



# Player Development Framework

2019 TEST REGIONS REPORT





## Acknowledgments.

The NRL Projects and Strategy team would like to acknowledge and thank those members of the Player Development Framework (PDF) Steering Committee for their contribution to the development of the framework.

**Mr David Maiden** (QRL)  
**Mr Robert Lowrie** (CRL)  
**Mr Brad Donald** (NRL)  
**Mr Keith Onslow** (CRL)  
**Mr Barry-John Mather** (NSWRL)  
**Mr Ben Ikin** (QRL/Fox Sports)  
**Mr Ivan Cleary** (Penrith Panthers)  
**Mr Matthew Cameron** (Penrith Panthers)  
**Mr Paul Dyer** (Brisbane Broncos)  
**Mr Peter Mulholland** (Canberra Raiders)  
**Mr Greg Brentnall**  
**Mr Gareth Holmes**  
**Mr Luke Ellis** (NRL)

We would also like to make a special mention to our friends at the University of Queensland, whose expert advice and guidance provided solid foundations for this project.

**Professor Cliff Mallett**  
**Mr Bob Crudgington**

With regards to specific Player Development Framework Concepts and Programs, we would also like to thank the following individuals:

**Mr Neil Henry** for his commitment to the development of the TackleSafe Program and RISE Program.

**Mr Mal Meninga** and the Elite Programs team for their support of the RISE Program.

Through the leadership displayed by the following people and Leagues, we have been able to analyse the frameworks efficacy in the test regions of the QRL South East Queensland Division, NRL Victoria and the Toowoomba Junior Rugby League.

**Mr Brad Tallon** and the South East Queensland Division Board along with the Gold Coast, Ipswich, and Brisbane League Officials, **Mr Brent Silva** and NRL Victoria and **Mr Dan Aldons** and Toowoomba Junior Rugby League.

A number of other Leagues adopted various components of the framework in 2019 and can also be acknowledged for their progressive approach to administering the game, including CRLNSW Groups 1, 2, 3 and 18.





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## Executive Summary.

**Small-scale pilots of the interventions based on the Personal Assets Framework (PAF) to player development and delivered throughout the 2018 Rugby League season were found to have a positive impact on a participant's experience, and therefore the game itself. However, these pilots were exploratory. They largely operated in isolation to each other and to fully understand the efficacy of the proposed interventions it is essential they be applied in unison within the one region.**

The QRL's South East Queensland Division (SEQ), made up of Rugby League Brisbane, Rugby League Gold Coast and Rugby League Ipswich agreed to adopt the framework for season 2019. In addition to SEQ, NRL Victoria and Toowoomba Junior Rugby League independently made the decision to also adopt the framework and the associated interventions in 2019.

The following report is an analysis of the performance of the framework in these test regions throughout season 2019. The research aimed at gathering quantitative and qualitative data to demonstrate the impact of alternate models of delivery, additional registration options, varying competition structures and increased choice for aspirational participants. Data were collected from each setting via a series of surveys emailed to the participants who experienced game delivery models impacted by the proposed changes (e.g., the families of children who played in an U6 League Tag format received a survey relating to this particular intervention).

The surveys examined the impact the interventions had on a participant's confidence and where appropriate, we sought to understand the impact this approach to player development had on a participant's connection, competence and character (4 C's). These attributes are the desired benefits of the Personal Assets Framework (PAF) and are

achieved through developing quality relationships, creating appropriate settings, and encouraging engagement in developmentally appropriate activities. The model framework focuses on lead metrics such as developing the participants personal assets that over time contribute to longer term outcomes such as, ongoing participation, contribution to personal development, and superior performance. The PDF introduces a fifth 'C', contribution, which is the notion of a participant's likelihood of 'giving back' to the sport in ways such as volunteering (coach, official, administrator).

The quantitative and qualitative data analysis showed the intervention's that produced the most positive responses were: RISE Rugby League Development Program, TackleSafe Program, 18-Month Registration Policy, Community League Interpretations and Weight Related Competition.

The two interventions that proved most contentious were U6 Tag Rugby League and the application of Development Competitions through to the age of 12. Despite strong resistance to these particular initiatives, the results were encouraging and overall positive.

In addition to these surveys, Management Committees of the Club's in the respective test regions were also contacted to gain an understanding of their views of the individual interventions and the effectiveness of the framework as a whole. In analysing the responses from these surveys, the U6 Tag Rugby League format, TackleSafe Program and 18 Month Registration Policy are among the components of the framework that were viewed positively. Interestingly, and in contrast to the participants responses, the Development Competition concept proved most contentious with only 16% of Club Management Committee members believing this approach will have a positive impact.



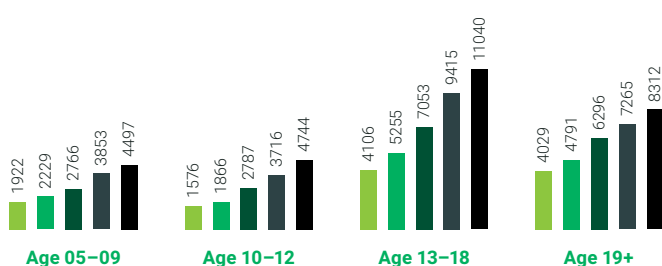
**The findings within this report, along with accompanying documents, illustrates the positive impact the framework can have on the experience of a participant when applied in its entirety.**



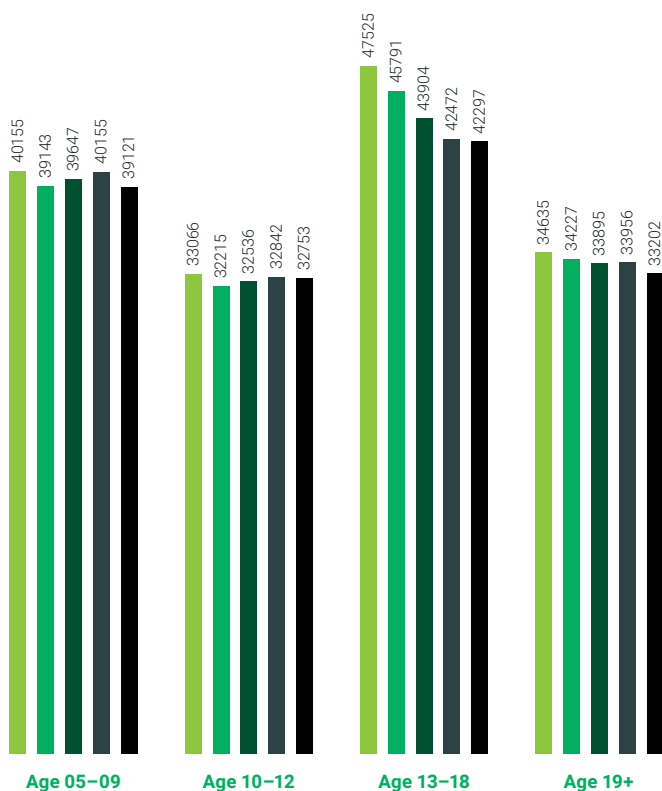
One other area of a potential dis-connect between the views of a participant's family and their respective Management Committee was in relation to a question which asked how likely they would be to recommend the framework to a friend or colleague. One explanation for the contrasting views may be the difference in wording for the cohorts: For the families, it was in relation to the respective intervention they experienced, when asked of the Management Committee, the question referred to the framework as a whole.

Rates of participation have long been regarded as the primary measurement of a sports overall health. While participation rates should be one of the main considerations in determining how well a sport is performing in relation to its strategic direction, participation rates can fluctuate annually based on a multitude of factors.

**Graph 1: National Rugby League Participation Numbers**



**Female player registration**



**Male player registration**

2015 2016 2017 2018 2019

When considering the effectiveness of the framework the short-term considerations should be based on the experience of the participant with the growth/decline in participation rates being a longer-term outcome of these collective experiences. The Developmental Model of Sports Participation (DMSP), which is the main athlete development model used to guide the framework, defines this in the model's time-line and breaks it down into 'actions' across a season/s as the short-term initiatives designed to deliver the longer term 'outcomes' of participation, personal development and performance.

In season 2019, Rugby League experienced growth across all female segments and decline across all male segments at the National level (Graph 1). In the framework test regions, there are examples (Brisbane, Ipswich) that mirrored these national trends; however, there are also settings that attained overall growth in both male and female categories (Gold Coast, NRL Victoria). Toowoomba Junior League attained growth in female participation while maintaining similar numbers to the previous season in male participation.

