

Capturing Rugby Union demands precision and quick reflexes for camera operators

Tim Moses, Freelance Cameraman and Camera Supervisor talks about the challenges shooting Rugby Union and takes us through the specific cameras positioned around the pitch.

By Tim Moses

I enjoy my rugby, so I feel pretty fortunate that shooting rugby union matches has been my regular winter work for the last decade or so, as do most of the regulars. The kit is very much standard Sport OBs equipment. Cameras are Sony 3500s & 4300s or Grass Valley LDX86s using Canon or Fuji, 14:1, 22:1 or 86:1 zoom lenses.

As with any live sports OB, the cutting between the cameras can be very fast paced, and each camera is normally also recorded, continuously in isolation.

All camera operators listen to the director on production talk back, plus the referee's mic and commentators enabling us to quickly offer shots to illustrate the commentary. Consequently, three or four hours of build-up, match and post-match often flies by.

The placement of the main cameras, camera 1 (wide play), camera 2 (tight play), camera 3 (main close-up) and the High Behind would be very similar to a football match, but beyond that the coverage differs.

At a football stadium, many of the additional cameras are clustered around the action areas, such as the goal mouths, whereas for rugby, most tries are scored in the corners.

It is now common to place a camera in each of the four corners. In fact, those cameras are often stipulated in the tournament's contract with the broadcaster, to assist with Television Match Officials (TMO, or Video Ref) decisions. As all cameras are recorded, the TMO has access to multiple angles to adjudicate infringements in scrums, rucks, mauls and jacklers over the ball etc.

Unlike football, the majority of rugby matches are rigged, shot and de-rigged in one day, unless the match is in a big international stadium.

Fortunately, most of the big lenses are at ground level and the stadia tend to be smaller with more accessible camera positions.

In a reasonably resourced live club game, the following camera plan is typical.

Camera 1 - Wide Play, which can be half the pitch if the ball is being kicked back and for from deep, but usually it's most of the staggered back line of attacking players to the opposing flat defensive line. This framing can seem counter-intuitive, with negative looking room, but as an operator, you are always thinking what does the viewer want to see, and what is likely to happen next. When the ref blows for a penalty, for example, it's good if camera 1

then pre-frames to include the ball and the posts for the next shot, so the viewer can judge if a kick at goal is an option.

Camera 2 follows tight play. Scrums, line outs, rucks and mauls and when the ball is in play, the ball carrier plus the players immediately around him.

"Follow the ball at all times," says Steve Bulmer, ITV's rugby camera supervisor "unless the ball is kicked, then force the cut, but stay with the kicker for a beat in case there is a late tackle, before going on to cover the catch."

And keep an eye on the referee. The rules of rugby can be very technical and the referee's decisions have a large bearing on the game. So, when the whistle is blown to stop play you may need to adjust the framing slightly to include the ref.

Camera 3 follows the ball carrier, most of the time and is sometimes cut to live during tight play. Camera 3 is the main close up camera, covering try scorer or the person of interest. In effect, the story. Slightly above ground level, is an ideal position, sometimes on a permanent platform above the tunnel.

Ryghi Pawb - Four camera coverage:

A highlights match can be covered by one camera, of course, but for a decent package, four cameras would be a good start. Ryghi Pawb, features highlights of college games in Wales for S4C, using a compact four camera OB.

Camera Supervisor, Richard Bartley explains how it works.

"Camera 1 does conventional coverage but needs to be usable at all times, sometimes playing it tighter as Camera 2 is fulfilling both the Camera 2 and Camera 3 roles. Two handheld cameras cover the near left and right touchline, paying particular attention to the near corners to offer tries scored in those areas. These cameras also cover team arrivals, dressing room sweeps, interviews and presentation. An alternative, is for the handhelds to operate at the near side corners on a tripod with a monocular VF, so that they can quickly revert to handheld mode when necessary. It is a challenge, but enjoyable when it all comes together. It's a lovely working environment with plenty of banter."

Camera 4, is the secondary close up and to get the best results, particularly relies on the editorial instincts of the operator, so it can be a really satisfying camera to work on. Camera 4 expert Jon Bird, says cameras 3 and 4 have a symbiotic relationship. Camera



'Kelly Watters checking out the camera 3 position ahead of Ireland v Scotland, Paris 2023.'



