

# TOUCH & RUGBY UNION COMPARED



There have been concerns raised in some quarters as to whether playing Touch is beneficial as a training tool for rugby union. Unease about the lack of contact, more lateral running lines and the absence of a need for defenders to commit to the tackle have all been cited as promoting bad habits in rugby players. This paper seeks to address these concerns and highlight the many benefits Touch has to offer to male & female players, junior age groups to senior level, new & experienced players.



Many rugby sides warm up for training with a game of Touch rugby. This tends to be very much on an ad-hoc basis with clubs developing their own variations on a game, and a relaxed attitude towards its refereeing. Standardising the game and adoption and enforcement of the Federation of International Touch (FIT) rules offers improved outcomes from such sessions. As players play more regularly improvements will be visible in terms of intensity, quality of execution of the play and the level of fitness required to play the game.

The presence of a domestic league structure for Touch in Wales offers teams opportunities to compete against others from different clubs, while the timing of the Touch season (early May to end of July) means it fits neatly between the end of the rugby season and the commencement of pre-season training.

The small number of rules, together with the absence of scrums and line-outs means that there are few breaks in a game of Touch. The pace of the game is constantly high demanding good levels of sprint-endurance type fitness. With 6 players on the field at one time, together with the capacity for unlimited substitutions full participation from everyone is required.

The nature of Touch requires attackers to work far harder to manipulate and exploit space. As a crash ball is not an option for breaching defences, attackers are compelled to be more creative and considered in how they engage and move defenders around the field. They are encouraged to adopt a greater level of thought, disguise and improvisation in their passing and running angles. Touch requires players to play with their 'heads up' and read and react to the play around them, improving their decision-making and game-management.

Whilst ball carriers may sometimes run laterally in Touch this is no more frequent than in 15s and should be mixed in with more direct running angles in attempting to engage defenders. The large playing field for a Touch game encourages attackers to maintain their width and use the full extent of the playing surface. This requires good handling skills both in terms of the length and direction of pass, from the hand or off the floor, and the speed and timing of their handling.

In defence, the large playing pitch & few players means large areas to be defended. In order to be successful, defences are required to work and move very much as a unit with constant communication essential. The potentially large gaps between defenders mean that they need to assess situations quickly & close down the space effectively. This is of particular benefit to players such as front five forwards who may be exposed to a mis-match in a game of 15s against outside backs and need to manage the situation successfully.



In addressing one of the specific concerns cited regarding the tackle. While in Tag rugby for instance pulling the strip represents a commitment to the tackle and requires proximity to the ball carrier, a 'tackle' in Touch can theoretically be made by a fingertip at full arms length. Whilst this is true, Touch defenders should always endeavour to align directly in front of the attacker to use their momentum to return into position and avoid becoming offside at the play-the-ball. This potential limitation of course could arguably be viewed as a benefit in necessitating the attacking team to work far harder to create space.



the ball following a tackle and Touch promoting more the distribution of the ball before 'contact'.

While Touch is not an all-encompassing development tool in producing good rugby players, there is no question that it has significant benefits to offer. The improvement in ball handling, fitness and vision for rugby players who have played touch is proven and the team building aspects, especially communication, can have an impact across the field. For these reasons it should sit alongside other forms of rugby as one of the portfolio of forms of the game available to coaches and players in improving their skills set. The game of Touch has significant strength in the southern hemisphere as well as the south sea islands, and it is no coincidence that these nations are the greatest exponents of the open field skills on a rugby field.

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## PLAYING TOUCH – AN OVERVIEW

The aim of the game is to score a touchdown by moving the ball towards the opponent's goaline. You do this by running forwards and passing or handing the ball backwards to a team-mate. No kicking is allowed.

The opposition attempts to prevent scoring or gaining a territorial advantage by touching the ball carrier. After a touch has been affected, the player in possession is required to stop, return to the mark where the touch occurred if the mark has been over-run, and perform a Rollball without delay.

The team in possession of the ball has six touches to score a try. After the sixth touch, if a try has not been scored, or if there has been an infringement, the ball is handed to the opposition.

