Year-Round Football Practice
Contact for College Student-Athletes
Interassociation Consensus Recommendations

A briefing document submitted by:
The NCAA Sport Science Institute

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Purpose
The primary purpose of this briefing document is to clarify the key components of the 2017 interassociation consensus recommendations on Year-Round Football Practice Contact for College Student-Athletes.

The secondary purpose of the briefing document is to provide answers to frequently asked questions about the recommendations.

Who Should Read This?
This paper is intended primarily for those with responsibility to implement the recommendations.

Stakeholders include:
- Compliance Administrators
- Conference Commissioners of conferences that sponsor football
- Directors of Athletics of institutions that sponsor football
- Football Coaches
- Primary Athletics Health Care Providers (i.e., athletic trainers and team physicians)
- Strength and Conditioning Professionals
- Student-Athletes

What are the Recommendations?
The Year-Round Football Practice Contact Recommendations are the product of the Second Safety in College Football Summit, conducted in February 2016. They serve as an update to previously published guidelines (June 2014) addressing year-round football practice contact and include additional recommendations for pre-season, inseason, postseason and spring practice. These updated recommendations, supported by the Committee on Competitive Safeguards and Medical Aspects of Sports, endorsed by the Division I Football Oversight Committee and 20 other scientific, medical and football organizations, are based on emerging scientific consensus.

Why are the Recommendations Important?
Football practices remain a frequent source of injury, including concussion and repetitive head impact exposure, in all three NCAA divisions. Contemporary research reveals the risk of concussion is greater in practices that allow tackling versus practices that allow contact without tackling. Such research also reveals that head-to-head contact carries a greater risk of concussion in football than head-to-ground contact. The Year-Round Football Practice Contact Recommendations help coaches manage practices in a way that limits player-to-player contact, reduces the risk associated with head impact exposure and enhances an overall culture of safety for college football athletes.
What are the Key Components of the Recommendations?
The recommendations include the following key changes from the previous guidelines (see Appendix 1):

*Definitions*
1. Non-contact/minimal contact is consistent with USA Football’s recommendations ranging from unopposed drills to drills run at an assigned speed with a pre-determined winner.
2. Live contact/thud is clarified further as contact at a competitive speed in which players are not taken to the ground.
3. Live contact/tackling is clarified further as any practice that involves tackling to the ground.

*Preseason*
1. Recommendation to discontinue two-a-day practices.
2. Recommendation to allow an extension of the preseason by one week. This requires a legislative change if the preseason begins one week earlier.
3. Recommendation to reduce weekly live contact practices (tackling or thud) from four to three.
4. Recommendation to ensure three non-contact/minimal contact practices per week.
5. Recommendation to ensure non-contact/minimal contact practice the day following a scrimmage.
6. Recommendation to add one day per week of no football practice.
   Legislation 17.10.2.1 would need to be updated if the preseason practice time begins one week earlier.

*Inseason*
1. Recommendation to allow only one practice per week of live contact/tackling, and to allow one practice per week of live-contact/thud.
2. Recommendation to add three non-contact/minimal contact practices per week.

*Postseason*
1. If there is a two week or less period of time between the final regular season game or conference championship game (for participating institutions) and the next bowl or postseason game, then inseason practice recommendations remain in place.
2. If there is greater than two weeks between the final regular season game or conference championship game (for participating institutions) and the next bowl or postseason game, then recommendation to:
   a. Allow up to three practices per week of live contact (two of which should be live contact/thud).
   b. Add three days of non-contact/minimal contact practices in a given week.
   c. Ensure the day preceding and following live contact/tackling should be non-contact/minimal contact or no football practice.
   d. Ensure one day per week of no football practice.
Spring season
1. Recommendation to add that non-contact/minimal contact practice should take place the day following live scrimmage.
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

General
1. Are college football programs required to implement the interassociation consensus recommendations?
   The consensus recommendations are not legislated, therefore compliance with the recommendations is not mandated. Coaches and sports medicine staff should be aware, however, that actions that are divergent from an established standard of care may put their program at a legal and ethical risk.

