

Why is the scrum always gone?

[Robert Culshaw](#) reflects on how changes to the game in the last two decades have damaged the current state of rugby league

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Having been born and brought up in Wigan, home of the most successful club in the history of the British game, rugby league football has always been a part of my life and, I feel, is something that defines my identity. However, certain aspects of the modern game of rugby league leave myself, a self-confessed traditionalist, slightly lost.

Writing in 1989, rugby league historian Robert Gate prophesied about the game in the years to come; Gate believed that by the year 2000 the scrum will have become 'logically,' extinct and that the RFL Championship will have been replaced by a financial based 'British Super League'. From 1996 Gate's prophecy has begun to come true. Super League and its exclusive broadcasting rights replaced the RFL Championship that had existed since the since the birth of rugby league in 1895.

Along with the new league came the switch from a winter season to a summer season, and what I feel was the start of decline in true rugby league. Skills and techniques honed over years of winter competition were no longer relevant, as the game transformed into a summer sport.

Super League brought other changes to rugby league, all intended to create a better viewing experience. As the Rugby League attempted to create a faster paced game, many rules were put in place to 'tidy up,' aspects of play. Striking, by the marking player at the play the ball, a tactic used to a great extent by the prolific Australian prop Ian Roberts, was banned in 1996. However minimal this change may seem, repercussions of this can be seen in the modern game. The threat of a strike at the play the ball, meant the ball had to be played properly, heeled back with the foot and protected by walking forward, however without the threat of a devious strike at the ball the play the ball has become a quicker movement, one that for me is annoyingly messy. In almost every Super League match you will see players rolling the ball back quickly without using their foot, and the apathetic attitudes of referees towards an offence that should be penalised does not help the situation.

Referee apathy is, in my opinion, a factor that has changed the face of the game forever, as it is without a

doubt that referee indifference to rule breaking that has led to the rugby league scrum becoming what it is today. When introducing my 'rugger' friends to the game, I get tired of explaining the scrum. As far as the laws of the game are concerned, they still call for contested scrums, with the ball fed down the tunnel between the front rows, however, feeding the ball into the second row became a prevalent offence of scrum-halves from the late 1980s, becoming so widespread that referees stopped enforcing the rules, simply to save frustration and time.

Ridiculed by many, the modern, loosely packed (by any combination of players, not just forwards,) sham of a scrum is nothing compared to how it used to be. Great steaming packs of forwards coming together, hookers squatting and striking for the ball with the whole crowd anticipating the outcome of the scrum, as a win against the head and feed could turn a game on its head - alas no more. Even more sadly, young rugby league players today see the scrum as something not to be taken seriously, fair enough seeing as they do not have professional role models. For example it is only, in my opinion the greatly underrated, hooker Matt Ballin of Manly-Warringah who retains the hooker's squat in the scrums. And when it comes to the scrums of Super League, seeing the 5'5" Leeds Rhinos halfback Rob Burrow packing in the front row is hardly inspiration to bind tightly and correctly.

As the 18th season of Super League is well underway, I struggle to think of what changes lay ahead for rugby league. The game has developed to become faster, and more fluid, but this has happened at the expense of traditional aspects of the game that are being forgotten about.

Moreover, the history of rugby league seems to have been buried as the young amateurs pursuing the sport for the first time are lead to believe that rugby league began in 1996, that scrums are nothing but a breather and that the Australians are always going to be better.

This sport is still something close to my heart, and something that will continue to be for the rest of my life; I just feel that we must not be ignorant of the past of this great sport. Rather we need to acknowledge what made, and continues to make, the sport of rugby league football the greatest sport on the earth.



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