

Words **SAM PETERS** // Main Image **TOM MAHER/INPHO**

LOSING THE COLLISION?

The schools game is pioneering ways to bring

rugby union back to a game of evasion

COLLISION (NOUN) – the instance of one moving object or person striking violently against another.

Precisely when rugby union started being referred to as a 'collision' sport instead of a 'contact' one is hard to identify. For my money, I'd say around 2009-10, some 15 years after becoming the last mass participation sport to embrace professionalism.

By then, in the aftermath of the brutal Lions tour to South Africa, when team doctor James Robson described professional players as "too bulky and muscle bound", the die had seemingly been cast for a 'good big 'un' to forever trump a 'good little 'un'.

As players got bigger, faster and stronger, so too did the forces





Schools Rugby

→ involved when collisions occurred. And collisions occurred a lot more.

Was there a concerted plan for this to happen? No. Was it inevitable, as money rolled in, gym time increased and the stakes rose, that rugby would become unrecognisable in its physicality? Yes. Did anyone think of the consequences? Apparently not.

Before professionalism, expressions like 'winning the collision' and 'dominating the tackle' didn't exist.

Passive tackling was coached with a judo roll technique deployed for head-on tackles. Rucks and mauls absorbed equal amounts of energy and game time, while 'sophisticated defensive systems' were what Luke Skywalker breached in an X-Wing Fighter. But since professionalism the game has evolved, fast, and the language has inevitably followed.

Rugby's parlance today hinges with expressions of physical dominance and force, despite rugby existing for almost two centuries previously as an evasion sport where contact was involved but not sought. Those days are long gone.

"Whether you're at schoolboy or international level, there's a premium on collision winning, that almost goes without saying," said now former England defence coach Felix Jones following his appointment last season.



As collisions have increased, so have injuries and concussions. The RFU and Premiership Rugby's own data shows a dramatic increase in the frequency of concussions since recording began around 2002. Severity of concussions (measured by mean days absent per concussion) has more than doubled in the same period. The severity of injuries has also increased.

As the average tackle height has risen, at the behest of professional coaches, so too have head-to-head collisions.

In recent years, as concern about the effects of repeated head injuries has increased, there has been a concerted push for referees to once again penalise head-high contact and in doing so protect players' short and long-term

health. But can the collision genie ever be put back into the bottle?

In 2018, I asked Alistair Hargreaves, the former Saracens captain and Springbok lock who had recently retired through concussion, if rugby could ever be a 'contact' sport again?

"Absolutely not," he replied. "The entire premise of rugby union now is to dominate the gain-line and win collisions. Rugby is a collision sport. It can't go back."

To Hargreaves and many others who have only known professionalism, the idea of depowering rugby is anathema.

Opta stats show average ball-in-play time at World Cups has risen from 25.5 minutes in 1995 to 34.2 minutes in 2023, while a team's average tackle count per match has nigh-on trebled from 58 in 1995 to 169 in 2023.

With the average weight of a top-flight player increasing by well over a stone during that time, collisions are now more forceful than ever.

But while the shift towards a collision-based game has been embraced by professionals, there is growing resistance at grass-roots level from rugby lovers crying out for a return to a less attritional game.

"I'm a huge believer in the importance of rugby and the values it can instil in young people," says Jo Thomson,

Brutal series

The 2009 Lions tour took a high toll



DID YOU KNOW?

Ironically, while ball-in-play time has increased in rugby, offloads have decreased from 30 per game at the first World Cup in 1987 to just 13.8 in 2023.

French greats RW chats to Pierre Villepreux and Olivier Magne, advocates of an evasive brand of rugby



headteacher at Clayesmore School in Dorset. "It's a fantastic sport which teaches so many important life lessons. Some of our pupils live for rugby and I want it to continue.

"But the data is hard to argue with. Rather than bury our heads in the sand, we should look for solutions to safeguard the future of this brilliant game."

Led by Thomson and supported by a forward-thinking sports department including former pro cricketer Dan Conway and ex-Bergerac No 8 Richard Dixon, Clayesmore are pursuing a rugby programme focused on reducing collisions. In July, a group of five Clayesmore coaches led by Dixon, an Oxford graduate turned maths teacher, attended legendary French coach Pierre Villepreux's coaching clinic *Le Plaisir du Mouvement* (LPM) in Lubersac with a brief to embrace his methods based on skills, go-forward and game play.

"The RFU pays lip service to player welfare and playing numbers are dropping, partly because people don't want to watch the boring collision-based rugby we're served up routinely," Dixon says. "The game has become too much about collisions. It never used to be, and it doesn't have to be in the future. There's no good waiting for the professional game to do something about this. They have proved they won't. So we'll do it ourselves."

