RLBC
RUGBY LEAGUE
BRITISH COLUMBIA

RUGBY LEAGUE BC

COACHING THE TRANSITION

A Coach's Guide to Transitioning Players from Rugby Union to Rugby League



DEVELOPING PEOPLE. GROWING LEAGUE. STRONGER TOGETHER.

GOVERN | DEVELOP | GROW

1. WELCOME TO RUGBY LEAGUE

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PEOPLE.
COMMUNITY.
OPPORTUNITY.

If you're coming to Rugby League from a Rugby Union coaching background, you already have a huge advantage. Your knowledge of player development, team culture, skills, contact, and game management is highly valuable.

Rugby League is familiar, but it is not simply Rugby Union with 13 players. The way possession, territory, defence and fatigue are managed is fundamentally different. This guide will help you transfer your existing coaching skills while developing a Rugby League mindset.



DON'T COACH RUGBY UNION WITH 13 PLAYERS.

Rugby League may look familiar, but the way possession, territory, defence and fatigue are managed is fundamentally different. The purpose of this guide is to help experienced Rugby Union coaches transfer their existing knowledge while developing a Rugby League coaching mindset.

2. UNION vs LEAGUE AT A GLANCE

	Rugby Union	Rugby League
Players	15	13
Possession	Contested (rucks/mauls)	Uncontested after tackle
Tackle count	None	Six tackles per set
Restart	Scrums, lineouts	Scrums (no lineouts)
Breakdown	Rucks and mauls	Play-the-ball
Defensive line	Variable	10 metres
Ball on ground	Can be contested	Must be released
Kick options	Varied (territory, tactical)	Key part of set completion
Game tempo	More stoppages	Continuous, high intensity
Substitutions	Typically 5–8	Interchange (rolling)
Primary focus	Retain possession	Complete sets, gain field position, apply pressure

3. THE BIGGEST COACHING MINDSET CHANGE

RUGBY UNION MINDSET

- Contest and retain possession
- Build phases
- Use forward dominance (ruck/maul)
- Tactical kicking to manage territory
- More stoppages to reset
- 15 players with specialised roles

RUGBY LEAGUE MINDSET

- Think in sets (six tackles)
- Complete sets and build pressure
- Uncontested play-the-ball
- Manage field position
- Faster, more continuous play
- 13 players, more multi-skilled

KEY COACHING SHIFTS

- ✓ From possession to completion
- ✓ From rucks to play-the-ball
- ✓ From phases to sets
- ✓ From contesting to structure and discipline
- ✓ From territory through retention to territory via kicking
- ✓ From 15 to 13 – more players do more



4. COACHING THE SIX-TACKLE SET

In Rugby League, you have six tackles to make progress down the field. Good teams use each tackle with a purpose.

1. **TACKLE 1 – SET THE PLATFORM**
   Secure possession, quick play-the-ball, get go-forward.
2. **TACKLE 2 – BUILD MOMENTUM**
   Continue through the middle or edges, maintain shape.
3. **TACKLE 3 – CREATE OPPORTUNITIES**
   Shift the defence, use shape and support.
4. **TACKLE 4 – APPLY PRESSURE**
   Look for a mismatch, move the ball, change angle.
5. **TACKLE 5 – SET UP THE FINISH**
   Position for a kick or attacking play.
6. **TACKLE 6 – FINISH THE SET**
   Kick for territory, take the line on, or go for points.

COMPLETION BUILDS PRESSURE. INCOMPLETION GIVES IT BACK.

5. THE PLAY-THE-BALL & THE "RUCK"

In League there is no ruck. After a tackle, the tackled player must get to their feet, place the ball on the ground and play-the-ball with their foot.



1. TACKLE

Player is held and tackled.



2. GET TO FEET

Tackled player gets to their feet quickly with the ball.



3. PLAY-THE-BALL

Place the ball on the ground and roll it back with the foot.



