

## Rugby on the back foot - but have the Lawes gone far enough?

---

Friday, February 22, 2019

When Courtney Lawes charged down that box kick in the dying minutes of the England v New Zealand game last Autumn, every English fan thought their team had snatched a rare victory against the All Blacks. The charge down set up a mesmerising side-step and thrilling try from an unlikely source in flanker Sam Underhill.

But no. As rugby fans are now all too well-accustomed, even when the referee awards a try on the pitch, it is best not to celebrate too early. The TMO checked (and re-checked) the footage and eventually ruled that Lawes was offside. The try was disallowed, and England lost 15-16.

This controversial offside decision divided the rugby community and has attracted much debate.

### Laws after Lawes

In the wake of the Lawes decision and ahead of this year's Six Nations, World Rugby has amended the [Laws of the Game](#) ("Laws").

The change affects Law 15.4, with the definition of offside at a ruck now the hindmost 'point' rather the hindmost 'foot'. The offside line:

*'runs parallel to the goal line through the hindmost point of any ruck participant.'*

Previously, the Laws stated that the offside line:

*'runs parallel to the goal line through the ruck participants' hindmost foot.'*

There is also a subtle change in specifying '**any** ruck participant'. This seeks to clarify that offside at a ruck is determined by the player furthest back on the defensive side. It does not matter whether that player is from the defending or attacking team.

The changes to the definition will make the offside line more distinct for officials and players. There will be no need to assess which defender's foot is furthest back. This can only be a positive step.

### Any impact on the Lawes decision?

However, this amendment does not seem relevant to the Lawes decision.

Law 15.4 is not at play in the Lawes scenario. This is because it was not a ruck. For a ruck to form, '*at least one player from each team are in contact, on their feet and over the ball*'. In November, no English defenders committed to the breakdown after George Ford made the initial tackle.

Therefore, it was Law 14.10 which governed the offside line:

*'Offside lines are created at a tackle when at least one player is on their feet and over the ball, which is on the ground. Each team's offside line runs parallel to the goal line through **the hindmost point of any player in the***

SQUIRE   
PATTON BOGGS

Article By

[Sports & Entertainment - Squire Patton Boggs](#)

[Squire Patton Boggs \(US\) LLP](#)

[Sports Shorts](#) [Entertainment, Art & Sports](#)  
[Global](#)

[New Zealand](#)

[United Kingdom](#)

### ***tackle or on their feet over the ball.***

This is the rule which World Rugby first introduced following the famous 'fox' tactics of Italy against England in the 2017 Six Nations. It creates an offside line at the tackle and prevents teams deliberately non-committing to the ruck to circumvent the offside rule. Ironically, if this Law had not been introduced following the Italian tactics against England in 2017, Lawes would *not* have been offside in November.

Clearly, Law 14.10 already included the term 'hindmost point of any player'. Therefore, this year's amendment to Law 15.4 merely makes the rules surrounding the offside line at the ruck consistent with those already in place at the tackle. The change to Law 15.4 would have made no difference to the Lawes scenario.

### **When is the ball out?**

The more significant element to the Lawes decision concerns the moment the ball is considered out and in open play. Surprisingly, there is little guidance on this in the Laws. Law 15.18 merely says that the ruck ends when the 'ball leaves the ruck'. Law 14.7 says that the tackle ends when 'the ball leaves the tackle area' or when 'a player on their feet from either team gains possession of the ball and moves away or passes or kicks the ball'.

World Rugby published [guidance](#) on this point in May 2014:

*'When a scrum half attempts to retrieve the ball from a ruck, the ball is not out until that player has picked the ball up from the ground.'*

However, World Rugby have not codified this into the Laws. In practice, it seems to be a matter of referee interpretation as to when the ball is out. More clarity and less subjectivity on this point would surely be welcomed.

With the recent push on scrum halves using their feet rather than their hands to position the ball before box-kicking, perhaps the way forward would be to call the ball out as soon as the scrum half touches it with their hands. This would also speed the game up and prevent scrum halves from dummifying and tricking the defensive line into stepping up too early.

### **Conclusion**

While the change to Law 15.4 adds a degree of clarity to the offside line, in reality it merely brings terminology in line. World Rugby could have gone further.

However, in a World Cup year, the governing body might well be cautious not to infringe their own [Bye-Law 5](#) by making any significant alterations to the Laws. The Bye-Law stipulates that there must be, save for certain circumstances, *'at least one year between the commencement of the Law amendments and the scheduled start of the Rugby World Cup Finals'*.

Perhaps World Rugby will provide more clarity after Japan. In the meantime, let's hope that the World Cup is not marred by a contentious offside decision.

© Copyright 2019 Squire Patton Boggs (US) LLP

**Source URL:** <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/rugby-back-foot-have-lawes-gone-far-enough>