such liable to penalty.

Keep up the good work... Tackling is a key part of rugby, so try to get your technique right now...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember to keep your head in a safe position, whatever type of tackle you are making...



Ask the Junior Doctor – September 2009

Dear Junior Doctor

I'm an U12 this season and when I heard that we would have a Number 8 added to our scrum I started planning some 'back-row moves', but now my coach says that the number 8 can't pick the ball up at the back of the scrum... If this correct are there any ways around this..?

Pick-and-Go of Pinner

Dear Pick-and-Go

Most Mini Rugby laws are based upon player 'safety', each season gradually allowing the game to become more and more like the Senior game without taking giant leaps. Your coach is quite correct that at U12-level the Number 8 is forbidden from picking up the ball and the reason given for this is that the scrum might become unstable if players start to break off from it at different times. Whatever the reality of this perceived danger we must play by the Laws and so I'm afraid that the Number 8 pick-and-go will have to wait for one more season.

There are always alternatives though... why not have your scrum-half pack down at Number 8 and then let the Number 8 put the ball into the scrum instead? Obviously each player would first have to learn the correct techniques and skills for this temporary position exchange, but this would in itself make them more knowledgeable and might even make them a bit more sympathetic to each other's occasional errors... Once perfected, this presents a perfectly legal and acceptable way to get your Number 8 running from the base of the scrum. Imagine your opponent's surprise if you called this move at the first scrum near their try-line... with the defence forced to be 5m from their own Number 8's back foot, you will have a huge amount of space to attack.

Keep up the good work... Next season you will be playing 95% Senior rugby laws anyway...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember, there is always a way to play around the laws without breaking them...



Ask the Junior Doctor – July 2009

Dear Junior Doctor

I'm going to be moving into the U15s in September and I understand that we will be using a full-size ball for the first time... What steps can I take now to get used to this in advance..?

Hands of Harrow

Dear Hands

The best advice that I can give here is just to practise, practise, practise... The key point though is to practise ALL elements of the game, not just the obvious ones...

Handling

Work on your pass strength AND accuracy as you will need to get used to the dynamics of the larger ball. If you are a hooker your throwing will also be impacted and will require work.

Adjust your catching technique such that you are still able to consistently receive a pass into the hands and not clutched to the chest.

Practise receiving high balls too, bearing in mind that the full size ball is a little heavier.

Consider your offloads, be they simple pop passes, offloads out of the tackle, push passes off the ground, belly passes, or 'rip and spins'. One-handed offloads will be trickier now.

Try picking the ball up from the ground, as if you were taking a pick-and-go or from the base of the scrum if you happen to be a back row player.

Kicking

This may well be the area where you notice most difference and once again you will need to ensure that all types of kick are worked on, (restarts, drop goals, touch-finders, wipers, grubbers, chips, place kicks etc), so that they become accurate and feel natural once again.

Ripping and Mauling

Work on the contact areas too, protecting the ball in a maul or ripping it from an opponent.

This may appear to be a long list but it is essential to be comfortable in all areas of the game. Although the change to the ball is relatively minor it is worth rehearsing all of these aspects as such attention to detail could be the difference between you and your opponents come September.

Keep up the good work... You will probably notice the transition far less than you think...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember to work on all skill areas to be sure that you're ready...



Ask the Junior Doctor – June 2009

Dear Junior Doctor

I'm going to a new school in September where they play 'Touch Rugby' rather than 'Tag Rugby' which I am used to playing at my rugby club. What is the difference and which is better..?

Freshman of Farringdon

Dear Freshman

The first thing to say is how pleased I am that you will soon be playing rugby at school **and** at your club. It's great that more schools are teaching rugby again now and the opportunity to play or train more than once a week will definitely improve your game, which is good for both school and club.

Touch and Tag are really very similar in that they are both games that resemble rugby in many ways but crucially take away any physical contact. The 'Touch' or 'Tag' is used to replace the rugby tackle, in the former case with players placing their hands on their opponent to signal a tackle and in the latter case with the tackler physically removing a 'Tag' from their opponent to show that they have completed a tackle. Both games are great for getting players used to running with the ball, avoiding defenders, passing and scoring tries.

