

INTRODUCTION TO CONTACT GAMES

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NORTH.

I remember the first day of teaching in my brand spanking new school, with me modelling my brand spanking new tracksuit and trainers. I was in effect a brand spanking newly qualified teacher - a probationer, as they were then known.

On this dawn of my 'brave new world' I was to shadow DRHM, my new Head of Physical Education and Games. "Come with me Robbo, we're going to start Rugby with the First Years." (Year Sevens to our younger brethren.)

So it began.

"Ten Blues, ten Whites and there is no punching, biting, kicking or grabbing of extremities. Here's the ball – bring it back to me!"

And that was that! The introduction to contact was done! In one fell swoop, any phobia of the physical had been averted (we hope) and it had been achieved in an informal atmosphere that engendered a team ethos, whilst allowing the new players to experience an introduction to a form of tackling, mauling and, to a lesser extent, rucking and informal scrummaging.

This teacher in charge was at the top of his game. He was (and still is) well versed in introducing the major games to young, enthusiastic charges, though you may be able to be a little critical of his methods.

"Were there any Health and Safety considerations which were not covered and could be an issue? Were there any children who did not experience a good introduction to contact rugby?"

The answer to both of the above question is more than likely "Yes" as this is the one area that new coaches are constantly concerned about – how to introduce contact safely and in a manner that enthralls the young player. Get it right and you have a player for life; get it wrong and that could be the end of rugby for that individual.

There are many RFU Non Award courses that offer coaches advice and rudimentary sessions for the introduction of contact: this contact might be within the warm-up, as stand-alone exercises or indeed as small-sided games. These courses (all

approximately three hours in length) include Start Rugby, Managing Contact and Tackle Safety.

START RUGBY.

Warm-up activities.

1.

- 1 ball per pair, jogging inside a 10 metre grid.
- Pass ball to each other whilst avoiding collisions and not dropping the ball.
- Continue, but on whistle change partners. Repeat activity, calling out partner's name for a pass.

2.

Start the group again, using a variety of activities (as above) in the grid and, for example on the whistle -

- Score a try and partner picks up the ball then he carries on to score.
- Ball carrier turns and holds the ball whilst partner wrestles to retrieve it.
- Fall correctly to the ground with the ball and pass to partner when on ground.
- Fall correctly to the ground with the ball and place the ball.
- Introduce the 'bump and feed' to introduce players to managing their body in contact.

Tim Reed, Community rugby coach for Suffolk uses an innovative method of warming up and introducing contact to younger players. He uses this method:

- Arrange players in groups of 5 or 6 in single file. Each one holds the person in front very tightly by the sides of their shorts.
- One person is on his/her own with a ball.

Now we begin.

Objective.

The person with the ball has to touch the person at the **back** of the single file with the ball between the shoulder blades. It just has to be a touch!

Everyone in the line has to work/move together to stop the person touching the ball against the last person in the line and the chain must not be broken. Initially the ball-carrier may not be touched

Outcome.

You tend to get lots of movement, (footwork, body swerve, etc,) teamwork and absolute exhaustion! This exhaustion can occur within twenty five seconds and the exercise lends itself very well to an efficient and fun warm-up

Keep changing the ball carrier and award points for success.

Within the Start Rugby and Managing Contact RFU Non Award courses there are many other warm-up types of exercises such as:

1. Back-to-back wrestling. Partners sit on ground and link arms whilst they are back-to-back. On the coach's command of "Left" or "Right," each tries to take the partner down onto the left or right side (the opposite direction from which the partner is working).
2. Stand and face your partner. Grasp your partner's left wrist with your right hand and he/she does the same. Try to touch his left shoulder with your right hand and try to stop him doing the same to you.

These games are great fun for the younger player and the emphasis is on a 'guided discovery' type of learning. The young players begin to appreciate what happens if you keep your feet together or apart. They begin to develop the correct foot position and strong base necessary for any contact skills.

Community Rugby Coach for Hertfordshire and Saracens, Jamie Traxon, uses a variety of wrestling games to introduce contact:

1. Wrestling.
 - In pairs and one kneels on all fours whilst the second player kneels at his side.
 - The second player (not on all fours) has thirty seconds to turn his partner onto his back.
2. Sumo wrestling.
 - Make circular coned areas. Put two players in each area and they work 1v1, trying to push the opponent out of the area.
3. Kabaddi. (More information on the game of Kabaddi, a raiding game that is well-suited to introducing young players to evasion skills, can be found at www.kabaddi.org)
 - Make a square grid which is split into two halves.
 - Select two teams of four, one in each half.
 - One of your team ventures into the opposition half and tries to touch an opposition player with the ball and then tries to return to his own half without being caught and 'detained' by the opposition.
 - If he is successful, the tagged player is out of the game – if the ball carrier is caught, then he suffers the same plight.

As with all physical games, reducing available space in the contact arena will allow the activity to be better managed. That, in turn, allows plenty of opportunity for the players to try out the game-related skills and offers plenty of opportunities to learn

through trial and error in a safe and non-threatening environment which is conducive to a learner-centred approach to coaching.

I think that the key to these types of games is to set the context early to the players regarding pitch, rules and objectives. After this is done, there are still huge implications surrounding discrepancy in size and emotional maturity. All coaches must avoid pitching a large, physically strong child against a smaller, weaker one. Do be aware of the small 'Tasmanian devil' who will take on anybody, regardless of the difference in age and/or size!

Finally, I mention probably one of the best tips I have been given and it came this week – it was not to over-complicate. Ian Simpson of Bishop Stortford High School introduces contact with a 'guard your cone' game. All players have a cone which they stand over. Two, three or four cone gatherers work as a team to gather as many cones as possible whilst the other players protect their cone by standing firm while the gatherer(s) can push/pull (legally) or barge the player away from his prize. It is simple, effective and it seems to achieve the objective of getting young players into contact without danger or apparent risk of injury.