

A Rethink on Advantage

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By Tony Kean, Editor of REFEREE Newsletter, New Zealand. Volume 12, No. 2, December 2002.

In a rugby world that demands consistency from referees it is no surprise Advantage Law interpretations regularly come under fire. Perhaps a rethink in our approach to the Advantage would be good for the game.

Law 8 - Advantage is one of the corner-stones of the modern game of rugby. It is considered to be a referee's best tool to reduce whistle, and as such it is generally utilised as much as possible. It overrules virtually every other Law, and the referee has wider discretion than with any other Law when making advantage decisions.

The problem is our current interpretation of the Advantage Law is flawed! It's only slightly flawed, but nevertheless it's flawed. Let me explain...

Advantage Law Problems

Under current Advantage interpretations we end up contradicting many ideals for the modern game of rugby...

Confusion - The word "Advantage" implies the non-offending team must get some superiority following an offence. But does that mean advantage from the situation of the offence, or advantage over and above the potential penalty gain?.

Inconsistency - because there are no hard and fast guidelines for when advantage is over we end up with many inconsistencies during a game and between referees, which are confusing for all.

"Nothing" penalties - how often do we play Advantage from an infringement that doesn't really affect the game, then are forced to come back for the penalty because of a teams inability to capitalise? Is this the definition of pedantic reffing?

Contradictory penalties - one side effect of the "talking" referee is that we often contradict ourselves through the Advantage Law. Eg: a player offends but stops when told to by the ref, who then plays advantage and ends up coming back for the penalty. Can we justify penalising a player for following instructions?

Negative play (milking the penalty) - In many situations teams prefer to have a penalty kick rather than run an advantage play - and for good reason. So they run the ball for a phase or two, then if nothing happens they milk the penalty - usually through an aimless kick or dropkick attempt - knowing they will come back for the penalty if it misses.

Surely the game would be better served if the non-offenders got the penalty straight away to avoid wasting time and energy, or advantage is judged over very quickly to promote more positive play.

Advantage Law Clarified

The Advantage Law wording has changed recently. It used to read something like...

"An Advantage must be either territorial or such possession of the ball as constitutes an obvious tactical advantage. A mere opportunity to gain advantage is not sufficient."

Then a couple of years ago the IRB changed the wording of the Advantage Law to better clarify both territorial and tactical advantage. Now it reads...

"Advantage can be either territorial or tactical. Territorial advantage means a gain in ground. Tactical advantage means freedom for the non-offending team to play the ball as they wish."

It is this definition of tactical advantage that is important, and is what I believe referees are overlooking. We still seem to be interpreting Advantage using the old Law definition and not making use of the benefits this new wording brings.

Using tactical advantage this way, immediately following an offence, if the non-offending team has possession of the ball and is freely able to pass, kick or run with it, Advantage has been gained. In addition, use of Advantage should reflect the extent the non-offending team is disadvantaged by an offence.

The Disadvantage Principle

The key factor here is to wait before playing Advantage to give yourself time to assess the outcome and whether or not the non-offenders were disadvantaged enough to warrant penalty. The Disadvantage Principle has 3 levels... Level 1 is where the non-offending team is in no way disadvantaged. For example, Team A knocks the ball on, Team B picks it up and kicks ahead. Or a Team A player is standing up off side on the blind side of a ruck, but Team B moves the ball to the open side. In both situations Team A has offended, but because Team B was not disadvantaged there is no need to play Advantage.

Using the Law definition, the non-offending team was immediately free to play the ball as they wish, so tactical advantage has been gained.

Level 3 is where the non-offending team is so disadvantaged that they are unable to play the ball as they wish. An example would be where Team A knocks the ball on and regathers it themselves, denying Team B possession. Or the Team A player standing offside tackles the Team B ball carrier as they run the blind side. In these situations there is no reason to play Advantage and the referee should immediately halt play.

You might argue in the latter example that the referee could still play advantage in the hope Team B retains the ball and uses it effectively - but why bother? Team B's initial attack was halted due to a blatant offence which deserves to be penalised immediately.

And obviously you should not play advantage on foul play or the standard non-advantage situations.

Level 2 is the intermediate situation, where the non-offending team is slightly disadvantaged or has the potential to be disadvantaged through an offence by the opposition. An example would be when Team A knocks the ball on, Team B picks up and is tackled. Or the off-side Team A player puts pressure on the ball carrier as he attempts to run, pass or kick.

In these situations you would play Advantage for a couple of phases only, just to assess the outcome. If the ball is available from the tackle for Team B, or the pressure applied does not prevent Team B from using the ball as they wish, call "Advantage Over" and play on. If Team B is not able to secure the ball cleanly, award them a scrum. Or if the offside player forces the ball carrier into making a poor pass or kick, penalise him.

If you think about it, this disadvantage principle can apply to every general incident in the game. It will eliminate "nothing" and contradictory penalties, while making use of Advantage more consistent across the board. Most importantly it will put a halt to "milking penalties" and "double-dipping" by the simple fact that as soon as the non-offending team kicks the ball they have chosen to use the ball as they wish, so their Advantage is effectively over.

Likely Problems with this System

This approach may not go down well under the current assessment systems we have, where a referee's performance is marked on how well he polices offences. The current approach clashes with a system where offences can be ignored if they do not disadvantage the opposition.

Three main arguments will likely be...

1. What about situations where an offence restricts a player's options? Despite what you have been told, this doesn't actually happen. A player's options to run, pass or kick are never restricted, it's just that by choosing one of these options an offending opposition player could be brought into the action.

Under this system, Advantage should only be played if and when the offender actually offends - so you can gauge the extent to which the opposition has been disadvantaged.

Don't forget that you, as referee, often have some time between when a player breaks the rules and when they disadvantage the opposition. Use this time to talk to players to prevent that offence from affecting the game.

2. Slowing down the ball recycle.

Here you have to make a judgment decision on whether the speed of the recycling makes a difference. For example, if the offence occurs following a break and is clearly aimed at giving time to reset a defence, either penalise straight away or play advantage over a short phase of attack to see if the non-offenders can capitalise. If the offence occurs when the attackers are not looking for fast turnover then they haven't really been disadvantaged so play on.

3. What about repeated Level 1 infringements?

Continuous offences, even if they are not disadvantaging the opposition, can ruin the shape of a game - and you'll likely cop a lot of stick from the sideline. In most cases a penalty should not be given until the offence does actually disadvantage. But if the player ignores warnings from the referee then it may be necessary to penalise. Again, there is often an opportunity for the referee to talk to players and give warnings before handing out penalties.

The Proof is in the Pudding

This interpretation of Advantage Law has been successful for me in several ways. Most importantly, it has allowed me to be more confident in my decision making and has encouraged players to be more positive. This is how I referee now. I challenge you to try it.