



BAFA Phase 4 Return to Play – Ideas for session content **Wayne Hill**

There are many questions being asked regarding Phase 4 and what can and cannot be undertaken through this period of Return to Play.

(<https://www.britishamericanfootball.org/downloads/stage%204%20-%20infographic.pdf>)

We are a long way off playing full contact games, and current guidelines restrict numbers of participants (currently up to 30), but the guidance does allow us to have opportunities to play Flag or Touch Football. We have a great opportunity ahead of us to build our athletes and support their athletic development and mental health and wellbeing. Let's focus on the fundamentals and the individual, as these are the two areas we do not always get enough time to focus on.

Firstly, through all of our phases of play the focus has to be on the individual. This is from a social, emotional and mental wellbeing point of view, as well as their physical wellbeing and development. So, where can you include this in your sessions?

- Can we split the team between the coaches or positional leaders to enable social interactions remotely to enable players to air their concerns, voice their requirements, ask for support and enable them to be part of the solution through this period? Many teams developed remote interaction strategies during the national lockdown. However, these are still needed now, as restrictions are still in place and pressures with work and family are probably as high now as before.
- Can we as a staff offer additional pastoral support or have discussions with more vulnerable individuals and ensure we are able to signpost them to appropriate support agencies if required?
- We have increased safeguarding responsibilities during this period of time, especially with children and our most vulnerable participants, as they may be particularly impacted and at increased risk right now.
- Can we talk to our young people about how they may have been impacted through this period, how are our students feeling with an unusual first term back in education. Below are some potentially useful links:
 - NSPCC resources re children – <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/coronavirus-advice-support-children-families-parents/>
 - Adult mental health resources here - <https://www.anncrafttrust.org/resources/safeguarding-in-sport-a-toolkit-for-supporting-participants-with-their-mental-health/>

- Do you work as a staff to support each other and ensure your mental health and wellbeing is being taken into account and you have someone to talk to?
- Can you connect to local resources with up to date COVID information on support and developments so everyone can be up to date? This might include links to jobs or training opportunities and local lockdown information etc. (Players and Coaches may be travelling into an area of local lockdown so make sure they are informed.)
- Can we ensure that in our sessions there are social interaction opportunities? Potentially undertake these in smaller groups, positional groups etc. This will enable the more introverted players and coaches to share in a more comfortable setting.
- Is this an opportunity for players to get to know others in the team that they might not have had previous exposure to?
- How can we make our sessions Fun? How can we introduce competition within the guidance of phase 4?

Obviously, all of the above social interactions need to be Phase 4 / Government and local restriction compliant. Thus ensuring, social distancing when on and off the field and teams are not exceeding outdoor gathering limits. These may differ in each home nation especially if not formally part of practice or play on field activity.

In the current climate we are more than just a Football Team and Football Coaches. We are a support mechanism for our players and staff.

One thing we can be doing at the moment to increase social interaction, team bonding and competition, is to develop our own club Flag / Touch Leagues (Flag teams already know this!). Therefore, within a 2 hour session the first hour would be focused on core fundamentals but the last hour would be our very own League. This might last 3 or 4 weeks with a prize at the end of it. You could create a league draft and assign coaches to be responsible for teams (coaches could even participate). A league would provide competition and create team bonding but would also develop many of the core fundamentals required for Football:

- Fitness – Flag / Touch is a quicker game, with more running than normal.
- Tracking of the Flag – this has many of the same fundamentals as tracking the tackle or open field block.
- Ball Handling – We never get enough time for real life heat of the moment ball handling. We can never catch enough balls at any position.
- Speed, Quickness and Agility – No matter what the position, OL to DB if we want to be better football players then we need to develop our SQA.
- Vision – One of the least trained elements of the sport, but being able to play a version of the sport that will enhance concentration, the development of eye focus, and greater play recognition and understanding.

With 30 players we could develop 4 teams. Brand them with team nicknames from your club nomenclature (the Gold, Silver, Bronze and Platinum Lions!) or allow players to name

their own teams. After 4 weeks, and a winner is crowned, you organise a re-draft or you create whatever structure you want. This creates a competitive environment, team bonding and skill development. If your club size is big enough you could even have a playoff structure between one group of 30 and another group of 30!

If your club structure is not big enough then just enable the variation of a tournament structure. This could be re-drafts every couple of weeks between your 2 or 3 teams or reducing the format down to 4 v 4 or 3 v 3.

A major reason to include Flag in your sessions is in relation to whole sport development. If we want to turn the pyramid upside down and increase participation within younger age groups. Then Flag Football is the vehicle we must use to do this. Therefore, by including more kitted players in the benefits of Flag Football we will hopefully gain more advocates and coaches for the game to support the future generations of our sport.

We have tackled the Individual and Competition side of the return to play but what about the athlete development focus of the session. Below are a few thoughts on what we should be focusing on for athlete development. Whether an individual is a 14 year old youth player, ten year veteran or a player new to the sport, all of them want to improve and be successful on the field. We can achieve this through:

- Development of body control and core stability.
- Development of flexibility, especially hip flexibility.
- Development of key movement patterns.
- Development of core fundamentals.
- Develop core fundamentals with increased focus on reaction to a stimulus.
- Breaking down skills into its subsequent parts (Sub-skills).
- Creating opportunities for success and improving the resilience of our athletes.

Development of body control and core stability.

There are many drills that can be utilised as part of team warm ups, conditioning or prep for contact. There are some fun activities based around the Bear position (down on all fours). There are many variations from working on lifting an arm at a time and holding the position or lifting a leg and staying in the balanced position. Exercises that move the arm through the body to enable core structure to be maintained are also of benefit.