I don't think that I can say which is better as each has strengths and weaknesses, (eg you don't need any special 'kit' to play Touch but it can get very heated when a player claims a touch-tackle that is not seen by the referee...). Interestingly I recently watched two games of adult non-contact rugby taking place on adjacent pitches, one being played to Tag rules and the other to Touch rules. It was striking to me that the Tag game resembled 'rugby 7s' with players checking back when the break was not on and looking to retain possession at all costs whereas the Touch game looked much more like full contact rugby with players taking the ball forward as a priority and using the touch-tackle as a chance to realign and start the next phase of the attack.

There are lots of variations that may be used in Touch or Tag rugby, one that I particularly like is for the tackler to have to lie down and then get up when they have completed a tackle. This removes them from the game for a few seconds, just like a tackle would in full contact rugby, and also opens up a gap for the side in possession to attack... why not try this next time you are playing?

Keep up the good work... Touch or Tag will both help to build essential 'core skills'...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember that you only need a ball and a few friends to start a game of 'Touch'...



Ask the Junior Doctor – May 2009

Dear Junior Doctor

I try really hard every week with my rugby but I just can't seem to get out of the B-team. I really want to play with some of my school-mates who are in the A-team but I never get selected. What can I do to get the coaches to notice me..?

B-team Bertie of Brent

Dear Bertie

You may not want to hear it but my first piece of advice is to concentrate more on developing your rugby-skills and to worry less about which team you're playing in... As long as you are competing and training regularly there will be plenty of time in the future to focus on which team you are representing. Much changes very quickly in Mini-rugby as players grow and as the laws change and I would wager that many who are in the A-team now won't be in a few years time... That said, it is great that you aspire to be in the upper echelons...

I'm sure that your coach has talked about improving your 'core skills' and I would echo that advice. Have a think about the following areas and rate your own performance and then use the summer months to try to improve every one of those areas...

- Handling... passing, catching and offloading... at pace..!
- Attack... breakdown skills, ball presentation, winning one-on-ones ... and scoring..!
- Defence... tackling, keeping alignment and communicating with team-mates... every time..!
- Athleticism... running, dodging, jumping, driving, strength, power, pace... and overall fitness..!
- Kicking... from hand for touch, grubbers, chips, box and at goal... with both feet..!

I heard some great advice just this week that sportsmen should practice where they are strong, not just where they need to improve. Build upon your strengths and eradicate your weaknesses. Improvements in all areas will lead to an all round great player and that A-team coach won't be able to ignore you any longer...

Keep up the good work... developing all areas of your game will pay dividends...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember the summer is a great opportunity to improve those core skills...



Ask the Junior Doctor – April 2009

Dear Junior Doctor

I've noticed that a lot of my friends at school are wearing head-guards and shoulder-protectors when they play rugby... Do I need to do the same..?

Bareheaded of Bromley

Dear Bareheaded

This is a somewhat delicate topic and I must state right from the start that I am only offering a personal opinion below and not dispensing formal advice... whether or not you choose to wear such protective equipment really is a decision for you and for your parents.

Someone once told me that rugby wasn't a 'contact sport'... it was just a sport where contact could occur... well, whilst I can understand the point that he was trying to make we all know that collisions on a rugby field are frequent and grow more significant as players grow up...

Keeping your head safe is essential in any contact situation and that is why your coach has no doubt spent lots of time talking about your head position when you tackle. I can see no reason why you should not use an approved head-protector when you play and train, especially if this makes you feel safer and more confident. At the very top level of the game, more and more players are using these and I'm sure that they are choosing to do so having received good advice.

I am less positive though towards the use of shoulder-protectors and other forms of 'body armour' which can give a 'false sense of security' (particularly to youngsters) and often excuse flawed technique, allowing players to get away with poor body positions in contact just because they are physically protected. Once again, I would say that if such equipment makes you feel more confident then you should consider using it, but please don't let it be a substitute for ensuring that you always employ sound technique in your tackling and in all contact situations.

Lastly, please don't ever forget your gum-shield... that is one piece of protective equipment that you should never play without...

Keep up the good work... tackling confidently and correctly will see your team win more games...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Remember your coach's advice; find a safe place for your head at every contact situation...



Ask the Junior Doctor – March 2009

Dear Junior Doctor

I love playing rugby but I keep dropping the ball... I don't do it on purpose but my team-mates are getting upset and I feel that I'm letting them down... What can I do to improve..?

