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1 / INTRODUCTION

P.L.A.Y. piloted USA Football's 8-Man Rookie Tackle program for 3rd graders in 2018 and with overwhelming success and positive feedback, P.L.A.Y. has decided to move the 4th graders into the 8-Man Rookie Tackle program as well beginning in 2019. Furthermore, to help bridge the transition to 11-Man, 5th graders are going to 9-man format, with full transition to 11-Man in 6th grade.

USA Football's Rookie Tackle is a small-sided tackle football game designed to be implemented as a bridge game between flag football and 11-on-11 tackle within youth football leagues and clubs across the country as a child's first experience to tackle football. USA Football believes that an age-appropriate and developmental approach to the game driven by high-quality coaching will improve athlete enjoyment and skill development. By modifying the game at younger age groups and educating coaches, commissioners, officials and parents on the game adjustments, mechanics and skills, we can create an age-appropriate, athlete-centered understanding that leads to a better experience.

2 / 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 the Rookie Tackle game are:

1. All participants learn to play all positions and learn all football skills that are required by the game.
2. Maximizing player enjoyment and skill development.
3. Ensuring all players have meaningful playing time and the opportunity for improvement and success.
4. Providing a bridge between flag football and the 11-player, full-field tackle version.
5. Encouraging leagues to play on a smaller field size that is appropriately scaled to the age and skill level of the youth football player.
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.
8. Limiting roster sizes to foster participation and provide a more focused, individualized coaching attention during practice and on game day.

USA Football recognizes that local community situations differ greatly. Limitations on the number of volunteer coaches available, registration, field space 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.

3 / PLAYING FIELD

1. The playing field will be 60 x 35; 4th grade will use the entire field going only one direction. 3rd grade will use a shortened 40-yard field to offer more opportunity for success.
2. The sidelines extend between the inside of the numbers on a traditional football field and should be marked with cones every ten yards. Use traditional pylons to mark the goal line and the back line of the end zone.
3. For 4th grade all possessions start at your own 40-yard line going across mid-field in toward the end zone. For 3rd grade all possessions start at the opponents 40-yard line going in toward the end zone.
 - a. Players not in the game stand on the traditional sidelines with one or more coach to supervise.
4. First downs, down markers and the chain gang are administered in accordance with the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) or local rules.

4 / 8-PLAYER RULES

Rookie Tackle uses the NFHS rule book as a base and employs the following adjustments for 8-player football:

1. P.L.A.Y. enforces a stripper rule for added safety. Strippers may not line up as a RB or WR, nor can they receive a handoff or a pass as a RB or WR. Strippers can lineup as a TE, catch a pass beyond the line of scrimmage and then run with the ball as a TE. Strippers can also play QB but must either pass or hand the ball off, they cannot role out of the pocket or run the ball beyond the line of scrimmage. If the Stripper runs the ball or leaves the pocket the play will be blown dead and it will count as a down.
 - a. Stripers are classified as:
 - i. 81lbs and above for 3rd grade
 - ii. 91lbs and above for 4th grade.
2. Because of the all players, all positions, all skills philosophy, there are no restrictions on jersey numbers or player positions, with the exception of the Stripper rule.
3. All game action takes place on a one-way field.
4. A turnover on downs brings the ball back to the designated starting spot determined by grade level, the teams switch sides from offense to defense, defense to offense.
 - a. At each change of possession, all players on the sideline will rotate into the game with an equal number of players from the previous rotation going to the side line.
5. Turnovers on interceptions or fumbles are blown dead immediately, no returns are allowed. Play restarts at the designated start spot with the recovering/intercepting team now on offense. There are no defensive touchdowns.
6. After each play, the ball is spotted in the middle of the field. Hash marks are not used.
7. Because of the limited field size, all 15-yard penalties are enforced as 10-yard penalties.
8. No penalty on the offense can take the ball beyond the designated start spot.
9. Penalties by the offense that are called on or behind the designated start spot result in a loss of down, the ball can not be spotted behind the designated start spot.
10. There are no defensive safeties. Tackles behind the designated start spot do not result in a loss of yardage or points.
11. Fumbles behind the line of scrimmage may be picked up and advanced by the offensive team only. All fumbles past the line of scrimmage regardless of the recovering team are immediately blown dead. All defensive fumble recoveries are also immediately blown dead.
12. All personal foul penalties include an immediate substitution from the field for a minimum of one play to allow coaches to address misconduct and promote good sportsmanship. We call this a cooling off period.