4. DUMMY-HALF

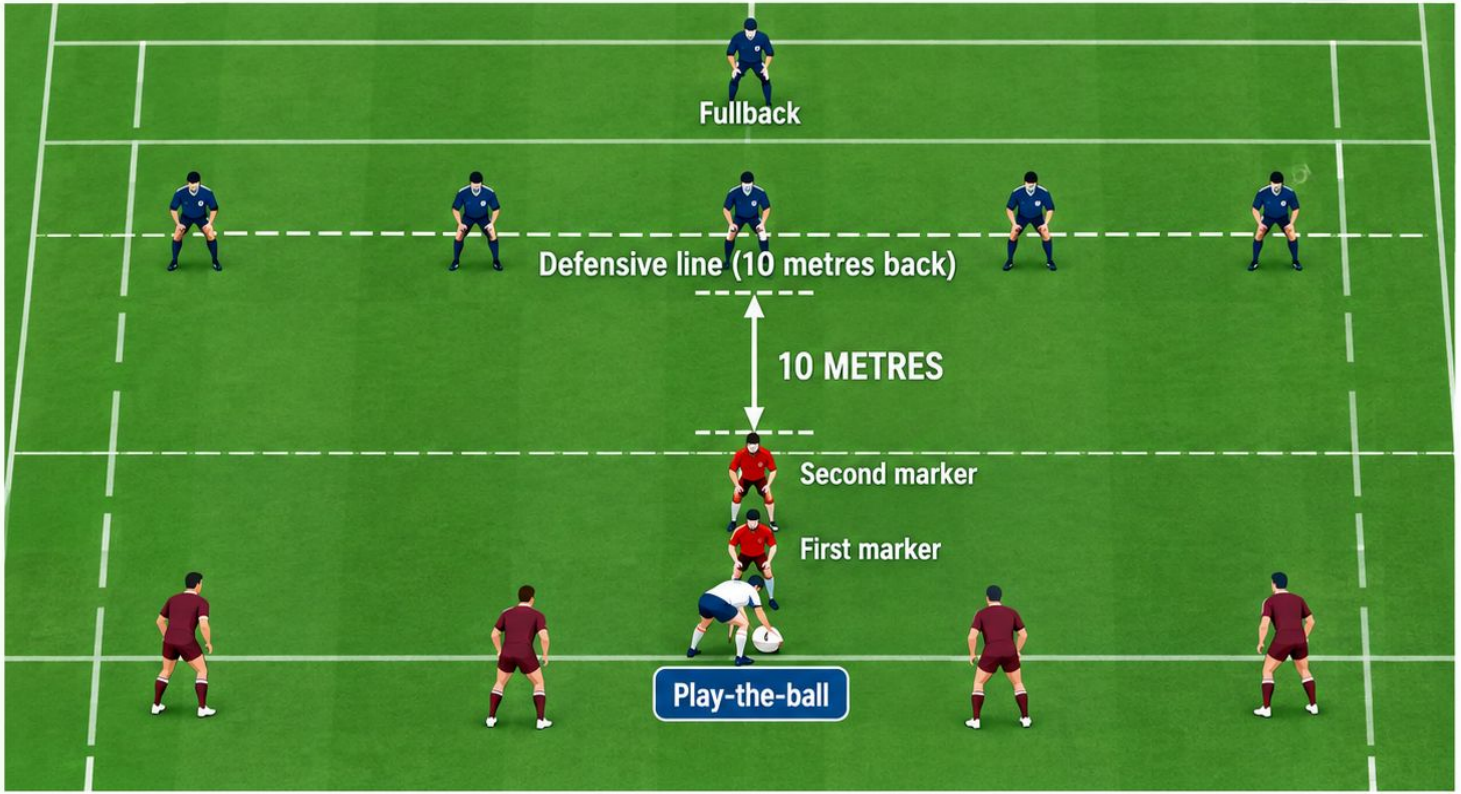
Dummy-half picks up and plays the next ball.

KEY COACHING POINTS

- Get to feet quickly
- Square up to the defensive line
- Roll the ball back with the foot (not throw)
- Dummy-half moves laterally (not straight back)
- Defenders retreat 10 metres and set their line
- No contesting for the ball on the ground

6. DEFENSIVE STRUCTURE

In Rugby League, defence starts with organisation, line speed and discipline. All **defenders except** the marker(s) must retreat 10 metres from the point of the play-the-ball and reset in a connected line.



- Defensive line (10m back)
- Markers
- Outside shoulder
- Defensive line integrity
- Communicate and number up

7. ATTACK & SHAPE

Rugby League attack is about creating space through shape, movement and support — while resetting behind the play-the-ball to stay onside.