Clumsy of Clapham

Dear Clumsy

EVERY rugby player drops the ball at some stage... the unfortunate thing is that people remember one dropped pass more than ten that are caught... especially if the drop is close to the try-line... ask your coach to show you a certain England 2nd Row in the World Cup final...

There are a number of 'technical' things that will help you to catch more than you drop... reaching out with your hands and arms towards the passer, opening the fingers wide but keeping your hands relaxed, watching the ball all the way into your hands and using all ten digits to keep it there.

More important than 'thinking' about all these details though is to practise, practise and practise some more... Mini-rugby players are at an age when their brains are learning to link up their hands and eyes and practise now will make catching 'automatic' when you are older.

You don't have to wait for rugby training, nor do you have to always use a rugby ball... many teams practise passing a rugby ball, then a tennis ball, then a golf ball... this helps to 'train the brain' to react to the different size, shape, weight and speed of the object that you're trying to catch.

Another great way to sharpen up your reactions is to bounce a rugby ball up a set of stairs, watching it tumbling down and catching it at the bottom.

Juggling too is a great way to improve these basic skills.

Keep up the good work... if you relax and enjoy practising catching, the drops will soon disappear...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Playground games can help hand-to-eye links, so you can even practise at school, every day...



Ask the Junior Doctor – February 2009

Dear Junior Doctor

I'm a really fast and tricky runner and I play on the wing for my school team but the ball doesn't get passed to me enough... my team-mates often ignore me and run back towards the middle of the field instead, where they get tackled... should I change my playing position..?

Wide-boy of Walthamstow

Dear Wide-boy

If you're as good as you say you are then I don't think that you should change your position, rather it is your team-mates who might need to change something..!

This 'cutting back' or 'checking in' is really common amongst Mini-rugby players; let's consider what both you and your friends might do to resolve this...

Firstly, you need to make sure that you get in a good position to support the ball-carrier and then let them know that you're there... Don't just call "yes, yes, yes" or "my ball"; be really loud and try to be more precise... Shouting "Wide-boy, short left" or "Wide-boy, wide right" will help your team-mate to know where you are and what sort of pass you need. It's also a good idea to make eye contact with them and to raise your hands as a target, the ball-carrier may only have a moment to decide whether or not to make the pass and showing them that you are ready will help with that decision.

Your team-mates need to be encouraged to keep their heads up, (so that they are aware of where their support players are), and they MUST avoid 'drifting' across the field as they run. This is easier to say than to do and even many senior players are guilty of what is often called 'crabbing' across the pitch... the problem is that 'crabbing' steals all the space from the outside players and when the ball-carrier finally looks to pass it seems to be a bad option and they cut back in instead...

A good way to limit this 'drifting' is for them to line up with their outside foot forward and to take a conscious step towards the ball when it is passed to them. This simple step will open up space for the wings and will make it more obvious to the ball-carrier that the outside pass is the best option.

A quiet word with your centres and a bit of playground practice should ensure that you get the ball in your hands more frequently and will surely see you scoring great tries in the corners...

Keep up the good work... if you call early, loudly and clearly... then the ball will come your way...

The Junior Doctor

PS! The quick guys are on the wings for a reason... get them the ball so they can work their magic.



Ask the Junior Doctor – January 2009

Dear Junior Doctor

I'm in the U10s this year and I'm really enjoying the pushing and shoving that goes on after someone has been tackled... How can I make sure our team gets the ball back every time..?

Pushy of Peckham

Dear Pushy

It's great to hear that you're enjoying the 'rough and tumble' of contact rugby... Once a player has been tackled and the ball is placed on the ground, you will quickly have players from each side coming together over the ball. This is now a 'ruck' and while I could probably write a whole series of articles on this topic instead here's a quick A, B, C to help you win back more ball than you lose...

Absolutely crucial that the tackled player places or 'presents' the ball well, reaching back towards his team-mates and positioning the ball so that it is easy for supporting players to see and protect.

Body-positions of the arriving players are equally important, bending at the knees as they approach the ruck, binding strongly with their shoulders in contact with the opposition and driving from 'low to high' will help to move the ruck forward, leaving the ball for your team to pick up and play with. One young team I coach shout 'SOCKS' as they approach the ruck to remind them to drop their hands towards their socks, automatically getting them into a good, low starting position for the ruck.

