

Frequently Asked Question: 2020 Participation Changes

What are the changes?

In 2020 there are some exciting changes coming to Small Blacks Rugby in your Provincial Union.

These changes include Under 11 Small Blacks playing 10-a-side Rugby. New Zealand Rugby will also be running trials with Provincial Unions to understand the benefits of 10-a-side Rugby for Under 12 and Under 13 Small Blacks.

QuickRip Rugby will also become an official part of the Small Blacks Development Model. It provides a fun and exciting non-contact rugby format and will be available in Rugby Clubs for the 2020 season.

Over the coming months NZ Rugby will be introducing further changes to improve adult and secondary school rugby.

Why are we making these changes?

NZR is always looking to improve the quality of the playing experience at all levels with player enjoyment and safety being the priority above everything else. Recruiting players through Rippa Rugby has been increasingly successful, however, we have increasing challenges in retaining players from U11s onwards.

A 2019 review of the Small Blacks Development Model has indicated that some changes are necessary for rugby to be more player centric with greater focus on player development and engagement. This is best achieved by smaller sided games that enable more opportunities for all players to run, pass, and catch the ball and score tries.

How do we know that these changes will be successful?

Rugby is a late development sport with player maturation not occurring until late teens. There is therefore time to develop players slowly and simply. Research from other National Unions has reinforced that young player development and engagement is best achieved by small sided games that emphasis and promote more ball handling, evasion skills, and decision making.

England Rugby research at a similar age group comparing 9-a-side rugby against a 8-a-side version indicated a 20% increase of ball in play though faster recycling of the ball, over 50% reduction of the time of the ball held in rucks and mauls, and a reduction in time committed to setting up scrums and lineouts.

The research also indicates there was a significant greater number of offloads. Player feedback from those participating in the England Rugby trials reported running with the ball and tackling as the most enjoyable aspect.

What are we expecting to achieve from the changes?

- Increased player development in key skills - run, catch, pass, evade, and decision making.
- Increased player opportunities to be involved in key skills and influence the game.
- Increased playing time with more tries.
- Improved player retention from u11s.
- Improved coach retention.
- Less emphasis on 'roles' and structures and more emphasis on deliberate play.
- Less emphasis on formal restarts such as scrums and lineouts.

Will these changes impact on 10 year old's sense of fun in rugby?

Children essentially play sport for fun and their mates with less emphasis on winning and formal systems of play. Research from rugby and other sports indicates that a shift to smaller sided games does not negatively impact a young player's sense of fun. Players' cognitive development at this point is still not fully advanced so their game experience is best enhanced by deliberate play where they participate in games with simple rules and low emphasis on formal structures (playing roles) and systems (tactics).

What impact will these changes have on Secondary School Rugby?

It is recognised that an outcome of the Small Blacks Development Model is that players are developed to enter the Secondary School system which typically plays 15-a-side rugby. This important transition is part of the considerations around further trials at U12 and U13 but also part of the wider considerations arising from the 2018 NZR Secondary School Rugby Review for player development from U14 onwards.

Will these changes have a negative impact on our Teams in Black and winning pinnacle events like Rugby World Cups?

No. Unlike sports such as swimming and gymnastics, rugby is a late development sport and players' ability to excel and perform are not easily identifiable until they reach their mid to late teens. For this reason, NZR's talent identification point is U17 to allow as many players as possible to develop the key skills of run, catch, pass, kick, throw, tackle and breakdown. These changes represent the start of a number of changes aimed at retaining more players for both participation but also to be considered as emerging talent.

Why is 7s and 10-a-side rugby being promoted in the framework?

7s and 10-a-side rugby offer a quality rugby experience and alleviate some of the challenges of forming large squads.

These formats also suit tournament and festival type experiences which we know are key to meeting some participants needs around the amount of commitment they can make to rugby.

What is Game On?

Game On is a flexible game format developed by the Welsh and English Rugby Unions to ensure more games are played without being negatively impacted by a lack of players and/or front rowers. NZR, in partnership with Provincial Unions, Clubs, players, and referees are developing a version for New Zealand for the 2020 season. Details of this game format will be available from October 2019.

What are other countries doing?

World Rugby empowers individual Unions to develop their own player development approach up to U19s. Whilst each nation will have its own approach based on its playing philosophy and player needs, there are many areas of commonality for which Unions collaborate to achieve best practice and advance the game globally. The English and Scottish Rugby Unions have invested in considerable research over the past decade and developed more player centric approaches to promote greater playing time, more touches on the ball, and a greater focus on find space rather than looking for contact. Their findings have validated a lot of NZR's recent work in this space which supports the shift to playing smaller sided games for longer in the Small Blacks Development Model.