KEY PRINCIPLES

- Build momentum with strong carries and quick play-the-balls
- All support players reset behind the play-the-ball to stay onside
- Dummy-half gives quick service and halves organise shape
- Play with width and push up in support
- Use middle and edge units to create space
- Run straight, use decoys, and attack the line
- Finish sets positively with a kick, repeat set, or attacking play

8. CONVERTING UNION POSITIONS TO LEAGUE

There's no direct like-for-like, but most union players can find a strong fit in League. Use this as a starting point.

Rugby Union Position	Likely League Position(s)	Notes
Loosehead Prop	Prop	Similar physical role
Tighthead Prop	Prop	Similar physical role
Hooker	Hooker	Key play-the-ball role
Lock	Second Row / Prop	Athletic locks suit edge
Blindside Flanker	Second Row / Loose Forward	Good fit on edge
Openside Flanker	Second Row / Loose Forward	Similar skill set
No. 8	Loose Forward / Second Row	Strong ball carrier
Scrum-half	Hooker / Halfback	Skills transfer well
Fly-half	Halfback / Five eighth	Decision making valuable
Centre	Centre	Direct transfer
Wing	Wing	Direct transfer
Fullback	Fullback	Direct transfer

9. UNION HABITS TO REMOVE

Some union habits can hold players back in League. Help your players unlearn these behaviours early.

- Arriving at the tackle expecting a Union-style ruck
- Trying to contest possession on the ground after the tackle is complete
- Delaying the play-the-ball
- Failing to retreat the required 10 metres in the adult game and reset quickly
- Overcommitting and disconnecting from the defensive line
- Kicking without regard to tackle count and field position
- Expecting lineouts, rucks or Union-style mauls to recycle possession
- Staying locked into one highly specialised role



10. YOUR FIRST 4 LEAGUE TRAINING SESSIONS

A simple plan to introduce Rugby League to union players.

1

SESSION 1 – RULES & PLAY-THE-BALL

- Key law differences
- Tackle, get up, play-the-ball
- Dummy-half and markers
- Introduction to the 10-metre rule

2

SESSION 2 – THE SIX-TACKLE SET

- Purpose of each tackle
- Attacking shape and support
- Kick options and set completion
- Small-sided set exercises

3

SESSION 3 – DEFENSIVE STRUCTURE

- 10-metre retreat
- Defensive line and markers
- Edge defence and communication
- Live defensive drills

