

# Blasting Off - Using Tackling and Contact Drills Effectively in Youth Football to Maximize Player Skill Development



Randy Mefford  
Fairfield Youth Athletic Association  
[randy@themeffords.com](mailto:randy@themeffords.com)



# Agenda

01

## Safety First

Protecting our youth and the current state of our game.

02

## Effective Tackling in Youth Football

Levels of Contact for Safer Practices

03

## Contact Drills to Maximize Skill Development

How to run an effective practice focusing on contact and tackling drills to improve players skill development

04

## Questions



# Safety First

## Protecting Youth

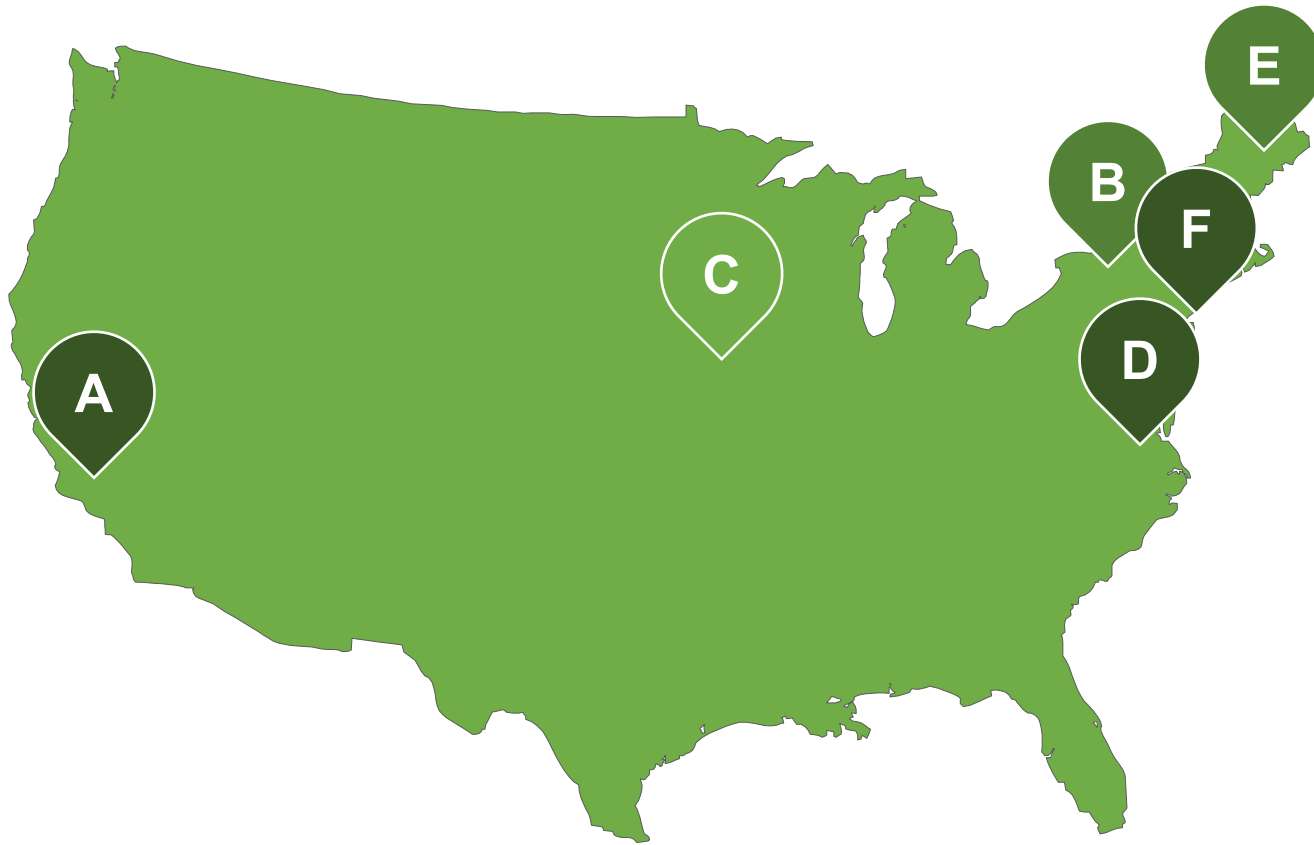
**Children Are Suffering Brain Injuries from Contact Sports—And Now Parents Are Demanding Action**

**What can we do as coaches?**

- Players with suspected concussions should not play or practice until medically cleared.
- No more tackling using the top of the helmet as a battering ram.
- Limiting full contact practice to no more than three days during any calendar week for any player.
- Suspend any coach for three games who allows an athlete to practice or play in a game when they exhibit symptoms of a concussion.
- Make sure a trainer is on site for all games.

# Youth Tackle Football—Proposed Legislation

There are only 6 states with active proposals.



