

Pads and Helmets: Rugby vs. American Football

By Robert Fawcett

I visited Australia a decade or so ago; a rugby match was on the TV at a local pub. Being one of the few identified Americans in the establishment, it wasn't too surprising that the topic of football (NFL-style American football) eventually came up among my Aussie hosts. Despite my largely failed attempts to convince the crowd that football was every bit as rough as rugby, all I could garner was at best total dismissal, and at worst contempt. The perception outside the U.S. is that American Football is just bastardized rugby with thick padding designed to avoid the physical harm associated with the Union sport. Interestingly, most Americans hold an inverse perception: that rugby is football without the pads, and as such, rugby is perceived as senselessly violent.

The misconceptions between rugby and football are rooted in the belief that football and rugby are similar sports. The truth, however, is far from this, as anyone who's ever played both sports can attest. In rugby, the only collision (i.e., running at speed for the purpose of forcing a player to the ground) is when one has the ball. The other 29 lads on the pitch are there for support. In American football, 21 of the 22 players had better be colliding with someone on every down - at full speed. In football, there is collision while blocking. In rugby, the equivalent is called "obstruction" and is illegal, thus there are far more opportunities - requirements - for player collision in American football.

The styles of tackling are also very different. In rugby, the object is to bring the player to the ground in order to force a turnover. In football, on the other hand, the purpose of tackling is to not yield a single millimeter of turf to the opposition advance. Rugby is largely about possession and football is largely about territory. This creates two immensely differing approaches to tackling.

In rugby, the tackler (ideally) wants to wrap up around the upper legs, and drag the runner to ground. Sooner is better than later, but a few feet doesn't matter much. In football, the tackler prefers a head-on collision, the hard plastic helmet connecting to the opponent's chest; a wrap up around the waist or lower subsequently follows, and then a drive backwards as far as the tackler can go. The ground is the forceful end of a preferably very long trip on an American tackle. Without a helmet, an American football player would not likely live or walk for very long in such a contest. In rugby, a tackler may not grab around the shoulders and neck (at least when the ref is looking). In football, virtually any means of bringing the ball carrier to the ground is legal, so long as the facemask isn't grabbed. This broad interpretation of the tackling rule sets football far apart from its rugby counterpart, and greatly changes the amount of violence with which the objective may be carried out.

In rugby, a runner must absorb the impact of a tackler's flesh-and-bone shoulder and arm along with the variant inertial energy associated with the tackler's speed, mass and angle of attack. In football, a ball-carrier must absorb all these things, plus the impact of a hard, plastic helmet and shoulder pads behind the force of a tackler whose mass is often greater than his rugby counterpart. By the way, there is little protection for most American football players between the sternum and the groin, which happens to comprise the precise target area of a football tackler. Also, the pads are not the soft rubber found in rugby equipment. They are hard, reinforced plastic designed for the purpose of diffusing energy. Wearing football pads gives one a visceral sense of invulnerability that cannot be truly replicated in rugby. Thus, the force used in football tackling tends to be less restrained by the fear of injury, conscious or otherwise. There are plenty of fearless rugby tacklers, but they will rarely throw their careers (and possibly lives) away by running face-first into a head-on collision with a sprinting ball-carrier.

When a rugby player's tackling is imminent, he (hopefully) has someone nearby that the ball can be passed to - granted, this is not a certain way to avoid a tackle, but in theory, it moves play away from him. In football, all play ends when and where the ball runner is crushed - no one passes the ball in American football but the quarterback.

Having played both sports, I can say that while the tackling differs, one method is no less bearable than the other in their respective environs. Crippling injuries or death would occur if someone attempted to use American-style tackling in rugby (I know - I made that foolish mistake in one of my early matches and nearly paid dearly for it). American tackling in rugby may also result in "over-commitment," that is to say, running at so great a speed at the ball-carrier that a successful reaction to a side-step or a reasonably competent pass is impossible (remember, in American football, there is no passing once the ball leaves the line of scrimmage). This lends credence to my theory that while former football players are impressively capable of good hits in rugby, they tend to be vulnerable in getting burned by a smart, experienced backline player.

This is not to say, however, that rugby tackling is "weak." It is not. Within the confines of the laws, it, too, has its own terrible aspect of violence; but one that is appropriate for a bunch of ruggers trying to bring down anyone who has the ball. As a backliner myself, I have both given and received my share of bone-jarring rugby tackles. But I rarely felt the kind of impact I routinely encountered in American football, even when accounting for the pads.

To those who would deride the comparative aggressiveness of American football football, I would say this: you may intelligently criticize only when you have played both sports. My sense of it is that ruggers who have never played a down of football cannot meaningfully comment on the difference between the two sports. The truth of the matter is that if a skeptical rugger were to strap on football armor and play just one half of American Football, they would not hold the same opinion of the sport's violence. Being aggressively flattened a dozen or so times by 25 stone (350 pound) behemoths tends to make one a believer.