- a. A second personal foul committed by a player in a single game will result in an ejection for that game.

Special Team's adjustments:

1. There are no special teams.
 - a. There are no kickoffs or punts. Each possession starts with the ball being placed at the designated start spot, regardless of whether there is a score, turnover or turnover on downs.
 - b. There are no extra points by a kick.

Offensive adjustments:

1. Each play must include three offensive linemen (a center and two guards, with one guard on each side of the center). Player rotations may result with traditional non-lineman numbers at these positions for the purpose of fundamental skill development.
2. Guards are required to play from a three-point stance.
3. The center may only have his or her snapping hand down.
4. The distance between a guard and center may not exceed three feet (1 yard) but may be closer. A recommended spacing is one arm length; this reduces the A-gap.
5. Because of the all players, all positions, all skills philosophy, players should change offensive positions during the game. However;
 - a. Once the linemen are set in their stance, players may not shift to another offensive position.
 - b. All three offensive linemen (center and guards) are ineligible for a pass, but may advance a tipped pass.
6. The quarterback-center exchange may be direct, pistol or shotgun.
7. Quarterback sneaks are **prohibited** in all situations because the defense is not allowed to have players aligned over the center or in the center-guard A gap.
8. All offensive formations, immediately out of the huddle and prior to the snap, must be in accordance to the Rookie Tackle Offensive formations installs per grade level.
 - a. Creativity is encouraged, coaches can design their own plays from the formation installs.
 - b. Formations not in the Rookie Tackle offensive formations installs are not allowed.
9. There are no unbalanced lines allowed for 3rd grade. 4th grade can go unbalanced as long as it's in accordance to the Rookie Tackle Offensive formations installs.
10. The offense may use none, one or two TE, as long as there is only one TE on each side of the Center. TE must start in a 3-point stance.

11. Twin receivers are allowed only in 4th grade as long as it's in accordance to the Rookie Tackle Offensive formations installs.
 - a. For purpose of Rookie Tackle, twin receivers is defined as two players outside the guard-to-guard box on the line of scrimmage, on the same side of the center.
12. No trips formations are allowed.
 - a. For purpose of Rookie Tackle, Trips is defined as any three players outside the guard-to-guard box on the line of scrimmage, on the same side of the center.
13. Motion is not allowed in 3rd grade, however 4th grade may have one WR or RB go in motion per play. The motion player can either re-set into their stance prior to the snap OR must be traveling parallel to the line of scrimmage at the snap.
14. All blocks below the waist by any player anywhere on the field are **illegal**.

Defensive adjustments:

1. Defenses may only have two defensive linemen unless an offensive formation includes a tight end. In that case, a third defensive linemen may line up over the tight end. Two tight ends allow the defense to use four defensive linemen.
2. Defensive linemen must be in a three-point stance.
3. Defensive linemen must be aligned on the guards and/or tight ends in a head up position.
 - a. No shade or gap alignment
4. If the offense aligns with no tight ends, the defense may still align with four players on the line of scrimmage (but no more than four). However, they must be positioned over the guards and WR's. Defensive linemen positioned on guards must be in a three-point stance.
5. The defense must have one player (safety) at least 10 yards from the ball.
6. All remaining players not on the line of scrimmage or at deep safety must be 4 yards off the line of scrimmage.
 - a. Defenses that choose to not match the eligible receivers on the line of scrimmage may position those players on the second level as long as they are at least 4 yards off the line of scrimmage.
7. No blitzes are allowed. Players within the box at the snap can penetrate upon the snap. Linebackers, safeties and cornerbacks (both on the line and at depth) can flow to the ball naturally **after** a handoff is made, but predetermining penetration to a specific gap is illegal.
 - a. The box includes offensive players who line up within two yards of the ball and on the line of scrimmage along with the defensive players lined up directly over them.

