

Lancashire County RFU Meeting at Liverpool St Helens RFC

8th February 2023

Brian Stott opened the meeting with a request for a minutes silence for Dave Hodgson, Past President and Bob Grant , Former Lancashire Council Member and County Treasurer.

Brian Stott, Lancashire County RFU President, opened the meeting . The only topic for discussion was the decision to lower the tackle height that had recently been voted through by the RFU Council.

Ken Andrews and Dave Clarke would explain why they had voted as they had and there would be a presentation by Phil Kearns and Tim Millar who were there to represent the RFU.

This would then be followed by a Question and Answer session.

Ken Andrews opened the discussion by reading a statement about why he had voted as he had. The meeting had been called in response to the anger and frustration that the clubs were feeling in response to misleading information from the RFU.

The information released had been translated in people's minds as 'below the waist'

The vote had not been taken on guesswork or as a knee jerk response to the presentation that the Council had seen but was taken with the number one priority being player safety and welfare.

Ken recognized that the aim was to ensure players safety and well being on the pitch. He spoke about the fact that several years ago there had been an attempt to get tackles banned completely. This had led to red cards being issued for high tackles , HIA and the RFU had introduced Headcase. However none of that was about prevention.

He then spoke about the impact of any litigation , several players had been diagnosed with Early Onset dementia , if their decision to sue the RFU was successful then this would have profound repercussions for RU/RL/Football.

Adverse publicity meant that parents were reluctant to let their children play rugby. All studies show that lower tackles are safer than high tackles.

France have implemented the lower tackle immediately and there is the potential to learn from them and New Zealand who are also trialing lower tackles.

The Council Meeting on Monday would establish groups that would be part of the consultation process and would involve people from all aspects of the game. The CB would arrange a group of individuals to be involved in this process , including Coaches , Players, CSO , Officials etc.

Ken ended by saying that he was passionate about the need to lower the tackle height.

Dave Clarke then spoke and said he did not have anything to add to what Ken had said other than the presentation and evidence they had seen was compelling. The forefront of any decision has to be the players safety.

Phil Kearns then addressed the meeting and again emphasized Ken's point, The next point is the engagement process with the game but again with the emphasis being on player safety.

Tim Millar then addressed the meeting, he explained that his role and experience was in looking at HIP(Head Impact Prevention) and reducing Head Accelerated events. Although there may not be a concussion there is still an impact on the brain.

There had been two studies carried out , one in France and one in New Zealand, this looked at an area to tackle such as the sternum and below and below the ribs and belly. There was ongoing research into this and the results were being monitored.

Nothing has been decided about where the tackle will be.

That concluded the presentations and the panel of Council Members and RFU Staff would take questions.

Bill Nichols, Chair of the NW RPPG, asked whether the date of July 3rd , which was in the communication that was sent out, would be the date that adhered to.

The reply was that all comments would be taken back to the Council, however whilst there may be the possibility of a delay this was unlikely to happen because scientific evidence had been used to arrive at the decision, if there was a delay and something happened then there could be possible litigation because the RFU had acted against scientific advice.

There was then a query from the floor regarding headguards , could they be used as an interim measure , Phil Kearns replied that headguards do not answer the problem , evidence shows that there is still an impact on the brain but there is also some evidence that more injuries occur as they can sometimes make a player play recklessly.

World Rugby would be bringing their rule in on January 1st.

Tim Harper, Manchester Rugby Club, opened by saying that there was a general agreement that the tackle height should be lowered but was there too much reliance on non peer reviewed studies.

Tim Millar replied that they were looking at the tackle height in open play and looking at every aspect of the law.

Ken Andrew then pointed out that the Lancashire Age Grade committee had set up a trial invitation meeting, of the 28 clubs invited only 6 turned up.

J Beardmore, Didsbury Toc H, presented some facts to the meeting that research showed that in the French study the rate of concussion had only changed from 19.7% to 16.2%. He quoted Ross Tucker , He also stated that ' No one has ever said let's lower the tackle height'. He accepted that there was a duty of care towards players but players want to play, he felt

the problem was the people at HQ/World Rugby, he wanted to know why did they want to change the game.

Phil Kearns replied to his question saying that the stats he was quoting only applied to one league , however if multiplied across all the leagues it presented a different answer.

Paul Manley. Orrell RUFC, commented that he did not know why there was a change because as a coach he already coached to a lower height , so this was already being done.

Robbie Jones, Lancashire Schools, drew attention to a study that showed lower tackles produced more concussions, he asked if Ross Tucker's data was being peer reviewed and was the medical information legitimate.

Greg Nicholls, Blackburn, asked if the Council minutes could be published. He felt the Council Members should be representing the views of their clubs.