The findings within this report, along with accompanying supporting documents, illustrates the positive impact the framework can have on the experience of a participant when applied in its entirety. While declining male participation rates provided the catalyst for the project to be undertaken, the framework has the potential to provide Rugby League with the leading (Australian Sport) industry approach for design and delivery of sport to young people. This leadership requires ongoing research, collaboration, and adaptation of best practice sport delivery, which through commitment over time will deliver the objectives of recruiting and retaining participants, fostering personal development and transitioning more high performers into the aspirational stream.



# Recommendations

The report proposes 6 recommendations and 2 sub-recommendations including;

## Recommendation 1

Rugby League adopts the PDF and collaborates with state league's and their affiliates on a national implementation plan.

## Recommendation 2

Develop a unified marketing and communication campaign to lead the implementation process.

## Recommendation 3

The 16 NRL Clubs are engaged to assist in the communication and marketing campaign.

## Recommendation 4

Recruit an implementation support team.

## Recommendation 5

Develop a PDF induction program targeted toward key stakeholders including; Club management committees, volunteers, full-time Rugby League employees and game officials.

## Recommendation 6

Partnerships are formed with the University sector to review, analyse, and evolve the PDF and associated programs on an annual basis.

## Sub-recommendations

Upon successful implementation of the PDF, further considerations should be made regarding the impact Rugby League can have on Australia's sporting landscape, thus positioning itself as a national leader in sport delivery. Therefore, the PDF Steering Committee propose an additional two sub-recommendations.

### Sub-recommendation 1

Re-brand the PDF the Australian Sports Development Model (ASDM).

### Sub-recommendation 2

Engage Aus Sport and other like-minded Australian sports to form a consensus on adopting an ASDM aligned approach to sport delivery, particularly at the junior level.



**Rugby League adopts the PDF and commences the process of national implementation.**





## Introduction.

**Following a review of the game's participation strategy, conducted in late 2016, a number of recommendations were proposed to the ARLC to improve the outcomes for the game in the participation space.**

Although the development of a PDF was not one of these recommendations, as a result of this research, the game's major stakeholders recognised the need for such a framework and committed to undertaking the work necessary in developing a best-practice model for delivery of the sport. This decision aligned with the long-held belief by many in the game, of the need for such a framework.



**The Player Development Framework will provide a basis for the consistent and optimal delivery of the game, tailored to meet the needs of participants relevant to their age, skill level and aspiration.**

A number of sports around the world have adopted Player Development Frameworks some of which have been based on athlete development models such as the Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model, the Foundation Talent Elite Mastery (FTEM) model, and the Deliberate Practice (DP) model. However, LTAD and FTEM lack empirical support and the DP model has been linked to burnout and sport attrition. Another framework that has significant empirical and anecdotal support is the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP). Importantly, these programs based on the various theoretical frameworks, have formed the basis of player and coach development as well as having influence over competition structures, talent identification and elite pathways that, in turn, have guided policy and practice.

For many years, Rugby League stakeholders have identified the need for a best practice, over-arching framework to guide all major stakeholders in the game. The PDF will provide a basis for the consistent and optimal delivery of the game, tailored to meet the needs of participants relevant to their age, skill level and aspiration. At its foundation, the framework will provide a best-practice model and be aligned with evidenced based research.

**The purpose of this project was to find the optimal delivery model for the sport to:**

- › Enhance player development outcomes so there is an increased number and quality of elite players in the system.
- › Increase the number of recreational participants who can opt into higher levels of participation if their aspirations change.
- › Increase the retention of participants, as a growth strategy, as well as ensuring all participants have an experience that gives them a lifelong affection for the game.
- › Create a 'Community' environment that fosters the games four core beliefs, in not only players, but coaches, officials, parents and spectators.
- › Ensure life-long involvement and positively contribute to the personal development of everyone in the Rugby League Community.
- › Provide consistency in the delivery of Rugby League across all areas of Australia.

The PDF endeavours to provide a foundation for the consistent and optimal delivery of Rugby League. The objectives of the PDF are:

- › Attract and retain participation
- › Foster personal development
- › Transition and nurture performance

The PDF will provide a basis that affords all Australians the opportunity to play Rugby League regardless of their age, skill or aspiration and while the needs of the performance athlete will be vastly different to those of the recreational player, the broad participation and performance pathways will complement each other. To realise these outcomes, appropriate skill acquisition opportunities and game structures will be delivered, along with a clearly defined juncture that introduces the aspirational pathway.

The model which provides the basis for the framework promotes an emphasis on creating appropriate settings, developing quality relationships and encouraging personal engagement in activities to enhance a participant's connection, confidence, competence and character.

The PDF has introduced a further domain of contribution, which aims to strengthen the Rugby League community by encouraging lifelong involvement in the sport.

## Guiding principles

### Foundation principle

Provide an environment that fosters connection, confidence, competence, character and contribution

### Principle 1

Deliver high quality, early and ongoing engagement.

### Principle 2

Offer high amounts of deliberate play for children.

### Principle 3

Delay specialisation in childhood and recognise the benefits of diversification.

### Principle 4

Players start to choose a performance or participation pathway at around the time of transition from primary into secondary school.

### Principle 5

Develop optimum performance with specialised training to start around 16 years of age.



**The Player Development Framework will provide the basis that affords all Australians the opportunity to play Rugby League.**



# Supporting research

Whilst developing the PDF multiple athlete development models were reviewed. It was determined that the DMSP (Figure 1) was the most appropriate for Rugby League and was backed by the most scientific research. This model is supported by a strong evidence base and has been developed and refined over the past two decades. The DMSP promotes appropriate processes and pathways to achieve the desired outcomes associated with sport development throughout childhood, into adolescence and adulthood.

This DMSP was designed to investigate and understand the different pathways of sport involvement from childhood to adults. It is based on a holistic approach to sports participation with consideration of social and psychological development and its relationship with biological development. The DMSP focuses on developing appropriate training and engagement with some key distinctions in terms of understanding the interplay between deliberate play and deliberate practice during development.

The DMSP includes some aspects of the various models mentioned previously (LTAD, FTEM, & DP), however, it challenges some key concepts in these frameworks. For example, DMSP challenges the notion of a linear developmental pathway; and acknowledges the psycho-social costs associated with a focus on early specialisation through an emphasis on deliberate practice.

## The DMSP is defined by distinct phases of participation

### Sampling Phase

Widely regarded as the most important phase, occurring between the ages of approximately 4-12 years. The model recommends children of these ages try multiple sports, and different positions within sports, allowing them to explore and develop a broad skill set with high amounts of deliberate play included in training.

### Recreational Phase

Those happy participating in sport purely for recreational purposes enter into this phase following the Sampling years. This does not mean a player can't transition to a more performance focussed pathway later if their aspirations change.

### Specialising Phase

The Specialising phase occurs approximately at the time of transition from primary into secondary schools for participants who harbour a level of aspiration in their sport. This essentially means a reduction in the number of sports played compared to the Sampling phase eg. 4-5 sports with 2-3 becoming more of a focus. During this phase a gradual transition from high amounts of deliberate play towards more deliberate practice activities occur.

### Investing Phase

The Investing phase emerges at around the age of 16 and is where one sport becomes a central focus of an aspirational players life. This phase requires long hours of training, intense coaching and participation in high performance competition and events. This phase is achieved by only a small number of players with high amounts of deliberate practice to enhance sport specific skill acquisition.

**Figure 1: Developmental Model of Sport Participation**

	MIDDLE CHILDHOOD			LATE CHILDHOOD				ADOLESCENCE					ADULT	
	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19+
ENTRY INTO SPORT	1	→ Recreational participation through sampling		→ Sampling Years Activities: › High amount of deliberate play › Low amount of deliberate practice › Involvement in many sports				→ Recreational Years Activities: › High amount of deliberate play › Low amount of deliberate practice › Activities that focus on fitness and health					→ Probable Outcomes › Recreational participation › Enhanced physical health › Enhanced enjoyment	
	2	→ Elite performance through sampling		→ Sampling Years Activities: › High amount of deliberate play › Low amount of deliberate practice › Involvement in many sports				→ Specialising Years Activities: › Deliberate play and practice balanced › Reduce involvement in several sports		→ Investment Years Activities: › High amount of deliberate practice › Low amount of deliberate play › Focus on one sport			→ Probable Outcomes › Elite performance › Enhanced physical health › Enhanced enjoyment of the sport	
	3	→ Elite performance through early specialisation		→ Early Specialisation Activities: › High amount of deliberate practice › Low amount of deliberate play › Focus on one sport									→ Probable Outcomes › Elite performance › Reduced physical health › Reduced enjoyment	

# Personal Assets Framework

The Personal Asset Framework (PAF, Figure 2) was developed by Cote and colleagues after the DMSP to explain the different determinants that lead to ongoing participation, personal development and a higher level of performance. This model demonstrates the importance of creating consistency in the way the sport is delivered from the perspective of the governing bodies, league and club administrators and coaches. The model addresses the way in which these three stakeholders can achieve the desired outcomes over a prolonged period, over multiple sessions or seasons by continuously adopting immediate, age-appropriate actions (Dynamic Elements) during a participant’s experience to improve their connection, confidence, competence and character.