**A – California**

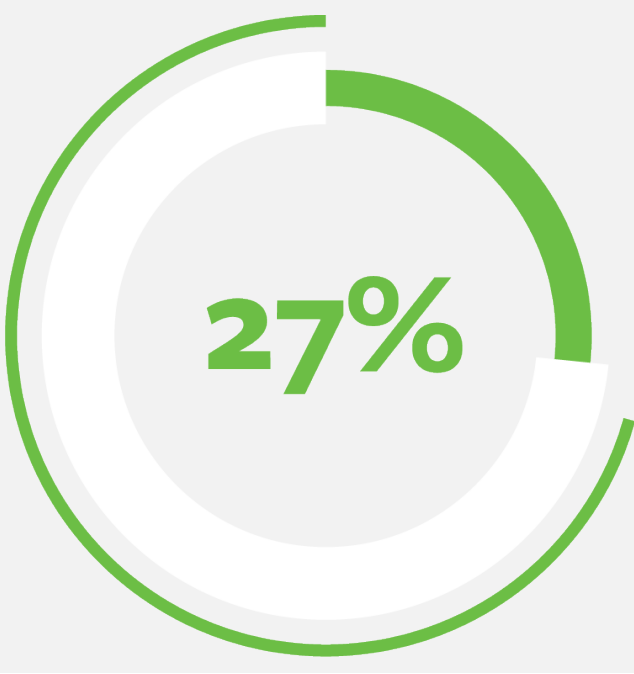
**B – New York**

**C - Illinois**

**D – Maryland**

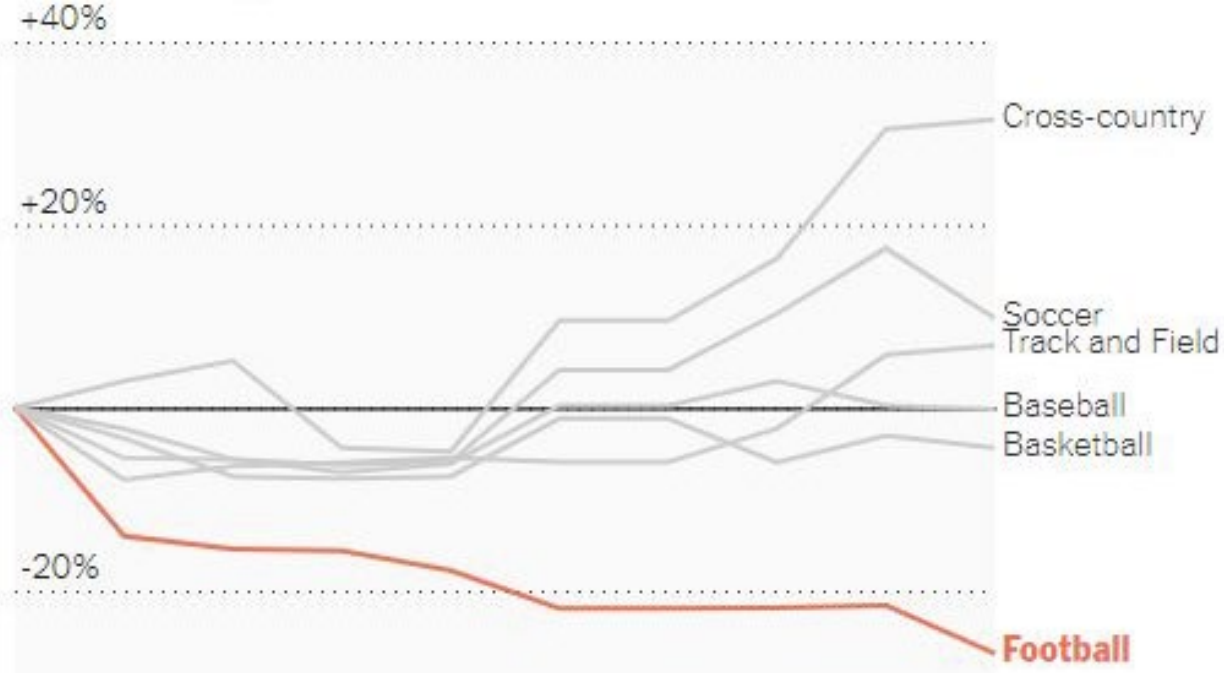
**E – Massachusetts**

**F – New Jersey**



High school participation in 11-man football has fallen more than 10% nationally since 2009, and 27% in Ohio during that time, the largest decrease out of all 50 states in the last decade.

Source: New York Times 11/8/2019



## Football Participation is in a decade long decline



Football is falling all over the country: on the coasts and in the heartland, in the Upper Midwest and in the Deep South, and in California, Ohio, Florida and Texas.