'Tim Moses (Camera 1), Frances Nic Rhuaidri (Camera 2) & Cathal O Huallachain (Camera 4) before the Wales v Fiji match in Bordeaux, World Cup 2023.'

FRANCES NIC RHUAIÐRI

3 covers the king, camera 4 the king maker or the villain or the unfortunate player who has made a critical error. Camera 3 and 4 usually have each other's feeds in their 2ed return. If there is a cross field kick, for example, what can work really well is if camera 4 remains with the kicker. If the play leads to a score, there is often a big reaction from the kicker which makes a great replay. On lower budget specs when there is no camera 4, the corner camera will ideally be backing up on the camera 4 role.

Cameras 5 and 6. The touchline radio handheld cameras. These guys are the work horses of the crew and often get fantastic shots, being so nimble and close to the action. After shooting team arrivals, they are on the pitch for pre-match warmups and pieces to camera, post-match celebrations and on occasions, on the pitch, picking up close ups the scorers, immediately after a try. They are utilised heavily for live action during the match when the play is hugging

the touch line. These shots are often assumed to be steadicam.

Carrying the camera underarm is physically demanding and does take it's toll on the body. Camera 5 stalwart Chris Routledge, keeps himself in condition by booking regular sports massages. Chris adds: "Once you get over the physical aspect of the camera it can be incredibly rewarding, offering creativity and dynamism unavailable to static cameras. Multiple games can take its toll physically but once you're able to read the game and be a few steps ahead it becomes more manageable. Except in the rain. It's brutal in the rain."

These knights of RF, don't get paid more than the rest of the crew, but we try to compensate them by giving them a later call time, coming in after the rig.

Cameras 7, 8, 9 and 10. The corner cameras are positioned just inside the corner flag, with a sightline down the touchline so that any stray feet in touch can be spotted.

These cover the ball carrier in long shot, sometimes tighter, if a player is making a break towards them. But this can be risky if a replay of a low tackle, out of shot, is missed. These cameras are now usually cut to live when there is a try in their corner, which I think looks great, as cameras close to the action really showcases the intensity of the sport. There was some debate when the corner live cut was introduced, as some felt this was crossing the line, but my feeling is the viewer is sophisticated enough to recognise that the match is covered from cameras in multiple positions.

During the many stoppages in play, the corner cameras are used as additional close-up cameras, picking up tight shots of players faces, which could otherwise be obscured from the gantry. During these lulls in play, the players can be looking in any direction, so geography is not really an issue for close ups and these shots often look better from ground level anyway. The corner

cameras are also ideally placed to pick up close ups of coaches and notable faces in the crowd. When the ball is in play in your quadrant, however, you need to be on it, as nobody wants to miss a try and the TMO is also relying on your angle if any clarification is needed.

Pro Deux - Seven camera coverage: French club rugby is buzzing at the moment and some second tier Pro Deux matches are broadcast live, with a reduced spec to that of the French Top 14 coverage. Seven cameras are used, Cameras 1 and 2, a near side handheld and four corner cameras, two of which have big lenses.

Camera 11, reverse cabled handheld camera. This is a busy camera. As well as

fulfilling a similar role on the far touchline as cameras 5 and 6, it also has multiple cable drops for commitments pre and post-match. These include team arrivals, dressing room sweeps, teams out of the tunnel and pre and post-match interviews.

Camera 12, The High Behind. Cut to live for set ups and kicks and often one of the first replays, due to its unique angle. The coverage is fairly wide, showing most of the back line so the viewers can see the overlaps and mismatches, but once it looks certain that a try will be scored, I like to see the shot tighten in to get a clearer view of the grounding.

Dressing Room Mini Cameras. I don't think the teams are keen on these, but

the contracts tend to stipulate them these days.

Bigger Matches: On bigger matches extra cameras would include a Beauty Camera. On TNT rugby, there is a neat solution to provide a super wide shot, using a full format Sony F55 camera, with a SMPTE cable adaptor and stills type Canon EF 8-15mm lens. It is normally positioned on the camera gantry near camera 1 on the halfway line. A shot including the whole pitch, with a standard B4 camera is difficult to achieve without a hired Stadium lens, but this method provides a great background shot for graphics.

