



NATIONAL PRACTICE GUIDELINES

FOR YOUTH FOOTBALL



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BACKGROUND

USA Football is committed to advancing player safety to protect the health and well-being of every child. In addition to coaching education, a key element of player health and safety is the responsibility of all coaches to conduct organized practices and teach proper fundamentals in a safer environment. There are approximately 9,300 youth tackle football organizations in the United States. Within these are approximately 2.5 million young athletes who play and 400,000 adults who coach. These guidelines were developed in conjunction with leaders across medicine, sports science and child development.

PURPOSE

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide youth football organizations with recommendations to establish consistent methods designed to limit the chance for injury during structured practice sessions. This document provides youth football commissioners and coaches with heat acclimatization guidelines, clear definitions of contact, recommendation of prohibited drills and the number of practices per week, and time limits on player-to-player full contact.

There is much to be learned about helmet impacts in youth sports. We remain committed to adopting the best evidence-based practices. We recognize that even with the latest research available, there is no clear consensus in this area. Accordingly, we will update these recommendations and guidelines in accordance with the evidence. Ideally, this emerging data will help us understand the potential for long-term adverse cognitive, emotional and/or neurological effects from concussions and/or other repeated head contact without associated symptoms. Based on what is known about concussions today, the guiding principles in developing these recommendations were to reasonably limit head contact and thus concussion risk.

USA Football strongly recommends that all athletes receive a pre-participation physical examination before the start of every season.

GUIDELINE 1

Implementing a preseason youth football heat acclimatization period

Reported cases of exertional heat stroke (EHS) currently rank among the top-three causes of sport participation fatalities. Setting mandatory guidelines for heat acclimatization provides a vital standard to protect athletes against exertional heat illnesses and possibly save lives. The majority of EHS cases occur during summer workouts when athletes are unprepared to cope with environmental conditions and physiological demands placed upon them. Heat acclimatization guidelines recommend that athletes be introduced slowly to environmental stresses during practice sessions, resulting in a lowered risk for EHS. These guidelines call for a two-week period (10-14 days) when coaches gradually increase the length and intensity of practice and the amount of equipment that can be worn. At all times, athletes should have access to fluids and have periods of rest throughout a practice.

Recommendations include:

1. At no time throughout the preseason or regular season should teams practice more than once per day (no two-a-day practices).
2. During practice days one and two of the heat-acclimatization period, a helmet should be the only protective equipment permitted. No form of player-to-player contact should occur during the first two practices. Please refer to USA Football's Practice Time Guidelines for practice frequency recommendations.
3. During practice days three and four, only helmets and shoulder pads should be worn. No full contact drills should be allowed. USA Football defines full contact as drills being run at "Thud" and "Live" tempo. Coaches are encouraged to limit player-to-player contact up to "Controlled Levels" using USA Football's Levels of Contact. Please refer to USA Football's Practice Time Guidelines for practice frequency recommendations.
4. On practice days 5 and 6, controlled contact which would occur no sooner than the second week of a youth organization's preseason schedule according to these guidelines, teams have the option to wear full pads and full contact drills can begin and should be utilized within the recommended time allocation discussed below. Please refer to USA Football's Practice Time Guidelines for practice frequency recommendations.
5. If a practice is interrupted by inclement weather or heat restrictions on any of the practice days, the practice should resume once conditions are deemed safe.
6. On days when environmental conditions (via heat-index or Wet Bulb Globe Temperature) are extreme, modifications should be made to the work-to-rest ratio (to allow for cool-down periods and rehydration) or rescheduled to cooler parts of the day; i.e., before 10:00 a.m. or after 6:00 p.m.

USA Football's Practice Time Guidelines

AGE	PRACTICE LENGTH (MINUTES)	PRACTICES PER WEEK
Age 5+	30-60 min	1-2 practice(s)
Age 8+	60-90 min	1-3 practice(s)
Age 10+	75-105 min	2-3 practices
Age 12 thru Pre-HS	90-120 min	2-3 practices

Note: This chart is strictly concerned with the frequency and duration of practices as it relates to age. Time limits on contact are addressed within other recommendations.

GUIDELINE 2

Ensure all youth coaches understand the definition of “full contact”

Full contact drills should be limited during the preseason and regular season as the number of exposures may increase the chance for injury to youth players. For purposes of these guidelines, full contact consists of both “Thud” and “Live Action” using USA Football’s definitions of Levels of Contact.

Rationale: By definition, “Thud” involves initiation of contact at competitive speed with no predetermined winner, but no take-down to the ground. Initial contact, particularly with linemen, is just as physical with “Thud” as with “Live Action.” USA Football recognizes that “Live Action” likely carries a higher injury risk to the body than does “Thud.”

GUIDELINE 3

Recommended number of team practices and amount of “full contact” drills per week

Preseason Recommendation

Following the preseason acclimatization period, coaches are to limit the amount of full contact to no more than 30 minutes per day (75 minutes per week limitation). No two-a-day practices should be allowed at any point throughout the preseason. Please refer to USA Football’s Practice Guideline Chart for recommended practice times by age. USA Football recommends no more than one live-action scrimmage per week.