## Dynamic Elements explained

The Dynamic Elements describe the real-time, immediate effects on a participants experience that are influenced by the governing body, league and club administration and the coach.

## Appropriate settings

This element describes the importance of age-appropriate rules and competition structures that relate to field size, team size and competitive structures. With the recent review of the junior league laws, Rugby League is consistent with these recommendations in relation to age-appropriate on-field laws. However, with regards to offering age-appropriate competitive structures, Rugby League is not always consistent with the recommendations.

## Personal engagement in activities

This element relates to the amount of activity and type of activity a participant engages in throughout the year. It refers to an appropriate balance of play, practice and competition. This recommendation is led by understanding the physical, emotional and cognitive development of children. In addition to the participants engagement in Rugby League itself, it also highlights two additional areas of engagement that are required to ensure a fulfilling experience. These are Complementary Physical Activities which involves providing children the opportunity to enjoy and benefit from other physical activity that can further contribute to the development of the physical skills necessary to be successful in Rugby League, and Complementary Activities that provide balance such as education, music and art.

## Quality relationships

This element relates to age-appropriate social dynamics that the participant experiences with their coach, team mates and parents. Establishing appropriate team dynamics and spectator behaviour leads to greater levels of confidence, connections and character that enhance the likelihood of achieving their game objectives.

Figure 2: Personal Assets Framework



# Rugby League specific research

Further to the investigation into various player development models, examples of best practice Rugby League delivery across numerous regions were drawn upon. Evidence was also sourced from research conducted in collaboration with Dr Wayne Usher from Griffith University, who investigated players' Rugby League experiences and the impact these experiences have on retention rates – "Investigating motives that influence Australia's Rugby League retention rates" (2017). This in-depth investigation determined some key areas that players, who failed to return to the game of Rugby League, identified as having an adverse effect on their overall experience in the game. The four major areas that were investigated were the coaching, playing, club and socialisation experiences.

Supplementary evidence was sourced more broadly from research projects and sporting experiences from locations including Belgium, Ireland, Norway and United States of America to assist in establishing alternate models of delivery, additional registration options, varying competition structures and increased choice for aspirational participants within Rugby League.

Extensive research was also undertaken to fully understand the variances that occur between children in physical, social-emotional and cognitive development (Stages of Development, Figure 3), particularly as they pass through puberty, and the significant impact this can have on a participant's experience when played out in a Rugby League context.

**With the support of this evidence-based research, and with an over-arching aim to positively improve the standards for the Rugby League community, combined with a thorough understanding of the environment, the following concepts were proposed to further enhance the Rugby League experience:**

- › Tag Rugby League Competitions
- › TackleSafe Program
- › Development Competitions
- › 18-Month Registration Policy
- › Weight Related Competitions
- › RISE Rugby League Development Program
- › Community League Interpretations

**Figure 3: Stages of Development**

	EARLY CHILDHOOD			MIDDLE CHILDHOOD				LATE CHILDHOOD				ADOLESCENCE					ADULT		
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19+	
PIAGET'S COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT THEORY	PREOPERATIONAL STAGE				CONCRETE OPERATIONAL STAGE				FORMAL OPERATIONAL STAGE:										
DMSP THEORY	SAMPLING											RECREATIONAL							
												SPECIALISING							
												INVESTING							
DELIBERATE PLAY / DELIBERATE PRACTICE	DELIBERATE PLAY											DELIBERATE PRACTICE							
RELATIVE AGE / MATURATION EFFECT	RELATIVE AGE EFFECT											MATURATION EFFECT							
EFFECT ON PARTICIPATION (EXPECTATIONS)	MATTHEW EFFECT (PARENTS)				PYGMALION EFFECT (PARENTS, COACHES, SELECTORS)											GALATEA EFFECT (PLAYER'S PERCEPTIONS)			
TECHNICAL & TACTICAL SKILL ACQUISITION	FUNDAMENTAL MOTOR SKILLS				BASIC SPORTS SKILLS				SPECIALISED SPORTS SKILLS					SPECIALISED POSITIONAL SKILLS					
PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT												FLEXIBILITY							
												SPEED							
												AGILITY							
												STRENGTH							
												ENDURANCE							
MENTAL & EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT												SELF-CONCEPT – SELF ESTEEM							
												STARTS TO UNDERSTAND THE EFFECTS OF EFFORT							
												COGNITIVE & EMOTIONAL CAPACITY TO INVEST							

## Research method

Throughout the test regions where the framework was applied holistically, participants and parents of participants were recruited to provide feedback in relation to the respective intervention they/their child experienced via surveys. The surveys were designed to address specific elements relating to the PDF with a direct relationship between the program/competition experience of the participant and the environment in which the program/competition was delivered.

More directly, the questions related strongly to the PDF's Foundation Principle: to provide an environment that fosters participants' connection, confidence, competence, character, and contribution within the specific club setting and the broader Rugby League community.

Generally, a mixed method approach was utilised by offering a simple Yes/No response (quantitative data), this was complemented by commentary from open-ended questions being analysed for thematic categorisation, which represented the qualitative data. The data garnered from these responses were analysed and provided the basis for the information represented in this report.

In total, more than 900 fully completed responses were received across the 7 framework initiatives with response rates ranging between 6% for the development competitions and up to 35% for the RISE program.



**My 6-year-old used to be scared and close his eyes when people ran towards him. Now he is a whole new kid knowing he won't be hurt.**



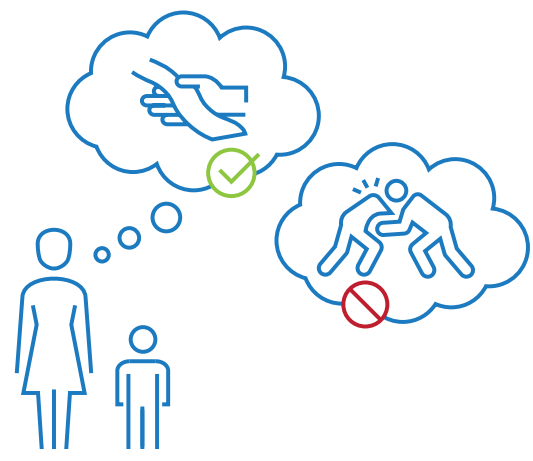


# Tag Rugby League.

## Laying the foundations

Our research shows the biggest barrier to early entry into Rugby League is the tackle aspect of the sport. This is supported by the games participation data in the youngest age groups where more than 60% of 5, 6, 7-year olds are born in the first half of the year. This bias is created by the Matthew Effect whereby involvement in sport is largely determined by a parent's perception of their child's competence in a specific sport or sports. Essentially, older children begin with some advantages (bigger, stronger) and those initial advantages tend to beget further advantage (more playing time). At this age, the difference between a child born at the start of the year compared to later in the year can be up to 20% in terms of physical, cognitive and emotional development. To mitigate the parental concerns feeding the Matthew Effect, a tag format of the sport will provide a more appealing proposition for more families with young children.

### The Matthew Effect



Furthermore, by delaying the inclusion of tackling, Tag Rugby League competitions allow every new participant the opportunity to better learn the basic game concepts and skills such as catching, passing, running and evasion. This approach provides a space in the game for children to focus on the key fundamentals before being introduced to the more complex skill of tackling and being tackled.

## Understanding the evidence

When exploring the idea of introducing an entry-level format for children to better ready themselves for the game of Rugby League, the NRL's Retention Survey (Usher, 2017) which highlighted 'injury/fear of injury' as a key driver for participants not to register in the following season, was evidence that addressing the physical and technical elements associated with tackling and being tackled needed to be considered.

**“ Tag Rugby League allows every new participant the opportunity to better learn the basic game concepts and skills such as catching, passing, running and evasion. ”**



Starting too early from the standpoint of skill acquisition can lead to a slower rate of learning, which can lead to frustration and the development of bad habits, which can take considerably longer to overcome later in the developmental stage (Anderson & Mayo, 2017).

Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development suggests that children move through four different stages of mental development. His theory focuses not only on understanding how children acquire knowledge, but also on understanding the nature of intelligence. The stage of development most relative to this concept is the preoperational stage:

### Preoperational stage – ages 2 to 7:

Piaget noted that children in this stage do not yet understand concrete logic, cannot mentally manipulate information, and are unable to take the point of view of other people, which he termed ‘egocentrism’. They are also developing the ability to concentrate on more than one thing at a time.

