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How new tackling restrictions are affecting high school football in New Jersey and beyond

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Everywhere he goes, Terry O'Neil, founder of Practice Like Pros, an organization seeking to reduce injuries in the sport, receives the same request.

"Tell me about New Jersey."

The Garden State has reduced the amount of "live tackling" permitted in practice to the lowest level in history, to make it safer for a [sport that has suffered a drop in participation nationwide](#) each of the previous five years.

"One of the reasons why we wanted to go out there is to be trailblazers," Passaic Tech coach Matt Demarest said. "So that people see, 'Hey, we're trying to do what's best for the kids.' "

The New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association in February [passed a bill with the most restrictive contact limitations in the country](#). It reduced live tackling — defined as one player taking another to the ground — from "unlimited" to six hours in the preseason and from 90 minutes to 15 minutes per week during the season.

"The whole idea of those limitations being put in place was to provide for the health and safety of the student-athletes, and that's our primary focus when it comes to the sport of football," said Jack DuBois, assistant director of the NJSIAA.

"I think this is how high school football is going to rescue itself from the current participation crisis," O'Neil said.

Will a cutback in "live tackling" make football safer and increase participation? Or will the players suffer from not "going live" while practicing the critical art of tackling?

Impact on the game

The new practice rules have had a minimal impact on the game during the first month of the season, according to a dozen New Jersey coaches.

Most of them say they had already curtailed the amount of "live tackling" in practices. Instead, they're capitalizing on an unlimited amount of "thud" tackling, in which players can hit and wrap up each other but must remain on their feet.

"We tackle every day in terms of drills, we stay up, we form tackle, we wrap," said St. Joseph (Montvale) coach Augie Hoffmann, whose Green Knights are ranked No. 1 in the [USA TODAY NETWORK New Jersey Top 20](#). "We have a tackling circuit pretty much every day for four or five minutes — not live, but thud — and just understanding the fundamentals of tackling."

Longtime coaches Frank Fucetola of Williamstown and Chuck Johnson of Ridgewood cannot even remember the last time they had live tackling in practice. Fucetola says it's been at least "seven or eight years," and Johnson hasn't utilized it in more than a decade.

"We work on a tremendous amount of technique," said Fucetola, whose Braves are No. 4 in the [USA TODAY NETWORK New Jersey Top 20](#). "We'll go thud up top with the linemen to stay fresh, but we don't rip the ball carrier down or anything like that. It's all technique, form, nothing to the ground."

"We've got to get away from two kids standing 10 yards apart and running into each other," said Johnson, whose Maroons are No. 14 in the state rankings. "That's barbaric. It's stupid."

Most injuries occur from players tackling each other to the ground, according to Practice Like Pros. The majority of football injuries, and 80 percent of catastrophic injuries, “involve the act of tackling or being tackled,” according to Dr. Robert Cantu, medical director for the Connecticut-based organization.

Preseason worries

Coaches had greater concern about the reduction in practice time during the preseason.

Going from “unlimited” to six total hours was dramatic, especially considering that each scrimmage — teams can have a maximum of three scrimmages — counts as one hour of live tackling.

“Preseason hours, with the way they counted the scrimmages, didn’t leave you with a lot of time,” said Steve Dunn, a veteran coach in his first season leading Ridgefield Park. “You had to spread it out and really pick and choose your moments when you were going to do some of the drills that everyone’s accustomed to when you’re simulating a live game.”

“We definitely had to lighten up some of the contact drills we did in the past,” said Carteret coach Matt Yascko. “I think our tackling did suffer a little bit in Game 1, probably because of less tackling drills, less live contact that we did in the preseason. But overall, I think the concept, and keeping the kids as safe and healthy as possible, is a good move.”

It’s a dramatic change from the 1990s, when Yascko and several other current New Jersey coaches played high school football. Back then, teams ran the ball more — and ran it straight at each other.

“The game has changed. But I also think the mentality has changed, where it was just the beginning of sport performance and how to get yourself healthy and ready to play on a Friday night,” said Yascko, a 1992 Edison graduate. “Back then it was more ‘tougher and stronger’ and who was tougher the longest. And I think that’s kind of gone by the wayside.”

Small schools, big benefit

New Jersey's small schools, especially Group 1 programs with an enrollment of fewer than 500 students, have been especially careful when it comes to live tackling in practice. An injury to a key player can create a domino effect at a program with fewer than 40 players.

