



BOKSMART POSITION STATEMENT: COACH ACCOUNTABILITY

The following is a position statement of the BokSmart National Rugby Safety Program and SARU on the coach's role in being accountable for adequate preparation and management of their players at all levels to make the game safer for all involved.



Providing coaches, referees, players, and administrators with the knowledge, skills, and leadership abilities to ensure that safety and best practice principles are incorporated into all aspects of contact rugby.

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Players should not be allowed to participate in or continue playing in a game of contact rugby:

- If they have not been appropriately conditioned for rugby and their specific position,
 - If they have not been appropriately and technically coached specific to their position,
 - If they have not been instructed on safe rugby techniques relevant to their position,
 - If they are injured or carrying an injury, and
 - If they have not been completely rehabilitated after injury.
1. When it comes to tackle rugby, players need to be fit and strong in order to play the game effectively. Being stronger and fitter also reduces the chances of serious injuries occurring. Players should also be sufficiently conditioned for their specific positional requirements. If not appropriately developed physically, conditioned and/or experienced enough, a player should not be required or allowed to play in that position at any level under any circumstance. It is the coach's responsibility to ensure that players are appropriately developed, conditioned and experienced for their position. This is especially relevant in high-risk positions such as the front row or tight five. Coaches are therefore accountable for their players' safety when making these very important decisions, as a serious and/or catastrophic head/neck/brain injury is a life-changing event for both player and coach alike.
 2. In high-risk positions such as the tight five, a player should never be played out of position, or simply because they are the biggest (e.g. therefore prop) or tallest player (e.g. therefore lock) in the team. It is the coach's responsibility to ensure that players are progressively exposed and coached technically to perform and play efficiently in these high-risk positions. This should also be performed initially in a controlled environment to ensure that the risk of injury to the player is minimal before gradually exposing them to full contact/contested/match situations. They should also be strong enough and fit enough to be able to tolerate the technical requirements of the position under fatigue and high force situations. A coach should never play someone out of position, especially in a high-risk position, simply because they need someone for the game to take place. This is viewed as irresponsible behaviour, which could have serious ramifications should this player become seriously/catastrophically injured.
 3. It is ultimately the coach's responsibility to teach safe rugby techniques to all players and instil a collective responsibility in the coaching staff and players to coach/play the game safely and be

technically proficient at the same time. Safe technique is effective technique. Coaches and players all want to “win the league”. However, how can you do that if all your players are injured? Safe technique is about educating players about the optimal body positions and techniques required for the different technical aspects of the game of rugby, i.e. taking the ball into contact, tackling, entering into a ruck/maul, cleaning out at a ruck/maul, scrum setting, scrum engagement, lineout jumping/support, principles of attack/defence, etc. to make the game safer and more enjoyable for all.

4. During a high-intensity, closely contested game, with the match result hanging in the balance, some coaches opt to retain players on the field even when they have developed a severe acute injury, and thereby run the risk of exacerbating the current injury, i.e. making it worse. This practice goes against responsible behavior, is unethical, and can bring the game into disrepute, as the message provided is a “play at all cost” approach regardless of safety and the consequences to the player. A classic example is a player who is severely concussed, and once he/she has regained consciousness, the coach opts to keep him/her on the field for the rest of the game, fully knowing that the player is at risk. Another example is a concussed player, who a week later is selected by the coach to play an important match for his/her club without any medical clearance, and then suffers a repeat concussion. Not only does this practice put the player in harm’s way, but the player will not be able to perform at peak performance levels, will therefore more than likely let the team down, and as a result of aggravating the injury further might have to miss out on most of the season. This form of player management would be counterintuitive and counterproductive to the overall team performance and the player’s general health and well-being. When a player is sufficiently injured that continuing playing would worsen the state of the injury to the detriment of the player, the coach should be compelled to use his reserve bench accordingly and replace the player no matter how good a player or how crucial he/she might be to the team. This is the correct and ethical way of managing injured players, and should be viewed in this light.
5. When it comes to injuries, it is common practice that some coaches resort to playing their star players, regardless of whether they have sufficiently recovered from injury or not. This is very apparent in amateur rugby, where medical management is less controlled. This places players at unnecessary risk of re-injury or predisposes them to further injury. Additionally, if a player has not been completely rehabilitated, his/her performance will not be at an optimum level, and this is therefore a bad investment for team performance. Returning a player too early therefore places the team at a distinct disadvantage and with possible re-injury might lead to this key player being removed from play for the remainder of the season, which also amounts to a bad

investment. This is a common occurrence, especially when winning is the only motive for playing, and it is most apparent in closely contested matches.

To ensure that the game of rugby grows in South Africa, and to lure and attract more players to participate in the game, it is imperative that coaches manage their players appropriately, in order to make the game safer and more enjoyable for all. This will also improve the image of rugby in the eyes of the general public, and might change the perception of parents in allowing their children to play and enjoy the game of rugby in the future.