Shortly before Christmas last year, Dixon invited Toulouse's coaching team, via academy coach Sam Lacombe, to showcase LPM to Clayesmore's pupils. In February, Toulouse's coaching staff, including former All Black Jerome Kaino, landed in the sleepy village of Iwerne

Minster to run a session attended by several West Country schools.

"It was an incredible day and the boys absolutely lapped up what they were told," says Clayesmore's head of rugby Tom Griffiths. "As a school, we're really embracing LPM and the idea of rugby being an evasion-based game, not a collision one."

“Playing numbers are dropping. People don’t want to watch boring collision-based rugby”

The movement is not exclusive to the West of England, with St Paul's School in London, an RFU founding member, one of several independent schools actively exploring ways to depower rugby.

"Professional rugby is not a good shop window for the school game, nor is its nomenclature always encouraging," says Neil Rollings, chairman of the Professional Association of Directors of Sport in Independent Schools.

"Some parents will be enthusiastic for their children to emulate the size, athleticism and appetite for heavy contact that can be witnessed in the Premiership. However, a focus on big hits, macho confrontation and a celebration of abnormal size and power of players detracts from the assertion that rugby is a game for all shapes and sizes.

"It has led to a polarisation in the sport. The number of pupils persisting with the game until the sixth form, even in the biggest boarding schools, is smaller than at any time in history."

While professional rugby's risk profile has risen, Rollings, the former director of sport at Cheltenham College, Sedbergh and Magdalen College, Oxford, believes the schools' game is tarnished unfairly by comparison.

"The schools' game should not be confused with the professional version," he says. "The RFU, to its credit, has robust data measuring risk levels throughout the game: this demonstrates that school-age players are at significantly less risk.

"There never was a golden age in which all boys loved rugby. There is

understandable, inter-generation hatred of the game from those who suffered on windswept fields at the hands of unsympathetic bullies. But the game isn't like that anymore. There is an irony that at a time when rugby has never been better coached, safer or more player-centred, it attracts the greatest negative publicity."

Whether Rollings is right, parental perception of risk has undeniably grown. Headteachers around the country, many of them historically avid supporters of rugby, are naturally responding. "Headlines around injury in the professional game, the rise in popularity and provision of other sports, and the increasing challenges of finding appropriate fixtures means rugby is now under threat in our schools," says Sally-Anne Huang, head teacher at St Paul's School. "We have moved well beyond the point where



Seeking space
Mini rugby in Munster

Schools Rugby

→ we can bury our heads in the sand and hope it can hold on to its traditional place in our culture.”

Such was the concern over dwindling player numbers last year that Huang detailed former head of sport Glenn Harrison, a former Cambridge Blue who also played for Wharfedale and Harlequins, to create the blueprint for an alternative format with more emphasis on safety and skill.

“For me, there is far more value in promoting skill, speed and awareness with less reliance on kids being obsessed with size and chucking down protein shakes three times a day so they can get bigger and win collisions,” says Harrison. “That reliance on size and terms like ‘winning collisions’ contributes to a poorer game in my book and potentially more injuries.

“Contact is going to be there and rugby is a physical game. But there’s a danger in words like ‘collision’ and children watching the sheer brutality of the pro game. It puts fear in parents’ minds.”

Harrison, in tandem with the RFU’s medical research lead Dr Keith Stokes, delivered on the brief in October 2023 when three other leading rugby-playing independent schools, Tonbridge, King’s Wimbledon and Hampton, joined St Paul’s in a trial of the ‘Third Game’.

“The new game is designed to keep the main elements of scrum, lineout, full-contact tackle, but to reduce the number of collisions and reward hitting space, offloading and passing earlier,” says Harrison, whose trial was observed by John Lawn, the RFU’s Game Development director, and long-serving head of medicine Simon Kemp. “The trial was incredibly well received by the

other schools and in four hours of game time we didn’t record a single injury.”

Harrison’s ‘Third Game’ sees another invention of the professional game, the ‘jackal’ contest over the ball, outlawed for safety reasons, while ball-carriers deemed to have intentionally collided with a static defender are also penalised.

To encourage more width and fewer carries near the breakdown, seven points are awarded for a try scored in a shaded red eight-metre square ‘try zone’, while No 8s are not allowed to pick up from the scrum base.

Each ruck counts as a ‘phase’, with teams permitted four phases before a scrum is awarded to the defending side.

“In October 2023 we ran a very small pre-pilot festival,” an RFU spokesperson tells *Rugby World*. “During May and June, we met with more than 150 rugby-playing schools as part of our regular engagement with them. Several have shown an interest in expanding the pilot this season. It will be a deliberately small pilot, with around 30 schools taking part, the majority being in the U14-U16 age grades. This targeted approach will enable us to better understand how players, coaches and referees feel about the game.

