

RUGBY

THE **ART** OF **SCRUMMAGING**



Enrique TOPO Rodríguez



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THE AUTHOR



Enrique TOPO Rodríguez is an Argentina-born rugby union player. He started playing for the Universidad Nacional of Cordoba RC in 1971. Internationally, he started for Argentina and Australia, representing the Wallabies at the Rugby World Cup in 1987. He also played as a guest for Tahiti. TOPO played tighthead prop, loosehead prop and hooker. He was known for his hard play and excellent scrummaging technique. He retired from rugby in 1992.

Rugby–The ART of SCRUMMAGING

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Please note: For reasons of readability this book is written in the male speech form. Any references to trainers and participants of course include men and women.



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Enrique TOPO Rodríguez

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FIRST SECTION

TOPO's introduction and explanation

Rugby—The ART of SCRUMMAGING was originally published in Sydney in August 2012 and quite obviously didn't cover the new scrum engagement sequence changes that were introduced in 2013.

One of the most significant characteristics of those changes was the elimination of the noxious and dangerous hit on engagement, prior to the put-in of the ball. The introduction of the pre-bind engagement by the IRB took place in early April 2013 during a South Pacific competition and trial matches played between teams of Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Samoa and Tonga. These new changes and modifications were adopted for official trial in September 2013 for the Rugby Championship (Southern Hemisphere) and soon after in the European Premier Rugby Championships.

The amazing thing with the hit was that neither the law book nor the coaching manuals ever refer to such a maneuver or tactic. This means that it developed on its own out of competitiveness at the high international levels as a way of circumventing the law or other restrictions imposed by referees.

This is not new as the scrum has been adapting and morphing through hundreds of years whether the referees like it or not. I will weigh in on over-officiating which on one hand may prevent accidents but on the other are killing fun, initiative and creativity. Today we are no longer watching just a sport; we are watching a business, an entertainment and lastly, a sport.

In my opinion the priorities, particularly on the part of rugby management, have dramatically changed and are affecting the final product we receive in the stands on the field or at home on TV.

Therefore *Rugby—The ART of SCRUMMAGING* will cover the developments regarding the rugby scrum and its law since late 2012 onwards. Plenty of controversy, myths and contradictions have already developed, so I will endeavor to cover those points as much as possible in *Rugby—The ART of SCRUMMAGING*.

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In any case, it would be wise and strongly recommended to consult with your own doctor in case you have or may have developed a medical condition or are taking medication, or have any other concern that may interfere with your health.

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Acknowledgements

Crossing over to psychology in a book about scrummaging has raised a few eyebrows. However, I’ve always been a firm believer of mind over matter. Many thanks to Michael N. Fox, Steve D. Mellalieu, and Peter C. Terry for sharing your invaluable insights and helping rugby people to improve their scrummaging regardless of position or area of responsibility. The selfless contribution and artistry of my daughter, Victoria I. Rodriguez, that has made this book so much easier for everyone to read—whether neophytes, aficionados, or professionals—can never be underestimated. Thank you, Victoria.

The original version of *The ART of SCRUMMAGING* published in August 2012 could never have been undertaken without the professional expertise of my consultant and writer R.J.P. Marks, my editor Peter Fenton, OAM, and my coordinator R.V. Turnbull. All have a lifetime involvement in rugby and have provided their time and skills with the desire of improving the game that they value so much. The same applies to the many expert collaborators who, with their personal comments, have added invaluable insights to the final chapter.

My message to family and friends

I would like to give a special thank you to my father, Enrique Nuri Rodriguez, and my mother, Lidia Josefa Basi, not only for bringing me into this crazy world but also for never showing me the easy shortcuts of life.

