

Lancashire County Rugby Football Union

Lowering the tackle height in the Age Grade and Adult Community Game

A note to all clubs in membership

We wish to address the concerns from the game regarding the decision made by Council, in principle, to lower the tackle height in the Age Grade and Adult Community game from July 1st 2023. We have summarised the evidence presented to Council by Professor Simon Kemp, Sports and Exercise Medicine (consultant) and why this proposal was supported unanimously by Council.

Rationale

The RFU announced on Thursday that they would be lowering the height of the tackle across all community rugby in the country from the current level of the shoulder, right down to the waist ie the belly button.

This follows the precedent set by France in 2019, in a trial they **successfully** implemented after tragic deaths caused by head impact in tackles in 2018. Since France led the way, and subsequently New Zealand followed (albeit with a change to sternum height, not waist height), it is becoming increasingly clear that this is going to happen more and more globally, first in community rugby and potentially in all rugby.

In March 2021, a Head Impact Prevention and Management Group was established by the RFU Board to focus on the analysis of all head impacts in the game and for assessing options, and making recommendations, to reduce these. Prior to 2021, head injury research in rugby union had focused on head injury assessments and concussions – that is, incidents where an observable injury event has occurred. As sport in general began to explore the relationship between participation and long-term health outcomes, the importance of considering all head acceleration events rather than solely those that result in concussion has been increasingly recognised.

This change in emphasis was reflected by a major change in approach by the RFU and World Rugby from concussion monitoring, management and prevention to head impact monitoring, management and prevention. Subsequent RFU discussion on possible Head Impact reduction targets concluded that this needed more data and that we needed an improved ability to measure head impacts beyond reported concussions.

The introduction of instrumented (“smart”) mouthguards in the elite adult game in 2021, in the community and age-group game as part of the New Zealand RFU and Otago University Orchid Study and, subsequently, across the English adult elite game (PRL and AP15s) for the 22-23 season enabled a large volume of data to be captured very quickly.

During the course of 2022, Council expressed, on multiple occasions, a concern that the public debate over head injuries, head impacts and any potential long-term consequences was impacting on current, and potential, participation. Discussions with HMC (the network of over 200 leading independent schools) also suggested that urgent and immediate action was required to seek to mitigate the likelihood of more and more schools choosing to remove contact rugby from the school sport programme.

In March 2022, initial data from the Otago Study was presented to the World Rugby Player Welfare & Laws symposium. Subsequently, more detailed data, along with evaluations from the effects of a lower height tackle as a result of a law change in the community game in both France (waist height) and South Africa (arm-pit height), was presented to the World Rugby Medical Conference in October 2022. These French and South

Africa studies followed on from a similar evaluation of a small-scale arm-pit tackle height law change in the group games in the Championship Cup in England in the 18-19 season.

In November 2022, World Rugby Exco discussed lowering the height of the tackle across the community game and this was further discussed at a meeting of World Rugby with the Development Directors of the 14 largest Unions. This proposal is now in train within World Rugby and is expected to be formally adopted in March 2023. NZRU has already announced their plans to implement this and this has also found significant favour in Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Based on recommendations from the Head Impact Prevention Management Group, the Community Game Board and Governance held a joint meeting where they agreed to recommend to Council that the tackle height be lowered in age-grade and adult community rugby from 1st July 2023 subject to necessary law amendments.

Additional work is underway to consider how best to reduce unnecessary head acceleration exposure during contact training.

Research and evidence

In 2016, World Rugby and RFU researchers, using video analysis of tackles in the professional game that did and did not result in HIAs and concussion, identified 6 aspects of the tackle (tackle height, tackle type, tackle direction, ball carrier and tackler body position and tackler speed and acceleration) that, if changed, had the potential to reduce the likelihood of concussion, as measured through Head Injury Assessments (HIAs). These analyses highlighted the important relationship between the actions of the ball carrier and the tackler and the need to consider them collectively rather than separately. These analyses have been repeated subsequently and the results have been consistent.

