



Leicestershire Rugby Union - Tackle Height update 3

(Following the national CB call last night (23 January 2023))

Last night I attended the national CB call hosted by the RFU and attended by CB representatives of the game from around the country. The main topic of discussion was the Tackle Height Decision.

RFU President Nigel Gillingham opened the meeting and was followed by presentations from Professor Simon Kemp (RFU Medical Director), John Lawn (RFU Head of Game Development) and David Barnes (RFU Head of Discipline). Simon presented on the nature of the medical science, John on the next steps and the instruction of the Game and David on the nature of the sanctioning regime. Following the presentations the speakers responded to many questions and comments.

The recorded session is due to be made available online on the CB portal, shortly. I will try to give a flavour of the comments and questions here but my notes will be no substitute for viewing the video once available.

Nigel Gillingham: Head-to-Head concussions occur in 1 in 88 tackles, head to knee in 1 in 198, head to hip in 1 in 568 and head to midriff in 1 in 1728. The only Law variations that the RFU can effect are in the Community Game; the elite game is the preserve of World Rugby, who appear set to make a similar decision at their next Council meeting, in May. The RFU met with the other Home unions last week and confirmed that their Community Game Board equivalents and main Boards are all intending similar action in the next few weeks. Scotland have been operating a waist high tackle Law variation at U14 for the last five years.

Simon Kemp: quoted from peer-reviewed scientific literature dating back to 2016. He discussed the Championship tackle height and Stellenbosch trials and the French experiences. (I have not quoted any data here as the papers need to be read in full). He said World Rugby video presentations of both the Championship and Stellenbosch trials is available and the French presentation would be made available. There is no published data on the New Zealand trials. Simon suggested that the RFU Head Impact Prevention & Management group (HIPM) considered waist height as the 'lowest reduction for the greatest benefit.'

'Smart' mouthguard data shows that as the tackle height is reduced, so is the detrimental effect on the head.

There is little data as yet on the Women's and Girls game; though there is evidence of 'reduced neck strength and reduced athletic maturity'.

John Lawn: talked about developing, testing and reeving the Laws of the Game. to add some clarity to the definition of 'waist' he stated that the 'waist' for these purposes was the area between the navel and the line of the sternum. The initial point of contact would be likely to be set at no higher than the line of the navel.

Support for the Game would be provided both face-to-face and online in preparation for next season. This would commence with the Education sector in June.

David Barnes: acknowledged the concerns already voiced regarding the likely increase in red cards and discipline hearings. He emphasised that an empathetic approach would be taken.

The meeting then moved to questions and comments. (I cannot reproduce those in full - please access the video recording but will give details of some of these and the responses they produced.

- The RFU Laws group comprises players and active referees, amongst others
- There is an intention to consult with Coaches, Players and Referees on the technicalities
- There will be a 'road map' produced
- Instruction and guidance for the Game will run from May through to December and will be revisited for the following three to four years
- There were several comments to the effect that the approach seems rushed. **I agreed.**
- There were comments to the effect that the evidence for determination of waist height over sternum height seemed unclear. **Again, I agreed. It seems to me that the HIPM expressed a preference for this conclusion without any clear evidence that the lower height (waist) would produce any significant benefit over higher (Sternum) height.**
- It was only at the World Rugby Medical meeting in November that the various scientific studies and evidence were first all pulled together.
- World Rugby has just two Council meetings each year, the next one being in May.
- One contributor, John Pownall, made a very telling contribution calling for, amongst other things, a deferral of any implementation for a year – to allow for full engagement with the game and, if necessary, education and training on any Law variations. **A point of view with which I wholeheartedly agree.**
- I asked John Lawn to comment on the likely direction of travel in respect of Mauls and Pick-and-Drive, given the many comments on social media. JL said that the Maul will remain unaffected as it does not constitute a tackle, and the Pick-and-Drive would be dealt with by differential refereeing.

After the meeting I spoke on the phone with David Roberts, Chair of the Community Game Board and RFU Board Member (the Board meet again tomorrow). I expressed my concerns about the manner of the decision making; that the issues should have been subject to a full, open and face-to-face debate at Council in February; that the face-to-face education piece was not planned to start until June, which was far too late and would mean there would be 'too little, too late'; that I was unconvinced by the determination of the actual tackle height choice and that, all-in-all, an early deferment of the decision for a season should be agreed to allow for full and open engagement with the Game.

I have also written to my Council aligned Board member, Phil de Glanville, this morning, on the same issues and in advance of the Board's discussions tomorrow.

Peter Howard
RFU Council Member
24 January 2023