Football is still the most popular high school sport among boys

**14%**  
FOOTBALL

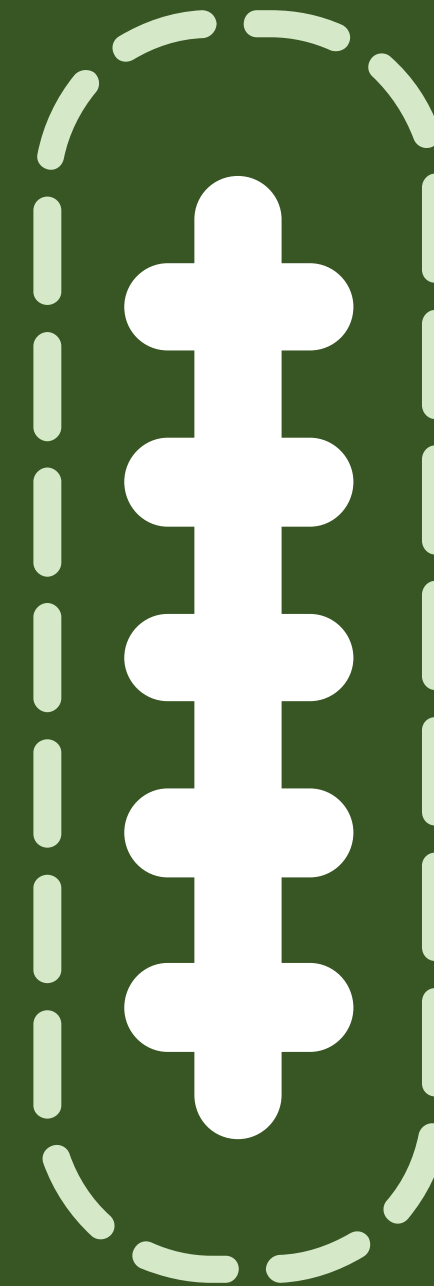
**8%**  
TRACK & FIELD

**7%**  
BASKETBALL

**6%**  
BASEBALL

**6%**  
SOCCER

**58%**  
CROSS COUNTRY,  
WRESTLING TENNIS, GOLF,  
SWIMMING, LACROSSE, - Do  
not participate.



# Tackling



*Effective Youth Football Tackling*

# 5 Levels of Contact for Safer Practices

## Live

Intensity Level 5

Drill is run in game-like conditions. This is the only time players are taken to the ground.



Intensity Level 5

## Thud

Intensity Level 4

Drill is run at competitive speed through the moment of contact. There is no predetermined winner. Contact is above the waist, players stay on their feet, and a quick whistle ends the drill.



Intensity Level 4

## Control

Intensity Level 3

Drill is run at an assigned speed until the moment of contact with one player as the predetermined winner. Contact is above the waist, and players stay on their feet.



Intensity Level 3

## Bag

Intensity Level 2

Drill is run against a bag or soft-contact surface.



Intensity Level 2

## Air

Intensity Level 1

Drill is run unopposed and without contact.



Intensity Level 1



# 5 Exercises to Improve Tackling Fundamentals

## BREAKDOWN

This is the starting and fundamental position for tackling. This includes having your feet shoulder-width apart, shoulder blades squeezed and down, knees and hips bent with a slight 45-degree forward lean of the back and hands in front of the body.



1

## BUZZ

This fundamental is the technique for coming to balance regaining breakdown position prior to contact.

Once the defender is within “striking distance” of the ball-carrier, the defender buzzes his feet while widening his base and sinking his hips.



2

## HIT POSITION

This fundamental refers to the body being in the proper position just before impact.

Have a bend in both knees. With your back foot directly under your hips. Head and eyes up, shoulders square to the contact.



3

## SHOOT

This fundamental refers to the explosion or use of the hips when tackling.

To finish the tackle, continue to drive your legs while working up and through opponents.



4

## RIP

This fundamental focuses on the throwing of two uppercuts with your arms to secure your opponent in the tackle – not grabbing or swinging around of the arms.

Secure the tackle by “grabbing cloth” (the back of the ball-carrier’s jersey).



5

# Deductive Tackling System

“Switch to rugby-style tackling – it was a game changer for the Buckeyes.

Kerry Coombs – Defensive Coordinator at The Ohio State University

Our game is changing, and if we don't do something about it, then we're at the mercy of the powers that be. Who are they? They're the moms and dads that don't let their kids play sports, specifically ours. So we can't just bury our heads in the sand.





# The ~~deductive~~ rugby tackling system relies on three core principles.

1. Use the hip as an aiming point
2. Keep the eyes up
3. Keep those feet moving

- The low aiming point helps prevent helmet-to-helmet contact. Eyes up prevents using the crown of the helmet and moving the feet basically brings it all together by providing the force needed to complete the tackle.