4

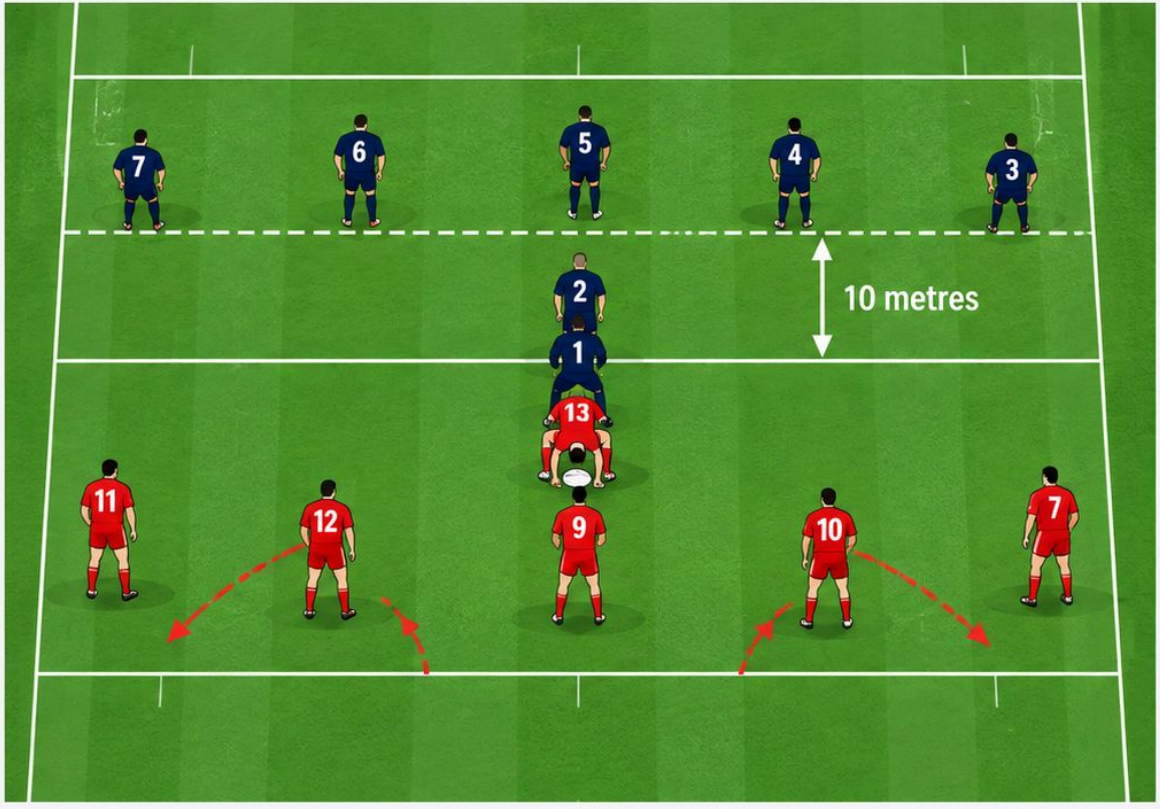
SESSION 4 – PUTTING IT TOGETHER

- Full set sequences
- Attack vs defence scenarios
- Game management (tackle count, field position)
- Conditioned game

11. TRAINING DRILLS

LEARN PRACTICE PLAY LEAGUE.

1. PLAY-THE-BALL & MARKER DRILL



- Tackle the ball carrier
- Player gets up and plays the ball
- Dummy-half picks up and passes the ball
- First marker stands directly opposite the player playing the ball
- Second marker stands immediately behind the first marker
- Non-marker defenders retreat 10 metres and reset their line
- Attacking players reset behind the play-the-ball
- Repeat continuously

Attack (red)

Defence (blue)

