



**ROOKIE TACKLE<sup>®</sup>**  
IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	3
What is the Football Development Model? .....	4
Implementation and Game Philosophy .....	4
Adopting Rookie Tackle .....	5
Timing and Overtime .....	7
Scoring .....	7
Participation .....	8
Coaches .....	9
Recommended Season Length and Games Per Season .....	9
Weekly Practice and Contact Limits .....	10



## THANK YOU ESPN

USA Football sincerely appreciates ESPN for the support of its Football Development Model

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## INTRODUCTION

**USA Football's Rookie Tackle®** game type is part of the Football Development Model (FDM). It is a small-sided tackle football game designed as part of the progression from Non-Contact to Limited Contact to Rookie and Senior Tackle™ games. It also serves as a child's first experience to tackle football.

By modifying the game at younger age groups - including the elimination of the 3-point stance and special teams - we can create an appropriate athlete-centered experience.

By educating coaches, commissioners, officials and parents on these game adjustments, mechanics and skills, we are leading the way for a better, safer game.

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## WHAT IS THE FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT MODEL?

The Football Development Model (FDM) is USA Football’s new initiative designed to help coaches teach athletes based on their age, the skills they are learning and game type. From flag to traditional tackle, USA Football has outlined the progression of game types to give leagues and players options to share and play the game. These game types, in addition to the skill and age progressions, help reduce contact and make the game safer. Learn more at [usafootball.com/fdm](https://usafootball.com/fdm)

## IMPLEMENTATION AND GAME PHILOSOPHY

Like all other forms of youth football, USA Football envisions leagues and clubs adopting the Rookie Tackle game structure and adding this offering to their league pathway. While USA Football will provide the initial game structure and rule book, we are aware it will be governed and implemented at local levels. As such, the number of players on the field may vary from six to eight to meet community needs, registration numbers or individual circumstances.

### **The goals of Rookie Tackle are:**

1. Participants learning the “all players, all positions, all skills” philosophy.
  - a. Not all players may play every position, every game or even through the course of the entire season. All players should have at least one offensive and defensive line position as well as one offensive and defensive skill position to play each game.
  - b. In practice, players should learn all skills of all positions for development purposes in accordance with the Football Development Model principles.
2. Maximizing player enjoyment and skill development.
3. Ensuring all players have meaningful playing time and the opportunity for improvement and success during game action.
4. Designed to be implemented as part of the progression from non-contact to limited contact to Rookie and Senior Tackle games.
5. Encouraging leagues to play on a smaller field size that is appropriately scaled to the age, size and skill level of the youth football players.
6. Encouraging a fast-paced game with more plays, greater activity and the promotion of fun.
7. Emphasizing fundamental skill development by isolating situations for players to showcase their abilities via formation regulations and limited field size.

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8. Allowing leagues and clubs to maximize field space by playing two games at a time on one regulation-sized football field.
  9. Limiting roster sizes to foster participation and provide more focused, individualized coaching attention during practice and on game day.
    - a. Roster caps are recommended at two times the number of players on the field (meaning a league/club playing 8-on-8 should cap rosters at 16). Smaller rosters are preferred.
    - b. Fewer players on the sideline means fewer substitutions and more playing time for each athlete.

USA Football recognizes that local community situations differ greatly. Limitations on the number of volunteer coaches available, registration, field space and/or equipment may lead to different needs. Because of these situations, USA Football has adopted rules for 6-, 7- and 8-player versions of Rookie Tackle.

## ADOPTING ROOKIE TACKLE INTO YOUR LEAGUE

Rookie Tackle builds upon the skills gained in Non-Contact and Limited Contact football as part of a player pathway in alignment with the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee's American Development Model (ADM).

By playing Rookie Tackle, coaches and administrators are able to:

- Increase teams' coach-to-player ratio
- Play in an age-appropriate space
- Decrease the cognitive load on individual players
- Lessen the number of players on the field for more individual attention
- Focus on skill development
- Foster a fun, positive experience for young players

These are just some of the factors that allow coaches to dedicate greater attention to skill development, especially newly introduced skills of blocking, defeating blocks and tackling. A greater focus on teaching these aspects of the sport advances young players' understanding and learning of foundational skills, helping them transition to 11-player tackle and regulation-sized fields at the next stage.

