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The Hooker and the Scrummage

The Hooker at Scrum-time

Now, when penning this piece, I was wondering if I may get my front-rowers union card revoked for spilling the beans on some of the dark arts! However, it truly is one of the few parts of the game that has a pure one on one battle and long may it stay that way. I'm going to look at some basic techniques and also talk about some of the great players I played with and against and their repertoire, both as hookers and props.

So, setting the agenda, as a hooker I viewed my core role as twofold:

- Win the ball
- Set the height of the scrum

The first point is self evident, but in the modern game there's two ways of doing this- the strike and the drive,. Sadly, the game is erring more to the latter, which takes some skill out of the position. I think the core reason for this is the paucity of back row moves since the detachment rule came in- there's no great need for particular channel ball anymore and I believe the game is poorer for it. The modern method is to feed (normally squint, I have to say!) and then to drive over to win. The drive method is height dependent- you want to be starting from low and use your quads to drive dynamically. As a striker, you'd set leading with your right shoulder, looking to them move to square on as the ball is struck for your subsequent drive. I'd look to get my head on the back of the opposition hooker's neck to use him as almost a pivot for my strike, then move my head down to get under his breastbone and unload dynamically upwards. With the drive method, I'd be a lot squarer, looking to hit hard and drive low to up.

The key person in all of this is my good friend the tight head prop, who'll be trying to get inside his loosehead, possibly using his binding arm to pull the LHP away from his hooker and destabilise binds, and therefore a concerted drive. Or eh may wrap his right arm over the top of the shoulder of the LHP to keep him under. This has the danger that a strong loosehead can use this as a lever to lift his opponent though. I liken our roles as two sides of an arrowhead, pincering and controlling the opposition hooker.



So much of this is about reaction and changing to the game. If your in a weak scrummage, you'll often want to stay as low as you can, folding down. The key here is the setup, I'd want to literally

push my props down as low as possible in the hit (getting the TH to touch the ground before engagement makes this easier !!) so we started low and then had options. Of course in a more dominant scrum, I'd want to be higher so we had the leverage to unfold dynamically drive through and up. A good tip is to think of both the hit and the drive as a Karate punch. Try and punch through the object in question- a yard behind your opponent. This makes the hit hugely dynamic and makes you drive through with great power.

On opposition put in the key word is disruption. I would literally ignore the opposition THP (where one of my shoulders is supposed to bind) and I'd go in hard, with my LHP, straight onto the hooker, thus making the other variant of the arrow head described above., To do this, you need to be much squarer, opened up, leading with your left shoulder, driving up on contact.

In my time I was fortunate to play with some of the best scrummagers around. Talk to any front rower from my era and one name will constantly crop up in the tight head berth- that of Cobus Visagie. He was simply the best scrummager I have ever seen- a walking technique book, and immensely strong in the upper body and technically brilliant. He was all about getting up and in under the breastbone of the hooker and I'd hate to have played against the monster from the High Veldt. His demolition of Welsh International Duncan Jones in Saracens defeat of the Ospreys a few years back was amazing- splitting the Hair Bear out and giving Huw Bennett a torrid time. Julian White was also immense- a real strong man. One of the keys of White was even if he got in a bad position, he'd cope through pure animal strength. A monster in every sense.

On the other side of the scrum, my old mate Nick Popplewell is often forgotten, but he was a master technician who made things comfortable., No fuss, just comfort. Made my life easy and a great man to pack down alongside, in the same way British Lion Tom Smith was. Rarely would you think of Tom as a strong man, but I tell you, there were few that he'd not worked out by the end of a game and almost always came out on top through pure technique, repertoire and guts. Sylvain Marconnet in terms of opponents also would get a mention for being a typically brilliant French powerhouse, one of the most proficient and destructive looseheads around.

Just finishing the props, it would be remiss of me not to mention my good mate Jason Leonard. He was a freak as he was possibly the only player I've played with that was **TECHNICALLY** proficient at either tighthead or loosehead. Jase was a dog. He'd dog it out against anyone as was very resilient. When do you ever see him go backwards? He might not have been the most destructive, but for stability, he was THE man.

The world of hookers is similar- from the powerhouse Steve Thompson to the tricky Ibanez. Thommo was a big unit, and I'd want to stay very low against him during the stroke and then unfold upwards and make him stand up. Easier said than done as he was and still is, immensely powerful. Rafa was slightly different in so far as whilst obviously very strong, he was very intelligent, combinative and he'd try anything to get the upperhand. Even to the point in one game, he deliberately tried to scrum on the other side of me, which totally threw us. When someone does things like that, they can throw you mentally, which means you lose concentration. Rafa was a difficult opponent.

Anyway, I trust by the end of this I still have my Union badge!

My quick recap of the learning points:

Core Role

- Set the agenda of height
- Win the hit and control the hit
- Win the ball



Have a strategy to cope with the different types of hookers you'll come up against.

Above all- enjoy. After all, there's not many men that can honestly say they're a professional hooker, are there?

See you soon,
Munch.

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