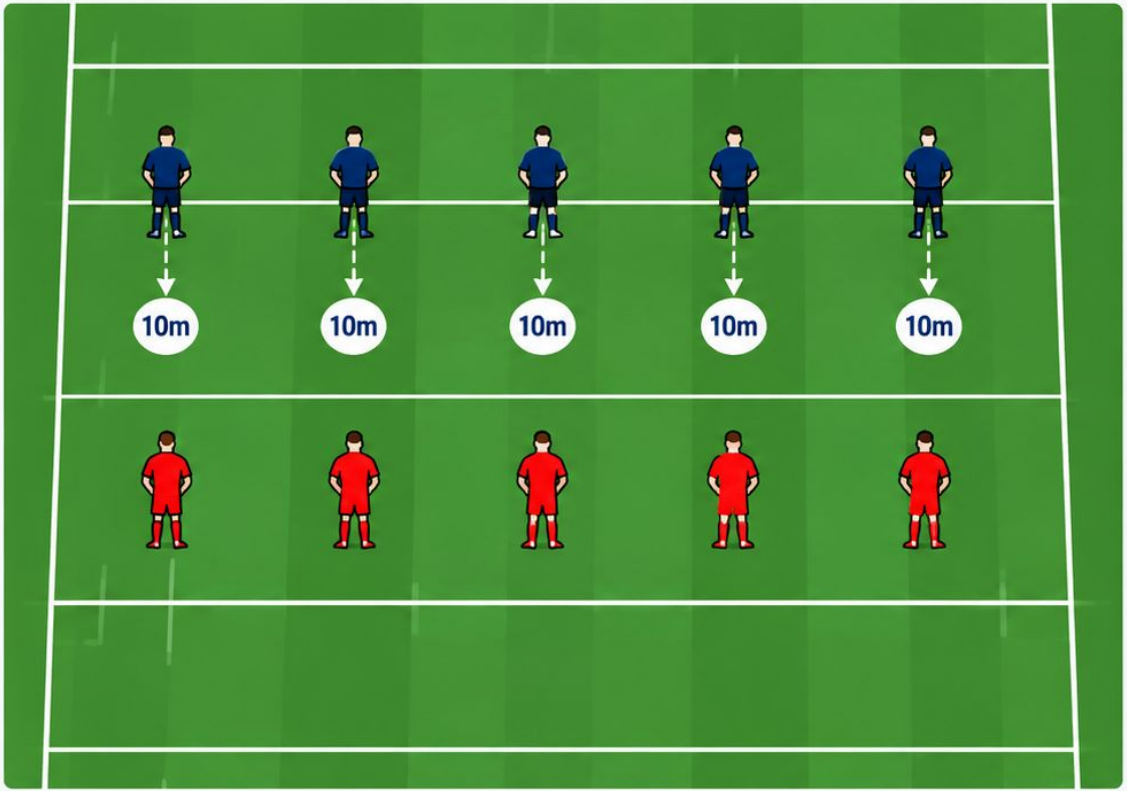
Movement

10-metre retreat line

11. TRAINING DRILLS (CONT.)

LEARN PRACTICE PLAY LEAGUE.

2. RETREAT 10 DRILL



- On tackle, all defenders retreat 10 metres
- Reset the defensive line
- Focus on speed, spacing and communication
- Add attack once comfortable

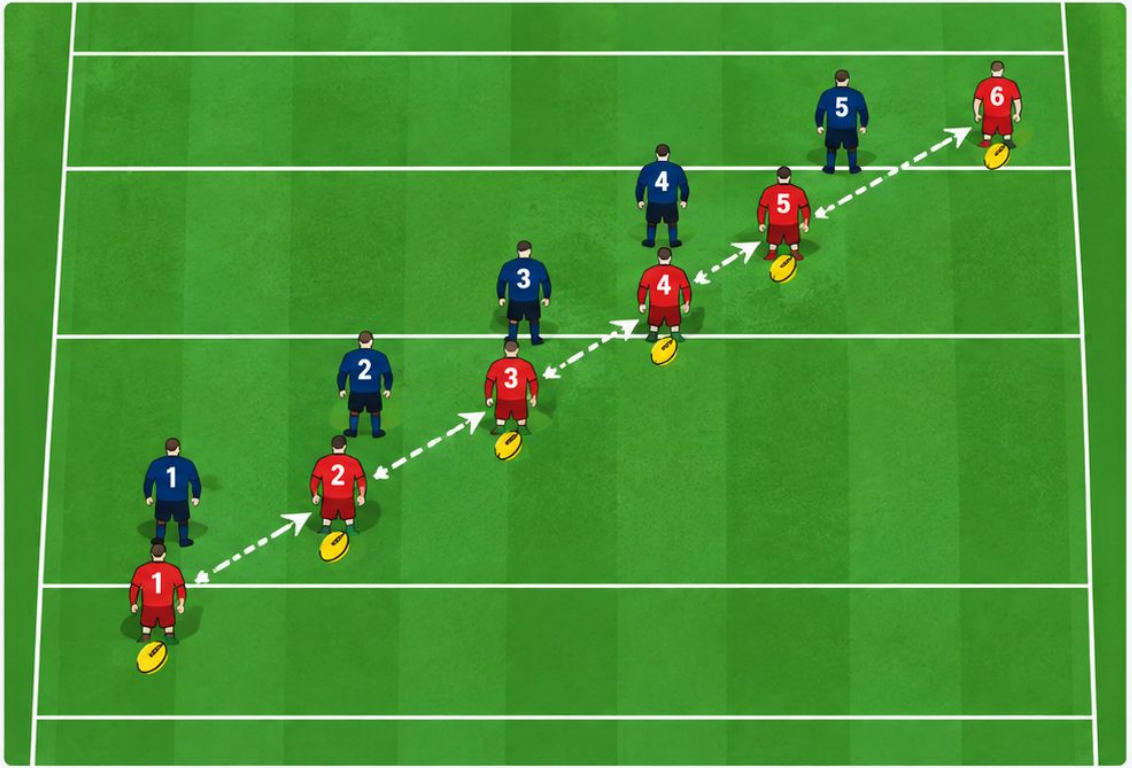
Defence

Attack

Retreat 10m

11. TRAINING DRILLS (CONT.)

3. SIX-TACKLE COMPLETION DRILL



- Run a full six-tackle set
- Use shape and support
- Finish with a kick or attacking play
- Rotate positions

Attack

Defence

Ball movement

4. THREE-DEFENDER TACKLE & RECOVERY DRILL

Work on safe defensive technique, control and immediate release.

1 APPROACH & CONTACT



Defender 1 makes initial contact, aiming for the upper body. Defenders 2 and 3 close in for support.