In a Rugby League context, this information is critical, as it helps us to understand the way in which young participants process new information. It is clear from Piaget’s findings that prior to the age of 7, children are generally unable to process complex tasks due to their incapacity to think logically. Therefore, teaching safe and correct tackle technique to children under the age of 7 may not be the optimal learning window for these younger age groups.

## Finding success



### New Zealand RU – Rippa Rugby

Introduced in the early 2000’s, Rippa Rugby, the entry point of the Small Blacks Development Model was designed to help 6 and 7 year old players develop their rugby skills as their physical ability develops, making the game as simple and safe as possible for all Kiwi kids, regardless of their age, shape or size.

The Small Blacks Development Model has been developed to ensure that there is a consistency of play, coaching and player welfare at all levels throughout the country, and is a great way of getting kids involved in a team sport.



### NFL Flag Football

NFL Flag powered by USA Football is the NFL’s official youth flag football program. It is promoted as a safe, fun, exciting sport that can be played year-round by boys and girls from ages 5-17. Fast paced in nature, players get to enjoy playing America’s favorite game in a non-contact environment.

“Over the past three years, the number of 6-12-year-olds playing flag football has increased by 38 percent, to more than 1.5 million. That is nearly 100,000 more than those who currently play tackle football, according to a study by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, which has analysed youth athletic trends for 40 years.” (The Future of Football Has Flags – New York Times – 20.11.2018)

### NFL Flag Football key stats:

<b>6m+</b>	Total participants (6,572,000)
<b>81.7%</b>	Male participants
<b>27.7%</b>	Participants in the 8th grade or less

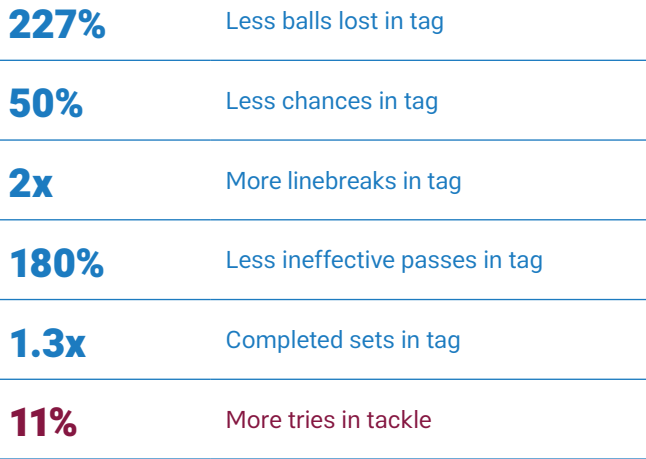
### NFL Tackle Football key stats:

<b>5m+</b>	Participants in the U.S (5,157,000)
<b>32%</b>	Participants in 8th grade or less (1,650,000)
<b>124,000</b>	Female participants (26+ times/year)

“Over the past three years, the number of 6-12-year-olds playing flag football has increased by 38 percent, to more than 1.5 million.”



Rugby League: Tackle vs Tag analysis:



■ Tackle ■ Tag



**We have loved the tag format. For my child it has meant that he could learn/focus on fewer skills at a time, which has meant he has been able to grasp them better and practice them more.**

## Applying the evidence

During the 2019 season, the Tag Rugby League format was applied in Brisbane, Gold Coast, Ipswich, Toowoomba and Victorian Leagues in the Under 6 age group only. In total, over 1800 children participated in Tag Rugby League competitions. All participant families were provided the opportunity to comment on their experience with 330 surveys completed, representing a 18% return rate.



**78%**

reported that their child's **enjoyment** of Tag Rugby League met expectations (23%), occasionally exceeded expectations (17%) or exceeded expectations (38%).



**23%**

reported that Tag Rugby League had **influenced their decision to participate in Rugby League**. Of these, 82% said Tag Rugby League had made a positive influence.



**73%**

reported that Tag Rugby League had improved their child's **confidence** in Rugby League.

When asked how likely it was that they would recommend Tag Rugby League to a friend or colleague, participants responded using a 0 (Highly Unlikely) to 10 (Highly Likely) scale:

**47%**      **21%**



**56%**

reported that Tag Rugby League had provided increased **involvement opportunities** in games for their child.

## By the numbers

5 & 6 Year Old's (All Test Regions)	Number	Growth
Male	1694	-11%
Female	167	+20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1861</b>	<b>-8.8%</b>





# TackleSafe Program.

## Laying the foundations

The TackleSafe program allows participants to learn correct and safe techniques, preparing them for the tackle version of Rugby League. The prescribed six-session program is delivered by accredited NRL TackleSafe deliverers, and aims to increase player confidence and physical competence in all tackling situations. To enhance the overall enjoyment of participants, the TackleSafe program complements the Tag Rugby League initiative to offer a safe and progressive introduction to tackle Rugby League. The TackleSafe program addresses concerns commonly influencing parents' perceptions towards Rugby League; in relation to their child's size, strength and abilities (Matthew Effect).

The program focuses on four key technical skill areas; Physical Literacy, Safe Landing, The Tackle and Running into Tackle. Each of these skill areas are made up of some key terminology and buzzwords that aim to provide simple and effective instructions that are easy to understand.

## Program objectives

### Players

Provide a systematic introduction to tackling and being tackled with the aim of enhancing players confidence and competence leading to a greater level of enjoyment.

### Coaches

Educate entry-level club coaches with the necessary skills to teach new Rugby League participants how to tackle and how to be tackled safely.

### Parents

Give parents peace of mind, and highlight the games commitment to offering a safe, inclusive environment.

## Understanding the evidence

Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development suggests the stage of development most relative to this concept is the concrete operational stage:

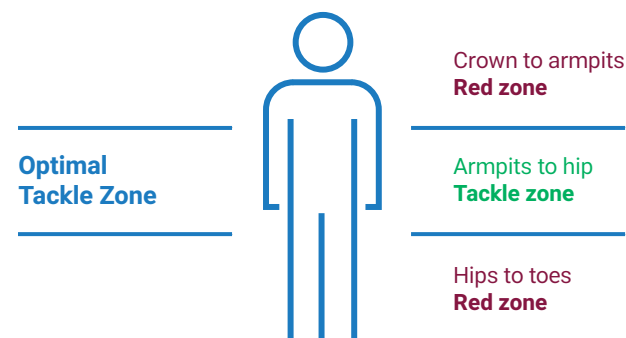
### Concrete operational stage: ages 7 to 11

Piaget determined that children in the concrete operational stage were fairly good at the use of inductive logic (inductive reasoning). Inductive logic involves going from a specific experience to a general principle. In a Rugby League context, this would suggest that this stage of cognitive development offers a perfect window to introduce the complexities of making a tackle and being tackled.

### Tackle Zone

Trinity College Dublin (2018) conducted a study of over 1000 rugby tackles to identify the safest Tackle Zone. Findings from this study have had a strong influence in the way the TackleSafe program is delivered and how coaches instruct tackle technique within the TackleSafe Program. We have defined this as the "bellybutton area" to ensure it is simple and easy to comprehend for the young participants.

### Tackle Zone



## Finding success



### Tackle Box Program

To compliment the Rippa Rugby concept, New Zealand Rugby Union provide 'Tackle Box' sessions which must be carried out by all Under 8 coaches before the season starts. From then on coaches are encouraged to continue with tackling practice at every level of the game.



### Heads Up Football

USA Football has worked with leaders in both medicine and sport across the country to create a full-featured tackling program that any league or school can use to address key safety issues – and ensure that every coach understands and knows how to implement each component of the program.



**As a coach, the TackleSafe program provided a lot of in-depth features and tips to help with understanding the game at the age level I was coaching. Safe techniques and how to react to situations from on field to off field with our team players, coaching staff and parents.**

## Application and results

During the 2019 season, the TackleSafe program was delivered in Brisbane, Gold Coast, Ipswich, Toowoomba and Victorian Leagues in the Under 7 age group only. At the conclusion of the reporting period, approximately 1306 children had participated in the program. All participant families were provided the opportunity to comment on their experience with 168 surveys completed, representing a 13% return rate.



# 85%

reported that TackleSafe had improved their child's **confidence** in Rugby League.



# 60%

reported that TackleSafe had **influenced their decision to remain/return to Rugby League.**



# 94%

reported that their child's **enjoyment** of TackleSafe met expectations (17%), occasionally exceeded expectations (29%) or exceeded expectations (48%).

When asked how likely it was that they would recommend TackleSafe to a friend or colleague, participants responded using a 0 (Highly Unlikely) to 10 (Highly Likely) scale:

# 73%

8-10 range

# 15%

5-7 range

10



Highly Likely

Highly Unlikely



# 86%

reported that TackleSafe had improved their child's **competence.**



## Development Competitions.

### Compete at all times, not win at all costs

Development Competitions allow coaches to focus entirely on technical, tactical, physical and social development in their players. Competing is the essence of Rugby League however, when there is a strong focus on winning, decisions regarding participation and playing for fun with mates, and ensuring a fair and equitable selection process can be compromised.