Clearing out the opponents, or driving them back and away from the ruck area, will give your team the best chance to have quick and 'clean' ball, (by this I mean that the ball will be available for the acting scrum-half without pressure from opposition players in the ruck).

Don't pick the ball up if you're part of the ruck... you will give away a penalty... I know it's tempting but if you're in the ruck then you're not allowed to handle the ball.

Every option will be available to your supporting players if you ruck well.

Keep up the good work... and remember to drive from low to high, (like an aeroplane taking off)...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Young players are much more likely to retain possession with quickly recycled ruck ball.



Ask the Junior Doctor – December 2008

Dear Junior Doctor

My hands were absolutely frozen during training at the weekend. What can I do to stop my fingers dropping off when I catch the ball..?

Frosty of Fulham

Dear Frosty

Just for once, your mum was probably right when she told you that you needed another layer on...

The only really effective way to keep your hands warm is to keep your body warm... A normal 'core' temperature will help to keep all the extremities comfortable, as your circulation system will be pumping warmth all around your body. This is best achieved by wearing a number of thin layers, rather than one thick one, (something to do with trapping insulating air I seem to recall from my prehistoric physics lessons). Some of the proprietary brands of thermal clothing are really effective now, and thin enough to be worn without affecting your game.

If you're just training then I'm sure that your coach won't mind you keeping wrapped up and if you are playing a match then keep it the extra layers on until you're actually ready to play. When buying these extra layers for training though, do make sure that they don't have buckles or zips which could cause injury in contact situations.

I know that it's not always possible, but keeping dry will also help and you should certainly get into some dry, warm clothes if ever you get seriously uncomfortable through the cold.

Lots of players think that rugby 'mits' will keep them warm but whilst they may help with grip and handling, any effect on body temperature is likely to be minimal.

I'm sure that your coach will want everyone moving to keep them warm (and motivated), and that they will avoid any exercises that involves long lines or any waiting around...

Keep up the good work... and remember to stay involved, an active player is a warm player...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Lots of players complain about training when it is cold/wet... but rugby is a winter-sport after all.



Ask the Junior Doctor – November 2008

Dear Junior Doctor

I've just moved into the U11s this season so we now have 12 players on each side, but the pitch seems too small for all of us. Why do we have to be in such a small area..?

Cluttered of Catford

Dear Cluttered

The short answer is simple, (but a bit unhelpful...) "that's the rules..." The rulebook says that the maximum size for a U11 pitch is 60m x 43m. Actually, this isn't that small but many Clubs have to use smaller areas if there isn't enough space or because they use the lines from a full-size pitch.

Whatever the reasons, don't be disheartened, there are spaces and it will improve your rugby if you learn where to find them and how to exploit them...

In most U11 games I see the opposition stand miles back at 'kick-offs'...your kick only needs to travel 7m and a well judged kick combined with a well timed chase can see possession regained...

All U11s are excited because they are allowed to 'kick' for the first time, but the small pitch and rushing players force 'escape kicks' rather than positive ones. Don't just kick and hope, target the corners, ensure your team-mates are ready to follow the kick and use a variety of high, low, grubber and bouncing kicks; you will definitely gain ground and maybe even steal possession back...

With 12 'defenders' facing you it is really important to start committing players in one area of the pitch and quickly moving the ball to another. Always remember that the ball will move faster than any player and that most of the time a couple of swift passes away from the tackle area will give you much more room to play, (and make the game much more exciting to watch)...

The wide defensive line also means that there is no benefit at all in running from side to side across the pitch. I'll bet that your coach calls "run straight, run straight" and this is more important than ever now as 'crabbing' left and right will just give the defence time to line up their tackles...

A final point to think about, (not just for U11s...), is to try to make sharp direction changes when you are running, ('cut angles not arcs'), as these changes in direction will commit defenders and maybe even take them off-balance and weaken their tackle. If all 12 defenders are moving left to right and you cut right to left you have a good chance of breaking through their line...