“During the 2024-25 season we will also be supporting and promoting T1 Rugby, which is the new format of non-contact rugby from World Rugby which looks and feels more like rugby union, and is being rolled out globally. As it is non-contact, it’s great way for new players to get involved.”

Shortly before this article went to print, the RFU published findings from *The Review of Rugby in Schools*, which described the sport’s dwindling



participation numbers as “an urgent issue approaching crisis point”. The review warned that if the RFU doesn’t commit to widening its base by introducing more broadly accessible, non-contact forms of rugby, it will lead to a “diminished audience” and “a much weakened professional and national game”.

The RFU welcomed the findings and responded by committing £5m to roll out T1 over the next four years.

Interestingly for St Paul’s, who in February will host a ‘Future of Sport in Schools’ event, the 2024-25 academic year has seen an uptick in playing numbers for the first time since before the Covid pandemic. It’s unclear whether this is directly related to their enlightened player welfare approach.

The move away from collision-based rugby in schools is welcomed by player welfare group Progressive Rugby.

“Rugby is a wonderful blend of contact, skills and evasion, but the desire in the elite game to ‘dominate the collision’ is commanding the narrative and heightening fears around brain injury,” says Professor John Fairclough. “Numbers playing are falling and it’s crucial that we reduce the number of

Spreading the gospel
All Black Jerome Kaino



DID YOU KNOW?

World Rugby launched T1 Rugby last year as “the first non-contact form of the game that reflects rugby union’s characteristics”. It includes lineouts, scrums, kicking and a breakdown. See world.rugby for more.



The 'Third Game'
St Paul's take on KCS
Wimbledon in the trial

to educate coaches and remember that rugby is about movement, evasion and problem solving."

Growing hand in glove with the increased emphasis on non-contact rugby is a movement in the commercial and tech sector to create solutions. Luca Health, which uses AI smartphone technology to provide more accurate concussion and health data for players and coaches, was co-founded by Nick Greenhalgh, an ex-professional whose career was cut short by foot and knee injuries he believes were linked to a conditioning programme that saw him add 12 kilos in his last year at school.

"I co-founded Luca because I strongly believe players, especially those at grass roots, deserve and need more support," he says. "I fell foul of the 'bulk-up at all costs' attitude that was pervasive in the late 2000s, as I was making the transition from schoolboy rugby to the pro ranks.

"I did what I was told because all I ever wanted to be was a rugby player.

"We're building Luca because I know the mind of an aspiring player; I know

collisions on the field to better protect players and the game's long-term future. We applaud school leaders looking to innovate and focus on a more expansive style that prioritises skills and evasion."

While there is little data showing a correlation between avoiding collisions and reducing injury rates, there is plenty of evidence to suggest the opposite is true. Put it this way: are you at greater risk of injury in a car which does crash into a wall or one which doesn't?

Eugene du Toit, Master of Haileybury, played rep rugby in South Africa and has coached extensively in the UK.

"Rugby is a wonderful game, catering for players of all shapes and sizes," he says. "The values and traditions of the game are very much those we want to instil in our pupils at Haileybury. We

must remember, however, that school rugby is not professional; young people must be able to play the game for pleasure and enjoy doing so.

"Enhancing skills and creativity can only make the game safer, more enjoyable to play and to watch. Parents are increasingly concerned about collisions, and schools need to think carefully about what we can do to make sure that rugby remains a safe, inclusive and attractive option in our co-curricular programme."

In August, Kingham Hill School in Oxfordshire hosted the third LPM UK coaching week. "The fear of injury is more than it ever was but now you've got coaches all the way from junior age groups just holding bags and letting kids run straight into them," says Kingham's outgoing director of sport Tom Phillips.

"That's not the way the game's played. Rugby has a contact element but it's about evading contact rather than looking for it. We need

how important the sport is to them and the lengths they're willing to go to live out their dreams – often to the detriment of their physical and mental health."

Return2Play, co-founded by Dr Sam Barke in 2015, now has more than 100 leading schools on their books, offering access to medical care and concussion guidance seven days a week.

"The really heartwarming part of this story is the sheer number of people who love the game and accept we need to make changes," says Dr Barke. "In the early days I did a number of talks to directors of rugby and coaches and always felt like the enemy in the room.

"Fortunately, there are fewer people dragging their feet now and more people saying, 'If we want this fantastic sport to survive, we need to engage with these player welfare initiatives'.

"People are seeing the game isn't being ruined by these changes. In fact, they can be a positive. The organisations investing in player welfare are achieving higher performance. It stands to reason."

Improved performance and healthier, happier players. Now who wouldn't want that for our sport? **RW**



A different way Action from the LPM camp in Lubersac, France