



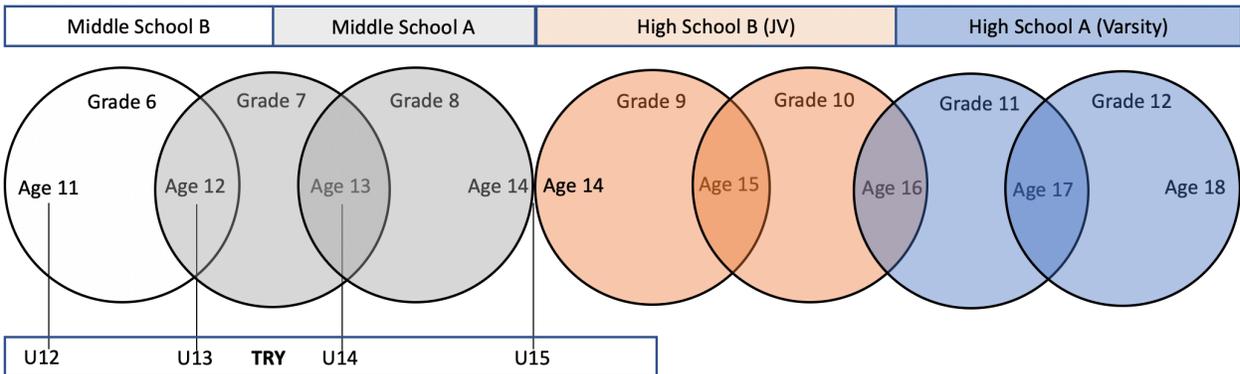
2019 Middle School Rugby

Background and Motivation

The State of Colorado defines middle school as grades 6th, 7th and 8th. Middle school is a time of major physical, emotional and social growth resulting in substantial variation in physical and emotional maturity within and between grades/ages. The middle school ages present a unique challenge in terms of structuring full contact rugby with priorities on (1) player safety and welfare, (2) player engagement and enjoyment (3) player development as it pertains to the game of rugby. This is not a unique challenge to rugby, as it has been reported that approximately 70% of children in the United States stop playing organized sports entirely by the age of 13 – an age right in the “middle” of middle school. The reasons cited for kids dropping sports by age 13 include an emphasis on sport becoming too serious (not fun), demanding or competitive too soon (i.e. due to specialization at an early age) as well as the financial commitments of competitive youth sports.

Middle School Rugby – Filling a Gap

Rugby Colorado is positioned to provide a safe yet challenging and rewarding opportunity to participate in an exciting world sport, open to youth of both genders from all sizes, ages, ability and socioeconomic backgrounds. Middle School Rugby is designed overlap with Rugby Colorado’s successful developmental TRY league (ages 5 – 14) and the competitive Rugby Colorado High School 15s (grades 8 - 12).



For player safety, enjoyment and development in a contact game such as rugby, it is strongly advocated that sport through middle school limit the **age** of players, rather than the weight of players. There is an evidence-based trend in youth sports (< 15 years of age) to focus on age rather than weight to determine divisions/leagues. As noted by USA Football (2011), “a young athlete’s size is a less accurate indicator of maturity than is a player’s age and coordination, which creates strength and power.” Ideally, youth rugby divisions/leagues would be played within a single age and as rugby grows in the state of Colorado, that may be possible at some point in the future. However, given the projected number of players for middle school rugby, divisions that combine a maximum of two age groups will be constructed to minimize the maturity gap. Exceptions will emerge (i.e. a 200 lb. physically and emotionally mature 13-year-old or a 110 lb. less mature 14-year-old) and therefore, it is critical to have a transparent and supportive waiver process (See Waiver Process below) for coaches and parents to rely upon so that kids may “play up” or “play down” as appropriate.



2019 Middle School Rugby Guidelines and Rule Variations

To participate in Middle School (MS) Rugby, a player must be enrolled in middle school (grade 6th – 8th) or be of middle school age (ages 11-14). MS Rugby will consist of two divisions: (1) MS “A” or “Open” division and (2) MS “B” or “Light” division. These divisions are constructed to minimize the maturity gap by restricting each division to two age groups.

Middle School Open (A) Division

The MS Open (A) division will be comprised of 8th graders and more experienced and/or older 7th graders. There is no weight limit for the MS A (Open) division, nor is there a minimum weight of a 7th grader to play in this division. It is strongly recommended that larger players (i.e. > 150 lbs.) play as forwards so as to avoid potentially unsafe high-speed physical mismatches among the backs.

Middle School Light (B) Division

The MS Light (B) division will be comprised of 6th graders and less experienced and/or younger 7th graders. There is no weight limit for 6th graders in this division while the recommend maximum weight of a 7th grader is 140 lbs.

