

**A PROPOSED LAW TRIAL TO LOWER
TACKLE HEIGHT AND
REDUCE HEAD-ON-HEAD IMPACT
IN AMATEUR RUGBY**

IRFU RUGBY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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The IRFU initiated a Community Consultation process in January 2023 to look at measures to improve tackle behaviours, reduce head-on-head contact and ultimately lower occurrences of head injuries (including concussion) in the amateur game.

This commenced with a review of new and existing trials, studies and medical research and progressed with an internal consultation process involving over 100 IRFU and Provincial Staff.

The consultation then moved into a community notification phase with distribution of resources including an information guide from the IRFU Medical Department; an official proposal from World Rugby; and an open invite to a Community Consultation Webinar on Tackle Behaviours.

Of those who have engaged with the process to date, there is a critical mass of stakeholders who are clearly open to change for the good of the game. There are also those who are opposed to change and others who have not engaged with the consultation process but await its outcome.

This document, in conjunction with a series of open engagements with stakeholders, represents the next phase in the community consultation process.

There is an appetite for change in the Irish Rugby community but it is recognised that any law trial as part of this process must be reasonable and implementable. It must be well communicated and resourced. The trial itself must also yield data that enables further evidence based decision making.

The purpose of this document is to present a law trial which meets this criteria.

It summarises some of the available evidence, but it does not present it in full. For more information, all stakeholders are advised to be aware of the following resources:

- [An open memo to all clubs and schools](#)
- [World Rugby Proposal](#)
- [IRFU Medical Department Information Guide](#)
- [The Case For Lowering Tackle Height \(Ross Tucker, World Rugby Sports Scientist\)](#)
- IRFU Community Consultation Webinar On Tackle Behaviours
 - [Introduction](#)
 - [Consultation Process Overview](#)
 - [World Rugby Proposal Overview](#)

The focus of this document is on providing clarity around the law trial itself and offering answers to some of the many questions raised throughout this process.

2.1 What law trial to lower tackle height are the IRFU considering?

The IRFU are considering a trial change to Law 9.13

For the purposes of this trial, tackling an opponent above the line of the sternum would be penalised as foul play.

World Rugby Union Law 9.13 current states that “*Dangerous tackling includes, but is not limited to, tackling or attempting to tackle an opponent above the line of the shoulders even if the tackle starts below the line of the shoulders.*”

It is proposed for a trial period that the height of a legal tackle is lowered from below the line of the shoulder to below the line of the sternum.

This is to incentivise greater use of the belly tackle.

COMMUNITY GAME: LEGAL TACKLE HEIGHT PROPOSAL



THE RISK OF CONCUSSION IS 4.2 TIMES HIGHER WHEN THE TACKLER'S HEAD IS ABOVE THE BALL CARRIER'S STERNUM IN THE TACKLE*

BELOW THE STERNUM

- TACKLE THE BELLY
- BELOW THE BALL
- TARGET THE TORSO

*[SOURCE: DATA FROM 878 HIAS, ONGOING WORLD RUGBY RESEARCH STUDIES, AS IN TUCKER ET AL 2017]



2.2 Why is more use of the belly tackle important?

World Rugby and laboratory studies have shown that head injury risk is lowest when tackles are made to the belly area (Green zone tackles).

2.3 Why is it important to lower tackle height?

Risk of head injury is at its highest when tackles are made to the head and shoulder (red zone tackles).

2.4 What about tackles at waist height or lower?

There is a moderate risk to tackles from the waist down to the ground (Orange zone tackles). The IRFU are not considering a law trial which sets legal tackle height below waist height.

2.5 Why are the IRFU considering a law trial to change tackle height?

This trial is being considered on the basis of recent evidence presented by World Rugby and reviewed by the IRFU Medical Department.

Feedback from Irish Rugby stakeholders through the consultation process to date also indicates that the Irish Rugby community is open to implementing a law trial with the aim of reducing head-on-head impact.

- [Click here for more information on World Rugby’s Global Law Trial](#)
- [Click here for an information guide from the IRFU Medical Department](#)

2.6 What would be the goal of this trial?

The core focus of this trial would be to see if lowering the tackle height can reduce head-on-head contact in the tackle.

Feedback from the consultation process to date has shown that the Irish Rugby community is open to a law trial which could make the game safer.

Focusing the trial around reducing head-on-head contact targets an area of greater risk to rugby players while adhering to rugby union’s principles of play.

2.7 Why this trial in particular?

The IRFU is looking to identify a trial which requires minimal change but can lead to maximum results.

There is a reasonable expectation that we can lower tackle height from the line of the shoulder to the line of the sternum.

In practise, this would seek to lower the maximum height of a legal tackle by 10-15cms, based on the average height of males and females.

This small change can influence the amount of head-on-head contacts we’re seeing in the game while promoting tackle behaviours which focus more on tackling in the green zone area.

The IRFU are not advocating a law trial which sets legal tackle height below waist height at all levels of the game.

Laboratory and World Rugby studies have shown there is:

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| GREEN ZONE: | Belly area (between torso and waist) - head injury risk is lowest. |
| ORANGE ZONE | Waist down to the ground - a moderate head injury risk. |
| RED ZONE: | Head and shoulder - highest risk of head injury. |

[For more information on this table, please review the IRFU Medical Department Information Guide](#)

3.1 What levels and grades of Irish Rugby would be included in this trial?

| | |
|---|--|
| Rugby Prime (U6 and U7) Boys & Girls | <i>No Change (Non-Contact)</i> |
| Mini Rugby (U8 to U12) Boys & Girls | <i>No Change (Waist Height Or Below)</i> |
| Age Grade (U13 to U20.5) Boys & Girls | <i>Below The Sternum</i> |
| Schools Boys & Girls | <i>Below The Sternum</i> |
| Junior Club Men and Women | <i>Below The Sternum</i> |
| Senior Club (Energia AIL) Men and Women | <i>Below The Sternum</i> |
| Regional and Interprovincial Rugby (Amateur) | <i>Below The Sternum</i> |

3.2 If this only applies to amateur rugby, how will it affect clubs and schools players with ambitions of being contracted?