The recommendation of the World Rugby Expert Working Group was that to reduce the occurrences of HIA, 30% of which occur to the ball carrier and 70% to the tackler, the game should focus on 2 aspects; lowering the tackle height line and encouraging tacklers to bend in the tackle. The data has consistently shown that any head-to-head contact will result in the greatest probability of a player leaving the field for an HIA (in the professional game). This risk of head-to-head contact has been shown to be consistently significantly greater than the risk of head to hip or head to knee contact.

The World Rugby data shows that the chances of either the tackler or the ball carrier receiving an HIA is 3.5 times more likely when the tackle occurs above the line of the sternum. A range of this evidence from the evaluations previously referenced in South Africa, New Zealand and France along with our own work in the Championship Cup in and on the recent waist height tackle trials has been analysed extensively by the Head Impact Prevention and Management Group.

This is key supporting evidence for a risk reduction approach that involves a lowering of the tackle height.

French Rugby has been trialling below the waist tackling combined with upright ball carrier since 2019. After an initial period of transition they report a decline in the number of penalties awarded for illegal tackles and reduction in in blue cards issued by referees for suspected concussions. Their analysis of the game showed increased passing, offloads, line breaks and fewer kicks in open play and a 63% reduction in head-on-head contacts. Feedback has shown the game speeds up in a way that players and spectators find more attractive and no unexpected consequences were reported after three seasons of the trial. This is supported by an ex Lancashire player and coach who is currently coaching in France.

Whilst the final details of World Rugby's proposals are not yet finalised, they have indicated that our proposals are aligned with their principles. Under current delegation from World Rugby the RFU is able to develop and apply its own laws in the community game. This delegation is already being applied in relation to tackle height



in other Unions, most recently in New Zealand with Scotland, Ireland and Wales considering a similar approach in the next few weeks.

Now that this proposal has been approved, an extensive programme of communications, support resources and training will be initiated. There is recognition that this needs to cover a wide range of stakeholders including (but not limited to) Referee Societies, club referees, coaches across the age-grade and adult game, players themselves, parents of age-grade players, spectators, school leaders and teachers. A game-wide development programme consisting of face-to-face training, digital resources, eLearning, webinars and master-classes will be established to support awareness with other key groups.

PRL, through their membership of the Head Impact Prevention Management Group, are supportive of this proposal and we are working with them and World Rugby to ensure that the small group of players that play in both professional and community teams during the same season will be supported and not disadvantaged by these proposals.

With World Rugby expected to make a decision to initiate global change at a meeting in March, this would not allow us enough time to subsequently adopt this and communicate for the 23/24 season (losing two months of important preparation/communication time). Awaiting this global decision would hence mean delaying until season 24/25.

There have been suggestions that we defer implementation to season 24/25 or introduce in phases – age-grade from 23/24 and adult from 24/25. With the evidence we have, and a stated commitment to take steps to reduce head impact across the game, this may appear inconsistent and presents legal risk.

Any decision to implement a lowering of the tackle height at professional and international level would require a global law change directed by World Rugby.

Having been part of the discussions for over two years, Ken in the in the Education and Age Grade Sub Committee and the Age Grade Governance SC and all of us engaging in many hours of discussion and debate, listening to medical evidence and reading extensive evidence from trials, we came to the conclusion that this was a necessary step to ensure the future safety of our players.

The message now is that this is about future proofing our game for the next 100 years, take out the debate about concussions, focus on creating and shaping a modern game for this and future generations.

We believe that we all have been honest and thoughtful in our collective decision to vote for the motion for the reasons put to you.

Your club will have received notification of the decision taken at Council in the Community Game Update dated 19th January 2023 in which Dr Simon Kemp, RFU Medical Services Director explains the rationale and research behind the change. Please also share with and encourage your coaches, players and members to watch the accompanying video.

Kind regards

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RFU Council members for Lancashire

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