Rationale: USA Football recognizes preseason practices may require more full contact time than practices occurring in the regular season to allow for teaching fundamentals with sufficient repetition to prepare for the season. Coaches are encouraged to introduce contact through a progressive manner to ensure they are using proper technique before full contact (Thud & Live Action) drills are allowed.

USA Football recommends that practices involving drills or activities considered to be full contact are not allowed on consecutive days. This includes the day following a game or live-action scrimmage. Full contact is defined as any drill or activity in which contact occurs at a competitive speed. Full contact drills and activities are based on the initial player-to-player contact, regardless of whether an athlete goes to ground or not. Please refer to USA Football’s Levels of Contact in this section.

Regular Season Recommendation

Once the regular season begins and games commence, USA Football recommends the number of practices per week is decreased to account for the weekly game. Coaches are to limit the amount of full contact to no more than 30 minutes per day (60 minutes per week maximum). Please refer to USA Football’s Practice Guideline Chart for recommended practice times. No more than one full contact game or live-action scrimmage is recommended per week. In postseason, a minimum of three days should lapse between full contact games.

Rationale: At this point in the season, games have begun and full contact exposure rates have increased on a weekly basis for players. To account for this, the recommendation to eliminate one practice per week and decrease the amount of time dedicated to full contact drills decreases the number of exposures per week.

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GUIDELINE 4

Coaches need to use a practice plan and assign a “level of contact” for every drill according to USA Football’s Level of Contact chart

USA Football defines contact using its Levels of Contact chart (see below) to help coaches assign a level of resistance for each drill period within their practice plan.

Properly employing the levels of contact during a football practice is an important skill for youth coaches to learn. This is completed by adjusting the distance between players, the speed at which they conduct a drill and modifying the “winner” of a drill. In doing this, coaches can better accomplish specific teaching objectives during practices and decrease the chance for injury.

Planning when to teach, when to compete and when to adjust contact promotes a better experience for players and coaches. Proper usage of the Levels of Contact system will help players perform their contact skills at a high level while instilling confidence. Employing the Levels of Contact system also helps reduce player fatigue, which can advance player safety.

Explaining Levels of Contact

Levels of Contact focuses on varying intensity levels throughout practices to build player confidence, ensure their safety and prevent both physical and mental exhaustion.

Three levels that include six different intensity components are used to introduce players to practice drills which position them to master the fundamentals and increase skill development.

LEVELS OF CONTACT	Contact	Intensity	Description
No Player-to-Player	AIR	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players run a drill unopposed without contact
	BAGS	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drill is run with a bag or against another soft contact surface
Controlled Contact	CONTROL	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drill is run at an assigned speed until the moment of contact • One player is pre-determined the winner by the coach • Contact remains above the waist and players stay on their feet
	CONTROL to GROUND	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drill is run at an assigned non-competitive speed or with players pre-engaged • One player is pre-determined as the winner • Players are allowed to take their opponent to the ground in a controlled manner
Full Contact	THUD	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drill is run at a competitive speed through the moment of contact. • There is no predetermined “winner.” • Contact is above the waist; • Players stay on their feet and a quick whistle ends the drill
	LIVE	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drill is run at a competitive speed in game-like conditions.

GUIDELINE 5

Recommendation to prohibit select drills:

In the interest of safer play and to remove high-risk drills which have limited transfer to skill development, USA Football recommends youth programs prohibit contact drills that meet the following criteria:

- Only promote or teach contact "down the middle" of an opponent with no intent to offset the contact point.
- Do not allow for players to win with speed or angles, but only through physical contact or collision.
- Game- or Pod-based drills that require no game-specific reaction such as a designated ball insertion point for the offense, a run/pass threat or designating a specific gap to control for the defense.
- Any full-contact drills that allow for greater than a 2:1 player-to-player ratio.
- Drills that include any of the essential elements listed in the above definitions.

This would include player-to-player contact drills such as:

- Board Drill / OL vs. DL In-Line Run Blocking with no variation of run, pass or play going right or left
- Bull in the Ring / King of the Circle
- Oklahoma Drill
- Pods / 3-Spot without Run-Pass Read

GUIDELINE 6

Recommendation on the Two-Point Stance:

For youth football programs playing any version of Non-Contact, Limited Contact and/or Modified Contact games (i.e., Rookie Tackle®), it is recommended that all players initiate movement from the two-point stance.

Recommendation at the youth Senior Tackle™ level (traditional full field, full contact) to use the two-point stance for offensive players:

For youth tackle football played at the Senior Tackle™ level (traditional full field, full contact), programs are encouraged to instruct and use the two-point stance for players on the offensive side of the line of scrimmage.

Practice Plan Example Within & Exceeding 30-Minute Full Contact Allocation

Please see the USA Football Coach Planner App. Download the USA Football Coach Planner App by visiting usafootball.com/coach-planner.

You can also access PDFs of the USA Football Practice Plan, which available to any coach who purchases a certification. Learn more at usafootball.com/certification.



References

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