2. Do any of the interassociation consensus recommendations require a legislative change?
   The preseason practice recommendations allow for preseason to be extended by one week in the calendar year to accommodate lost practice times from the elimination of two-a-days. If programs wish to start their preseason practice one-week earlier, this would require a legislative change. Further, current rules in all divisions allow two-a-days, so there may be a need to amend this legislation to eliminate two-a-days.

Definitions
3. Current trends support a rugby style/safe tackling approach that includes a brief period of skill development during practice. Does the safe tackling skill development trigger the use of a live-contact/tackling practice?
   No. Using the intent of the new definitions, if the rugby style/safe tackling approach has a pre-determined “winner,” and is primarily instructional, then it is most consistent with live contact/thud.

4. What does “control” mean as used to define non-contact/minimal contact practice?
   Control means that the tempo and outcome of tackling is controlled as compared to competitive speed or tackling to the ground.

5. Is the use of equipment during non-contact/minimal contact practices at the discretion of the coach and medical staff, or should the practices be non-padded, no helmet?
   The use of equipment during non-contact/minimal contact practices is at the discretion of the coach and medical staff.

Preseason Practice
6. If the day following a scrimmage is a designated day off, does the subsequent day need to be a non-contact/minimal contact practice?
   No.

7. Can preseason practice start one-week earlier to accommodate the lost practice time associated with the recommendation to eliminate two-a-day practices?
   Not without a legislative change.
8. Give the recommendation to discontinue two-a-day practices, what if any activities are recommended for programs to conduct during the second session of a practice day?

* A second session of no helmet/pad activity may include walk-throughs or meetings; conditioning in the second session of activity is not recommended.  

9. What type of activities may a program conduct during the required one day of no football practice?

* Medical treatment is allowed if required. However, no formal football-related activity is permitted, including (1) no contact with sport coaches or strength and conditioning specialists; (2) no assigned drills, conditioning or film review. 

**Inseason Practice**

10. On the day after a competition, can a student-athlete who did not compete subsequently participate in live-contact/tackling practice while student-athletes that did compete in the game participate in a non-contact/minimal contact practice? 

* Yes, this is consistent with the intent of the recommendations. 

11. On the day after a competition, can a student-athlete who played a limited role in the game and not in their specific position (e.g. played five plays as kick-off cover in which most plays were touchbacks) participate in a live-contact/tackling practice at their respective position on offense or defense to continue their positional development? 

* No, this is inconsistent with the intent of the recommendations. Any participation by a student-athlete in a competition, regardless of the length of time or position, represents an athletic exposure. 

12. During a “bye” week, can a student-athlete participate in two live-contact/tackling practices? 

* Yes, this is consistent with the intent of the recommendations. 

13. During a “bye” week that has less than five days of practice, can a student-athlete participate in one day of live-contact/tackling, one day of live-contact/thud, and two days of non-contact/minimal contact practices?  

* Yes, this is consistent with the intent of the recommendations. 

14. Can a student-athlete participate in two days of live-contact/thud practice in lieu of one day of live-contact/tackling and one day of live-contact/thud? 

* Yes, two live-contact/thud practices provide less head impact exposure than one live-contact/thud and one live-contact/tackling practice, so this is consistent with the intent of the recommendations. 


Postseason Practice

15. The recommendations state that the day preceding and following live contact/tackling should be non-contact/minimal contact or no football practice. Why is this the only application of the recommendations in which a non-contact/minimal contact practice is recommended prior to a live contact/tackling practice?

This was a result of many discussions with football coaches and the Division I Football Oversight Committee. It represented a balance between an increase in contact and safeguarding against that increase.

Spring Practice

16. If the day following a scrimmage is a day off, does the subsequent day need to be a non-contact/minimal contact practice?

No.

Year-Round Training

17. Is year-round training addressed in the interassociation consensus recommendations?

While year-round training recommendations were discussed at the Safety in College Football Summit, they were not included in the final recommendations because this would have triggered legislated changes. The next step is for the membership to work from these recommendations to consider a holistic, legislated, year-round approach to football.
Purpose:
The Safety in College Football Summit (see appendix) resulted in inter-association consensus guidelines for three paramount safety issues in collegiate athletics:

1. Independent medical care in the collegiate setting;
2. Concussion diagnosis and management; and
3. Football practice contact.