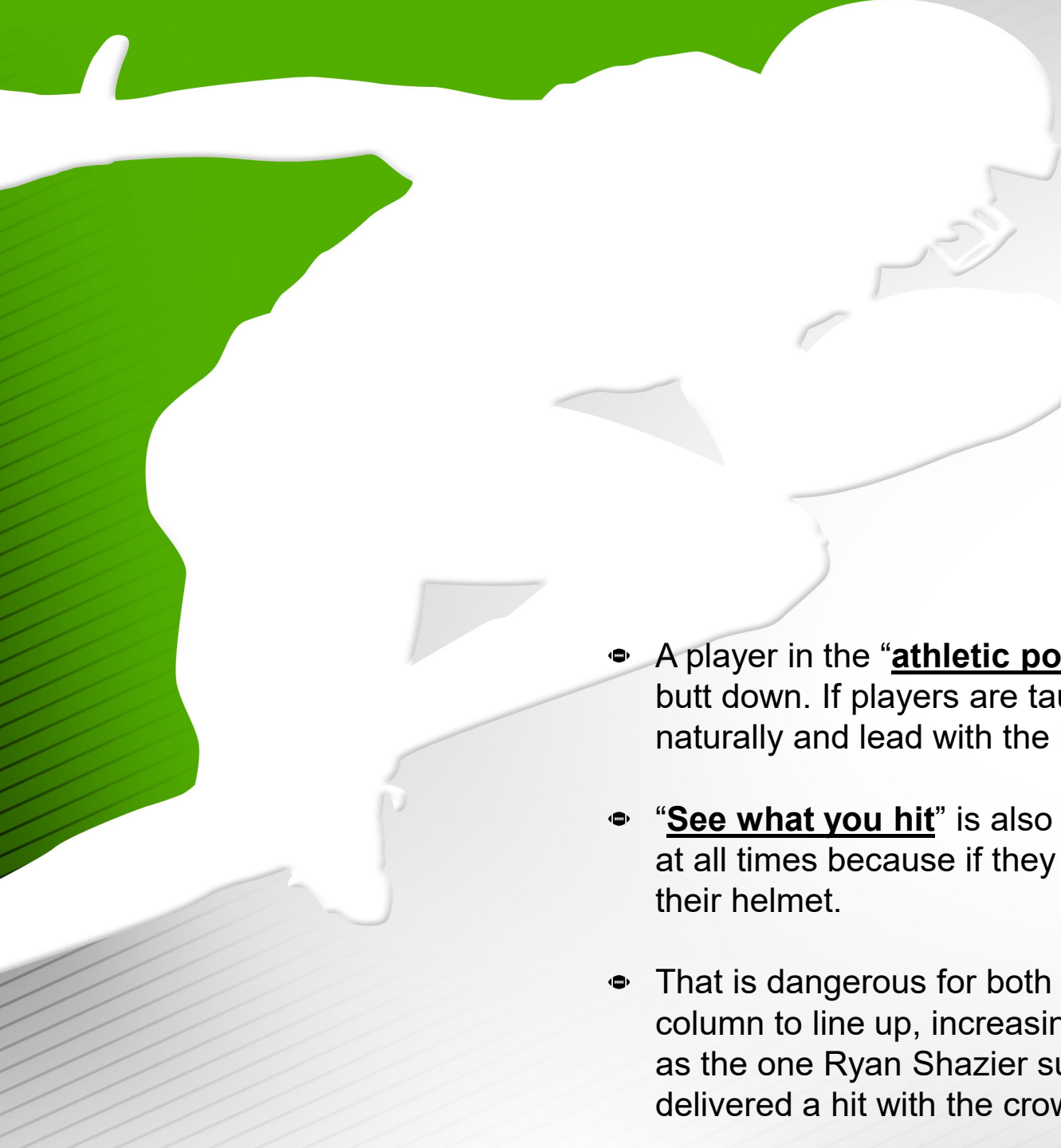
## **Out** is the old “head across the bow” approach

- **Coaches used to teach players to cut off a runner’s path head first. That didn’t mean leading with the helmet, per se, but it did tend to put a player’s head in the path of a pending collision.**
- Instead, teach players that while aiming for the offensive player’s hip, the head will go behind the ball-carrier — and that’s OK.



## In is the “wrap and roll” tackle.

- **Going behind the ball-carrier necessitates bringing him down with both arms and using a player’s momentum to bring him down.**
- The upshot of this: Since we’re usually tackling a moving target, this ended up happening anyway no matter how many straight-on tackling drills a team might have held in the summer heat.
- By encouraging what was often a by-product of the old tackling method, Ohio State coaches have found the new method more effective and easier to adopt.



# Coaches still stress the “athletic position” and “see what you hit.”

- **These are two things I can say coaches have been stressing for at least 25 years. It's probably longer than that, but 25 years ago marks the first time I was taught to tackle so that's as far back as I can go.**
- A player in the “**athletic position**” will be on his toes with knees bent, chest forward and butt down. If players are taught to maintain that posture, they are less likely to bend forward naturally and lead with the head.
- “**See what you hit**” is also an old mantra intended to make sure players keep their eyes up at all times because if they are looking down at the ground, they will lead with the top of their helmet.
- That is dangerous for both the ball-carrier and the tackler because it causes the spinal column to line up, increasing the potential for fractured vertebrae and spinal injuries such as the one Ryan Shazier suffered against the Bengals a couple of season ago when he delivered a hit with the crown of his helmet.



## Arms are the new chest.

- **One way to reduce helmet-to-helmet contact is to stress leading with the arms instead of the upper body.**

- That goes for players on both sides of the ball. Whether they are making a block, disengaging from a block or attempting a tackle, by establishing contact with the arms and using the body as a counterbalance, players can be physical and effective without involving their heads in direct contact.



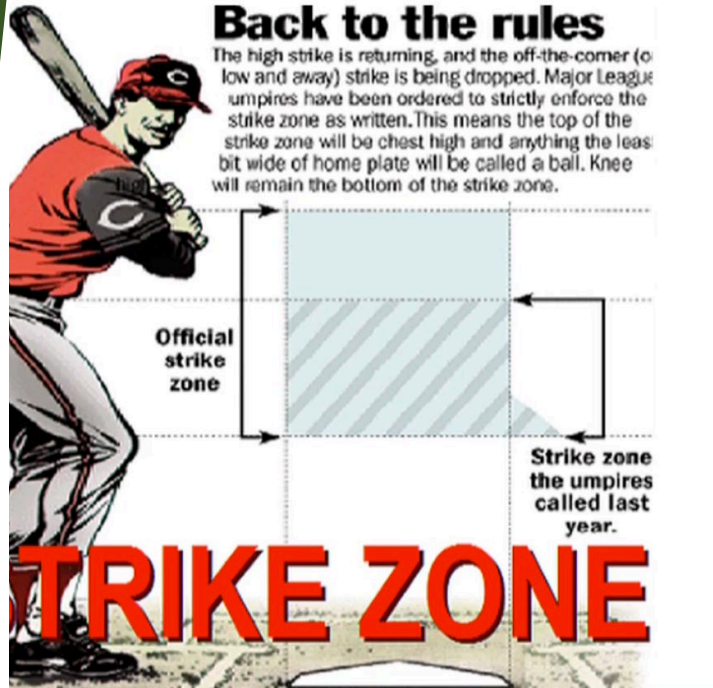
## Use bags as tackling dummies as much as possible.