Throughout the last 50 years or so I have gathered many friends, both in Argentina and Australia. I can't begin naming you all because I may either unjustly forget some of you or even run out of space. Many have been guiding beacons to follow and others have been much cherished emotional company. Some, as mentioned throughout chapter 1 definitely have been and continue to be a source of inspiration and motivation in both good and bad times for me. Life after rugby has been a colourful rollercoaster ride at best, a bit rough, lean and disheartening at times, but definitely invigorating and worth sticking around for. Through good times and bad I've always received the support of sincere and generous friends. You know well who you are, and I am indebted to you forever!

I learned not so long ago that when I receive any form of help, I chain up my ego; I accept whatever help is offered; and I pay it forward and, if possible, increase it two-fold! I have learned that those three steps are a very important part of the universal circle of gratitude.

In a household of five siblings we were quite often told: "It has to be done" and "It is up to you." We had to find our own way. A sense of responsibility was ever present in the air and any sense of indulgence or complacency seemed to have been stamped out (perhaps at birth). Although during our infancy and adolescence we rarely went without a meal or clothes, everything was measured and we had to endure several tough financial times.

Our family started in Concordia, Entre Rios (Argentina) with Liliana Maria, Enrique Edgardo, Silvina Iris, and Eugenio Daniel. Around 1960, we moved to Cordoba in Cordoba Province where Melisa Nuria was born completing the Rodriguez quintet.

A big thank you goes to all of you because each one contributed in different measures and areas in my formative years and to the development of this rare clan sense. We all had to pull together in order to get through, and so we did.

To my family and friends, and so to all of you, I extend my eternal gratitude from the bottom of my heart and I ask providence for the health to continue producing whatever

I can produce; a good dose of perseverance to continue assisting people in whichever way possible.

Thank You!

Enrique TOPO Rodriguez

New life in Sydney

After arriving in Sydney in 1984 with my ex-wife Ines and children Victoria and Ignacio, the four of us practiced teamwork, helping each other at all times, and we made things work.

As immigrants, we had to make tremendous efforts to adjust to a new country with many new things and to demonstrate that we are worthy candidates for anything. And so we did! Victoria and Ignacio are two wonderful professionals, gainfully employed and contributing to this wonderful country. This was our number one reason for coming to Australia back in 1984!

And another new story begins

In 1982 in Cordoba I started to wonder about the pros and cons of playing a season or two in France. However, the conditions weren't right for the four of us so we decided to wait until a better opportunity came. A year after, during the Argentine Pumas' tour of Australia in the winter of 1983, I came to appreciate this country, its people, and its climate and saw the enormous potential for a growing family. We soon decided it was a good time to move to Sydney just for a season or two as we never contemplated full migration. Thanks to Warringah RC I had the opportunity to play for them for seven years and our family lived happily in Newport, Mona Vale and Cromer. Contrary to popular belief, I came to Australia without a job, without a contract and without any money being paid to me to play! Those were very different times compared with today's rugby.

We were very happy with our permanent resident visa status and the one-way ticket to Sydney both of which were organized by the club. Mind you it took us four full days to

travel: Buenos Aires – Iguazu Falls – Rio de Janeiro – Miami – Los Angeles – Tokyo – Sydney. By the end of 1984 and having played eight tests with the Wallabies, my fate was more or less sealed with the Ockers.

My original reason for writing this book was always to share experiences and knowledge acquired as a player and coach and through time spent studying the scrummaging subject. This process has invariably involved the contribution of many teammates and coaches through the years. We must remember that scrummaging involves teamwork at its best, something which I am immensely grateful for and very proud of too.

Sharing the contents of *Rugby—The ART of SCRUMMAGING* with other players, coaches and aficionados will also help me avoid taking these secrets to my grave. I sincerely hope that the collection of opinions expressed by this book will receive the full attention of the rugby world, and that they are accepted as a small contribution toward the big discussion currently taking place which aims to solve the global conundrum the scrum has faced for the past eight years. It is also my desire to become involved in an active semi-retirement capacity spreading the gospel where needed.

