Dirty and dangerous play is bad, even if you don't mean it.

For some years now, I have noticed a problem within girls high school rugby. I didn't say anything about it because I coached a girls team from 2002-2008, and my team was on the short end of this stick several times. I didn't want it to get personal.

But my time at the latest U19 Girls Championships, plus discussions with other coaches has shown me this is a bigger problem than just mine.

It is: hitting a try-scorer after she has scored.

This happens much more often in girls rugby than in any other aspect of the game. Generally it goes like this: a player has a breakaway, and dives in at the corner. A girl is chasing said player, and just after the ball is touched down, the defender comes flying in. She comes in knees first (this is by far the most common body position during this play) and strikes the scorer in the back, the neck, and the head.

At this year's nationals I saw it happen frequently, and also saw a player touching the ball down (and not sliding) while a defender ran by her and smacked her knee-to-knee.

This rarely, if ever, gets penalized (thanks to an unknown ref in 2007 who penalized my team's opponent at Nationals for doing this).

Why doesn't it get penalized? I think referees often can't imagine young girls can be dirty players. Others have suggested the refs have simply registered the try and turned their backs. What gets missed is, this is incredibly dangerous play. Even if it's a mistake, it's dangerous. Flying into an unprotected player a she scores a try, and driving two knees into her back, neck or head is very dangerous and should be stopped.

Why does this happen in girls rugby more than others? I think for a few reasons (and remember, I coached girls HS rugby for seven years; I know something about it): 1. Defenders like to be seen trying, even when it's hopeless. The best way to be seen doing this is to run desperately (but hopelessly) at a player about to score. Then, to protect themselves, they try to slide on their shins. They are not interested in making a real tackle to prevent a try; 2. Coaches are busy teaching many aspects of the game. They don't go into the minutia of how it's illegal to kick a ball out of someone's hands, or how to legally and effectively tackle to prevent a try; 3. Girls are generally not fighters. In a men's or boys game, and even in an older women's game, if someone hit late after a try, there'd be a crowd of angry teammates looking to exact some retribution. Some chest-thumping can be useful. Girls, generally, don't do that. They gather around their fallen teammate to help her, but don't seek revenge.

How can we stop it? We can stop it by having refs look for it, and having them penalize teams. A few penalties at midfield, and a few yellow cards can go a very long way to discouraging such dangerous play. One 15-minute session from a coach on avoiding late hits can do a lot, too.

Back in 2007, a day after my team had received a penalty for a late hit on a try-scorer, we suffered the same problem. This time, our try-scorer was kneed in the side of the head and had to leave the game with a concussion. I walked onto the field with the kicking tee, and asked the referee what she'd seen.

"Oh, she just caught a knee."

My response is the question we should all ask: "Why?"