

# French rugby's 11 Commandments



By PETER FITZSIMONS \*

**T**HE Eleven Commandments of French Rugby:

1. People with titles and authority are accorded automatic respect.

Put the tag of *président* or *dirigeant* (director) on anyone and, in the eyes of the French, they grow a good foot taller. Even in the small rugby clubs it is not unusual for the president to be addressed by his minions as "Monsieur le Président".

2. Politics is everywhere.

My club has about 50 *dirigeants*. Each of these men knows to the nearest centimetre where the others are situated along the left/right political spectrum and so does *La Mairie* (the town council) which contributes heavily to the annual budget of the club.

3. Proximity to one's town means power.

When my team can hear in the near distance our own beloved church bells, we play like men possessed. In the four seasons I have played here we have *never once* lost a competition game at home. When we play away from home, the other team plays like men possessed and we, comparatively, play like "puddy tats".

4. The spirit of a rule is everything and its precise meaning nothing.

The rule that "you must be back 10 metres", for example, doesn't mean "that distance between nine and 11 metres". It means "back a bit". Equally, if a "knock-on" is just a very little one the standard procedure is just to play on.

5. Anything goes in a fight.

If you take the *Manual of Standard Procedure For Regular Australian Guys*, and look up under "Fighting" it says "fight with your fists and nothing else — only girls kick, scratch and bite" (Germaine, I didn't write it). In France, absolutely anything goes.

Incidentally, the four most outstanding facial scars I bear all come from playing against rugby clubs that ring the Mediterranean. The further south you go, the more violent the fights become.

6. Meal times are sacred. Repeat sacred.

In those long bus trips that are so much a part of French rugby it doesn't matter how tired we may be, how many white-line kilometres

remain between us and home, two hours after dusk the bus stops and we eat.

But it is none of this just-a-quick-snack-and-we'll-keep-moving nonsense. *Quel horreur*. Rather, it is invariably a three- or four-course meal with cheese and lingering coffees afterwards. An hour and a bitty later, sated, we move on. Liberal lashings of red wine are quite normal at the team's meal before the game.

7. Handshaking and kissing are *de rigueur*.

In a normal day over there I estimate that I shake hands about 100 times and hand out perhaps 20 or 30 *bises* (kisses).

Correct comportment when meeting any man you know is to formally shake his hand and say *ca va?* If your friend or acquaintance is with people you don't know, no matter — it's still handshakes all round.

For women friends, but not acquaintances, one kisses both cheeks, perhaps twice if she is particularly close. With really close men friends a little cheek kissing is also not out of order.

At first I thought the formality of all this handshaking and kissing was the most unheard of thing I'd ever heard of — now I kinda like it.

8. Age equals respect, almost.

My team treats with obsequious respect anybody that has even a hint of grey hair. Everybody except referees that is, whom we delight in insulting particularly when the scores are close.

9. Punctuality is just not on.

"Training starts at seven o'clock" means training starts whenever you happen to get there and "the bus leaves at nine o'clock" invariably means about half-past nine.

10. Dress and presentation are particularly important.

To be normally dressed is to be well dressed. All of my team mates are capable of carrying on long and animated discussions about the pros and cons of this or that brand of clothing and can spot a fake La Coste T-shirt at 50 metres.

11. There is no sense of "personal space".

If you take 10 Australian rugby players and put them on a 10-metre bench, they will instinctively arrange themselves so that each player has exactly one metre of space and no one will be touching anyone else.

Take 10 French players, though, and sit them on a 10-metre bench and they will invariably be draped over each other at random, sitting precisely as they landed. A hand resting on another's thigh raises no cry of *poofta!* from the stalls.

\* Peter FitzSimons has just returned from playing his fourth season of French rugby.