- **Try hitting different types of bags instead of players smashing into each other.**

- This obviously reduces the number of collisions players have overall, which cuts down on injury and prevents overall wear and tear.
- Another added benefit of doing more reps with bags than a live ball-carrier: Players will develop muscle memory of the right technique rather than doing anything necessary to get a player on the ground, which is what tends to happen in old-fashioned mano-a-mano tackling drills.

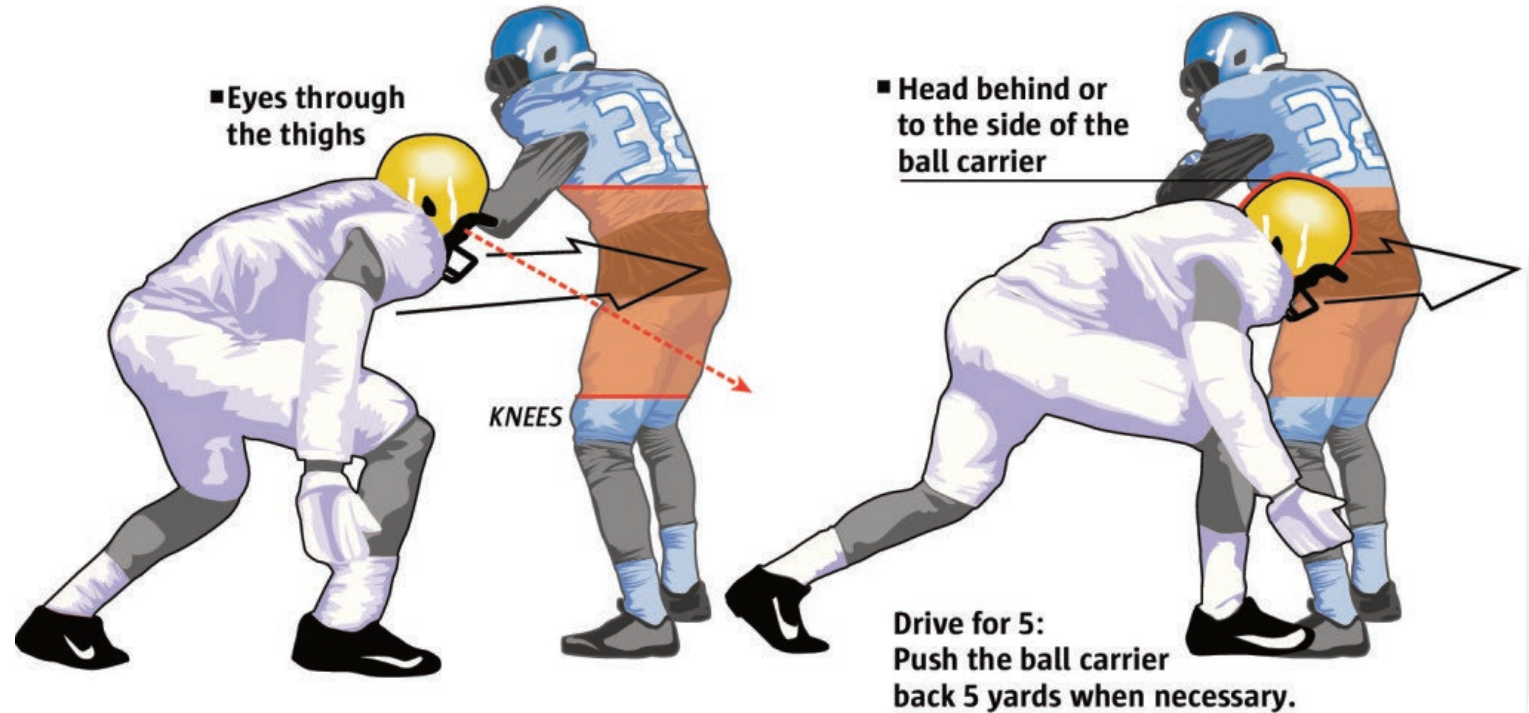


# Let's Play Ball

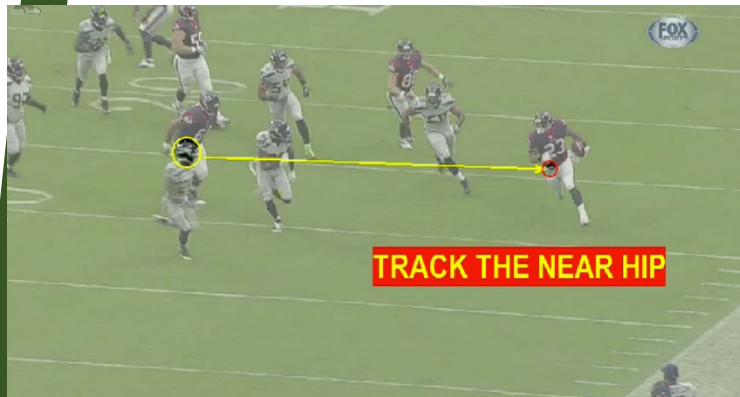


## The strike zone

No umpires needed here. The Huskies and Seahawks have taken the lead in a movement to teach their players safer tackling techniques, and a key emphasis in that is the lowering of the "strike zone" on a ball carrier to take the head out of the tackle. UW defenders are taught to target the ball-carriers' abdomens starting at the bottom of the jersey number to the top of the knees.