Delaying the focus on premierships at this age will provide an opportunity to create a more respectful, supportive environment, focusing on building resilience and adaptive behaviours in all participants.

An over-emphasis on winning is detrimental to optimal player development and enjoyment. The introduction of premierships is directly related to early specialisation and deliberate practice coaching methods. This approach leads to the early classification of players based on the parent, coaches or selectors perception/expectation of 'talent' (Pygmalion Effect or self fulfilling prophecy), which leads to the players own belief's/expectation (positive or negative) of their ability (Galatea Effect), which further exacerbates the Relative Age, Growth and Maturation Effects.

Development Competition's will provide more inclusive environments by promoting personal development and positive social interactions and postponing the current short-sighted consensus that premierships are essential to childhood sports and future sporting success.

#### Pygmalion Effect



I will do this  
because the coach  
thinks I can.



#### Galatea Effect



I will do this  
because I  
know I can.



## Understanding the evidence

From our recent analysis, it has been determined that the major reason players are exiting our game is due to a pressured environment that is leading to a negative overall experience (Usher, 2017). To mitigate this and create an inclusive environment for all players, the game will delay the early specialisation approach to minimise overuse injuries, keep players in the game longer to develop their abilities, and contribute to adaptive psycho-social development (Martel, 2015).

In relation to cognitive development, it is only at about the age of 12-13 that children can fully understand the differing effects that effort, practice, and ability have on their performances (Horn & Harris 2002).

Campbell, Bracewell, Blackie and Patel (2018) stated “if a competitive atmosphere is created that is inappropriate for the developmental stage of the child they may begin to withdraw from the sport or, more importantly, become exposed to negative psychological effects caused by this aging mismatch”.

The differences between children and adult’s understandings of physical performance and organised competition should be reflected by competition structures that don’t emphasise performance at an early age as this “over-emphasis on performance can lead to early stratification and perpetuate Relative Age Effect” (Musch & Grodin 2001). Having the focal point of personal development supported by competition structures will divert the win-at-all costs mentality that in contrast provides opportunity to develop more respectful, supportive, adaptive behaviours in participants.

## Finding success



### Mackay Junior Rugby League

In 2010, in response to declining junior participation rates, the Mackay Junior League trialled non-premiership development competitions up to U11s (later extended to U12s). The idea behind the change was to place a greater emphasis on fun, enjoyment, and skill development. Despite wanting the kids to try hard and strive to win, coaches have focused more on helping every individual in their team learn the game and develop. And it’s worked. More kids are getting more footy time, providing a better overall experience for kids and their parents. Mackay’s participation rates at the U11 level have grown by over 40% over eight years and year-on-year player retention rates are currently 83%, well above the national average.



### Croatian and Belgian Football

Case studies from Belgium and Croatian soccer further emphasise the need for less focus on results and more on development. Belgium (11 million people) does not have competition tables until age 14. The results have been very positive, and this is reflected by their elite national team elevating from being ranked 66th in the world to 1st in just 15 years. Croatia is experiencing a very similar story. Comparative to other soccer playing nations, their population of 4 million people is small but through providing a more positive playing experience has led to the development of more creative athletes who stay in the game until much later in life (Keep it on the Deck, 2018). This also translates for their elite athletes, with the national side qualifying and competing at ten of the past fourteen major competitions.



### Norway Winter Olympics

The Norwegian athlete development model avoids early specialisation and disregards the scoreboard prior to 13 years of age. The result of subduing premiership competitions and creating environments where “the unique value of the individual and principles of equality are the central guidelines” (Norway’s Sports Federation and the Olympic and Paralympic Committee, 2010) has developed an intrinsic motivation within participants who remain within sport for the enjoyment and social interactions as opposed to winning because “the idea isn’t to have the highest-ranked 10-year-old athletes in the world but rather the most mature adults” (Wolken, 2018). While retention and personal development has been achieved in Norway (5 million people), the Nordic nation also eclipsed the field at the most recent Winter Olympics claiming 39 medals, with 14 being gold, evidence that eliminating rankings through competition doesn’t adversely affect the athlete pool at an elite level.

## Applying the evidence

During the 2019 season, The Development Competition format was applied in Brisbane, Gold Coast, Ipswich, Toowoomba in Under 12's and Victorian Leagues in the Under 11's age groups. Approximately 2300 children participated in Development Competitions across these Leagues. All participant families were provided the opportunity to comment on their experience with 138 surveys completed (183 incomplete), representing a 6% completed return rate.



# 77%

reported that their child's **enjoyment** of Development Competitions met expectations (27%), occasionally exceeded expectations (21%) or exceeded expectations (29%).



# 55%

reported that Development Competitions created an environment that was more conducive to **inclusive, supportive, and respectful behaviours**.



# 63%

reported that Development Competitions had **influenced their decision to participate in Rugby League**. Of these, 66% said it had made a positive influence.



# 50%

reported that Development Competitions provides an environment where coaches can concentrate on the **development of all players**.



# 59%

reported that Development Competitions had provided increased **involvement opportunities** in games for their child.

When asked how likely it was that they would recommend Development Competitions to a friend or colleague, participants responded using a 0 (Highly Unlikely) to 10 (Highly Likely) scale:

# 47% 30%



# 60%

reported that the Development Competitions had improved their child's **confidence** in Rugby League.

## By the numbers

12 Year Old's (SEQ & Toowoomba)	Number	Growth
Male	1948	+2%
Female	173	+22.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2121</b>	<b>+3.3%</b>
11 Year Old's (VIC)	Number	Growth
Male	204	-2.9%
Female	22	+4.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>-2.2%</b>







# 18 Month Registration Window.

## Levelling the playing field

The 18 Month Registration Window Policy provides an opportunity for players who are born between July and December to register in the year level immediately below their calendar grouping. In allowing this, Rugby League is seeking to promote ongoing participation and personal development for players who may feel overly challenged in their calendar group. This initiative specifically targets children who may be new to the game, late developers or lack confidence.

Variances in maturation and developmental stages, especially in the late childhood and early adolescence, can present a vast range of physical, emotional and cognitive diversity among participants. This policy addresses the perceived advantage that children close to an age cut-off receive. Additionally, it caters to new participants in the game who may elect to play under the policy as a method to gain confidence whilst starting their Rugby League journey.

## Understanding the evidence

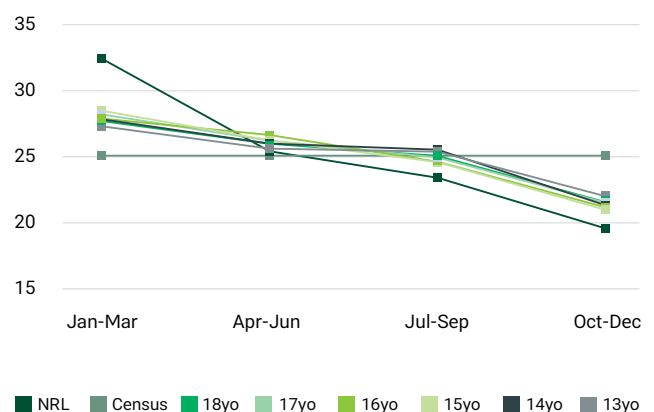
**The 18 Month Registration Policy specifically aims to reduce the occurrence of the Relative Age, Growth and Maturation Effects:**

### 1. Relative Age Effect

This is a phenomenon in which children born in, or close to, a critical age cut-off period may have an advantage in both sporting and academic endeavours. In a sporting context, an earlier birth is typically associated with superior ability; however, the perceived advantage is principally due to being physically, emotionally and cognitively more developed.

Through our analysis of Rugby League participation data (Figure 4), there is a clear indication that the month in which a young person is born directly impacts their involvement in Rugby League at both a participation and elite level. Interestingly, the games drop out rates are inverse of this data with relatively more Quarter 4 drop out, the trend then follows a straight line to Quarter 1 being the least.

**Figure 4: Rugby League Participation Data 2015-2018**



Furthermore, other extreme examples of the bias these effects create in the game can be found in the junior representative programs. Quarter 1, Quarter 2 representation in these selection-based teams can exceed 90% in the younger age groups, and remains heavily biased towards participants born between January and June in the 16-18 year old programs.

## 2. Growth and Maturation Effects

The development of a child is driven by two distinct processes; growth and maturation. These have important implications for a player in regard to their performance and ongoing participation.

Growth is the increase in overall body size with changes in muscle, bone and fat and this affects motor skills.

### Growth is complicated because:

- › Different parts of the body grow at different rates
- › Periods of growth start and stop at different times

Maturation is the genetically programmed series of changes leading to maturity.

