



Joint Statement by D&W RFU and Somerset RFU Council Members

The recent vote by Council to lower the tackle height to reduce head impact injury has caused considerable and understandable comment from the Game, so we have put together a summary for you:

We are sorry we couldn't get information out to you earlier on this matter but hope this note might provide a bit more background on the subject, updated with some developments since the initial announcement. The decision is to support Player Welfare and is designed to improve player safety, reducing the head impact exposure and concussion risk for both ball carrier and tackler.

The RFU Council were asked to vote on whether they thought the tackle height should be reduced to the navel (the stomach, not below the hips as some people have assumed) and the attacking player should where possible, remain upright when carrying the ball.

The aim is to reduce the number of head-on-head collisions by doing so. We were presented with a magnitude of video footage and data from studies carried out over the last 3-5 years in France (where these Laws were implemented immediately in 2019 after four young players died whilst playing), New Zealand, South Africa and England.

The data shows 75% of concussions suffered whilst tackling was because the defender tackled high rather than going low. Two heads (the attacker and the defender) colliding at high speed is the main contributor to concussion in rugby. The whole aim from this is to try to reduce the incidence of Head Acceleration events- these are events linked to concussion and possible longer term brain issues.

As well as these studies from overseas, the RFU has been undertaking its own studies in Age Group arm-pit height and in the Championship Cup in season 18/19 plus there is increased use of instrumented mouth guards (IMG) in the game now. Indeed the data that comes from these alone is quite interesting. Overall, the studies indicate that higher contact on the ball carrier and higher head proximity of players in relation to one another leads to an increase in HIA and concussion risk.

The indication is that World Rugby is heading towards mandating lower tackle heights and the RFU wanted to ensure there is as much time as possible to work on the Law alterations needed, plus preparing training material (video's, webinars, courses etc.) for Coaches, Referees and Players. Tackle height revision is also on the current agenda in Scotland, Ireland & Wales. As an example in Scotland they have been limiting the tackle height to the waist line for U14 down in recent seasons.

Waist height

Our simplistic view from a technical perspective is that the tackle height has only been reduced by give or take, 30 centimetres.

i.e. From the shoulder to the bottom of the ribcage.

This because if a tackle is made at the navel or below, the depth of the shoulder covers most of the stomach anyway.

Also, if this is supplemented with the other ball carrying height Law in place where the ball carrier is not allowed to dip into contact, the tackle height limit will be similar to what it is now.

We have watched footage of matches with the new Laws, and it remains very similar to today's game.

Understandably, there were a few more penalties as players were getting used to the new Laws but there were more offloads and it was definitely more free-flowing.

This should encourage the game to be more skilful and entertaining as a result.

Main Driver

The main driver behind the decision is player welfare and safety.

As you may be aware, over 200 professional players and 55 amateur players have filed legal challenges against the game. The players claim they were not protected by the game from concussion and now they have or may have brain damage as a result.

The danger is that if the research on tackle height is ignored, we may find ourselves in a similar situation.

It was also felt that any delay could be very harmful to the game, hence why there wasn't any consultation with the game as a whole.

A lot of the background information is on England Rugby and below are some links to other material on this subject. There will be a number of communications from the game around how the changes are developing in the coming weeks. Law Changes will be shared as and when agreed.

The bottom line is yes players will have to change how they play the game, like many we were taught to tackle around the legs- not the body. With the tackler tackling lower and the ball carrier not dipping into tackles, as they seem to do far too often, the game will be a safer and we won't lose so many players to head injuries as we currently seem to.

We all appreciate that change is not always welcomed but something had to be done to improve player safety and hopefully encourage more people to play rugby, rather than shying away from it for fear of head injury. This is more aimed at future proofing the game- the focus has to be on creating and shaping a modern game, not only for the current player but the future ones as well.

The RFU is now in the process of preparing both the wording of the Law, the interpretation and impact on the game. Alongside this are the details of how this fundamental change will be managed over the intervening months before next season.

It is to allow as much time as possible to work on these areas that the decision to reduce the tackle height was made.

We appreciate there are currently more questions than answers, but the RFU Council were not asked to vote on the law interpretations.

That is now the responsibility of RFU Governance who will work with experienced referees, coaches, and players to iron them out.

However, you can appreciate an empathetic view will be taken by match officials as this is rolled out, in terms of red cards and disciplinary procedures.

Whilst we appreciate this is an emotive issue for many, we really hope that over time people can begin to understand the decision and why it was made.

In the past, it was seen by some as a sign of weakness to go off the pitch after a head knock and it is only recently that players have had to serve a three-week mandatory recovery period following a concussion. We have moved with the times, and we must do it again otherwise we may not have a game.

If these Law changes make the game safer in the future, then in our opinion it is a decision worth taking.

As soon as we have any more information around the Laws and implementation we will share this with you.

Please do see the link below to a paper by Ross Tucker, who has led the work for World Rugby since 2015. The article, whilst a little lengthy, does help to paint a clearer picture as to why we have reached this position.

Links

England Rugby <https://www.englandrugby.com/news/article/rfu-council-approves-lowering-of-the-tackle-height-across-community-rugby-in-england-2023>

Article on the changes- Paper from Ross Tucker. <https://www.patreon.com/posts/lowering-legal-77489775>

The explanatory video from Dr Simon Kemp can be accessed below:

<https://vimeo.com/791165197/abba304ccc>

The submission from the FFR to World Rugby:

[10 - FFR Waist Height Trial presentation at WR MCC October 2022.pptx](#)

The way that this process has been handled has admittedly been very unsatisfactory, and in retrospect should not have been allowed to happen. This has been compounded by a communication process from the RFU we feel has fallen far short of competence.

Decisions of this magnitude should only be taken after Council Members are given sufficient time to consult with their Clubs, and this is but one item that we and many of our fellow RFU Council members have and will continue to feed back to the RFU.

Please follow the RFU CGU updates which will be sent out. Rest assured that Council members are doing all they can, within the delegated powers they have to ensure the whole game receives proper and accurate support and consultation.

Thank you

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