Keep up the good work... and remember to use the space available; target spaces and not faces...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Use the next two years to get ready for Youth rugby... you'll find that the big pitch is very tiring



Ask the Junior Doctor – October 2008

Dear Junior Doctor

I know that this section is supposed to be for the Mini-Rugby players, but I'm a Mini-Rugby coach and I need some help..! How can I coach an extremely large group of lively young players who are easily distracted and who only seem to be motivated by the game at the end of the session..?

Overwhelmed of Oxford

Dear Overwhelmed

Thanks for making contact, and rest assured that this is a very common situation...

I won't dwell on the 'child protection' issues nor on 'optimum coaching ratios' but first of all, you need to recruit some support... the more that you can share the load and the smaller the individual groups of players, (especially when coaching 'contact' rugby elements), then the better your session will be in a whole variety of ways.

I always encourage coaches to adopt a 'multi-station' approach where the players are divided into small groups who work on each of a number of 'coaching stations' in rotation. This works on many levels; it ensures that all coaches see all players and conversely that all players have access to all coaches, (from novice to most experienced, and from back specialist to forward expert), it enables a lot of different elements to be covered in a short time, (eg the stations may each focus on a core skill area), it keeps the sessions short and snappy so that players do not have time to get 'bored' and most importantly it allows the coach to identify with individuals rather than anonymous groups.

Employing a 'game-sense' approach to your coaching may address the issue about players wanting to 'play games' rather than undertake 'dull drills' and another tip is to vary the point in the session when you play your games, ie don't always do this at the end.

Lastly, engage the least attentive players, call them by name and ask them to lead demonstrations.

Keep up the good work... and remember to look for that parent who is itching to be asked to help...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Good coaches always look to learn... watch other people's sessions and steal the good bits



Ask the Junior Doctor – September 2008

Dear Junior Doctor

I thought that ELVs were little green men that lived in the forest but now rugby commentators on TV, my rugby coach and even my school-teachers are talking about them... what is this all about..?

Mischievous of Mitcham

Dear Mischievous

I know what you mean, anyone would think that there is nothing else to talk about in rugby circles...

In an attempt to improve the game, the law-makers have decided to try out some new laws and to change some of the existing ones... these are your ELVs or **Experimental Law Variations**. It is not yet clear whether they will become permanent after this season or whether further trials and more variations will come along, (watch this space...). In Mini Rugby, what you are allowed to do changes every year as you go up an age group anyway so I don't think that you will have any difficulty learning and adapting to these changes...

Perhaps the most confusing thing is that different ELVs are being trialled in different competitions and in different parts of the world, so what you see on TV is not necessarily going to be the same as what you see at your club. To further complicate things, I've noticed that many commentators are getting it 'wrong' when describing games as they too have to learn to adapt to the changes...

Luckily, certain ELVs will not apply in rugby below U19 level and in many ways this makes things easier for you as very little will actually change in your case. The only ELVs that might have a real effect in Mini Rugby are:

- a) that both teams must be 5m behind the hindmost foot of the scrum until the ball is picked up by the scrum-half, (in itself, not a big change for most Mini age groups)
- b) For the U11s and U12s who are allowed to kick, if your team takes the ball back into the '22' and then kicks it straight into touch, then the lineout will be from where the ball was kicked and not from where it crossed the touchline.

Try to learn to live with the 'little green men'... they don't mean you any harm...

Keep up the good work... and remember to listen to the referee/coach at all times...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Very few people know all of the laws... don't let these ELVs affect your enjoyment of rugby



Ask the Junior Doctor – August 2008

Dear Junior Doctor

At the end of last term a visiting coach ran a rugby 'taster session' at my school, I thought that this was great and I would really like to start playing rugby at a club next season. Where can I find out about local clubs in my area..? I'm also a bit scared about joining in with more experienced players, will I be able to cope and will I fit in..?

Novice of Neasden

Dear Novice

Firstly, let me say that I'm delighted that you have been bitten by the 'rugby-bug'... I'm confident that rugby will provide you with hours of entertainment and many new friends...

In terms of finding a club that runs Mini-rugby the best place to start is the 'Community Rugby' section of the RFU website which has a facility to 'find your nearest club', (see <http://www.community-rugby.com>). You might also want to contact your County Rugby Body who are likely to hold information on which clubs in your county have active Mini-rugby sections.