Player Guidelines

Division	Age (as of May 1)	Grade (as of May 1)	Maximum Weight	Recommended Experience	Gender
MS Open (A)	13 and 14	7 th and 8 th	-	1 season (TRY or MS)	Single
MS Light (B)	12 and 13	6 th and 7 th	140 lbs.*	-	Single

*7th graders only

Middle School Rugby Variation

	Middle School Open (A)	Middle School Light (B)
<i>Format</i>	15s, 12s or 10s (minimum)	15s, 12s or 10s (minimum)
<i>Players</i>	15s: 8F/7B, 12s: 6F/6B, 10s: 5F/5B	15s: 8F/7B, 12s: 6F/6B, 10s: 5F/5B
<i>Field Size*</i>	100x70m	100x70m
<i>Time*</i>	25-minute halves (5-minute halftime)	20-minute halves (5-minute halftime)
<i>Ball Size</i>	Size 5	Size 4
<i>Kicking</i>	Permitted	Permitted
<i>Scrum</i>	Contested	Contested
<i>Lineouts</i>	Contested (lifting permitted)	Contested (lifting permitted)
<i>Mauls</i>	Permitted	Permitted
<i>Kickoffs</i>	Scoring team <i>kicks</i>	Scoring team <i>kicks</i>
<i>Substitution</i>	Allowed during stoppage of play	Allowed during stoppage of play

* See USA Rugby Field Size and Times of Play for Youth Rugby Players in USA Rugby



Waiver Process

The recommended guidelines for deciding upon a waiver include: (1) safety and welfare of the player under consideration and other players he/she will face during training and competition and (2) allowing the player an opportunity to develop his/her skills. It is recommended that any clear developmental outliers based upon size/coordination/experience or anyone outside of the age range (ages 12-14 as of May 1) be considered for the waiver process where appropriate. Through Rugby Colorado, coaches (with parent approval) may submit a waiver to recommend that a player “play up” or “play down” depending upon the unique circumstances. Players are strongly discouraged from playing in multiple divisions and are encouraged to “play up and stay up” if appropriate for their size/skill.

Foul Play

In addition to the following the general World Rugby Laws (9) regarding obstruction and unfair play MS Rugby places an exceptional priority on player safety and welfare. The following infractions and foul play will be a point of emphasis in middle school rugby:

- During general match play
 - All forms of physical and/or verbal abuse is strictly prohibited
 - Tackling, charging or grasping an opponent whose feet are off the ground is not allowed
 - Falling on or otherwise initiating contact with a player on the ground is not allowed
- Players making a tackle
 - Must use arms to wrap in all instances
 - Contact above the armpits is not allowed
 - “Horse collar” tackles and “jersey sling” tackles are not allowed
 - Lifting an opponent off the ground is not allowed
- Players carrying the ball
 - “Fends” (stiff-arms) are allowed with an open palm and must be below the neck
 - Striking a tackler with the fist, forearm, elbow head or knee is not allowed
- During a scrum
 - Must follow the “crouch-bind-set” cadence of the referee
 - Front row player must not pull an opponent nor intentionally collapse a scrum
- During a ruck or maul
 - Initiating contact or charging without binding onto another player is not allowed
 - Contact above the line of the shoulders is not allowed

There are three levels of disciplinary action based upon the above infractions:

1. Warning: Referee may issue an official warning to a player for unsafe and/or foul play.
2. Yellow Card: Referee may issue a yellow card to a player for unsafe and/or foul play. Player must serve 5 minutes on the sideline (“sin-bin”) so that the coach may explain the infraction to the player. Teams are required to play down one player for 5 minutes.
3. Red Card: Repeat or egregious infraction. Player is removed for the remainder of the match. Teams are required to play down one player for the remainder of the match. Player will be referred to the Rugby Colorado disciplinary committee for further evaluation/action.



Match Scheduling, Referees and Trainers

All matches will be played in a “jamboree” format, held at a rotating location 5-6 times throughout March and April. This format was adopted to consolidate resources across Rugby Colorado (referees and medical trainers) and through centralized scheduling, new teams will have a seamless and direct entry into MS Rugby without concerns of securing a field 3-4 times per season for matches. Finally, jamborees provide an environment that fosters and builds community at a critical age of development in the sport.

Training Scheduling

Trainings (practices) should not exceed 6 hours (360 minutes) per week to optimize player safety/welfare as well as to avoid sport “burnout”.

Training Recommendations

Additional recommendations for trainings follow the evidence-based trends for player safety/welfare being adopted by professional, collegiate and youth (American) football organizations which include minimizing full contact (i.e. tackling to ground, full speed). Recommendations for middle school ages is that no more than 30 minutes per training/practice is devoted to full contact. Additional information can be found [here](#).

General Injury Prevention Recommendations

[A recent study out of the UK](#) has demonstrated that a series of exercises, if performed regularly (2-3 times per week), substantially reduce the risk of youth rugby injuries (including concussion). These exercises are relatively quick to do and are easily implemented as part of a training/practice warm-up as well as part of a pre-match/game warm-up. Scottish Rugby has a very [effective overview of these exercises](#) and how to perform them. Pay special attention to the neck strengthening exercises (Part 4) as neck strength has been shown to be a protective factor against concussion. Full link to Scottish Rugby’s RugbyRight Activate Warm-up Routine can be found [here](#).



Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why do you allow different formats (15s, 12s, 10s)?

A: This is largely to follow the World Rugby's [Get Into Rugby](#) initiative which advocates for the flexible transition towards a full 15s format while accommodating newer and/or smaller clubs that may not have a full 15s squad.

Q: Why are 8th graders being pulled out of the 8/9/10 events?

A: As noted in the Background and Motivation, the ages of 12, 13 and 14 are critical periods of growth and development. We advocate that middle schoolers play alongside other middle schoolers and not be pushed "too far too fast" into the highly competitive High School Rugby. Further, for the High School programs that fall under the Colorado High School Activities Association (CHSAA), 8th graders are not allowed to participate in high school events.

Q: Wouldn't it be safer to build divisions around weight rather than age?

A: Research has shown that there is no difference in the rate of injury across multiple sports in a strict "age-only" division compared to a division based upon age *and* restricted weight limits. However, there is a higher rate of injury when younger players play against older competition irrespective of size/weight. Researchers have noted that strength and power come from age and coordination, not physical size. Indeed, a 140 lb. 16-year-old will (on average) have much more strength and power than a 140 lb. 13-year-old. Further, by focusing on age, the emotional and social maturity of the players are much more aligned which will improve player retention and overall connection to their team.

Q: Why not just have middle schoolers play within TRY?

A: There are a few reasons why MS players need their own league played roughly in parallel with the High School league. First, as players progress through middle school, they become less involved with TRY for a variety of reasons. For example, when they turn 14, they are allowed to begin working an after-school or summer job that may conflict with the summer schedule of TRY trainings and jamborees. Additionally, 14-year-old players moving into 9th grade, are also beginning to link into their High School athletics scene and may include summer training for football and potentially other sports which presents conflicts with TRY. Finally, by separating TRY from the MS League, TRY coaches would be able to manage the MS season prior to the TRY season competitions.

Q: Why not have the MS League build down from High School?

A: The overall goal is to have a MS league that maximizes the potential for teams to participate. Not all high school programs have a connection to youth rugby and not all youth (TRY) clubs have a direct connection to high school programs. Having a stand-alone MS rugby league opens up the possibility for youth (TRY) clubs AND high school clubs to participate.



- Q:** *Are there any issues related to the Colorado High School Activities Association (CHSAA)?*
- A:** As noted above, for some high school programs that fall under CHSAA (high school-based rugby teams vs regional independent rugby clubs), 8th graders may not participate in high school competition.
- Q:** *Why are ages being considered as of May 1 and not aligned with the academic school year?*
- A:** May 1 will approximately be the end of the MS season and therefore, it ensures that a player is under a specific age throughout the season. It also avoids a player aging in/out DURING the season. It also allows for players with summer birthdays (i.e. an 8th grader turning 15 after May 1) to play with their middle school peers rather than trying to find a High School JV program to participate with.
- Q:** *What about 6th graders who turn 12 **after** May 1?*
- A:** Younger players who are 11 years of age throughout the entire season may still join the league after they have gone through the Rugby Colorado Waiver Process. Decisions should be made collectively with coaches, parents, player and Rugby Colorado as it pertains to safety and welfare of the player.
- Q:** *What about 8th graders who turn 15 **before** May 1?*
- A:** These players will need to go through the Waiver Process if they intend to play middle school rugby where decisions will need to be made that ensure the safety and welfare of the player as well others that he/she will be competing against in trainings and matches. If the player is experienced and physically and emotionally mature, it is recommended that the player seek out a High School JV (B side) club that does not fall under CHSAA rules.
- Q:** *What happens if we don't have a full squad of either division?*
- A:** The jamboree format is structured such that teams can "combine" during matches and in fact, the same teams may combine throughout the season if preferred (develop chemistry and familiarity with one another). Even if you have a handful of players interested in playing, the league will do all it can to ensure they will play at least one half of a match during every jamboree.
- Q:** *What happens if we only have a full squad if we combine 6th-8th grade together?*
- A:** Depending upon the age/skill/development of the players, the Waiver Process may be utilized to aggregate within a single division. For example, you may have a handful of inexperienced, smaller (< 140 lb.) 13-year-olds 8th graders who are able to play safely and develop their rugby skills appropriately with younger grades in the MS light (B) division. Again, Waiver Process is in place to handle variations of this sort.
- Q:** *Colorado springtime weather can be rough, is this really the best season?*
- A:** Many youth rugby players and high school rugby players also play American football which dominates the fall season. Summers are difficult for a variety of reasons. March/April is a window that ensures players are still in school (not taking family vacations) while days are getting longer and warmer. It also falls after most winter sport schedules (i.e. basketball).