- b. On pass plays, anyone outside the box on the snap cannot rush the quarterback and must remain behind the line of scrimmage in pass coverage.
 - c. Defensive linemen are not allowed to shoot the A-gap.
 - d. Defensive linemen must initiate contact with the guards before crossing the line of scrimmage.
8. If the ball is on or inside the 4-yard line, the five non-linemen players, excluding the deep safety, may align on the goal line.

5 / TIMING AND OVERTIME

1. Each game is made up of two-24 minute 'running time' halves with time stoppage for the following.
 - a. When a touchdown is scored the clock will stop, the clock will remain stopped for the PAT attempt. Time will resume at the first snap after the possession change.
 - b. Injury.
 - i. Injured players must leave the field for at least one play.
 - ii. The clock will start once the injured player has left the field, not at the next snap.
 - c. 2-minute warning of each half.
 - d. Time out.
2. Each team will get one timeout per half. An injury timeout does not count against the team with the injured player.
3. Halftime is five minutes.
4. There is no overtime.

6 / SCORING

1. Offensive touchdowns are worth six points.
2. All PATs are attempted through a run or pass try. Coaches can choose to go for one point from the 5-yard line or two points from the 8-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.
5. There are no two-point defensive safeties. All tackles behind the initial start spot result in a loss of down, but the offense retains the ball, and the ball is re-spotted at the designated start spot.

7 / PARTICIPATION BEST PRACTICES

P.L.A.Y. Rookie Tackle football coaches will be trained to teach the fundamentals of every position with the aim to rotate players to sample a variety of positions throughout the course of the season. The goal of the 8-player bridge game is to introduce players to contact skills of blocking and tackling while building off of the flag football model of multi-position skill development. To accomplish this, “all players, all positions, all skills” remains the focus for coaches in this introduction to tackle football.

Rosters limits should be set to no less than 10 players but no more than 16, with flexibility due to registration numbers and available coaches. 12 Players per team is ideal but not required. This roster size ensures all players achieve meaningful playing time and is more manageable for the coach. 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 among both line and backfield positions during the course of a game. Initial practices of changing positions by possession in order to match up “big vs. big” and “small vs. small” on both the line and covering each other at skill positions has provided structure to the substitutions pattern in our pilot 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.

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 and changes made as soon as possible to ensure competitive balance. Coaches are encouraged to keep players at an assigned position for the duration of each possession and rotate on the change of possession. Athletes are not to be situationally shifted from line to skill positions during any possession when a key moment occurs.

P.L.A.Y. is focused on developing all players and not just utilizing a teams best players, for this reason P.L.A.Y. has instituted rules for rotation as follows:

Offense

1. No Player can play the same offensive or defensive position for an entire game. Even with Strippers being limited to certain positions they must be rotated between center, guard, and TE (if applicable). They may also play QB within the rules defined for Strippers in ‘Player Rules’.
2. QB must be rotated each possession, a player is limited to playing QB two possessions per game but can not be in consecutive possessions.
3. RB’s must be rotated each possession, a player is limited to playing RB two possessions per game but can not be in consecutive possessions.
4. A player can not play WR for every possession.
5. All non-Stippers must play RB/WR in at least one possession per game

Defense

1. All players must play at least two defensive positions per game.

8 / COACHES

Each team is allowed one coach in the huddle and on the field at all times to facilitate instruction, faster play calling, 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, though, there is to be no extra instruction, audibles, or changing of plays allowed. Extra instruction after the huddle break will result in one (1) warning, 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.

9 / RECOMMENDED SEASON LENGTH AND GAMES PER SEASON

Rookie Tackle football is designed to be fall-only seasons with a maximum of 10 games per season. There should be a minimum of five days off between games 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 must 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 all members of all teams receive the same number of games and opportunity for development.

10 / WEEKLY PRACTICES 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 30 minutes per practice for no more than 90 minutes total per week.

During the regular season and playoffs (if applicable), practice is reduced to a maximum of two per week to accommodate the game with each practice having a full-contact limit of 30 minutes and not exceeding 60 minutes per week.