Many of the clubs with large Mini-rugby sections run special induction days for newcomers. These are great because you will be with other players who are new to the game and the introductory sessions will be tailored towards those like you who aren't yet familiar with all the terms and techniques. You might be surprised at how many others are in your situation...

Let me finish by reassuring you that you should have no fears nor concerns about 'fitting in' as rugby is the most inclusive and welcoming sport that can truly claim to have a place for all...

Keep up the good work... and remember to get down to your local club soon...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Rugby is more than a game, it can start and build lifelong friendships... give it a go...



Ask the Junior Doctor – July 2008

Dear Junior Doctor

Our coach seems to hate mauls and always cries out for a 'quick rucking game' but is there any way of mauling that Junior rugby players could use successfully..?

Muscles of Merton

Dear Muscles

Mauling is still a very important part of the game of rugby, though it is really hard work and it often causes the game to slow down or even stop..!

Briefly described below though is one type of maul that you may like to experiment with...

Upon contact the ball carrier should turn around, placing his back to the opposition and protect the ball with a wide, strong stance and strong arms. The next arriving player should bind onto the ball, rip it from the ball carrier, always downwards, and roll 180 degrees to the left or right, presenting his back to the opposition as well. Immediately another arriving player should repeat this to the same side, by which time the original ball carrier should be free and should repeat this roll once more.

This rolling motion is difficult to defend against as the 'point of attack' keeps changing. More often than not the third 'roller' will find himself in space and will be able to break away from the maul and drive through the fringe defence, supported by the scrum-half. The first and second 'rollers' mustn't sit back and watch at this stage, they are in the very best position to support the player driving into space and to be available for a quick offload.

Keep up the good work... and remember 'offload first, ruck second, maul if you have to...'

The Junior Doctor

PS! Rugby is more fun and better to watch when played at speed, so try to keep the ball alive...



Ask the Junior Doctor – June 2008

Dear Junior Doctor

My mates often want to take a football over to the park and kick it about but it's much harder to get a game going with just a rugby ball... We can't really tackle because the ground is getting hard and just passing and kicking to each other is boring... How can I keep my rugby-skills up-to-speed and also get my friends to join in..?

Bored of Barnet

Dear Bored

I can't believe that your coach hasn't used 'games' during the season to practise your rugby skills... Almost every part of the game of rugby can be broken down and practised by playing a kind of game... all you need to do is to change a few of the rules... We call this 'conditioning' a game and it is a very powerful tool in embedding particular messages or techniques.

Try a few of these or better still, invent some of your own...

- 1) Play 'touch rugby' but only award a 'tackle' if the player holds his opponent's shorts with two hands, (in this way a low, balanced tackling position can be encouraged).
- 2) Play 'rugby netball' where no-one may run with the ball and a try is scored by catching a pass within the in-goal area, (this will encourage good communication and movement).
- 3) Play 'touch rugby' but where the ball must be rolled along the ground instead of being passed, (this will encourage low body positions, competition for the ball on the ground and a good technique when picking up a rolling ball).
- 4) Play 'tag' but where a player may only be caught when tagged with the ball below the knee, (this will again encourage low body position and evasive running).
- 5) Organise lineout races where all players must catch the ball, run a short shuttle and return the ball before the next player starts his run. Keep a record of the 'best time' and the best team.
- 6) Organise passing races where players may only pass to the left (and then the right). Teams will soon discover that they must straighten their running lines and loop around in order to continue, both essential skills in maintaining space and running support lines.

Keep up the good work... and remember, games are fun, but they are also great learning tools....

The Junior Doctor

PS! Rugby is the greatest team game of them all... it's true that there are certain skills that may only be practised in a group so call your friends, get over to the park and play together as a team...



Ask the Junior Doctor – May 2008

Dear Junior Doctor

I read your reply to 'Fanatical' last month... but surely I should spend the Summer months getting bigger and stronger like the professionals..? I'm too young to use a gym so what else can I do..?

Bulk-up of Brockley

Dear Bulk-up

You are SO RIGHT... you ARE too young to use a gym. Rugby is what is called a late-development sport which means that you will have loads of time to spend in the gym later, (if that's really what you want to do...). I would rather see you practising your core skills and building your stamina..