2 WRAP & CONTROL



All three defenders wrap using both arms, keep their heads to the side and drive with their legs. Defender 2 targets the mid/upper legs (above the knees).

3 COMPLETE THE TACKLE



Work together to stop forward momentum. Keep the ball carrier under control. Do not dangerously tackle below the knees.

4 RELEASE AND RECOVER

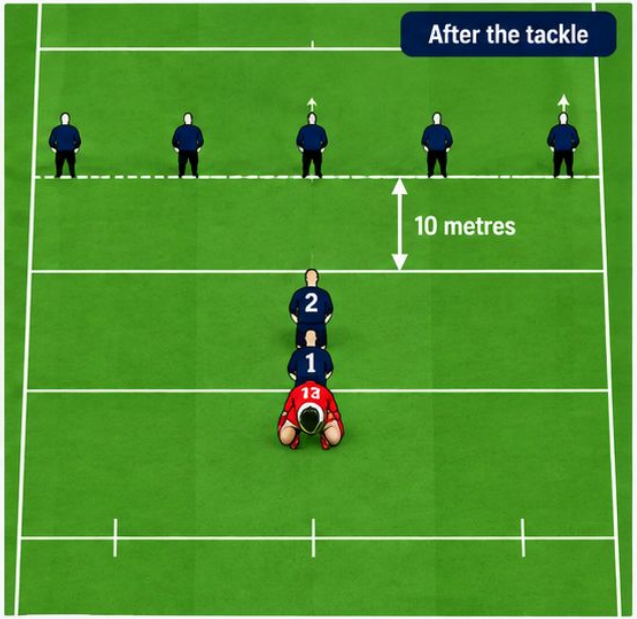


Once the tackle is complete, release immediately and move away. One defender becomes the first marker, a second defender can be the second marker, and the third defender retreats to the line.

5 RESET



Non-marker defenders retreat 10 metres and reset the defensive line. Communicate and get set for the next play.



COACHING POINTS

- Use safe and legal tackle technique (wrap with both arms, head to the side).
- Hit with line speed and keep your feet.
- Work together and control the ball carrier.
- Do not tackle below the knees or use dangerous techniques (e.g. hip drop).
- Release immediately after the tackle.
- Transition quickly into marker and defensive line roles.
- Communicate and stay organised.
- Focus on technique, effort and safe, consistent practice.

Attack (ball carrier)

Defence

Retreat 10 metres

Movement

12. MATCH-DAY CHECKLIST

A quick reference for new League coaches.

TEAM MANAGEMENT

- ☐ Interchange plan and rotations
- ☐ All players understand their roles
- ☐ Clear communication on the sideline

IN-GAME FOCUS

- ☐ Tackle count (always know where you are)
- ☐ Completion rate
- ☐ Field position and kick strategy
- ☐ Defensive line and spacing
- ☐ Discipline (penalties are costly)
- ☐ Adjust to momentum and fatigue

POST-MATCH

- ☐ Review completions, errors and field position
- ☐ Identify key learnings
- ☐ Provide clear, positive feedback
- ☐ Plan focus areas for next training session



13. COACH DEVELOPMENT WITH RLBC

Rugby League BC is committed to supporting coaches at every stage of their journey. Whether you're transitioning from Rugby Union or new to League, we offer:

- ✔ Coaching education and certification pathways
- ✔ Practical resources and workshops
- ✔ Support for club and community coaches
- ✔ A growing network of experienced coaches
- ✔ Opportunities to be part of the growth of League in BC

BECOME PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER.

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14. KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Your existing coaching skills are valuable.
- Don’t coach Union with 13 players.
- Think in sets, not phases.
- Focus on completion, field position and defensive structure.
- Teach the play-the-ball, 10-metre rule and six-tackle sets early.
- Help players unlearn unhelpful Union habits.
- Use simple, progressive training sessions and drills.
- Keep it simple, clear and consistent.
- You’re helping to grow Rugby League in BC.




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PEOPLE.
COMMUNITY.
OPPORTUNITY.
A STRONGER BC
THROUGH RUGBY LEAGUE.


“RUGBY GAVE US
THE GAME. RUGBY LEAGUE
GIVES US ANOTHER WAY
TO CHANGE LIVES.”
DIFFERENT CODE.
SAME SPIRIT.
BRIGHTER TOMORROW.
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