To my own family, even though circumstances changed through life, since our arrival to Australia, it is very important for me to acknowledge the part you all have played in my life and the realization of *Rugby—The ART of SCRUMMAGING*, 17 years in the making.

The good oil

By Peter Fenton OAM—INTRODUCTION by TOPO

Blokes' bloke, rugby man extraordinaire, scrum and sports poet, editor, and collaborator, Peter 'Fab' Fenton has coached Parramatta R.C. (Sydney) to a First Grade premiership victory, as well as the Sydney representative team to wins over several international sides. In my 30 years in Australia I've been blessed with his friendship and companionship whether as a coach or even a luncheon companion and have shared many belly laughs over his jokes and anecdotes. Having him as an editor and advisor to *Rugby—The ART of SCRUMMAGING* was a great asset and wonderful experience. His comments, opinions and insights have invariably thrown the proverbial light into quite a few tricky situations. Fab, my full gratitude to you.

Let's hear it from Fab

One thing that is extremely clear to me is that a very large number of people have become progressively disenchanted with the modern scrum despite how much time is taken trying to perfect it. I am sure we all know avid supporters who feel this way along with those who no longer attend top level games as they once did. To deny this is folly. Yes, it is convenient to watch on a big flat screen with a bottle of red, but large TVs are not new, nor is red wine. The magic of being at the game, feeling the excitement created by a boisterous crowd, and being part of the ambience of a thrilling sporting contest is not as appealing as it was.

There are too many stoppages, too many occasions where the ball is not cleared and result in melee behind where it was set. There are too many collapsed scrums, too many penalties. Worst of all, however, there are too many penalties for reasons neither seen nor understood by the spectators. If you go to a motion picture and don't understand the plot, an all-star cast will not save the film. This is what we have at scrum time in rugby matches continually around the world.

Positive, not negative, play should always be rewarded. The laws should encourage this. Remember a few seasons back when half backs constantly baulked to pass from the base of the scrum or ruck in order to get an offside penalty? How much better off did we become immediately when we decided to penalise the baulker? Now nobody baulks and the game goes on. I also believe the leniency given defending half backs while harassing the opposite number has increased alarmingly. Defending half backs are literally climbing into the opposing pack.

TOPO's insistence that a positive attitude from players themselves is essential and must be encouraged by coaches is spot on. Of course this positive play should be legal. Allowing crooked feeds because they allow the game to flow is a cop-out that leads to more problems as so many point out. One thing often mentioned is that the art of hooking has been lost. How could you disagree with that?

If the ball was thrown along the middle line and the defending team had a chance of snaring the occasional tight head, it would soon reappear and a natural depowering of the scrum would come with it. One astute contributor suggests the hooker should now be termed the thrower as he does actually throw in and no longer hooks. Promises made that referees would clamp down on crooked scrum feeds during the recent World Cup did not eventuate.

The fact that collaborators share differing views adds considerably to this book's merit. There are many possibilities in tactics and techniques that are dependent on the level of competition, together with the physical makeup and capabilities of the players and adventurous coaches.

Where do we go from here? Hopefully neither lawmakers nor referees will misunderstand the purpose of this book. Mind you, since referees have had so much input into the scrum there have never been so many problems. England and British and Irish Lions captain Martin Johnson's comment after a recent Six Nations game cannot be ignored: "What we had at Murrayfield was a game of rugby trying to break out between scrums." If this quote had come from David Campese we might have understood his frustration, but not from Johnson.

Both the writers and collaborators agree the players must be given, and must take, more responsibility for the safe setting of the scrum. Yes, safety is paramount, a fact realised and fully appreciated by the writers. Yet the groundswell of opinion doubting the safety of crouch-touch-pause-engage is so strong that it surely cannot be dismissed out of hand. If this much maligned engagement sequence is not making things safer, it is impossible to understand why it has any value at all.