This document addresses year-round football practice contact.

Background:
Enhancing a culture of safety in collegiate sport is foundational. Football is an aggressive, rugged, contact sport, yet the rules clearly state that there is no place for maneuvers deliberately designed to inflict injury on another player. Historically, rules changes and behavior modification have reduced catastrophic injury and death. Enforcement of these rules is critical for improving player safety. Despite sound data on reducing catastrophic football injuries, there are limited data that provide a strong foothold for decreasing injury risk by reducing contact in football practice. Regardless of such scientific shortcomings, there is a growing consensus that we must analyze existing data in a consensus-based manner to develop guidelines that promote safety. “Safe” football means “good” football.

NCAA regulations currently do not address inseason, full-contact practices. The Ivy League and Pac-12 Conference have limited inseason, full-contact practices to two per week and have established policies for full-contact practices in spring and preseason practices through their Football Practice Standards and Football Practice Policy, respectively. Neither address full-pad practice that does not involve live contact practice, as defined below. Both conferences cite safety concerns as the primary rationale for reducing full-contact practices; neither conference has published or announced data analysis based on their new policies. In keeping with the intent of both conferences and other football organizations, the rationale for defining and reducing live contact practice is to improve safety, including possibly decreasing student-athlete exposure for concussion and sub-concussive impacts. Reduced frequency of live contact practice may also allow even more time for teaching of proper tackling technique.

The biomechanical threshold (acceleration/deceleration/rotation) at which sport-related concussion occurs is unknown. Likewise, there are no conclusive data for understanding the short- or long-term clinical impact of sub-concussive impacts. However, there are emerging data that football players are more frequently diagnosed with sport-related concussion on days with increased frequency and higher magnitude of head impact (greater than 100g linear acceleration).
Traditionally, the literature addressing differing levels of contact in football practice correlated with the protective equipment (uniform) worn. This means that full-pad practice correlated with full-contact and both half-pad (shell) and helmet-only practice correlated with less contact. However, coaches, administrators and athletics health care providers who helped to shape these guidelines have noted that contact during football practice is not determined primarily by the uniform, but rather by whether the intent of practice is centered on live contact versus teaching and conditioning. There are limited data that address this issue, and such data do not differentiate whether the intent of the practice is live tackling or teaching/conditioning. Within these limitations, non-published data from a single institution reveal the following:

- The total number of non-concussive head impacts sustained in helmets-only and full-pad practices is higher than those sustained in games/scrimmages.
- Mild- and moderate-intensity head impacts occur at an essentially equal rate during full-pad and half-pad practices when the intent of practice is not noted.
- Severe-intensity head impacts are much more likely to occur during a game, followed by full-pad practices and half-pad practices.
- There is a 14-fold increase in concussive impacts in full-pad practices when compared to half-pad or helmets-only practices.
- Offensive linemen and defensive linemen experience more head impacts during both full-pad and half-pad practices relative to all other positions.

The guidelines below are based on: expert consensus from the two day summit referenced above; comments and recommendations from a broad constituency of the organizations listed; and internal NCAA staff members. Importantly, the emphasis is on limiting contact, regardless of whether the student-athlete is in full-pad, half-pad, or is participating in a helmet-only practice. Equally importantly, the principles of sound and safe conditioning are an essential aspect of all practice and competition exposures.

These guidelines must be differentiated from legislation. For each section below that addresses a particular part of the football calendar, any legislation for that calendar period is referenced. As these guidelines are based on consensus and limited science, they are best viewed as a “living, breathing” document that will be updated, as we have with other health and safety guidelines, based on emerging science or sound observations that result from application of these guidelines. The intent is to reduce injury risk, but we must also be attentive to unintended consequences of shifting a practice paradigm based on consensus. For example, football preseason must prepare the student-athlete for the rigors of an aggressive, contact, rugged sport. Without adequate preparation, which includes live tackling, the student-athlete could be at risk of unforeseen injury during the inseason because of inadequate preparation. We plan to reanalyze these football practice contact guidelines at least annually. Additionally, we recognize that NCAA input for these guidelines came primarily from Division I Football Bowl Subdivision schools. Although we believe the guidelines can also be utilized for football programs in all
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NCAA divisions, we will be more inclusive in the development of future football contact practice guidelines.