USA Football's Rookie Tackle pilot season in 2017, encompassed 10 youth leagues that changed the game type in their youngest contact age division from 11-player to Rookie Tackle. Whether that division is age- or grade-based depended on the community as did the decision to play Rookie Tackle within a single-year division or a two-year division. This model has been the most efficient way for leagues to incorporate Rookie Tackle into a player pathway and offer the innovative game type to its families.

By adding the Rookie Tackle game type to your league, you invite athletes with a game type that best fits their physical abilities and aptitude. The steps toward mastery are not increased by earlier introduction, but by introducing young athletes to the best version of the sport for them based on their physical and cognitive abilities to learn fundamental movement and football skills.

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The process of introducing a new game type requires both quality coaching and parent communication. Once you decide to adopt Rookie Tackle, inform your coaches and parents. Keep everyone updated on what game formats will be offered ahead of time to ensure a smooth registration process and that parents are well aware of your commitment to provide fun and positive football experiences.

Single age/grade groupings have shown to be an easier process as the players moved up from flag to Rookie Tackle, as many players brought little or no experience from 11-player versions of the game. Through this process, athletes and parents were able to learn the Rookie Tackle rules and gain the positive benefits of the Football Development Model as the only form of tackle they have ever played.

Leagues that offered two-year age/grade bands for game types experienced a different challenge. Those leagues involved families that were part of an existing 11-player football option in the previous season. Playing Rookie Tackle should never be viewed as a “step back,” but instead as a forward-thinking investment in the skill development of each child – a step that will better prepare them for long-term development and enjoyment of the sport along with the myriad benefits of sport participation.

With both the returning and new parent groups for this two-year age/grade band, important areas to address are:

- New rules
- What they will experience and see in the new game type
- The benefits of the Football Development Model
- Why the league adopted this model for player development
- How this will affect first-year players
- How this will affect returning players

**Eleven-point list for introducing Rookie Tackle to your league:**

1. Identify age/grade group to play Rookie Tackle
2. Select on-field roster size: 6-, 7- or 8-player
3. Secure league vote for adoption
4. Communicate change to parents
5. Change website to reflect new pathway and addition of Rookie Tackle
6. Rookie Tackle marketing materials
7. League registration
8. Split age/grade number to create teams
9. Educate coaches on the game type and rules at [usafootball.com](http://usafootball.com)
10. Finalize team schedules (depending on total number of teams)
11. Kick off the season and keep it fun

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## TIMING AND OVERTIME

1. Each game is made up of four, 10-minute quarters with a running clock.
  - a. The clock should be stopped after a score (the point after attempt (PAT) is an untimed down) and to allow players to switch sides of the field and offense to defense.
  - b. Once the ball is placed at the 40-yard line, the starting of the clock is at the official's discretion.
2. The option for adjusting the number of timeouts or stopping the clock on turnovers is a league-specific decision.
3. The first- and third-quarter breaks are two minutes. This allows enough time for water, rest and new position assignments that will ensure rotations occur and players learn multiple skills.
4. Halftime is five minutes.
5. Total game time is 49-57 minutes, not including timeouts.
6. Overtime is played only in playoff games (if the league hosts playoffs).
7. For more information on playoffs, see page 9.

## SCORING

1. Offensive touchdowns are worth six points.
2. PATs are the coach's choice to attempt a one-point try from the 3-yard line or a two-point try from the 5-yard line.
3. With no special teams, there are no field goal attempts.
4. There are no defensive touchdowns as all turnovers are blown dead immediately. No returns are allowed to limit play back in the direction of the Administrative Zone.
  - Fumbles are not turnovers. It is only a turnover if recovered by the defense as the offense is allowed to attempt to recover it.
5. There are no two-point defensive safeties. All tackles behind the 40-yard line result in a loss of down, but the offense retains the ball, and the ball is respotted at the 40-yard line to preserve the Administrative Zone.

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## PARTICIPATION BEST PRACTICES

The goal of the 6-, 7- and 8-player bridge game is to introduce players to the contact skills of blocking and tackling while building off of the Non-Contact and Limited Contact football model of multi-position skill development.

To accomplish this, the “all players, all positions, all skills” philosophy remains the focus for coaches in this introduction to tackle football. It is acknowledged that not all players will play every position every game. Some may not get to play every position throughout the season, but development in practice is still vitally important. It is best to allow players to learn all skills in practice to best develop their full athletic potential in line with the principles of the Football Development Model.

