

# Shaping the game: making rugby more enjoyable for the young



It's notoriously hard to excel at something you don't enjoy. This is true in any area of life, including sport. Games that are overwhelmingly demanding – whether physically, mentally or in terms of their rules – can drive away many young would-be devotees who in later years might have grown to embrace and respect the inherent challenges.

The laws of rugby union are by no means simple. Some critics have questioned whether they are too “prescriptive”, at least for youngsters. Research by the University of Exeter's Centre for Sport, Leisure and Tourism, in partnership with the Rugby Football Union (RFU), aims to make the game more attractive at junior level by simplifying the rules, so encouraging fundamental skills, confidence and, above all, pleasure.



## Overview

Any governing body in sport wants players to develop from novice to expert. It is, after all, a guarantee of continued participation and interest. In 2010 a report by the University of Exeter, commissioned by the RFU, highlighted the need for distinct age-group rules to suit young players' advancing levels of physical and cognitive development – leading to Shaping the Game, a pilot project focusing on the “mini rugby” played by under-sevens to under-11s.

The three-year study began in autumn 2010, starting with an investigation into the effect of modifying under-sevens and under-nines rules. Under-sevens played four-a-side rather than seven-a-side games, allowing every player to become more involved. In contrast to the accepted approach, rucks, mauls, line-outs and scrums were not introduced at under-nines level: contact was allowed only through tackling, leaving the other elements to be brought in gradually over the following two years, and player numbers were reduced.

These changes were based on the theory that confronting youngsters with too many rules early in their development will stifle not only their progress but their love of the sport. This theory is supported by a wealth of research demonstrating

a link between how children perceive their own competence and the likelihood of them continuing with a given activity.

The impact of the study's first year was dramatically evidenced at selected end-of-year rugby festivals. A comparison of matches contested by teams that had spent the season observing traditional rules and matches contested by teams that had used the pilot rules revealed a huge rise in player “involvements”.

### For under-sevens (per game):

- 185% more tries
- 107% more runs
- 69% more passes
- 22% more tags per player

### For under-nines (per game):

- 85% more tries
- 37% more runs
- 126% more passes
- 16% more tackles
- 22% more ball-in-play time

The significance of these findings in fostering skills and a lasting interest in the sport is particularly clear in light of the fact that players using both sets of rules listed “scoring tries” and “tackling” as their favourite elements of the game.

## KEY FACTS

- The complexity of rugby union's rules can prove a barrier to young players' willingness to stick with the sport.
- A three-year study by the University of Exeter and the Rugby Football Union is aiming to address this problem by investigating the effects of rule changes at mini-rugby and junior level.
- The idea is to provide a “progressive player pathway” that introduces youngsters to the game's more complicated laws incrementally.
- This approach increases their individual involvement and enjoyment and helps develop fundamental skills such as handling and running.
- At under-sevens level it has resulted in 185% more tries, 107% more runs and 69% more passes per player.

[www.exeter.ac.uk/slt/ourresearch](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/slt/ourresearch)

# Shaping the game: making rugby more enjoyable for the young (cont.)



## Comments and implications

*"Changing rugby union's rules at junior level could be vital to developing the next generation of Grand Slam and World Cup winners,"* says PhD researcher and ESRC CASE studentship award holder Gethin Thomas.

*"More children are involved in the action when you simplify the game and focus on the skills that are most appropriate to young players' capabilities. That in turn means they spend more time developing the basic evasion, handling and running skills before they have to learn things like line-outs, scrums and rucking.*

*The key thing about this change of emphasis is that it puts the child at the centre of the development. Because each child is seeing more of the ball and is generally more involved in play, confidence and self-esteem grow alongside skills and ability. That leads to more enjoyment, which is crucial to the long-term retention of players and the development of children both on and off the field."*

The second year of the Shaping the Game pilot will concentrate on under-eights and under-10s, while the third year will focus on under-11s. Objective and subjective data is being gathered and analysed throughout the study with a view to informing RFU policy.

The findings so far, based on the involvement of more than a thousand young players, have proved a revelation.

*"The results to this point have exceeded all expectations,"* says Gary Townsend, the RFU's Player Development Manager.

*"The rule changes were designed to increase inclusion, passing, individual possession and try-scoring, but I don't think anyone envisaged it would be by such amounts."*

A general perception in rugby for many years has been that southern-hemisphere teams – most famously the New Zealand All-Blacks – favour a more flair-filled, fast-moving, crowd-pleasing game. Sides from the northern hemisphere, by comparison, rely on set-piece plays and a contact-dominated approach. Townsend thinks Shaping the Game could help redress the balance.

*"I believe this research will provide alternatives and solutions to the prescriptive style of coaching that currently prevails in mini-rugby and youth rugby,"* he says. *"It should appeal to those with an open mind and a child-centred approach, which I feel describes most of our coaches."*

*"We're aiming for a progressive player pathway that increases enjoyment, ability and the number of people in the game,"* adds Thomas. *"I've had parents tell me: 'My son went a whole year without scoring a try. Now he's scored three in a week.' That shows we're on the right track in terms of making a real difference in how rugby is played, perceived and enjoyed."*

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ESRC Researcher

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Gary Townsend  
Player Development  
Manager, RFU

## Further Information:

**Gethin Thomas** Email: [gjt201@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:gjt201@exeter.ac.uk)

**Web:** [www.exeter.ac.uk/slt/ourresearch](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/slt/ourresearch)

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