2020 Participation Changes: About the Participation Framework

What is the Participation Framework

New Zealand Rugby (NZR) wants as many people as possible to be part of our game for as long as they choose to be. In essence, we want New Zealanders to have a lifelong love of the game.

As part of that we need to balance the participation side of rugby with the performance side of rugby to ensure we meet the needs of all our participants (Players, referees, coaches and volunteers).

Rugby, like many sports is experiencing a drop in the number of our participants - particularly from Under 11 onwards.

To retain our young players into adulthood we need to give them more opportunities to play rugby in ways that suit them.

Our Participation Framework provides new opportunities for participants to be involved in rugby outside of the traditional 15-a-side pathway.

We know that while some participants play with a goal of reaching their highest potential, many other play to learn a new game, to have fun with their mates or keep fit. Rugby needs to cater for everyone.

What does a focus on the participants mean?

NZ Rugby and Provincial Unions are focused on moving away from trying to make the players fit the game we want to see delivered, to a game (or forms of the game) that players want to play.

To achieve this, rugby needs to deliver more forms of the game. This could be 15-a-side rugby, or it might be 7-a-side, 10-a-side and non-contact formats such as Rippa Rugby or QuickRip Rugby. The key is delivering what players and communities value and meeting that need.

What are the goals of the Participation Framework?

The objective of the new framework is to improve the breadth and depth of those participating in rugby. This starts with exposing more kids to rugby through primary school, after school and holiday programmes, introducing them to club and secondary school rugby and ideally building a lifelong love of the game.

Player retention is the priority. Rugby does well in recruiting players into the game from ages 5 - 10, however, this is also where many of our participants begin to leave the game.

The framework has a lot of rugby ‘offerings’. Do clubs and schools need to deliver all of these?

No. The offerings are what is available for clubs and schools to use if that is what their participants and communities might value. For example, Touch Rugby might be the summer version valued by some communities whereas some clubs find that QuickRip is preferable. Other communities might find that a mix of 15-a-side and 10 a-side competitions delivers a better outcome for more players. NZR encourages Provincial Unions, Clubs and Schools to engage with their communities to find out what they value and work to deliver those offerings.

Why is Touch Rugby part of the framework?

Touch Rugby has always formed part of rugby clubs’ offerings in summer to stay engaged with their communities. Some clubs offer affiliated Touch NZ modules which provide for high performance pathways, whereas others run their own unaffiliated modules. NZR is exploring the potential for a greater relationship with Touch NZ. Irrespective of whether this occurs, NZR see Touch Rugby as a relevant and viable rugby offering and will be looking to provide greater support to clubs that use it to successfully stay engaged with their communities.

Frequently Asked Questions - Non-contact Rugby

Why is non-contact rugby important?

Rippa Rugby has been a really successful addition to the rugby experience for young players up to seven years old. Beyond this, there are no options for players that would prefer not to transition to tackle grades at U8 due to preference, physical development, or confidence. This creates challenges for retaining players. Providing a non-contact pathway provides an opportunity for more players to stay in the game for longer and transition at a later point or possibly continue playing a non-contact version for life.

Will non-contact rugby impact negatively on players' ability to transition to tackle rugby at a later point?

Non-contact rugby will still preserve the key skills of run, catch, pass, throw, scrums and lineouts.

Importantly, the tackle skill continues to be developed through non-contact formats. Players are taught crucial tackle technique skills such as scanning, alignment, go-forward with support and correct pre-contact positioning with body height low, eyes focused on the core and hands above elbows in a ready position to make the 'rip'.

England Rugby research indicates that there is a greater emphasis on evasion, increased passing, and engagement which are all considered positive for player development and player engagement.

For those wishing to transition to tackle grades at a later point, NZR and the Provincial Unions provide programmes such as Tackle Clinic and Front Row Factory to provide competence and confidence in these specific skills.

What are the benefits of non-contact rugby?

Non-contact rugby provides a safe, inclusive and enjoyable rugby experience that can be played by children, teenagers, and adults. The reduced contact means that physical capabilities are less dominant and players across a broader age span can play together without fear of mismatch. It is becoming an increasingly popular rugby option in Secondary Schools for teenagers with over 80 schools participating in QuickRip tournaments in 2018.

Share your feedback

We'd love to hear your feedback about the 2020 Rugby Framework changes. You can get in touch via email: participation@nzrugby.co.nz