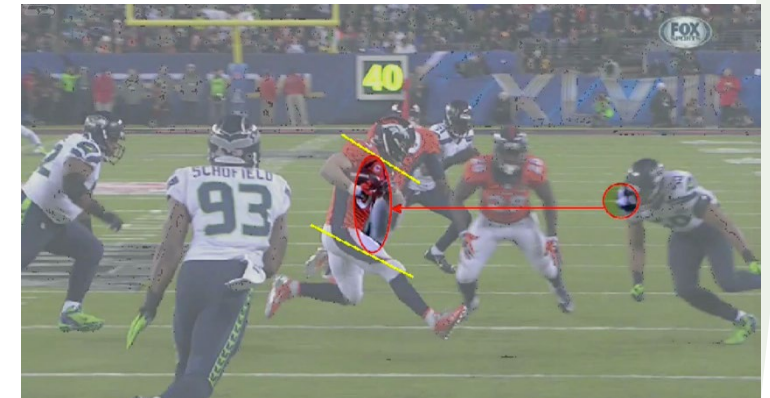
# HITTING HARD



TRACKING THE INSIDE HIP IS KEY TO TRACKING THE BALLCARRIER.



AMONG THE BEST TACKLING EXAMPLES IS THIS ONE OF K.J. WRIGHT, WHO IS ABOUT TO BRING DOWN JACKSONVILLE'S DENARD ROBINSON FOR A TWO-YARD LOSS.



THE "STRIKE ZONE" ILLUSTRATED AS K.J. WRIGHT IS SET TO BRING DOWN WES WELKER IN SUPER BOWL XLVIII.

# Poor Technique



# Proper Technique





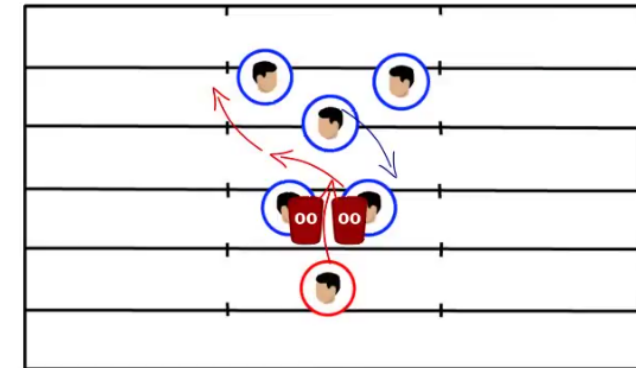


# Defense Drills for Youth

Simple, fun and effective techniques to boost your team's skills

# Breakthrough Drill

## BREAKTHROUGH DRILL



Teaching runners to stay low, run with power and be decisive

### Drill Setup

- Have two defensive players line up side by side with blocking bags
- Have a third defensive player line up between them, 3-4 yard backs
- Have a final level of defensive players, aligned behind the first two but 6-8 yards back
- Ball carriers form a line in front of first level of defense with a football in hand

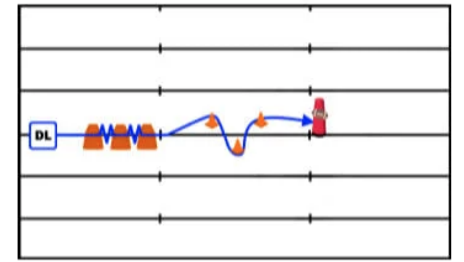
### How it Works

- On coach's signal, ball carrier will explode through the first line of defense
- At 2nd level, defender will commit to either left or right, with running back reacting and cutting in the opposite direction
- At 3rd level, ball carrier will put a move on final defender and explode forward for another five yards

### Coaching Tips

- Make sure players are finishing the drill hard – it's not showtime, we want to see which players can beat a defender in the open field and manufacture yards
- First line of defense will have blocking bags to bump the runner with, forcing him to keep the ball secure and run with power and purpose

# Sack Drill



To teach and reinforce correct tackling fundamentals, good footwork, and a nose for the football.

## Drill Setup

- You'll need 3 agility bags, 3 cones, and a standup dummy.
- Place the three agility bags 2-3 yards apart, and 5 yards downfield, place the cones in the shape of a triangle with each cone 5 yards apart.
- Lastly, the dummy bag should be 5-7 yards downfield from the last cone.

## Execution

- The first player in line will get down in a 3 point stance. Use a football as a visual signal for the defensive lineman to get off.
- The defensive lineman will explode through the agility bags getting his knees up high, then breaking out to the first cone, going around all three.
- Lastly, the player will sprint for the dummy bag and attempt to perform a strip on the ball as they sack the dummy bag.