Definitions:

**Live contact practice:** Any practice that involves live tackling to the ground and/or full-speed blocking. Live contact practice may occur in full-pad or half-pad (also known as “shell,” in which the player wears shoulder pads and shorts, with or without thigh pads). Live contact does not include: (1) “thud” sessions, or (2) drills that involve “wrapping up;” in these scenarios players are not taken to the ground and contact is not aggressive in nature. Live contact practices are to be conducted in a manner consistent with existing rules that prohibit targeting to the head or neck area with the helmet, forearm, elbow, or shoulder, or the initiation of contact with the helmet.

**Full-pad practice:** Full-pad practice may or may not involve live contact. Full-pad practices that do not involve live contact are intended to provide preparation for a game that is played in a full uniform, with an emphasis on technique and conditioning versus impact.

Legislation versus guidelines:

There exists relevant NCAA legislation for the following:

1. Preseason practice
   a. DI FBS/FCS – NCAA Bylaws 17.9.2.3 and 17.9.2.4
   b. DII – NCAA Bylaws 17.9.2.2 and 17.9.2.3
   c. DIII – NCAA Bylaws 17.9.2.2 and 17.9.2.3

2. In-season practice: No current NCAA legislation addresses contact during in-season practices.

3. Postseason practice: No current NCAA legislation addresses contact during postseason practices.


5. Spring practice:
   a. DI FBS/FCS – NCAA Bylaw 17.9.6.4
   b. DII – NCAA Bylaw 17.9.8
   c. DIII – NCAA Bylaw 17.9.6 – not referenced to as spring practice, but allows five (5) week period outside playing season.

The guidelines that follow do not represent legislation or rules. As noted in the appendix, the intent of providing consensus guidelines in year one of the inaugural *Safety in College Football Summit* is to provide consensus-based guidance that will be evaluated “real-time” as a “living and breathing” document that will become solidified over time through evidence-based observations and experience.
Preseason practice guidelines:
For days in which institutions schedule a two-a-day practice, live contact practices are only allowed in one practice. A maximum four (4) live contact practices may occur in a given week, and a maximum of 12 total may occur in preseason. Only three practices (scrimmages) would allow for live contact in greater than 50 percent of the practice schedule.

Inseason practice guidelines:
Inseason is defined as the period between six (6) days prior to the first regular-season game and the final regular-season game or conference championship game (for participating institutions). There may be no more than two (2) live contact practices per week.

Postseason guidelines: (FCS/DII/DIII)
There may be no more than two (2) live contact practices per week.

Bowl practice guidelines: (FBS)
There may be no more than two (2) live contact practices per week.

Spring practice guidelines:
Of the 15 allowable sessions that may occur during the spring practice season, eight (8) practices may involve live contact; three (3) of these live contact practices may include greater than 50 percent live contact (scrimmages). Live contact practices are limited to two (2) in a given week and may not occur on consecutive days.

References:


10. Trulock S, Oliaro S. Practice contact. *Safety in College Football Summit.* Presented January 22, 2014, Atlanta, GA.


**Endorsing Organizations:**

- American Academy of Neurology
- American College of Sports Medicine
- American Association of Neurological Surgeons
- American Football Coaches Association
- American Medical Society for Sports Medicine
- American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine
- American Osteopathic Academy for Sports Medicine
- College Athletic Trainers’ Society
- Congress of Neurological Surgeons
- Football Championship Subdivision Executive Committee
- National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics
- National Athletic Trainers’ Association
- National Football Foundation
- NCAA Concussion Task Force
- Sports Neuropsychological Society
REFERENCES
