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KICKING OFF

For very nearly 200 years, rugby football has been played all around the world, and for most of those years very few people have had the faintest idea what has been going on. Beneath the heaps of bodies piled over the ball, little is seen and even less is known, but much is discussed. Rugby is a game full of bluffers.

So, even if you have never once picked up a ball and run with it, you will find in this slim volume all that you need to know, or rather all you need to appear to know, in order to enjoy the oval ball game. You will discover how the game was invented on the playing fields of an English public school, or so some people would like you to think. You might find yourself with an overwhelming urge to go and train but, with the help of this guide, you will soon realise that this is far from obligatory. You will even be provided with a selection of instant opinions that will get you through any discussion about the international professional game.

Rugby is a game rife with complex rules, regulations and some extraordinary traditions. Fortunately, very

few of them need to be fully understood in order to be enjoyed. With this guide you will soon appreciate the ones that are worth knowing and the ones that are much better ignored.

It turns out that the game of rugby is essentially a warm and welcoming family, albeit one that is mildly dysfunctional and has a massive drink problem. There is a place on the pitch for everyone, including the socially inept who, as it happens, make absolutely marvellous referees. The short, the tall, the broad and the small will all find a role to play in a game that celebrates diversity and ineptitude almost as much as athletic prowess.

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The original home of bar-room bluster and banter, rugby clubs are a bluffer's paradise. If you can hold your own, hold your nerve and hold your drink, there is a vast amount of joy, entertainment and good company to be had. You might even get a little bit of exercise into the bargain. But the moment will eventually arrive when you find yourself on the spot, which is where this short but definitive guide can offer invaluable help. It sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in discussions about rugby, and to equip

you with a vocabulary and evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and techniques that might even allow you to be accepted as a rugby expert of rare ability and experience – even natural sporting talent. But it will do more. It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight – without anyone discovering that, until you read it, you probably didn't know the difference between a hooker and a *haka*.