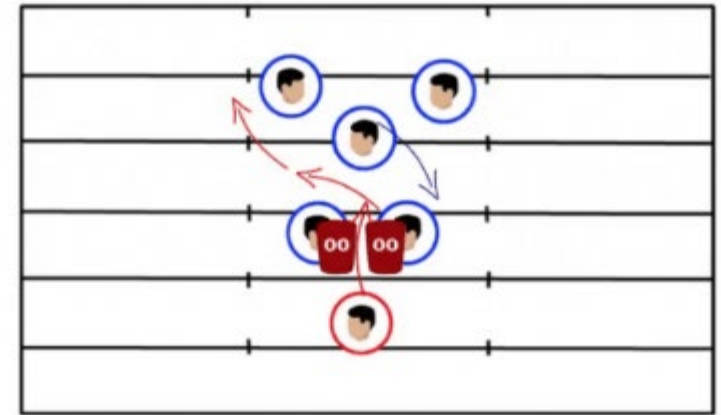
## Coaching Tips

- Much like the RB Gauntlet drill, you're free to create any combination of obstacles in the defensive linemans path that they need to avoid to sack the QB.



# Break Through Drill

## BREAKTHROUGH DRILL



Teaching runners to stay low, run with power and be decisive

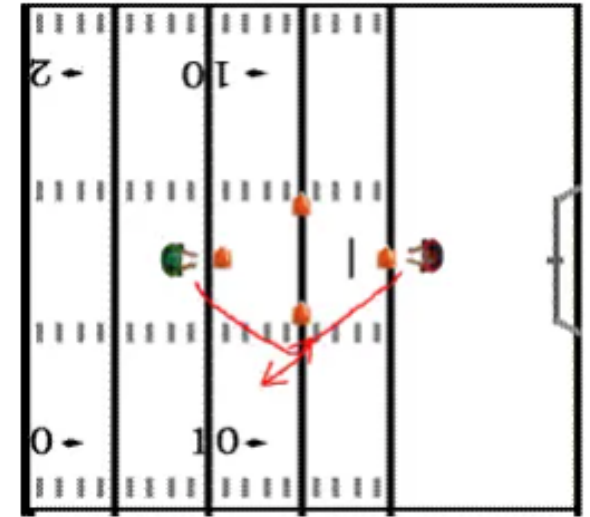
### Drill Setup

- Have two defensive players line up side by side with blocking bags
- Have a third defensive player line up between them, 3-4 yard backs
- Have a final level of defensive players, aligned behind the first two but 6-8 yards back
- Ball carriers form a line in front of first level of defense with a football in hand

### How it Works

- On coach's signal, ball carrier will explode through the first line of defense
- At 2nd level, defender will commit to either left or right, with running back reacting and cutting in the opposite direction
- At 3rd level, ball carrier will put a move on final defender and explode forward for another five yards
- Coaching Tips
- Make sure players are finishing the drill hard – it's not showtime, we want to see which players can beat a defender in the open field and manufacture yards
- First line of defense will have blocking bags to bump the runner with, forcing him to keep the ball secure and run with power and purpose

# Angle Tackling Drill



This tackling drill focuses on getting into the proper tackling position and the mechanics of a tackle from an angle.

## Drill Setup

- The cones should be set up two yards by two yards.
- The inside cones are two yards apart, which makes the cones that the players are at, facing each other, four yards apart.

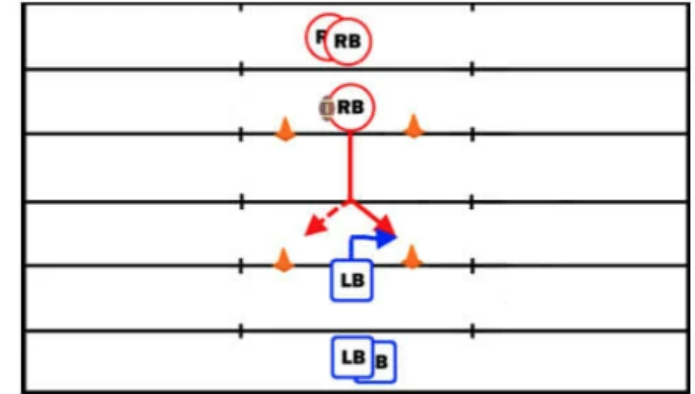
## Execution

- You have an offensive player and a defensive player, and the players are going to step toward a cone, in the same direction.
- The defensive player takes a step and freezes. That's a very important coaching point—that both of them take the big step and freeze. That's why the cones are so close.

## Coaching Tips

- Coach up the stance: holster the hands, get your elbows close to you, then shoot up, grab some cloth, and shoot through. The eyes are at the numbers, actually a little bit lower.
- A variation of this drill is having the players take a couple of steps.
- Most running backs aren't going to run to the defender. They're going to run away from. This is part of the pursuit aspect of it. If you're head up on a running back, he's got two directions he can go. If you take away the inside, he only has one way to go, which is the outside. Push him to the boundary while everyone is pursuing.

# Open Field Tackling Drill



To work on pursuit and tackling form in the open field.

## Drill Setup


- Setup 4 cones, all 10 yards apart.
- Have the LB's form a line on one end, with the ball carriers on the other end with a football in hand.
- The coach will stand behind the LBs, in view of the RBs.