Try these ideas over the next few months and the coming season will be better than last:

1) Practise your passing whilst running at speed... Set up a target, roughly hand-high and try to hit it with your pass as you SPRINT past. Make sure that you pass both ways, (to the left and to the right), and vary the height of the target slightly to simulate taller and shorter team-mates...

2) Better still, if you can find a friend, practise passing together... but at PACE. Try to catch the ball in your hands rather than clutching it to your chest, this will allow you to pass the ball on much faster in a game situation. Try to take the pass 'in your stride' so that you don't lose speed. Try changing directions just as you receive the pass, sometimes taking the ball early as you 'cut' towards the passer, sometimes taking the ball late as you 'swerve' away from the passer...

3) Practice your kicking from hand whilst on the move... it's relatively easy to direct a chip or grubber kick when standing still, but can you do it accurately and repeatedly when running..? How about when an opponent is advancing towards you..? Practice this with your friend... it's a tricky skill but it can be useful when a defence rushes at you...

4) For fitness... I would strongly recommend running some 'intervals'... Mark out a circuit that you can comfortably stride around at three-quarters pace in 45 to 50 seconds. Now run that circuit 10 times, starting every two minutes... ensuring that you run every one of the ten laps in the SAME TIME... don't sprint the first and crawl the last... pace yourself so that you can run a consistent time for all 10 laps. Run these 'intervals' three times a week and try to reduce your regular time by a second or so every fortnight. Of course, the better your time, the longer your rest period...

5) As an extension to the above, add some changes of direction and/or changes of pace to the circuit... try some side-stepping along one part of the lap or add a burst of speed each time you pass a particular point, but remember consistency is more important than a fast lap-time or two...

Keep up the good work... and remember that practicing techniques turns them into natural skills....

The Junior Doctor

PS! Passing is so important, for every player... there are still many in the senior game who can't pass well off both hands... Practise your passing now so that it is 'automatic' when you are older...



Ask the Junior Doctor – April 2008

Dear Junior Doctor

I'm despondent... the rugby season is nearly over and I'm concerned that I won't see my rugby mates or be able to legally bash anyone again for several months, could you please give me some suggestions as to what I might do..?

Fanatical of Finchley

Dear Fanatical

I sympathise with your plight, I don't know what I am going to do to fill the coming weeks either... but here are some suggestions below:

- 1) Keep an eye out for rugby camps...
- 2) Watch rugby on the TV, and spot what the players in your positions try to do...
- 3) Take a rugby ball out in the park and practice your passing and catching whilst running at speed...
- 4) Keep fit, but stick to aerobic activities, we don't need 'gym monkeys'...
- 5) Think about scrums and line outs that are contested, ie where you must work to win the ball...
- 6) Practice running while bent over and push/drive the furniture around your house whilst in this 'strong position'
- 7) Repeatedly tackle your dad when he's least expecting it and remember to go low...
- 8) Take your kit out at least once a week and grind it into the dirt, otherwise over the summer Mum might forget how to wash it...

Keep up the good work... and remember, no 'fending off'....

The Junior Doctor

PS! Tackling is fun... and even more so because the side that tackles best rarely ever loses...

Enjoy tackling, the rewards are endless...!!!



Ask the Junior Doctor – March 2008

Dear Junior Doctor

My coach keeps screaming at me to “RUN STRAIGHT, RUN STRAIGHT” but I don’t know what he means nor why he thinks that this is so important... can you please explain..?

Henpecked of Harrow

Dear Henpecked

Your coach may have noticed that when you have the ball you sometimes run towards the touchline (sideline), or worse still, back towards your team’s try line, rather than up the field towards your opponent’s try line. There are many reasons why this is important and I have listed some of these below:

you can only score at rugby by crossing your opponent’s try line with the ball, so it makes sense to run towards it... after all you do want to score don’t you..?

if you run forward you will find that your team mates will soon be behind you and in good positions to support and to receive a pass...

if you run forward you give your opponents no time to set up their defence, whereas if you run backwards or sideways then they will have extra time to build a strong defensive line... gulp!!

if you run backwards then you will quickly find that all your team-mates are in front of you and you will not be able to pass to them... you will be on your own with no support... double gulp!!

if you run backwards then your opponent will chase you, and when his tackle comes he will be the one running forward and in a good position to tackle you aggressively... triple gulp!!

if you run towards the touchline then you can easily be pushed/tackled into touch and then your opponents will automatically have the ball... quadruple gulp!!

