



Irish Rugby Mixed Ability Rugby Guidelines

Forming a mixed ability rugby team is pretty much the same as forming any other rugby side. Teams are likely to be a mixture of experienced players, keen novices and people helping to make up numbers.

Ethos

- A mixed ability adult team may have more rugby novices with less understanding of the game, therefore more reliant on experienced players. The team will also need an experienced coach, as well as additional assistants with rugby experience, on and off the pitch. Teams to date have benefited from someone with experience of working with people with a disability. However, like all teams, it is made up of a variety of people, with a variety of skills, on and off the pitch.
- On field it is important to remember that among a mixed ability team there is an emphasis not only on winning but also developing and showcasing the abilities of all players. These aims are interrelated – not mutually exclusive and it requires a balance.
- Competition is an essential element of the game, players will experience defeat and players should learn from this. Ideally people should experience success and failure.
- Most players with disabilities have made it very clear they enjoy the physical contact and opportunity to expend some aggression on the pitch.
- Games between teams should be competitive but not humiliating or embarrassing; winning should not be at any cost. Remember the key words are MIXED and ABILITY if one side fields too many able-bodied players, that may be through injury or lack of availability of disabled team members, it does not prevent facilitation on the pitch.
- As with most rugby club activities the social aspect should be emphasised, this is an opportunity for involvement and integration and is a vital element of community rugby.

Recruitment

- Recruitment of players with a disability is completely in the same ways as you would recruit all other players, through other members, word of mouth, social media, etc. However, you may wish to link with local service providers and/or sports inclusion officers in local councils to ensure a continuation of members over the coming seasons.
- For further information in starting up a disability section within the rugby club see IRFU club guidelines – <http://www.irishrugby.ie/disability>
- Organise an information session and a short demonstration of the activities that will be done in training and matches.

Training:

- Training sessions will vary according to coaching styles but experienced players should be willing to assist the coach in teaching skills and tactics of the game to new players.
- Coaches and assistants should be qualified to IRFU Stage 2 and have completed the disability inclusion training through IRFU, Cara and/or DSNi
- For assistance with inclusivity "[Setting up a disability rugby section](#)" document

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Players:

- The basic ingredients of the mixed rugby team:
- At least 21 (squad number) probably a core of 27 but the more the merrier. All players are adults, that is over 18-years of age.
- The pack is usually made up of 4 facilitators and 4 players with a disability. This allows immediate support of a facilitator and players don't get as easily isolated.
- The positional requirements of back play and the exposed nature of playing in the backline can make it more demanding for new players so best to have more experienced players here.
- A balance of players is important. It is important that the more experienced players realise that one of the major aims is to give people with learning difficulties the chance to get involved and learn the skills. Too many players of too high an ability might inhibit other players and highlight differences.
- Most new backs players start on the wing. This means that they stand on the edge of the pitch and have a smaller area to cover and will see less of the ball. It allows players to learn the game, how to tackle, how to run hard and how to catch and pass the ball at their own rate.
- Use rolling subs so they all players get a game and plenty of breaks in training.

Insurance:

Players should be registered members of the club and like all members it is recommended they take out personal insurance. IRFU insurance covers catastrophic injury.

Refereeing:

- Insurance requires they are qualified. Inform the Branch of any planned friendly fixtures with local teams so referees may be included in appointments.
- Speak to the referee before the match so they are aware of varying abilities among the players and the use of non-contested scrums.
- It is vital that clear communication is used. Briefing all teams prior to the start of the game is crucial to ensure that all players/coaches are aware of what to expect.
- Usually it's quickly established within a few minutes of kick off as what players can and cannot do.
- The spirit of rugby and the core values are vital to ensure that the match is played fairly and all players can experience the game.
- To ensure the game flows coaching of basic laws are sometimes required.

Contact:

- Whilst some may be worried or skeptical about contact, rugby is a popular sport because of the contact. Confidence can be built through drills, praise and experience. There will be injuries – including broken bones, but as with 'normal' rugby players, it's accepted as part of the game.
- Having non-contested scrums removes the need for specialist players, makes it safer for all and gives novices an opportunity to be involved in the game without too much contact at the outset. It also allows novices a place to be heavily involved (through scrums and lineouts).
- The first 5-10 minutes of a game are important for the opposition so they can see the level of skills among the team and how to tackle.
- Some players like to highlight levels of skills by giving them different coloured shorts or headwear. This needs to be discussed with players as there is mixed opinion as to the 'value' it gives; some players feel it highlights difference while some players wearing the shorts or headwear feels it gives them confidence around contact and extra protection.

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Game-day:

- To ensure that the game is played in the right spirit it is essential to brief the other team and the referee beforehand (a changing room talk) about what to expect. A good dialogue is the best way to ensure all players and management understand the game.
- If one team is significantly better than the other and hampering everyone's enjoyment the better team might consider taking on some of the other teams less able players or take the opportunity to put people in unfamiliar positions.
- Games can be played in quarters. It allows teams to take stock and allows the opponents an opportunity to work out the intricacies of the game.
- In games there is an option of having a passive defence for the first 5 minutes (moving up slowly in defence, not counter rucking and not ripping the ball or competing on the floor). Be very clear here not to create a false situation, if the ball comes loose or there is no opponent rucking out then the opposition should pick the ball up and play on. Another option is in attack to have one call of 'slow ball', this allowed time for less able players to get in to position and the defence were aware that it would be a controlled contact situation
- There will be players in every mixed ability side who do not require a hard tackle to stop them but the use of simple 'common sense' to hold and turn them. Similarly ripping the ball from an obviously frail player is not going to go down well.