### These changes occur in the same sequence in everybody, but there are great individual differences in:

- › When puberty starts
- › How long it takes (it can be 18 months to five years)
- › How much growth occurs in the adolescent growth spurt – the growth spurt in height happens first and is followed by the growth spurt in weight and then the growth spurt in strength

The uneven spread in growth and maturation in young people of the same age creates challenges related to opportunity, training, and competition.

Delorme, Boiché and Raspaud (2009) stated, high contact sports where physical attributes are primary determinants for success present a significant prevalence of RAE. As the attributes of strength, stamina and physique of competitors are deemed to be relevant in the game of Rugby League, having a transitional phase to support the physical development of all players, is a positive inclusion and balances the RAE by creating a fairer and more inclusive playing environment.



**The uneven spread in growth and maturation in young people of the same age creates challenges related to opportunity, training, and competition.**

## Finding success

Country Rugby League, Bidgee Bulls and East Coast Dolphins regions had a provision which allowed participants born between July and December the choice to register in the year level immediately below their calendar grouping for numerous years.

### In 2018, participants were surveyed on their experiences:

**35%**

Rated their experience better than previous years with no one rating it worse

**70%**

Identified an improvement in Rugby League competence

**64%**

Cited an improvement in confidence

### Top two reasons for using policy:

- › Difference in physical, mental or emotional maturity relative to remainder of calendar grouping
- › New participant to the game of Rugby League



## Application and results

During the 2019 season, the 18 Month Registration Policy was applied in Brisbane, Gold Coast, Ipswich, Toowoomba, CRL East Coast and Victorian Leagues. At the end of the reporting period, 1190 players were approved to play under the policy. All participant families were provided the opportunity to comment on their experience with 155 surveys completed, representing a 13% return rate.



# 96%

reported that their child's **enjoyment** of the 18 Month Registration Policy met expectations (16%), occasionally exceeded expectations (13%) or exceeded expectations (67%).



# 73%

reported that the 18 Month Registration Policy had provided increased **involvement opportunities** in games for their child.



# 93%

reported that the 18 Month Registration Policy had improved their child's **confidence** in Rugby League.

When asked how likely it was that they would recommend the 18 Month Registration Policy to a friend or colleague, participants responded using a 0 (Highly Unlikely) to 10 (Highly Likely) scale:

# 79%

8-10 range

# 8%

5-7 range

10



Highly Likely

Highly Unlikely



# 92%

reported the 18 Month Registration Policy had **influenced their decision to remain in Rugby League**.



**The confidence has overcome his fear of contact and meant he has started adopting better tackling technique.**





# Weight Related Competitions.

## Levelling the playing field

As a means of increasing participation by addressing differences in physical maturation, a weight related competition guide will be offered. The rationale behind the initiative is to provide an alternative format to cater for variance in growth and maturation, particularly through late childhood and early adolescence.

Weight Related Competitions are regularly promoted to mitigate these variances. Providing Weight Related Competitions in addition to the Open Weight Competitions that the game currently offers, allows players an opportunity to participate in competitions where the variance in weight is controlled.

This policy will not force participants to play up or down an age category, rather it provides an alternative option for players to select an Open Weight or Weight Related Competition within their calendar group.

## Understanding the research

The NRL's Retention Study (2017) discovered that 'weight differences' were a commonly occurring theme amongst Junior participants who had left the game. As previously mentioned, variances in maturation can differ amongst individuals drastically, therefore a dispensation model that provides an option for this segment of the market will provide a more appealing proposition.

World Rugby's Weight Consideration Guide (2013), which explored weight guidelines from sports such as boxing and American football identified cognitive and psychosocial factors as being vitally important when classifying athletes based on weight. They also added the importance of participants playing at a level where enjoyment is still

achieved "through ensuring they are capable of playing and understanding the game at the level prescribed as well as being allowed to play with their friends" (World Rugby, 2013).

Unlike the Rugby example though, Rugby League won't create further stress by placing children beyond their calendar grouping. Campbell, Patel and Bracewell (2018) uncovered that "individuals playing up a grade by weight had a 46% higher chance of not playing in the following year compared to those playing in the correct age band". Providing Weight Related Competition alleviates parental and participant concerns about variations in size, meaning more players will be with people nearer to their physical age.

Additional to the physical component it was discovered there are significant impacts on the skill acquisition aspect of players who are mismatched. Campbell, Bracewell, Blackie and Patel (2018) identified that "smaller players have their confidence crushed, whereas larger players, who have experienced a certain dominance in their younger years, come to a standstill when this advantage starts to fade. Commonly these players, due to relying on the advantage of their stature, miss out on essential early skill development".



**Individuals playing up a grade by weight had a 46% higher chance of not playing in the following year compared to those playing in the correct age band.**

## Finding success



### Auckland Rugby League

Currently Auckland Rugby League offer club weight restricted participation opportunities in almost all age grades through to U/20 although after U/9 restricted weight competitions revert to combined age grades (i.e. 10-11, 12-13) due to limited numbers and population demographics. The demographics see restricted weight competitions primarily supported and played by North Shore clubs, Howick and Glenora.

Auckland Rugby League is the only Rugby League body in Australasia that has been able to maintain weight restricted competitions over a sustained period of time.

#### Weight Related verses Open Weight game analysis:

35%	More passes made
22%	More tackles made
45%	More linebreaks made
38%	More completed sets
26%	More tackle bust
55%	More tries
29%	More offloads

■ Open Weight ■ Weight Related



## Application and results

During the 2019 season, Weight Related Carnival was offered utilising Rugby League Brisbane's pre-existing Neil Gilmour Challenge. The carnival was run over two days with 160 players participating. All participant families were provided the opportunity to comment on their experience with 52 surveys completed, representing a 33% return rate.



# 86%

reported that their child's **enjoyment** of the Weight Related Carnival met expectations (25%), occasionally exceeded expectations (17%) or exceeded expectations (44%).



# 65%

reported that the Weight Related Carnival had improved their child's **confidence** in Rugby League.



# 58%

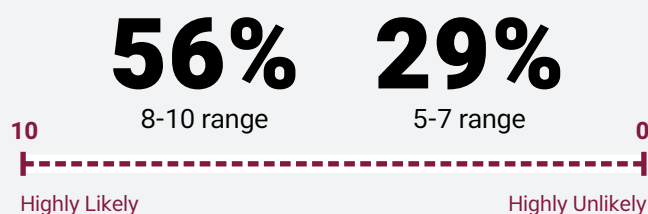
reported that the Weight Related Carnival provided increased **involvement opportunities** in games for their child.



# 67%

reported that they would be interested in their child participating in a **season long, weight related competition**

When asked how likely it was that they would recommend a Weight Related Carnival to a friend or colleague, participants responded using a 0 (Highly Unlikely) to 10 (Highly Likely) scale:





# Community League Interpretations.

## A game for all

The Community League Interpretations were developed to emphasise safety and good conduct within the game of Rugby League by creating the best possible on-field environment, actively encouraging the core beliefs of Rugby League, and a healthy respect for all participants. It applies to all players who play Rugby League at an entirely recreational level. In total, there are 8 modified law interpretations relating to: Tackling, Palming, Pushing, Flopping, Play-the-ball and Scrums.

For Senior players, injury management is critical due to working arrangements, health insurance and other life commitments. Providing rules that will further enhance the playing environment for recreational level footballers will provide a format of the game that promotes prolonged, active participation and enjoyment.



**Providing rules that will further enhance the playing environment for recreational level footballers will provide a format of the game that promotes prolonged, active participation and enjoyment.**

The additional measures will also act as a recruitment mechanism through attracting Senior players with a greater emphasis placed on fun, fitness and overall health. Implementing the Community League Interpretations may also reduce insurance premiums and provide an opportunity to attract more Senior players to Rugby League with less of a financial burden for all involved.

## Understanding the evidence

The adoption of the Community League Interpretations for recreational level footballers aimed at easing the concerns that a number of Senior players had in relation to injuries associated with participating. Arias, Argudo and Alonso (2011) outlined, a change in game conditions and rules should protect athletes' health and safety and observing the modifications quite strictly may contribute to a reduction in the frequency of injuries.

Through proactively seeking to enhance the overall safety of participants and having an environment that is less focussed on results and more so on the community element will promote sustained involvement in Rugby League.

Usher (2017) discovered that the two major reasons for Senior footballers not to return to the game after playing in 2016 were injury/fear of injury and other commitments. These reasons made up a significant number, with a total of 49% of responses. Further support for the argument of introducing additional safety measures for community and recreational level Senior football competitions came from the same study, where qualitative data presented 'injuries cause retirement' as a response that occurred quite frequently.