## Execution

- The first player in line will step up and beginning running forward.
- The LB will step up stay square. After the RB has run about 5 yards the coach will direct the runner either right or left.
- The LB will then close in and tackle the ball carrier before they get past the cones.

## Coaching Tips

- The key is for the LB to keep his feet moving and stay focused on the players torso – you can't juke with your hips!



# TOP 4 Mistakes Youth Coaches Make

01

## Scrimmaging too much

Spending more than 50 % of your practice scrimmaging leaves little time for developing players and allows bad habits to go unnoticed.

02

## Too much conditioning

Bad teams spend 25% or more of their practice time doing non-football related conditioning type drills

03

## Poor Defenses

Most of the poorly coached teams devoted less than 25% of their practice time to defense.

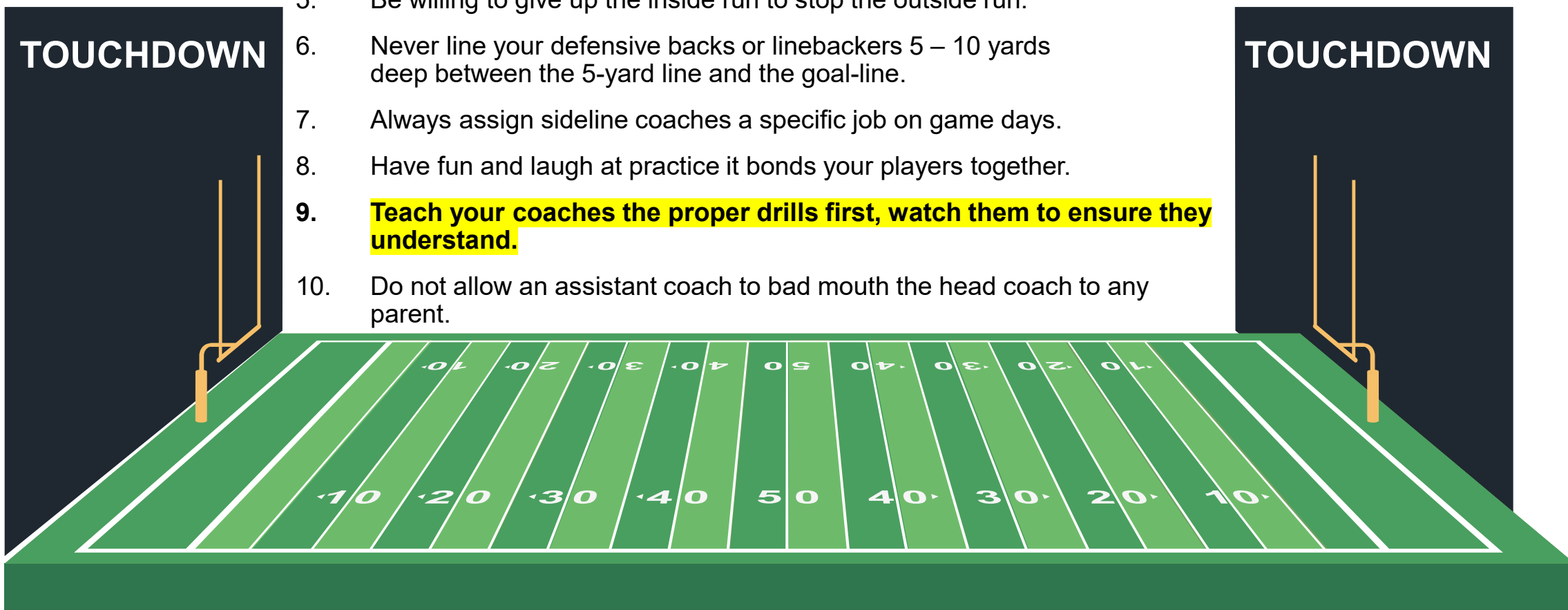
04

## Poor Teaching Methods

Coaching youth football is teaching, whoever teaches the most effectively and efficiently will consistently win.

# The 10 Youth Football Commandments

1. Do not teach a play until they get it right, but until they can't get it wrong.
2. Your QB should not be your best player, but your 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> best player.
3. You DO have to teach kids to be leaders, so make sure you teach them to be respectful leaders.
4. You're not coaching against the NFL, College, or even High School players. Use their inexperience against them.
5. Be willing to give up the inside run to stop the outside run.
6. Never line your defensive backs or linebackers 5 – 10 yards deep between the 5-yard line and the goal-line.
7. Always assign sideline coaches a specific job on game days.
8. Have fun and laugh at practice it bonds your players together.
9. **Teach your coaches the proper drills first, watch them to ensure they understand.**
10. Do not allow an assistant coach to bad mouth the head coach to any parent.



# More Information



## Rugby Tackling System

<https://www.elevenwarriors.com/ohio-state-football/2015/04/52228/video-heres-pete-carroll-explaining-rugby-tackling-which-revolutionized-ohio-states-defense>



## ATAVUS – Digital Tackling Academy

<https://offers.atavus.com/digital-tackling-academy>



## Glazier Clinics

<https://www.glazierclinics.com>



## USA Football

<https://usafootball.com/>



Thank you



Randy Mefford  
Fairfield Youth Athletic Association  
[randy@themeffords.com](mailto:randy@themeffords.com)