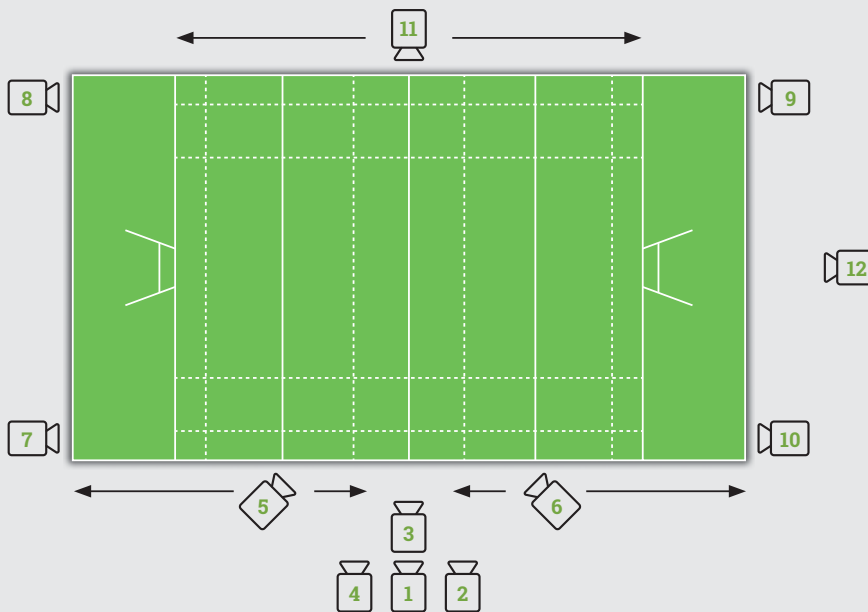
Cinecamera: Often a Sony A7siii or FX3 camera, with a Zeiss 40mm lens mounted on a Ronin RS3 gimbal, with live radio link. This camera can record at 200 frames per second, though these hi-mo shots need to be fed by the operator down the link. As it can get close to players for arrivals, warmups and celebrations, some unique style cine replays can be achieved, when the iris is fully open.

The iris can be adjusted to match the depth of field to the other cameras, if cut into live play. With an experienced operator, who takes their chances, this little camera can get some really fabulous replays from unique angles.

For the biggest matches, such as internationals, the coverage is complimented with the addition of steadicam (particularly useful for anthems), big lens reverse and hi-mo cameras. If the budget is big enough, a four-point wire spidercam would be added, giving us a bird's eye view of the scrum and line outs and some fantastic replays of play, or even mini cameras in the corner flags giving a worm's eye view of a try in the corner.

Specifications: Cameras are typically Sony 3500s, Sony 4300s or GV86s. All cameras are usually recorded but some have slow-motion replay capabilities, usually camera 3 and two of the corner cameras. Ideally all four corners and camera 4 would also have this facility. The bigger the match, the more cameras and the more of them are slo-mo capable, be it bi-mo (2 x speed), tri-mo (3 x speed) or even hi-mo (6 x speed). The latter would be normally extra cameras in different positions, directly behind the post, for instance. But more slo-mos means bigger budgets. The camera that channels would need a slo-mo license from the manufacturer and bi-mo requires 2 EVS replay channels, tri-mo requires 3

Rugby Union Camera Plan



No.	Body	Lens	Mount	Description
1	Sony 4300	22:1 or 14:1	Pods/Tripods	Main Camera Wide, main gantry
2	Sony 4300	86:1	Pods/HD Tripods	Main Camera Tight, main gantry
3	Sony 4300	86:1	Sheffield Plate/HD Tripod	Main Close Up Camera, near half-way line
4	Sony 4300	86:1	Pods//HD Tripods	Secondary Close Up Camera, main gantry
5	Sony 2500 RF	14:1	Hand Held	Hand Held Near Touchline
6	Sony 2500 RF	14:1	Hand Held	Hand Held Near Touchline
7	Sony 4300	86:1	HD Tripod	Near Left Corner
8	Sony 4300	86:1	HD Tripod	Far Left Corner
9	Sony 4300	86:1 or 22:1	HD Tripod	Far Right Corner
10	Sony 4300	86:1 or 22:1	HD Tripod	Near Right Corner
11	Sony 4300	14:1	Hand Held	Hand Held Far Touchline
12	Sony 4300	22:1	Pods/Tripod	High Behind
13	MiniCam	Fixed	Magic Arm	Home Dressing Room
14	MiniCam	Fixed	Magic Arm	Home Dressing Room

channels and so on.