## UNDERSTANDING THE GAME – THE BASICS

**Touch** is contact on any part of the body, with one or two hands, between a player in possession of the ball and a defending player. A touch includes contact on the ball, hair or clothing. Either defending or attacking players may initiate the touch. Players of both defending and attacking teams are to use the minimum force necessary to affect the touch. Passing after the touch is a penalty infringement.

**The Rollball** is affected by the attacking player positioning at the point of touch (ie no over-running), facing the defenders scoreline, standing parallel to the sidelines, placing the ball firmly on the ground and rolling the ball backwards along the ground between their feet for a distance no more than 1 metre. The defending team must retreat 5 metres from the point of rollball.

**Dummy Half** is the player who takes possession of the ball immediately after each rollball. The dummy half must avoid being touched in possession of the ball. The dummy half can cross the goal line but cannot score.

**Offside** for an attacking player means in a position forward of another attacking player who has possession or who last had possession of the ball, and for a defending player who has not retreated the required 5 meters from a rollball or 10 meters from a penalty.

**Team composition** can be up to a maximum of 14 players with 6 on the pitch at any one time. Unlimited substitutions at any time from the designated interchange areas. Teams of between 8-10 players encourages maximum participation.

**A touchdown** is awarded when an attacking player grounds the ball on or over the try-line. A touchdown is worth 1 point. Players may dive to score. Dummy half cannot score. No forward passes in the try zone.

**Footwear** to be moulded sole boots or plastic blades. No screw in studs. **Ball size:** Size 4 (Seniors). Size 3 or 4 (Juniors).

## TOUCH REFEREE RULINGS

**Change of possession:** play starts with a rollball

Ball to ground.

Dummy half touched in possession.

Dummy half scores a try.

Sixth touch.

Ball in touch.

Incorrect rollball

Incorrect tap

**Penalty Infringements:** play starts with a tap

Forward pass

Touch and pass

Rollball off the mark

Performing a rollball prior to touch

Defenders offside at tap or rollball

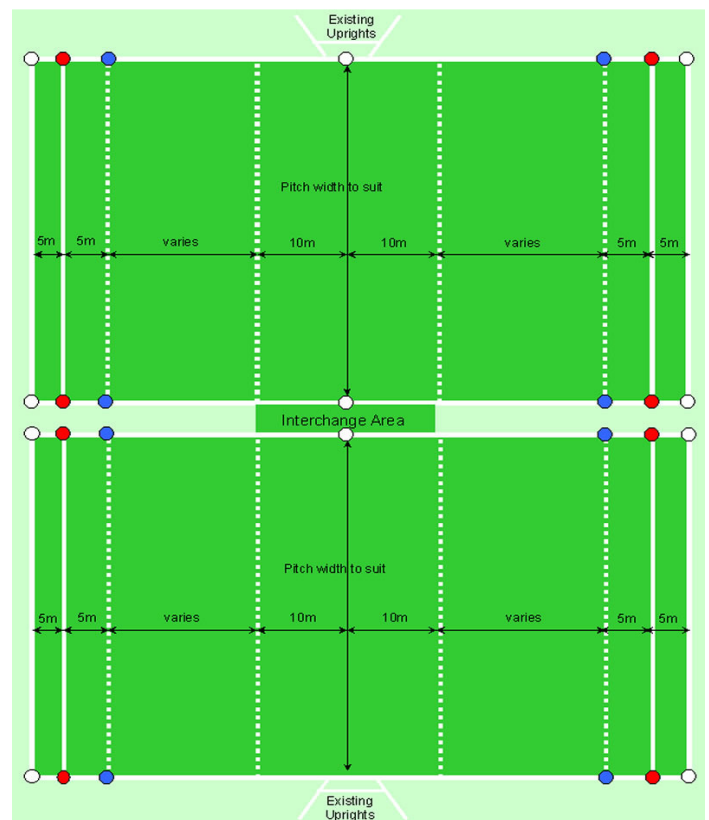
Obstruction or shepherding

Excessive force when making a touch

Incorrect substitution

More than 6 players on the field

Misconduct (sin bin or sending off may be used if serious)



**Pitch Dimensions** normally across half a rugby field (50-70m x 35-50m)  
Cones: Red – try line; Blue – 5m line; White – halfway & deadball