USA Football strongly recommends that team rosters be set at no more than two times the game format being played. Roster limits should therefore be set to 12, 14 or 16 players in accordance with league adoption of game type. This roster size ensures all players achieve meaningful playing time and is more manageable for the coach. It is further recommended to, if possible, keep the number below the cap to allow for a smaller team with fewer players on the sideline during a game. This results in fewer substitutions and more playing time for each athlete. Upon a change of possession, all players on the bench should rotate onto the field. Players should be rotated not only between offense and defense, but also among line and backfield positions during the course of a game. Going into each game, each athlete should have at least one offensive and defensive line position and one offensive and defensive backfield position.

The practices of changing positions by quarter has proven to be successful in our pilot leagues. One of the ways this has been accomplished is by matching the “big vs. big” and “small vs. small” on the line and covering each other at skill positions. During the pregame meeting, opposing coaches can decide what quarters they want to play “big” on the line and what quarters they will play “small” on the line. This strategy has provided structure to the substitutions pattern in our testing of this game format.

USA Football recognizes that body size alone is not the determining factor of on-field success and therefore coaches should look to ensure competitive matchups by a blend of body size, speed, temperament, skills and ability. Pregame communication of gifted or aggressive players that may be useful in letting opposing coaches know which quarters certain players should be matched up against each other regardless of “big/small” standards.

These rules should act to guide opposing teams’ coaches in a partnership of providing the best developmental experience for players, not to be exploited in order for coaches to scheme favorable matchups in search of victory.

Mismatches in ability levels should be identified early on in the game with changes made to ensure a competitive balance. Coaches are encouraged to keep players at an assigned position for the duration of the quarter and rotate on the quarter break unless the competitive balance is deteriorating the game. In order for all athletes to develop, we want each player to be challenged appropriately. Better players only get better by competing against other quality players, and newer, or less-skilled players, fair better against equally skilled opponents.



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Athletes are not to be situationally shifted from line to skill positions during the quarter when a key moment occurs. We want to avoid situations in which an athlete plays on the offensive line for first and second down and moves to quarterback or running back on key third and fourth downs. This allows players to get repetitions in all positions and all situations to assist in their development.

One of the most common questions around position sampling is the bigger, stronger, faster athlete who is now allowed to rotate into a ball-carrying position. With the quarter rotation, one of the benefits is these athletes would not be able to play running back (as an example) for the entire game. They are forced to rotate to the line. If the athletes are truly talented, they should have the ability to learn multiple positions and may only play running back for one quarter. This limits the competitive imbalance of the game naturally through the rotation system.

## COACHES

Each team is allowed two coaches in the huddle and on the field at all times to facilitate instruction, faster play calling and to keep the speed of the game and activity levels high. Once the huddle is broken, the on-field coaches may (and should) assist the officials in alignment issues as the goal of the game is development, not persistent penalties.

After the huddle is broken, extra instruction, audibles or changing of plays are not allowed. Extra instruction after the huddle break will result in one warning, and any continued infractions will result in a 5-yard penalty. This rule is enforced per team, not per individual coach.

Teams have the option to rotate which coaches are on the field at any time.

All football coaches should be certified before they reach the practice field. Coaches must earn their certification each year. Get started at [usafootball.com/certification](https://usafootball.com/certification).

## RECOMMENDED SEASON LENGTH AND GAMES PER SEASON

Rookie Tackle football is designed to be a single-season offering to run concurrently with other tackle divisions within an organization. USA Football recommends a maximum of one game per week to allow for adequate rest, recovery and practice time dedicated to fundamental skill development and learning the game.

A league that incorporates playoffs into its yearly calendar should adjust the number of regular season games as well as preseason scrimmages so the total does not exceed 10 competitions. Leagues that host playoffs should also consider hosting consolation rounds so that members of all teams receive the same number of games and opportunity for development.

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## WEEKLY PRACTICE AND CONTACT LIMITS

Rookie Tackle, regardless of the format and number of players, should limit preseason practices to three per week with no two-a-days. After an acclimatization period is conducted, full-contact drills (defined as Thud and Live Action by USA Football's [Levels of Contact](#)) should be limited to adhere to USA Football's full contact limits.

During the regular season and playoffs, practice is reduced to a maximum of two per week to accommodate the game.

**\*\* THIS MANUAL REPRESENTS PRACTICE AND IMPLEMENTATION GUIDELINES BASED ON OUR CURRENT LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE. RECOMMENDATIONS ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE AS MORE RESEARCH AND INFORMATION BECOMES AVAILABLE. \*\***