Approximately 99.73% of Irish Rugby's playing population is amateur and this trial would be designed to making the game safer for them in particular.

The 0.27% of contracted players within the Irish Rugby system have access to high performance environments designed to prepare them for professional rugby.

A reasonable modification to tackle height should not be viewed as a barrier to playing professional rugby.

3.3 What about contracted players who play at amateur levels?

The trial would not operate on a player-by-player basis – it would apply to all participants in amateur competitions.

Using the Energia All-Ireland League as an example - Of the 1020 players active in a round of the Men's Division, an average of 40 players are contracted (senior and academy squad contracts). The trial is designed to benefit the 96.08% of amateur players and it is not expected that the 3.92% would be adversely affected.

3.4 For this trial to apply to all amateur rugby, shouldn't we raise tackle height for mini rugby players?

No. Tackle height for boys and girls from U8 to U12 is not subject to change. While tackling at or below the waist presents a moderate risk of injury, there is no reported prevalence of injury at mini rugby level in Irish Rugby due to tackle height.

The emphasis will remain on teaching correct technique and a penalty is the sanction for tackles above the waist.

4

REFEREEING THE LAW TRIAL

4.1 How would the law trial be refereed?

Should a referee (or touch judge) judge a tackle to be above the line of the sternum, the tackler(s) is/are liable to be sanctioned.

The level of sanction will be determined by the referee based on his/her judgement on the level of danger.

A framework for decision making in the application of any law trial would be available to referees ahead of implementation.

4.2 What about double tackles?

All legal tackles in open play should be below the line of the sternum including 2v1 tackles (simultaneous and subsequent)

According to World Rugby, *“Nearly half of all tackles involve more than one tackler.”*

4.3 What about the pick-and-go?

A law trial would not change the ability for an attacking team to carry out a “pick-and-go” play.

A tackler remains liable to sanction if they have initiated shoulder-to-head/neck or head-to-head/neck contact.

Pick-and-goes are generally lower speed impacts which do not incur the greatest risk – this trial is primarily focused on tackle behaviour in open play.

Legal height of a tackle in a pick-and-go scenario will be kept under review as the trial progresses.

4.4 What about rucks and mauls?

World Rugby Law 9.20.b states that “a player must not make contact with an opponent above the line of the shoulders.”

No change would be proposed to this law for the purposes of this trial, meaning that contact in a ruck or maul up to the line of the shoulder would be permitted.

Any player in the opinion of the referee acting in a dangerous way is liable to sanction.

4.5 What about the role of the ball carrier?

There would be no law change applied to the ball carrier.

Previous trials to reduce head-to-head contact in amateur rugby have included specific measures which apply to the ball carrier.

Rugby Union Law 9.11 currently states that:

“Players must not do anything that is reckless or dangerous to others including leading with the elbow or forearm, or jumping into, or over, a tackler.”

For the purposes of this trial, a strict approach would be applied to reckless or dangerous play by a ball carrier. This would include a ball carrier leading with their head or initiating contact with their head.

5 COACHING THE LAW TRIAL

How can this law trial be coached?

A suite of resources are coming online in the summer of the 2023 to help clubs and schools promote positive tackle behaviours.

To help clubs and schools use pre-season training to adequately prepare for a law trial, the IRFU would make a number of resources available to clubs including videos and infographics.

A series of coaching workshops would also be made available to assist coaches in preparing their players for a law trial.

6.1 How long would a law trial last for?

A law trial would last for a period of two seasons – 2023/24 and 2024/25.

Review findings would be shared with clubs and schools at the end of the first season and on a more regular basis in the second season.

6.2 How would the law trial be monitored and measured?

IRIS is the Irish Rugby Injury Surveillance research project. It is a comprehensive measurement tool for games in the Energia All-Ireland League Men's and Women's Divisions and schoolboy senior cup competitions.

IRIS research records the incidence, type, nature and severity of both match and training injuries occurring across the amateur game in Ireland.

This data would be used to determine rate of change in match injury occurrence due to change in tackle height. Head injuries and injuries to other areas would be included.

There are currently four years of findings from Energia All-Ireland League research and two years of findings from schools senior cup games for comparative purposes.

Monitoring of the trial would feature qualitative and quantitative data analysis on an ongoing basis. This would include video analysis to tracking of any changes to game play and the gathering of feedback from players, coaches and match officials across a number of areas.

6.3 When would a trial commence?

After resources have been made available to clubs and schools and pre-season has been used to prepare players for a law trial, the trial would commence from the start of the 2023/24 season.

6.4 What are the expected results of the trial?

The core focus of this trial would be to see if lowering the tackle height can reduce head-on-head contact in the tackle.

While the intended outcome is the reduction of head-on-head contacts in the tackle, trials by their very nature cannot have expected results.

However it is expected that Irish Rugby stakeholders would buy into the trial, as new research has indicated we can reduce risk and make the game safer for our players.

There may also be unintended consequences. For instance, we may see an increase in the number of penalties for dangerous play – particularly in the early stages of the trial.

This rate of increase would be no fault of the players or the referees. It would simply be a by-product of behavioural change across a varied group of stakeholders.

Again, the important thing to remember would be a positive outcome at the end of the trial – reducing the risks of rugby to current players and potentially making the game more appealing to new players.