The scrum is recognised by many as the single most important part of the game. It sets the scene for so much that follows. Without it there is no rugby as we know it, and there is a real fear that some are in favour of its elimination. We must treasure it, respect it, practise it and fix it. I was asked to write some simple verse to open this book and another one at the end. In this book version you have both together. Enjoy it!

Two very unique scrum poems

*"The rugby scrum is quite unique,
depending not on pure physique.
Here courage, strength and rare technique,
produce a world of grand mystique.
Its artisans might justly claim,
the rugby scrum defines the game."*

*"If you've never been in a rugby scrum
You've played in a band without a drum
You've been on the hunt but fired no shot
You've ridden a ferry but never a yacht.
You lift your weights but you just don't sweat
You live by the course but don't have a bet
You eat your steak without red wine
You've never quite got to the front of the line.
But to those who revere this wonderful craft
You're in the top bar with the host's best draught."*



CHAPTER 2



Foreword



FOREWORD

By Phil Keith-Roach

Congratulations TOPO, another masterpiece to follow your original version of *The Art of Scrummaging* (published 2012).

Whether for players, coaches, referees, spectators, or law makers, your work gives a special insight into the world of the scrummager.

TOPO was an outstanding Argentine/Australian loose head prop who has also played the other two positions in the front row. In this book he not only covers techniques, scrummaging styles, and preparation but he also gives some significant suggestions and recommendations as to where the law makers could go next, should the ongoing dissatisfaction with the elite scrum continue through the Rugby World Cup 2015. In his 40-year career as prop, coach, and now author TOPO has never lost his focus on: i) organized and disciplined scrummaging; and ii) professional preparation, which is so vital these days.

Our paths crossed a few times in our rugby careers; in 1978 he was part of the Argentine Pumas team that played London Division at Twickenham. Then, after immigrating to Australia with his family in 1984, TOPO was selected for the 8th Wallabies who toured the UK and Ireland. It was then that Coach Alan Jones opted to trial our Rhino Powerhouse scrum machine for the duration of the tour. We followed their 18 match Grand Slam tour to every training venue with the giant roller machine. And the Australian success at scrum time proved to be the bedrock of their unparalleled playing achievement.

TOPO was already a renowned international scrummager prior to his arrival in Australia with unique inside knowledge of the famous Argentine coordinated shove system tradition, equivalent to the 8 men shove also known as 'la bajadita' (Spanish for lowering the scrum). With his experience, age, and wisdom he quickly became the natural leader of an otherwise youthful Wallaby scrum which developed into perhaps the most efficient and powerful unit the Australians have ever fielded. Moreover, this forward domination

greatly helped their very talented backline which enjoyed front-foot-possession most of the time, thus allowing them to display their brilliance as we got to see then.

TOPO brought timing and discipline to this particular band of men particularly in the scrum. His efforts paid off and how fortunate we are he's still here today dispensing his invaluable words of wisdom in his latest publication. Maybe this time World Rugby and the ARU will take note.

Curriculum Vitae

FULL NAME:	Philip Keith-Roach
BORN:	11/08/1943
EDUCATED:	St Luke's College Exeter and Pembroke College Cambridge
TEACHING:	Trinity School Croydon (1966-1968) and Dulwich College (1973-1996)
RUGBY PLAYER:	Hooker (1962-1984) Cambridge University, Gloucester Rosslyn Park London Division, England Reserve Hooker
PROFESSIONAL COACHING:	Scrummaging Coach – Wasps RFC (1996-2000) England Scrum Coach (1996-2007) Sale Sharks (2005-2010) Russia RU(2011) Stade Francais (2013 onwards)
TEAM ACHIEVEMENTS:	England 2003 Rugby World Cup Champions 2003, 2001, 2000, 1996 Five Nations Champions Sale Sharks Premiership Champions 2006. Wasps RFC Tetley Bitter Cup winners 1997 and 1998 Premiership Champions 1996 and 2000

CHAPTER 3