"We don't have the luxury of the depth that the bigger schools have, so we've been very cognizant of keeping our kids healthy," Middlesex coach PJ Jankowicz said. "And it's been a lot of meeting time with my coaches, and talking to a lot of college coaches, and just practicing smarter."

Limiting live tackling in practice is a good way to encourage freshmen at small schools to join the team and stick with the program, said Barry Blauvelt, who coaches his alma mater, Wallington.

"Hopefully, moving forward, these freshmen kids that we have here will tell their friends, 'Hey, listen, we're not going up against the seniors in practice, and we're being safe, and we're not being thrown to the wolves, so to speak,' " Blauvelt said. "And hopefully it will increase, or at least maintain, rosters of 35 to 40 kids at the small schools."

Parents also need to be convinced that it's OK for their children to play football, coaches say. The new rules in place are, no doubt, to reassure Mom and Dad as well.

"With all the noise that's been going on around the dangers of playing football, I think we had to do something that was going to allow the people on the outside, especially the parents who are not sure if they want their kids to play at this point, to know we're trying to make the game as safe as possible," St. John Vianney coach Joe Martucci said.

What does the future hold?

Will New Jersey be the first of many states to reduce live tackling in practice? Michigan followed suit this year, limiting teams to 12 total hours in the preseason and 30 minutes per week in-season.

O'Neil said he has made inroads in a dozen states, mostly in the South, and expects a handful to vote for it. He is a former senior vice president of the New Orleans Saints and has received support from former NFL stars including Archie Manning, Tony Dorsett and Anthony Munoz.

"I think the change is that you'll see a handful of that dozen make the switch in this coming off-season," said O'Neil, also a former executive producer of CBS Sports and NBC Sports.

In the meantime, New Jersey will continue to adjust to the new restrictions while working under the watchful eye of the national youth football community.

"Are we as good of a tackling team as we were back in the '80s and '90s, when we went full speed on defense?" Ridgewood's Johnson said. "Maybe not. But we're a hell of a lot healthier."

What coaches are saying

Here are some more thoughts from New Jersey coaches about the new tackling practice rules:

Chuck Johnson of Ridgewood:

"I think the rule is a really good one, because I think there are a bunch of knuckleheads out there beating the [expletive] out of their kids."

Barry Blauvelt of Wallington:

"The rule is a step in the right direction to reassure people that we are trying to do everything we can as a football society to make the sport safe. And the less opportunity for contact, the safer the sport should be, so we keep football moving in the right direction."

Matt Yascko of Carteret:

"I think any step to make the game safer for the high school kids is important, because a lot of parents are scared of the sport, and we're losing kids. And anything that we can do to keep kids and keep playing the sport that I love and spent my life coaching is important."

Brooks Alexander of Pascack Hills:

"By the NJSIAA definition of contact, we have ever rarely been above the current allotted time. I do not care for the change, only from the standpoint that it is an assumptive policy and the assumption is that coaches do not properly supervise their players and practice with disregard for player safety, which could not be further from the truth."

Peter Toale of Tenafly:

"It's another point that I can use to explain to parents and say, 'Listen, not only are we as a team, but ultimately the state and football around the country, working to make it safer for players today.' "

Joe Martucci of St. John Vianney:

"I was never a big proponent of driving kids to the ground. It was always about teaching technique, get there, break it down, being in the right spot, put your head in the right spot, get your body where it belongs."

Greg Gruzdis of Waldwick-Midland Park

"With our [low] numbers, we had kind of limited our contact last year to basically almost zero during the week on live bodies. We made a real investment in every tackling dummy and ring — we're tackling everything but bodies. Injury, low numbers, we can't get anybody hurt practicing tackling each other during the week."

Matt Demarest of Passaic Tech:

"Who are you going to go live against? If you go live against your young kids, it's an unfair advantage and someone's going to get hurt there. And then if you go live against your 1As or high 2s, someone generally gets hurt there, too."

Steve Dunn of Ridgefield Park:

"It's one thing to get a kid hurt on a Friday night. That's unavoidable. But if you get a kid hurt in practice tackling, that's a tough pill to swallow."

PJ Jankowicz of Middlesex:

"I just want my guys playing as fast and as fresh on Friday night as possible."

Augie Hoffmann of St. Joseph (Montvale):

"If you know how to coach and know how to practice, you can get everything you want to accomplish and live within the parameters that have been set."

Greg Tufaro, Tom McGurk, and Bob Jordan contributed to this article.