Alan Marsland, Broughton Pk , asked if any other Counties were holding meetings, if they are and the outcome is the same outcome as this meeting then can the decision be changed ? He is against what is going to happen because of the effect on the other laws. How many laws will it change?

Tim Millar responded by saying that no law has been re written as the Council are still deciding. They will act at some point but at the moment nothing has been agreed, but we do need to look after players.

Ken Andrews also reiterated that the legal tackle will be lowered and now is the time to decide where that tackle should be. Phil Kearns explained the safe area that could be used and that was being looked at. Waist does not necessarily mean waist band height.

Mark Nelson, Lancashire Head Coach, asked if it could be guaranteed that the laws would be the same for the Premier game and the Community Game.

The reply was that World Rugby have said they intend to lower the tackle height across the whole game. The RFU had made their decision and World Rugby has then made their decision. The Premiership was under the control of World Rugby and not the RFU.

Steve Jenkins, Oldham, Players were saying to him that they would not play if the laws change, so when will we know when they will change ?

Dave Clarke replied that there was a Council meeting on Monday when they would feed back this information to the Council. Following that Focus groups would be set up but at the moment could not give a timeline.

Ken Andrews asked why would players leave ? Players are older and not interested in new laws.

Wynand Van Zyl, Heaton Moor, stated that people need to see the bigger picture , we know about the injuries etc so need to look at how to reduce them , he was getting e mails from parents who didn't want their children to play . We need to educate coaches/teachers etc and think about the future and the bigger picture. He believes that it will be beneficial in the

long run, in his experience concussion was going up. We need support and clarity around the laws.

Ken Andrews had been doing some liaising with school and they were in favour of the new law , if there was a safety concern then rugby in schools would stop. Robbie Jones said that in Lancashire numbers in schools were rising.

Oldham then queried why were we talking about Age Grade when the focus was on Open Age , Phil Kearns replied that we are talking about the future .

Alan Marsland, Broughton Pk , then asked why were people arguing about safety ? in his view we need to work out how to deal with it.

Matthew, Ormskirk, asked if the laws had to be changed by a certain date , was it a bad idea to agree to something before we knew what it was ?

Tim Millar replied that after they saw the evidence from Ross Tucker they sought legal advice and were told they needed to take action.

There followed then some discussion about the different sizes of players and how it may affect them , Paul Manley from Orrell gave the example of Bob Kimmins and Chris Wright who were totally different but still tackled low.

John Lowe , Ashton U Lyne , Players had made a choice to play . some people will bring the line down , however no one had been consulted , think it should be put to a vote . Phil Kearns replied that different people make different choices so would be difficult to come to a consensus. No other laws had been consulted on .

Concern was raised that if one law is changed then this will impact on other laws, Tim Millar said that he was working with the referees' societies to ensure that this doesn't happen.

There was still some confusion about where the phrase waist and below had come from as no area had been specified.

Arthur Stewart, Sefton, asked why were we going over a minor detail which may only last 4 months if World Rugby were going to bring in their change on 1st January ? TM replied that World Rugby are comfortable with what the RFU were doing , Scotland and Wales were also following suit, France were continuing with their decision.

Dave Herriman, Injured Players Foundation, At the moment he is working with 5 Injured players , 4 are wheel chair bound, all the results of tackles , easy to see physical injuries but difficult to see what is in someone head. The game is different.

Karl Lawrenson, Leigh, said he wanted it to be noted

- Cant have two tier rugby
- Agree to the drop in tackle height
- May end up with 7's rugby
- Tackle round the legs , off load , faster rugby
- We were a 6 team club now struggling to field 3

Mike Feel , Colts, queried whether this was a mission creep to change the game. He felt it would reduce players, juniors and seniors, is this really a consultation or is it ticking a box, did the Council Reps feel duped by the RFU? Would they be going back and saying the clubs do not agree?

Brian Stott asked which clubs were against lowering the tackle height?

There was no definitive answer as a lot of discussion was taking place,

Ken Andrews replied that he did not feel duped as he saw the evidence and at the heart of all of this is player safety. With regard to the comment that people would walk away there was no evidence of this and it a personal opinion.

There then followed a general discussion whether the meeting had been called too early , the Council members should have had more information and was it possible to mandate the Council members to vote as the clubs say.

A comment from the floor was that the Council Members should rescind their vote as we cannot support it without more information. This was not possible as the vole had already been done. One Council Member had already been told to do that but was told he had to get the support of 20 other Council Members but that had failed to materialize.

At this point Dave Clarke pointed out that the purpose of the meeting was to get the views of the clubs, it was pointed out that there was not enough information to make that decision.

