

# TSSAA Announces New Prep Football Practice Regulations

By Darren Reese, Sun Sports Editor | Posted: Thursday, April 16, 2015 11:36 pm

"High school football is in trouble right now."

That is how Richard McWhirter, an assistant director with the Tennessee Secondary Schools Athletic Association (TSSAA), started his address at Hardin Valley Academy in Knoxville Monday morning.

McWhirter and Mark Reeves, also an assistant director for TSSAA, were conducting a mandatory meeting for prep football coaches to go over new practice regulations that will be implemented starting with the 2015 season.



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The key points of the new rules dictate how practices are ran once the season starts, and include: full contact is allowed in no more than three practices per week; full contact practice can last no more than 30 minutes per day; full contact in practice is not permitted on three consecutive days."

"There are a lot of people in our country that do not want (high school football)," McWhirter stated. "They think it's too dangerous."

"We've got to clean it up, compared to where it was 20 years ago. We've got to make sure we've got football safe."

TSSAA implemented the new practice regulations after receiving a report from the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) that offered recommendations for minimizing head impact exposure and concussion risk in football.

Amid the growing amount of data that emphasizes the frequency and severity of concussion-related football injuries, Reeves said the new policies were "in the best interest of protecting the health and safety of the student-athletes."

"That's what we all want to do, first and foremost," he said.

TSSAA received the initial draft of recommendations from the NFHS back in October, and immediately began the process of determining how changes could have an impact on prep football in the state.

The NFHS report stated that the recommendations were "designed to allow flexibility for the state

associations". It also stated that the guidelines could evolve and become more or less restrictive as addition evidence emerges.

While the NFHS gave states the flexibility to adopt the guidelines as they see fit, Reeves said TSSAA has been in contact with other state associations to share ideas and compare interpretations of the report.

At Monday's meeting, many of the questions attending coaches had centered around the definition of "full contact", and how different drills that are common during a football practice would be regarded under the new rules.

According to TSSAA's handout, the following files under "full contact": Live action - Contact at game speed where players execute full tackles at a competitive pace, taking players to the ground; Thud - Drills run at or up to full speed until contact, which is above the waste. The tempo is competitive with no pre-determined winners, and the players are not tackling to the ground.

Under the new regulations, a group of players cannot go through more than 30 minutes of the above situations per day and no more than three times per week.

It is possible, though, that not every player on a team will engage in their 30 minutes of full contact practice at the same time on a particular day.

One example Reeves gave was a practice divided up into periods, where one particular period had the offensive and defensive linemen going through full contact drills while other groups did drills that didn't involve contact. The 30-minute clock started for the group of linemen, while the other players still had their full time allotment remaining.

Reeves admitted that one of the byproducts of the new regulations is that they will encourage coaches to think about how they are going to organize periods where full contact is involved.

"This policy forces you to plan a little more, but planning probably makes practice time a little more efficient anyway," Reeves said. "So unintentionally, one of the consequences is that this probably helps us all become a little more efficient in what we are doing."

McWhirter said the new rules focus on practice because of the repetitive number of times players are getting hit. He pointed out that while symptoms of major concussions are obvious, minor concussions are equally dangerous if not allowed proper time to heal. The new regulations aim to address that.

Other limitations under the new policy include: no player is permitted to participate in more than eight quarters in one week (i.e. freshman, junior varsity, varsity); An Emergency Action Plan with clearly defined written and practiced protocols should be developed and placed at every high school; when possible, an athletic trainer should be present at all practices and games.

Local coaches Caine Ballard (Greeneville), Ben Murphy (Chuckey-Doak), Shawn Jones (South Greene) and Joe Case (West Greene) were in attendance at the meeting at Hardin Valley. North Greene's Scotty Verran went to the same presentation held at Daniel Boone High School Monday evening.

There are six more scheduled across the state in the coming week. Tennessee high school coaches are required to attend one of them.

Case felt the new regulations wouldn't drastically change how he runs practices during the season.

"Most of the coaches, it doesn't change a lot," he said. "There are some drills we do that are considered full contact that we may have to water down."

"I think it's good in a lot of ways, but it could hurt if some of the kids are not physically prepared. It's different, but we've always wanted to try and take care of the kids. That's the most important thing."

At North Greene, where roster numbers are small and head coach Scotty Verran has just two paid assistants on staff, the changes may be even less noticeable.

"We don't have that many players, so we can't have a lot of contact during the season anyway," Verran said. "You risk an injury and losing a player, and here if you lose a player it's like losing two or three, considering most of our guys play both sides of the ball and special teams."

"We normally run and workout in shorts and watch film on Mondays after games. We'll have contact on Tuesday and Wednesday."

In regards to the new regulations, a legitimate concern would be that there might be coaches out there that would try to skirt around the rules or not vigorously enforce them.

Reeves said he didn't foresee that as a problem, as TSSAA-member coaches have an outstanding track record when it comes to acting in the best interest of their student-athletes' safety.

"The onus is on the schools to administer and apply the policy that the organization has," Reeves said. "They sign a membership card every year to agree to abide by those."

"Ultimately, it is our job to educate the coaches, give them as much clarification and information as we can, and then occasionally have to deal with a violation that comes to our attention. With sports medicine and health-related issues, we have had very few issues with folks not complying."