Rugby is a very direct game, running forward and passing backward are really key points. If your first step, (with or without the ball), is forward and you always aim to make progress towards your opponent’s try line then I’m sure that your Coach will quickly calm down and shout much less...

Keep up the good work...

The Junior Doctor

PS! What do you need to score a try at rugby..?

THE BALL... NEVER give it away...!!!



Ask the Junior Doctor – February 2008

Dear Junior Doctor

I've noticed that everyone's tackling is improving and I can't just run through defences any more, could you please tell me what my options are..?

Tackled of Teddington

Dear Tackled

Defences are getting better and will continue to improve as everyone discovers that tackling is FUN... obviously, it would be better to make a pass to a free supporting player BEFORE you get tackled, but if this has not been possible then you should think about the following...

you don't have to fall over just because someone is trying to tackle you, they may not have a good technique and you may still be able to break through. Keep the ball held securely in both hands and protected. Get into a strong position, (lead with the shoulders, leaning forwards, body bent over, legs bent and apart forming a strong base), and continue to drive forward, pumping your legs as you go. Always protect the ball from the opposition though or they may be able to steal it.

if you feel that you are going to get pulled down, start to turn so that your body forms a barrier between the opposition and the ball. Call "down, down, down" to tell your team mates that you are going to ground and that you need supporting players to 'clear out' the ruck. You need their help FAST so calling "down, down, down" will get their attention and attract their support. You can still drive forward as you go to ground until the very last moment when you must turn your body, placing the ball carefully towards your supporting players and finally covering your head for protection.

you can stay on your feet and form a 'maul'. In this case call "up, up, up" to tell your supporting players that the ball will be in your hands, not on the ground. Keep the ball held tightly in two hands, get into a strong position and turn to make sure your body forms a barrier between the opposition and the ball. When I played though I found mauls produced only slow ball, (so defences had time to realign), were pretty boring and were very hard work so I suggest that you ruck whenever you can...

you may see some players make a pass out of the tackle but this is very difficult as defensive players will be pulling at your arms and pushing you around. It is very likely that the ball will fly away in a random direction, missing the target and that your team will then lose possession, so unless your arms are completely free I would avoid passing out of the tackle for now.

Rugby is a very simple game, avoiding contact and passing before the tackle is our aim but if this is not possible the next most important thing is to keep the ball safe so that your team keeps possession. If you keep the above in mind you may get tackled less, and even if you are tackled it won't matter as your team mates will keep the ball and your side should win...

Keep up the good work...

The Junior Doctor

PS! Try not to run too close to the touchline and NEVER into touch..!!! It hands the ball straight to the other team and no matter how good you are you can't score a try when they have the ball..!!!



Ask the Junior Doctor – Summer 2007

Dear Junior Doctor

I start U10 Rugby soon and even though I've been following your advice over the Summer to make sure I'm ready for September I'm still nervous about the changes to the rules for next season... Will I still understand the game and how will I know what to do differently..?

Concerned of Cricklewood

Dear Concerned

Please don't be worried... the changes to the rules for this season are really very simple, frankly speaking, you had much more to learn last year and you managed that brilliantly..! There are three main changes to contend with...

- 1) In the scrum, the three forwards are allowed to 'push' the opposition and try to 'hook' for the ball too. You will need to get in a strong position so that you can push hard and hook well in order to win your own ball, (the other team will take it if they can...)
- 2) In the lineout, two of the forwards are allowed to jump and compete for the ball, so again you will need to jump and be strong in order to keep your own ball, some movement in the lineout is also useful to distract your opposition (the other team will take it if they can...)
- 3) You will be playing with a bigger 'size' 4 ball, (but actually you will hardly notice any difference...)

Your Coach will be working on 1) and 2) in special 'Forwards' training sessions. Nothing else changes... you still CANNOT pass the ball forward, hand off defenders or kick the ball... sorry about that..! This year will be a great season for your big, strong forwards who will no doubt enjoy these rule changes.

Keep up the good work...

The Junior Doctor

PS! A 2-on-1 situation in rugby is like an open-goal in soccer, you should score EVERY TIME. Draw and commit the defender, don't drift sideways, stealing your support player's space, and just time the pass and you will never miss that open-goal.