Players should assist by:

- not playing for themselves and running through the opposition in this initial phase
- communicating clearly with your disabled players so the opposition can gauge their ability and confidence with contact
- keeping everyone calm when an individual from either team is not playing in the same Spirit as everyone else
- involve all the players ensuring even the most disabled get some "hands on", opposition teams will often facilitate this too.

Coaching Tips:

- As with all coaching 'repetition' is key to being able to convert a move in training to performing it in the chaos of a game.
- Patient is key. There may a big difference in the progress among players; some will learn quickly whereas others may struggle to pick up certain points and take them into a game. Keep it simple and make it fun
- Some players have difficulty knowing left from right, so it helps to point / use hand signals.
- Most new backs players start on the wing. This means that they stand on the edge of the pitch and have a smaller area to cover and will see less of the ball. It allows players to learn the game, how to tackle, how to run hard and how to catch and pass the ball at their own rate.
- As players learn more skills; they move to new positions in the backs and learn new skills.
- The half back positions can be more demanding as you need to give a lot of instructions and make big decisions as well as high levels of fitness. Before moving players into these positions make sure they have had a chance to build confidence
- Look at individual's strengths and set the drills up so that everyone can get involved. Talk to facilitators and give them specific roles, a little direction can help massively.

Protocols

- It is good practice to have a record of all players medical details at every training session and game which can be handed to medical personnel.

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- Some players will have complex health conditions including: Diabetes, Cerebral Palsy, Epilepsy, Heart conditions and mental health difficulties. Acknowledge that all people will experience health problems at some point during their life time, and the line between disabled and able-bodied can be a fine one.
- Even when you have previously played against a local side, each game will have new players who are not sure what to expect. Explain that disabilities are not always visible or obvious, but to take some time at the beginning of the game to assess the level of contact that is required to stop a player.
- To ensure that the game is played in the right Spirit It is essential to check for small variations in playing styles, for example disabled players in some teams players with a disability are unmistakable as they wear head guards or different coloured shorts respectively. In other teams players have stated that they don't want to be singled out as "different to anyone else on the team". At the time of writing the governing bodies support this choice option.

Facilities: A marked rugby field, post protectors, changing rooms, kit and somewhere to socialise afterwards. It's probable that opponents can provide all this. If not – pitches and changing facilities can be hired from local councils. Most pubs would welcome custom and provide/allow a buffet to be eaten. If kit cannot be borrowed then agree on a popular colour. If your team is part of a larger rugby club then all this should be available.

Guide for players in relation to injury

Some players may not be able to read. It is the responsibility of each Team Manager/Organiser to ensure that players are aware and understand the risks and responsibilities of playing full contact rugby. *The following information can be photocopied*

Injury Risk for all Players

Mixed Ability Rugby is full contact Rugby Union, with passive scrums. Although all games are played within World Rugby Guidelines and most are exhibition matches played in a friendly spirit, accidents and injuries can, and do happen. Whilst usually not serious, these are common injuries to Rugby Players. Thumb, Finger and Wrist Injuries Neck Injuries Shoulder Injuries Arm and Elbow Injuries Hernia and Groin Injuries Hip and Thigh Injuries Knee Injuries Calf and Shin Injuries Ankle and Foot Injuries Particular attention should be given to head injuries (concussion). Mixed Ability players may also have disabilities and medical conditions such as Diabetes, Cerebral Palsy or Downs Syndrome. Some may have high pain thresholds and not immediately show symptoms of an injury.

There is a guide for players in Appendix Two to make them aware of what to do if they are injured during training and/or a match. Please go through this guide with all players and coaches.

In addition, the following guidelines can be covered with all players, so they understand the ethos of the game and the purpose of Mixed Ability Rugby.

Call to Action Code

- We respect each other, the other teams, match officials and spectators because we want everybody to have a good time. We don't want to argue and we want to follow our Code of Conduct
- The games have to be competitive because we love to win. We don't want to cheat, we want to stick to the rules.
- We don't want to wear bibs or something that makes us stand out. We have the right to be all equal. It should be fair with both teams having about the same number of disabled players. If a team is short of disabled players or facilitators, they will be always welcome to borrow players from the other side.
- If we lose we will cheer the winners, be happy with our performance and work harder to play better next time.

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This document is to be used by nominated clubs who provide mixed ability rugby on behalf of the IRFU. Clubs involved in the current programme are:

- Sundays Well, Cork
- Malone RFC, Belfast
- Banbridge RFC, Co. Down
- De La Salle Palmerstown, Dublin
- Ballincollig RFC, Cork

Activities will be reviewed by the Spirit Committee regularly and for further information please contact IRFU Disability and Inclusion Officer David McKay david.mckay@irfu.ie

This document will be updated in June 2021.

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