

Recommendations and Guidelines for Minimizing Head Impact Exposure and Concussion Risk in Football

The Alaska School Activities Association, along with its Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (SMAC) has reviewed the recommendations of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) regarding policies to minimizing head impact exposure and concussion risk in football. ASAA strongly recommends to its member schools and districts to adopt the following as policy.

1. Full-contact should be limited during the regular season, as well as during activity outside of the traditional fall football season. For purposes of these recommendations and guidelines, full-contact consists of both “Thud” and “Live Action” using the USA Football definitions of *Levels of Contact*.

Rationale: By definition, “Thud” involves initiation of contact at full speed with no pre-determined winner, but no take-down to the ground. Accordingly, the task force supports that initial contact, particularly with lineman, is just as violent with “Thud” as with “Live Action.” However, the task force also recognizes that “Live Action” likely carries a higher risk for other injuries to the body than does “Thud.” The USA Football *Levels of Contact* “Air,” “Bags,” and “Control” are considered no- or light-contact, and thus no limitations are placed on their use.

2. Schools in Alaska should limit contact in practices. ASAA strongly recommends that full-contact shall be allowed in no more than 2 practices per week. Full-contact shall not be permitted on **more than 2** consecutive days. Full-contact time shall be no more than 30 minutes per day and no more than 60 minutes per week. **In no cases should a contact practice and a game be allowed on the same day.**

Rationale: There is insufficient data to specify with certainty a research-validated “best practices” standard for contact limitations. Several states (Alabama, Arizona, Maryland, and Texas) adopted varying limitations on contact prior to the 2013 football season. Preliminary *High School RIO* injury surveillance data suggest these states have seen a statistically significant decrease in concussion rates during practices, with no increase in concussion or other injuries during games.

3. Prior to regular season games, practices may require more full-contact time than practices occurring during the regular season, to allow for teaching fundamentals with sufficient repetition. ASAA strongly recommends that, in these practices, full contact shall be allowed in no more than three practices per week. Full contact shall not be permitted on **more than two** consecutive days. Full contact time shall be no more than 30 minutes per day and 90 minutes per week.

- A. Pre-season heat acclimatization protocols and regulations regarding heat and hydration take precedent and should always be followed.
- B. While total full-contact practice days and time limitations may be increased during the pre-season, the emphasis should focus on the proper principles of tackling and blocking during the first several practices, before progressing to “Thud” and “Live Contact.”

Rationale: Regular season practice limitations may need to be revised during the pre-season. This should be done in a specific and systematic manner to allow coaches to spend sufficient time teaching proper tackling and blocking techniques. Emphasis should be placed upon inexperienced players, as they slowly work through tackling and blocking progressions with “Air,” “Bags,” and “Control” using the USA Football definitions of “Levels of Contact.”

4. During pre-season, if twice-daily practices are held only one session per day should include full- contact.

Rationale: The adolescent brain needs sufficient recovery time following full-contact practices. In addition, concussion signs and/or symptoms may not develop for several hours after the initial injury.

5. ASAA has reviewed and recommends no change in the current ASAA policy which sets a maximum of six quarters played during a 1-week time frame.

For purposes of this policy a week is defined as a NFHS numbered week, and a team must have 3 full calendar days between contests. For example: if a game is played on Friday, the soonest that the next game can be scheduled is on Tuesday.

After 6 quarters of play per week, a kicking specialist may participate in up to 8 quarters per week, providing that in 4 quarters the player does no more than kick.

Rationale: High School RIO data consistently show that competition presents the highest risk for concussion. Participation in games at multiple levels of competition during a single week increases risk for head injury and unnecessarily increases head impact exposure. In addition, games played on consecutive days or those scheduled on the same day (C team and Junior Varsity games or Junior Varsity and Varsity games) may not allow the brain an opportunity to adequately recover. Consideration should be given to moderating these situations as much as possible.

6. Consistent with efforts to minimize total exposure to full-contact, head impact exposure, and concussion risk, organizations sponsoring football outside of the traditional fall football season should follow the policies outlined in 2 and 3 above.

The Football Camp Recommendations would be:

All campers can participate in up to 60 individual contact/thud instances per day. Camps will not have contact more than two consecutive days and will not exceed three contact days per week.

Rationale: Football played outside of the traditional fall football season presents an opportunity for learning, physical activity, and skill development. However, athletes are at further risk for head impact exposure and concussion during any full-contact activity. Consideration should be given to significantly limiting the total time of full-contact. Other factors to consider include time elapsed since the previous football season and whether individual athletes have recently been, or are currently, participating in other contact/collision sports (e.g., Ice Hockey, Lacrosse, Soccer and Wrestling). Athletes with a history of previous concussions, especially if accompanied by the factors which increase risk of concussion,

should seriously consider refraining from activities characterized by head impact exposure.

7. The NFHS, the NFHS SMAC, the ASAA SMAC and ASAA agree that an Emergency Action Plan for each venue, with clearly defined written and practiced protocols, should be developed and in place at every high school. When possible, an athletic trainer should be present at all practices and games.

Rationale: An effective emergency action plan (EAP) should be in place as a prompt and appropriate response to any emergency situation can save a life. The EAP should be designed and practiced to address all teams (Freshman, Junior Varsity, and Varsity) and all practice and game sites. An athletic trainer is a key component in any strategy to minimize injury risk and optimize safety for all participants.

ASAA will continue to reach out to coaches' association, working together to design and implement coach education programs that appropriately integrate youth, middle school, and high school football programs in every community. USA Football and the NFHS Fundamentals of Coaching courses will be the primary education resources for all coaches. Education for coaches should also include the proper fitting and care of helmets.

Rationale: The game of football continues to evolve and proper coaching technique at each level is fundamental to keeping the game safe and enjoyable. A proper fitting helmet may help decrease, but not eliminate, concussion risk.

ASAA will regularly educate its schools on current state concussion law and policies and recommend that schools to have a written Concussion Management Protocol. Schools should also be encouraged to share this information with coaches, parents, and students annually.

Rationale: Many schools experience frequent turnover of Athletic Directors and coaches. Frequent "refreshers" on state concussion laws and policies as well as sample concussion management protocols should be made available to ensure all schools are current on, and prepared for, safe and effective concussion management.