Preparation: Many of us have been schooled at some point, by the infamous Sunset + Vine / BT Sport rugby director, Steve Docherty, who is now sadly no longer with us. Steve expected the camera operators to know all the players. If we asked what he particularly wanted, he would look you in the eye and say "Get me all the right shots at the right time," so if you did not get a feel of what he wanted quickly, you would not last long. I would not endorse this approach, but it did drive us all on to a higher level.

Rugby teams are announced 24 hours before kick-off, so we have the opportunity to research the players in advance with the help of the internet and apps like Ultimate Rugby.

Corner camera supremo Joss Lowe, went a step further and would create his own picture team sheet with pen pics of the players in their match positions, top to bottom, Front Row to Full Back. Joss would kindly distribute these via the camera crew WhatsApp group, that the camera supervisor had set up in advance of the match.

These were so useful that many of us printed them at home and brought them to site. Once the commentators started asking for these team sheets, the production team realised their importance and they started producing them, in the same style and providing them on site. If I don't think that these will be available, depending on the broadcaster, I would still produce my own if I can. I now feel rather exposed without my sheet of team pics, croc clipped under my viewfinder.

On match day the camera supervisor will normally contact the VT coordinator to establish which players will be featured during the build-up, so we know who to concentrate on as they arrive at the venue and then during the warmup.

Innovation: Whereas rugby can sometimes be a bit slow to adopt new ideas, Gareth Laird-Jones, camera supervisor in Scotland, points out that over the last fifteen years, rugby coverage has been at the forefront of innovation, that other sports have copied.

"Equipping referees with body cameras and microphones has added a new intermit perspective to the coverage. Traditionally on-site studio presentation came from a box in the grandstand and more recently pitch-side. These days it is common place to host the broadcast from multiple positions all over the ground, among the fans on the terraces, in the bar and pre and post-match, among the players and coaches on the pitch. This access has allowed us to get instant reactions and inside opinions from the side-line live



'Josh Dwyer filming the crowd with a Sony A7 Siii at the England v Wales match, 2024.'

during the match. Again not only does it bring the audience at home closer to the action but it is also fantastic for us as camera ops to be right among the action rubbing shoulders with some of the biggest names in the game."

Experience: Exposure to filming other sports can also be helpful. For example, Irish camera supervisor, Frances Nic Ruaidhri says: "We love covering rugby because I feel it combines the best of the other two main sports we also cover here. The fielding of Hurling if not the speed and the pace and the hand passing and fielding of Gaelic football. Charge downs are also a big feature of both those games. The joy of rugby is the extra layer of storytelling we get to contribute to as operators, the whole process, when it goes well, truly feels like a team effort. A grand slam if you will."

Collaboration: The core crew working on the formally Setanta, then BT Sport and now TNT rugby is a supportive bunch. Lead rugby camera supervisor Jim Cemlyn-Jones is proud that we have brought so many inexperienced camera ops through our ranks. "People like Adam and Haydn Bevis-Knowles, Jack Blight, Guto Thomas, Paige Cantrell and Josh Dwyer started working with us with very limited experience and are now front line operators, which is fantastic news for the industry going forward".

Leo Rice, camera supervisor of the 2019 World Cup Final, enjoys the really collaborative relationship we have with match directors, Daniel Hudson, Gruff Davies and Sarah Cox. We are their eyes on the ground, particularly as they are now mostly directing remotely from the EMG Hub in High Wycombe. If we come up with a better way of doing something they are very happy to listen.

In fact, the directors value and rely on us to use our editorial instincts during a live match, as often once they have asked

for a specific shot, the moment has gone. Although being a fan and having an in-depth understanding of the game is not a necessary, it definitely is an advantage if you are. Having that knowledge of the game and the players does mean you are a step ahead.

Conclusion: I often feel that being part of a crew that regularly covers a sport is a bit like being part of a sports team.

You do your preparation in the days before the match. The day on site is completely focused on our on airtime, half an hour or so before the match.

Once you get down to the game, you have days when you are really satisfied with your contribution and some days you would rather forget.

But when the director, camera crew and EVS team are all on point and the camera choreography is motoring, that feeling gives you a real buzz.

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