

## AGE-GROUP RUGBY

The following is composed of extracts from a letter that was received from Andrew Micans at Leighton Buzzard RFC. It raises various important questions and Ron Tennick, National Education Manager, RFU Schools and Youth Department, has replied.

If you have any concerns, worries or questions, do e-mail the Editor.

I have been looking at the number of questions raised on the discussion forum regarding age grade restrictions and it would appear that I am not the only person involved with youth rugby at junior club level who is in need of some advice.

I am currently helping to organise/coach two teams, an U17s Sunday team and a Colts U19 Team on a Saturday, at my local club, Leighton Buzzard. Some of the information/wording I have seen regarding age grades seems somewhat ambiguous and open to misinterpretation.

A lot of confusion appears to arise from the definition of age grades. As I understand it, from the information I have read from the continuum and other journals, all age grades are defined by the player's age at midnight on the 1st September of that season. This leads on to the following:

I believe that the continuum states that,"16 year olds cannot play in a side containing players who are 19 years or over." Does this mean, therefore, that U16s cannot play Colts U19 rugby or can they play after their 16th birthday, bearing in mind some of these lads could turn 16 on the 2nd of September and consequently some older lads could turn 19 on the 2nd of September?

I am assuming all U17s and U18s are allowed to play in U19 Colts, even though some lads could have turned 19 in the early part of the season and some U17s will still be 16.

This leads onto something I read on the subject of squeeze ball. On safety grounds I am more than happy not to allow my lads to use this technique and know that it is not allowed at U16, U17 and U18 age groups. I am sure I read an extract from an article on the age grade continuum update from Mark Harrington on the discussion forum that said squeeze ball was permitted in U19 rugby.

Assuming U17s and U18s can play U19 Colts rugby, then some people may interpret this to advocate the use of this technique to younger players because they



are playing up an age group where it is allowed. I pity referees at this point and fear for the safety of some of the younger players if given bad advice.

It also does not appear to help the situation when different regions, schools and associations play different age grades. As an example, we are in the East Midlands region. As a club we are entered in the East Midlands Colts League and National Knockout cup competition, both U19 competitions. The East Midlands as a region do not run a representative side at U19 but do run sides at U16, U18 and U20. If age grades were standardised countrywide, it may be easier to legislate.

The message sent from some senior club academies, where it appears they can do what they like regarding young players playing in the senior game (if they are deemed good enough) also sends a mixed message.

Finally, the srum. As I understand it, no player is allowed to play in the front row in a senior team league match until he is 18 but he can play in a friendly if he is 17 as long as the referee and opposition are made aware of this and the players' safety is considered. This struck me as being slightly strange, bearing in mind that a junior club could quite easily arrange a friendly against a side from a higher league level against stronger and more experienced players, potentially increasing the risk to the young player. Please advise if this is wrong. At Leighton we have made the decision that no young players should play senior rugby in any position until they have passed their 18th birthday.

As mentioned earlier, because we will probably be in a situation where we will have to run U19 and U17 rugby over one weekend (Due to cup and league games clashing between the age groups), we need to balance both squads to protect players from playing too many games. We certainly can't ask some boys to play twice in a weekend. If we cannot use some of our stronger U17s, who would still be 16 in the U19 side, we may end up losing a year group to the game.

I fully understand the need for protecting these young players who are the future of the game, but with the confusion that appears to be present a major re-write of the rules and standardisation of age grade rugby may be needed.

Sorry this has turned into an essay, but any advice would be gratefully received.

## Dear Andy,

I have returned from holiday to find your epistle on my desk and I will try to answer all your queries in order. I should point out at this time that everything you have raised is covered in the new edition of the Schools and Youth handbook.



The regulation regarding age grades has been modified, but in effect the main thing to remember is that the age limit (taken at midnight 31<sup>st</sup> Aug/1<sup>st</sup> Sept) stays with the player for the entire season irrespective of when his birthday is. The only exception to this is when a schoolboy reaches his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday he may no longer play in school rugby. This is rare these days, but the odd lad does do a repeat V1th Form.

In fact the regulations now state that players should normally play within their own one year age band but may play up or down one year unless they are at the Under 16 level or above when it is permitted for a player to play up two years. In other words, the fifth former may play with both Lower and Upper Sixth and of course the Under 17 may play with Under 18s and Under 19s.

Unless a player has achieved his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday he may not play with those over 19 and no-one may play in the front row in Over 19 rugby until he has achieved his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The regulation on squeeze ball clearly states that it is not allowed in Under 18 rugby and below, so Under 19s may use the technique if they wish. Discussions are still underway to produce a ruling for an Under 19 game which includes Under 18 and U17 players.

There are still some anomalies which are gradually being removed as we move away from the 1<sup>st</sup> Sept age levels and move to 1<sup>st</sup> Jan. This is already the case at representative level but because of the school academic year starting in September, as does the rugby season for schools and youth, our internal competitions tend to be based on 1<sup>st</sup> Sept.

I hope this helps.

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