There was a query about why were the RFU coming to the clubs now when they hadn't consulted on any other Law changes.

There was a query about if the tackle height went lower that perhaps the area that was being discussed how would Council Members vote , should it be a personal view of the view of the clubs. There were concerns that there would be a massive fundamental change in the game.

Alan James, Lancashire Vice President, Asked if the lower tackle height would stop head injuries then make the law change and adapt. Educate the coaches, Everyone is getting hot under the collar and not understanding why people are against it. Is it that bad a law change ?

Steve Rigby , Fylde, spoke to say that there was a need to lower the height within the current laws, this would guard against law changes. There should be a clear mandate on which three areas without changing the game laws.eg

- Below waist height
- Below Belly Button
- Below Nipple Height

What height it is will affect what happens next.

The reply from TM was it would not be a line but would be an area, the challenge is not to change lots of existing laws. Sanctions will remain the same.

Peter Hughes, Past President,

We are in a different time , with concerns about safety , retention and litigation and all need to be aware of that. There are experts involved and there is a need to trust them and we need to trust our representatives to vote for the rest of the game.

Brian Stott then added that in his role of Disciplinary Secretary this season he had had three queries about players and if there had been any disciplinary action involved as the people making the queries were looking for evidence to sue that player.

Another comment from the floor said that in theory they were not against lowering the tackle height but increasing the tackle area may negate that. There was a need to focus on what we can do to improve , use carrot rather than stick.

Mossley Hill, introduced himself as the gentleman who spoke to Tim Millar at Liverpool, he wanted it noted that he had spoken passionately against the rule. Rugby Clubs will no longer be taken for granted , no one disagrees with playing safely but clubs are saying no to this rule, he had done some research himself and wanted to know why no one questions the data that is published and presented to everyone. People had only found limited research so how could a decision be made without looking at all the data. Felt there was a need to go back to Council and change the Laws. The communications had been managed badly.it only needed 8 clubs to change a Council Member.

Dave Clarke repeated what he had said earlier which was that they would go back to Council with the Views of the clubs. He would also ask for nominations of people to work on the Focus group.

Paul Manley, Orrell , said that clubs just wanted clarity as at the moment people were saying they probably wouldn't bother next season.

To draw the meeting to a close Dave Clarke told the clubs that he would go back to Council with the following messages:

- Clubs are angry that they were not consulted
- Clubs wanted further consultation and clarity
- Council members to vote against the RFU, however could not agree to the last statement as we don't know what the question will be.

Ken Andrews added that the consensus was we needed to look at the tackle height.

The meeting closed at 9.45pm

Attendees:

Ken Andrews	Lancashire Council Representative
Dave Clarke	Lancashire Council Representative
Brian Stott	Lancashire President
Christine Spivey	DCBSM
Ian Spivey	AG Chair CB
David Herriman	Past President/Injured Players Foundation
Brian Collier	Trafford MV
Alan James	Lostock
T S Harper	Lancs Rep Manchester
Paul Whittaker	CSO Waterloo
Clive Ennis	MADREF
Martin Young	Secretary Eagle
Ian Bailey	Past President DTH
Alan Marsland	Broughton Pk
Greg Nichols	Blackburn Coach
Ian Scott Brown	Individual Members
Damian Strett	West Pk
Ben Cottam	Bolton
Josh Dickens	Bolton
Bob Wilkinson	Clitheroe
Dom Serridge	Rochdale
Paul Arnold	West Pk
G Bancroft	Blackburn
G Bett	?
E McCabe	Club Secretary
Barry Loftus	Chairman Ruskin Pk
Dan Rainford	DOR Vale of Lune
Steve Rigby	Chairman of Rugby Fylde

Matt Fillipo	Chairman Fylde
Mark Nelson	Lancashire Coach
S R Blackburn	Lancashire Past President
Robbie Jones	Secretary Lancs CSV
John Ward	Ashton ?
David Robinson	Orrell
Paul Manley	Orrell
Sam Simpson	DOR Eccles
Wynand Van Zyl	DOR Heaton Moor
Jack Fitzwilliam	Captain Heaton Moor
Steve Turrell	Junior Chairman Oldham
Arthur Stewart	Sefton
John Vandemeer	Southport Chairman
Mike Dale	DOR Southport
Ryan Jennings	Aldwinians
Tom Kelly	Coach LCRFC
Bill Jones	Sefton RUFC
K Lawrinson	DOR Leigh
Rhianne Boag	Leigh M & J Chair
Bill Nichols	Chair NWRTPG
Steve Jenkins	Oldham
Stephen Ward	Chairman, Sedgley Park
Ernie Neely	Past President
Scott Barrow	DoR Sedgley Park