## Application and results

During the 2019 season, the Community League Interpretations were applied in the Pro Ten Community Cup of Country Rugby League Group 17. All 214 participants were provided the opportunity to comment on their experience with 20 surveys completed, representing a 9% return rate.



# 85%

reported that their **enjoyment** of the CLI format met expectations (10%), occasionally exceeded expectations (10%) or exceeded expectations (65%).

When asked how likely it was that they would recommend CLI to a friend or colleague, participants responded using a 0 (Highly Unlikely) to 10 (Highly Likely)

# 70%

8-10 range

# 25%

5-7 range

10



Highly Likely

Highly Unlikely



# 50%

reported that the CLI had **influenced their decision to play Rugby League in 2019.**



# 90%

reported the CLI promoted **socialisation and a sense of connection** within the Rugby League Community.



**Having small towns get a crowd like that is just very special. Having Rugby League back into the communities has definitely benefited the towns.**





**RISE**

## RISE Rugby League Development Program.

### A game for all

The RISE Rugby League Development Program provides coaches and 13-15-year-old aspirational Junior Rugby League players with an avenue to obtain specialised training and education through a holistic Rugby League development experience. In offering a program aimed at developing players physical, technical, tactical, and socio-emotional skills, the program hopes to enhance players connection, confidence, competence and character to the game of Rugby League.

By providing development opportunities for participants from age 13 onwards, thus delaying early specialisation, aims to accommodate the varying maturation rates (physical and socio-emotional). Furthermore, offering the RISE RLDP allows greater freedom for the participant to transition between the recreational and performance pathways should their aspirations change.

While the player pathway is the incentive for engaging in RISE, the program will also create an awareness of other opportunities within the game including refereeing, sports trainers, coaching and volunteering by offering Rugby League accreditation.



**Through my child's commitment to the RISE program I have an increased admiration to what Rugby League does for our young players. Every week I have watched my son physically improve but I have also seen how the game has increased his confidence and team spirit and how he cares for other players.**

## Technical & Tactical Development

Utilising a combination of deliberate play and deliberate practice principles, coaches will focus on improving players core Rugby League skills and decision-making ability.

Programs will be tailored to suit each individual. Coaches will also conduct skill assessments to ensure the program is as effective as possible in improving the competence and confidence of every player.

## Physical Skill Development

The physical development program will aim to inspire participants to lead an active, healthy lifestyle, by realising the benefits of being physically and mentally fit.

The sessions will provide players with an understanding of key pillars of fitness that are important in achieving future physical health and athletic performance.

**Players will learn safe and effective techniques to improve in the following areas:**

- › Flexibility
- › Agility
- › Speed
- › Strength
- › Endurance

## Socio-Emotional Development

The socio-emotional development component of the RISE program is led by the School of Applied Psychology at Griffith University through their Life-Fit Program.

The program aims to arm the players with the tools they'll need to tackle life's challenges as they grow older. Initially, players will complete an online assessment to help identify any possible concerns that relate to their emotions, self-confidence, relationships and lifestyle. If required, participants and their families will receive personal, confidential support from the Life-Fit team.

**Players will also participate in four Life-Fit workshops that relate to key components of mental and physical wellbeing to assist them in a sporting, school or work environment.**

- › Session 1: Strong Minds
- › Session 2: Keep Cool
- › Session 3: Stay Connected
- › Session 4: Healthy Habits

## Coach development program

The coach development program equips coaches with the knowledge and skills necessary to optimise the sporting experience within the RISE Program. Additionally, this coaching philosophy also benefits their local Rugby League communities.

Coaches attend a two-day workshop and complete an online module which introduces an awareness of Athlete Development Models, Stages of Development, Motivation in Sport, The Relative Age, Growth and Maturation Effects, Adult Effects on Performance and Participation and Best Practice Coaching Methods.



**As a lot of the drills are game based, it gives him the opportunity to learn by errors with advice from the coaching staff.**



## Understanding the evidence

“Around the end of primary school (or early years of secondary school; about age 13), children should have the opportunity to either choose to specialise in their favourite sport or to continue in sport at a recreational level” (Hancock & Côté, 2014).

The DMSP indicates that balancing the deliberate play and deliberate practice in the early adolescence is the beginning of the specialising years. Baker, Côté and Abernethy (2003) supported the delay in specialisation and discovered that the relationship between overly-intense sport specific training and undertaking additional activities was of a negative nature, thus encouraging diverse involvement in activity and adjourning sport-specific practice beyond the age of 12. Doing so was found to be more beneficial for the development of expert athletes.

The minimising of the Pygmalion Effect through delaying specialisation, removes the parental, coach/selector determinations of talent based on physical maturation and allows the player to develop a better understanding of their true skill and realise their potential.

## Finding success



### Canterbury Rugby Football Union

The Canterbury Rugby Football Union has ditched its junior representative programs through to 16 years of age in an effort to keep more players in the sport.

The CRFU has announced plans to adopt a focus on development pathways throughout junior rugby, following a detailed consultation period with its sub-union stakeholders, South Island provincial unions and New Zealand Rugby.

To support the change in focus the CRFU has been working with stakeholders to deliver a ‘best in practice’ development programme that focuses on skill development, is “age and stage” appropriate, provides coach development opportunities and provides equal opportunities across the region.

The development programmes will incorporate the ‘6 Pillars of Player Development’ and attendees will be by nomination, rather than trials and selection. The programmes will also provide aspiring coaches further opportunities to develop and refine their skills.



**As I am an older style of coach, the education materials have certainly changed my approach as to how I go about influencing younger athletes to better themselves.**





**He never felt like he was good enough to be in the team that he is, but with the skills acquired from this program he's starting to confidently do things on the field that he wouldn't before.**

## Application and results

During the 2019 season, the RISE Program was delivered in Wagga Wagga, Coffs Harbour, Gold Coast & Toowoomba. 149 players participated. All participants families were provided the opportunity to comment on their experience with 52 surveys completed, representing a 35% return rate.



**97%**

reported that their child's **enjoyment** of the RISE Program met expectations (9%), occasionally exceeded expectations (25%) or exceeded expectations (63%).



**69%**

reported that the RISE Program had **influenced their decision to remain in Rugby League.**



**96%**

reported that the RISE Program had improved their child's **competence.**



**99%**

reported that their son had developed **valuable connections.**



**97%**

reported that the RISE Program had improved their child's **confidence** in Rugby League.

When asked how likely it was that they would recommend the RISE Program to a friend or colleague, participants responded using a 0 (Highly Unlikely) to 10 (Highly Likely) scale:

**97%**

8-10 range

**3%**

5-7 range

10



Highly Likely

Highly Unlikely



**96%**

reported that the RISE Program assisted in developing their **son's character.**

## By the numbers

### Retention Rates (13-15 Years)

National	70.5%
RISE Program Participants	95%



**100%**

of coaches reported that the RISE Coach Development Program has **influenced their beliefs** about coaching and athlete development.



# Player Development Framework.

## Understanding our people

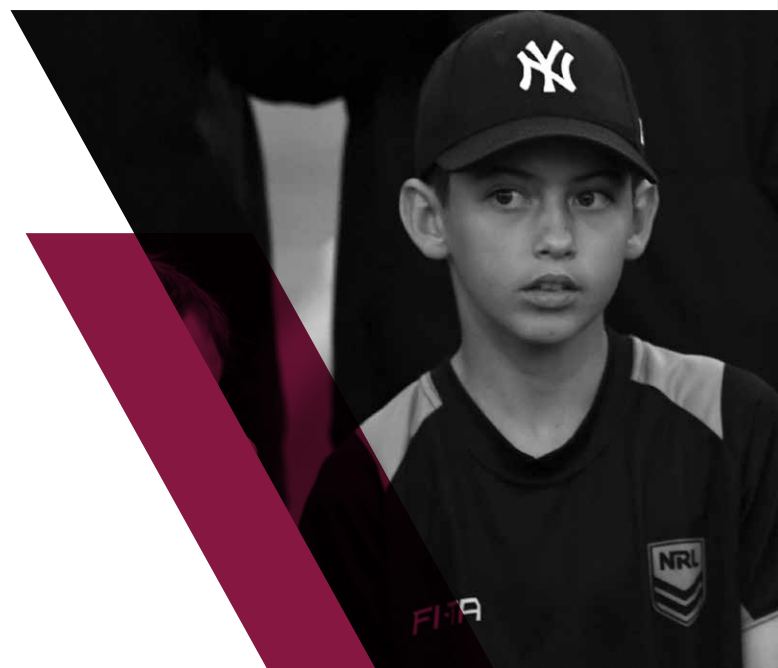
It is clear Club volunteers and officials play an influential role into the perceptions and effectiveness of any initiative that are applied in the club environment.

To gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of these club representatives in relation to the PDF and the interventions it proposes, all clubs from the trial regions were provided the opportunity to offer their feedback about each concept and the impact it had in their club community.

To ensure a balanced reflection of each club's experience was conveyed, it was encouraged that the recipient of the survey consulted their club management committee before responding.



**It is clear Club volunteers and officials play an influential role into the perceptions and effectiveness of any initiative that are applied in the club environment.**



## Application and results

261 club representatives were provided the opportunity to comment on their experience with 38 surveys completed, representing a 15% return rate.

### Tag Rugby League

# 61%

reported that Tag Rugby League provided the opportunity for participants to develop **confidence** and Rugby League **competence**.

### TackleSafe Program

# 68%

reported the TackleSafe Program had a positive impact on the participants playing experience.

### Development Competitions

# 16%

reported that the Development Competitions had a **positive impact** on the participants playing experience.

### 18 Month Registration Window

# 92%

reported the 18 Month Registration Window Policy had a **positive impact** on the participants playing experience.

### Player Development Framework

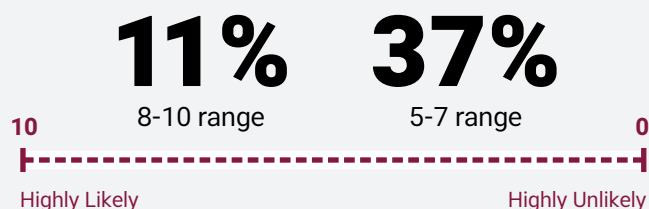
# 81%

reported the PDF will **influence the decision for players to return/remain in the game**. Of these, 50% said it would have a positive influence with 15% divided.

# 69%

reported the overall **effectiveness** of the PDF concepts was somewhat effective (50%), very effective (16%), extremely effective (3%).

When asked how likely it was that they would recommend the Player Development Framework to a friend or colleague, participants responded using a 0 (Highly Unlikely) to 10 (Highly Likely) scale:





## Conclusion.

**When looking across the preceding findings from participants and their families involved in 7 of the interventions suggested by the framework, it has been consistently indicated that a sense of heightened Confidence is the predominate theme that has been viewed as having the most impact on participants (children) and observers (parents).**

It is also evident that where it could be appropriately measured, the interventions also had a positive impact on a participant's sense of connection, competence and character. Such an outcome is a positive aspect of the PDF 7 initiatives. In this light, it can be posited, that the PDF has developed initiatives that provide participants with the appropriate opportunities to experience challenging, fun and skill / play based learning environments. Such experiences are indicated as having positive effects on youths' self – esteem, physical literacy levels and general mental and social wellbeing. It is further understood that positive sporting experiences foster positive citizenship, social success, peer relationships, positively correlates with academic performance and leadership skills – all of which has been indicated, by participants, as a flow on effect of improved connection, confidence, competence, character and contribution. As previously mentioned, positive improvements in these leading indicators when experienced across multiple sessions and seasons, result in the longer-term outcomes of ongoing participation, personal development, and superior performance.

The suite of initiatives, that the PDF offers, have been underpinned with an evidence based, strategic footing, which is based on contemporary literature and research, associated with international and national best practices in Junior sport implementation and youth development. It is clear that such

a strategic approach has brought forth initiatives that have been well received by participants and have the real potential to create long lasting and sustainable change throughout the Rugby League community.

However, a dis-connect exists between Club hierarchy and the participant experience. This dis-connect is most evident in the Development Competition intervention and the Club view of the overall effectiveness of the PDF. This anomaly presents an opportunity to establish a program that better informs the Club volunteers on the overall objectives of the PDF and it's perceived efficacy when viewed through the participants experience.

The creation and preliminary implementation of the PDF and supporting concepts has seen a range of player development models and sporting studies utilised. The goal was to provide a uniform approach to the delivery of Rugby League throughout the nation, which optimised the environment, while attracting and retaining participants, fostering personal development and transitioning and nurturing talent.

Overall, the PDF's preliminary introduction to a variety of Rugby League affiliates has been met with a high degree of optimism. The results of preliminary implementation have been very well received which has been reflected by the positive participant feedback.

**Led by the most contemporary research and best practice examples available, the PDF, when complimented by philosophically aligned Coach Development and Parent Induction programs, presents Rugby League with a model that would position the sport as a global leader in sport delivery.**







## Recommendations.

**There are six identified recommendations and a further two sub-recommendations that have resulted from the data. The recommendations are based on the research findings and are designed to ensure the most effective methods to implement the framework game-wide.**

The recommendations take into account the challenges that may be presented in regions where current game delivery models are least aligned with the framework recommendations. The benefits provided by a unified, collective approach by the games major stakeholders also form part of the rationale supporting the recommendations.

### Recommendation 1

**Rugby League adopts the PDF and collaborates with state league's and their affiliates on a national implementation plan.**

Game-wide adoption of the PDF and accompanying interventions within an agreed timeframe. Further agreed upon timelines for implementation to be achieved through collaboration between state bodies and their affiliates. Consideration to be given to a League/Region's current delivery model and their alignment to the PDF with the process of implementation to be guided by a set of minimum standards.

The large majority of stakeholders within the many Leagues that have been provided briefings and presentations on the framework, recognise the level of research leading the project, understand the rationale behind it and the positive opportunities the framework presents.

During these discussions a common theme emerged for 'the game' to make the decision to adopt the PDF. These statements were largely attributed to a concern of the negative response they may encounter within their respective Leagues should they be left in a position to make decisions on a League by League basis.

### Recommendation 2

**Develop a unified marketing and communication campaign to lead the implementation process.**

A unified marketing and communication campaign is developed which carries the influence and support of the major stakeholders i.e. NRL, QRL, NSWRL, CRLNSW, NRLVIC, NRLNT, NRLWA, NRLSA.

### Recommendation 3

**The 16 NRL Clubs are engaged to assist in the communication and marketing campaign.**

The 16 NRL Clubs and RLPA to provide their support and voice to the marketing and recruitment campaign. The influential voice of these organisations and associated players and coaches will impact positively on the large majority of the games support base and will play an important role in reducing the negative perceptions that may be associated with the PDF.

## Recommendation 4

### **Recruit PDF implementation support team.**

A PDF Implementation Support Team is recruited. This team will provide support, guidance and resource to Leagues/ Regions undertaking PDF implementation and will support administrators, volunteers, coaches, referees, full-time staff etc. in best practice implementation processes.

## Recommendation 5

### **Develop a PDF induction program targeted toward key stakeholders including; Club management committees, volunteers, full-time Rugby League employees and game officials.**

Led by the disconnect between the position of Club Management Committees and the experience of participants and their families, a PDF induction/information program be developed to create a deeper understanding on the benefits associated with the philosophies and interventions presented by the PDF. The successful implementation is heavily reliant on the games 'workforce' therefore a program targeted toward management committees, boards, volunteers and full-time staff is imperative.

## Recommendation 6

### **Partnerships are formed with the university sector to review, analyse, and evolve the PDF and associated programs on an annual basis.**

To ensure the delivery of Rugby League remains informed by the most contemporary research and available information, it is recommended ongoing partnerships are formed with the University sector to review, analyse and evolve the PDF and associated programs such as Coach Development, parent induction and volunteer support resources. This process provides the game with the opportunity to evolve incrementally and mitigates against challenges posed by sudden and significant change.

## Sub-recommendations

Upon successful implementation of the PDF, further considerations should be made regarding the impact Rugby League can have on Australia's sporting landscape, thus positioning itself as a national leader in sport delivery. Therefore, the PDF Steering Committee propose an additional two sub-recommendations.

### Sub-recommendation 1

#### **Re-brand the PDF the Australian Sports Development Model (ASDM).**

The PDF is re-branded to the Australian Sports Development Model. Led by the benefits experienced by USA Hockey and their American Development Model (ADM), the PDF presents Rugby League with the opportunity to be a leader in youth development through sport. The USA Olympic Committee (USOC) now actively encourages sports across America to adopt the ADM, using USA Hockey and the positive results they've experienced in both the participation and performance streams as the exemplar for the benefits of adopting a participant focused approach.

### Sub-recommendation 2

#### **Engage Aus Sport and other like-minded Australian sports to form a consensus on adopting an ASDM aligned approach to sport delivery, particularly at the junior level.**

In a similar approach to the recently announced Statement of Intent announced by the Chief Executives of 5 of New Zealand major sports (Hockey NZ, Netball NZ, NZ Cricket, NZ Football, NZ Rugby), under the guidance of Sport NZ, listing steps they will take to pave the way for substantial change in the way young people experience sport. Rugby League, at the appropriate time, approaches Sport Australia and other NSO's on the possibility of forming a consensus position in relation to sports delivery, particularly in the junior environment.





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