You can easily add Bear Crawls, as well as games associated to this. USA Football have many examples of these:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bs3g1BonLI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bb77G8r1UZg>

It should be noted that maintaining a strong Bear position is key. There is no need to rush things. The key point here is how can we ask our players to generate force through the core or be in a position to tackle at thigh level when we cannot get in those positions or maintain strength when in those positions.

***NB.** All of these exercises are also good pre-hab work for shoulders and rotator cuffs.

Development of flexibility, especially hip flexibility.

The development of flexibility is key so why not spend some of your training sessions focusing on this. Can you develop a stretching focus? Can you bring in a Yoga instructor? The focus is to develop core stability, enable the body to engage muscles groups to develop power and finally to prevent injury. If we want our plays to be explosive, we need to use hip flexibility to be transfer force through our core. You also might want to include plyometrics as part of your conditioning or pre-hab work.

Whether it be the Offensive Lineman looking to deflect force or a Flag player looking to improve tracking / flagging technique. Hip Flexibility and Core Strength are the foundations for success.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-uNaley_O8

Development of key movement patterns.

Every position has key movement patterns. However, there are many that are transferrable across positions in any code of the sport and will support immensely with the skill development for Special Teams in contact football. If you take the core movement patterns associated to tackling:

Run & Gather

Run, Shimmy, Run

Shimmy

Swoop

Near Foot

Two Foot Plant

Shuffle

All of these are evident in blocking or tracking the flag / player. For example, when an Offensive Lineman has to work to next level, this is when their faults appear, such as being too high, being off balance, attacking with wrong foot and shoulder or just not being under control. These next level blocks don't need to be devastating, they just need to be effective. Coaching these movement patterns supports cross training across the team to become more effective blockers, tacklers and special teams players.

This is also evident in Flag / Touch Football as the tracking of the near hip, being under control and having the ability to change direction and speed is essential when tracking the ball carrier.

Development of core fundamentals.

These examples are contact based however these are transferable skills when replacing the term tackling with tracking and blocking with creating space.

Regardless of scheme if we cannot effectively block or tackle then we will struggle as a team and it is therefore imperative we develop those core fundamentals.

We can teach all elements of tackling using the USA Football / Richie Gray Five Fights without kit. Teaching the core fundamentals of tackling without kit focuses the players on the correct body position, footwork, shoulder placement etc. (Rather than thinking they are invincible wearing helmet and pads).

In the current Phase of Return to Play we can easily focus on 3 of the 5 elements of the Five Fights: the Fight to Track the Ball, the Fight to Prepare for Contact and the Fight to Accelerate on Contact.

If you haven't got access to the USA Football Advanced Tackling System then check out BAFA's Advanced Tackling Round Tables with Andy Ryland and Richie Gray.

@CoachDig on Twitter provides a lot of content including this video with a lot of non-contact tackling based drills that can be adapted for Phase 4.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIwmPlmOguk&fbclid=IwAR00JdhT4nxvLOYQAZYkLI8zInL4HE4pw5y35eHOBhzu6eTuLiFTTijunl>

It is always good to remind yourself and review how you can adapt skill development and drills in the current climate. Why not retake the USA Football Shoulder Tackling course which is Free and has one of my favourite tackling drills using a Swiss Ball to reinforce dip and uppercuts.

<https://footballdevelopment.com/shoulder-tackling>

Like Tackling, there are many resources for blocking. From the USA Football Contact Systems to the OLP System. Regardless of preference break down the core fundamentals into the key areas you can teach and develop within Phase 4. For example – Can we teach the Track of the block, focusing on aiming points, moving targets, eye wash and angles? Can we focus on the Prepare section, as being balanced, under control and ready to deliver the blow will increase the effectiveness of the block? Finally, there are ways to focus on hip extension and the double under without equipment.

Check out Coach Paul Alexander on twitter and his posture drills for pass protection using a pole or broom stick (@CoachPaulAlex).

***NB.** You can access 3 free videos for Contact Systems and Advanced Tackling via the USA Football website.

Develop core fundamentals with increased focus on reaction to a stimulus.

This is really about the progression of the drills above to allow development. Once players are competent, how can you include a stimulus to provoke reaction-based actions on the element of the skills being coached? Sounds technical but by introducing a directional instruction to the end section of the drill, develops a reaction or decision by the player. This could also be based on a specific movement to start the drill or you can include a movement mid drill that changes the leverage or outcome of the skill.

Breaking down the skill into its subsequent parts (Sub-skills).

Every skill can be broken down into subsequent sub skills. We rarely have time to break all of these down and either build the skills up gradually or deliver a whole part whole approach to skill development. Take the following skills and see the different sub skills and how these can be developed within Phase 4.

Throwing the WR Screen

Throwing the Slant

Throwing the Fade

Getting off the LOS for a WR

Creating Leverage as a WR

Catching the Ball - NB. Put players in the body positions for the routes you throw.

Running with the Ball

Using Agility and Speed with the Ball

Inside Zone Blocking

Outside Zone Blocking

Blocking in open space

Pulling

Two Pass Rush Moves

DL Reads & Reactions

LB Pass Drops

LB Run Reads

DB Zone Coverage

DB Run Support

Creating opportunities for success and improving the resilience of our athletes.

To enable our players to fully develop these skills we need to create game like pressures and scenarios to enable the transfer of skill development when we move to the next phase of return to play and in any future games.

Early success in all skills is key, as this creates confidence in our players. Therefore, it is crucial that within your drills you can create differentiation for your players. This could be reducing the speed of the drill or increasing the speed of the drill. You could add an extra element for the experienced player such as a stimulus reaction. Decision making as part of a drill has been shown to embed deeper learning. But any decision-making drill can result in an athlete making a wrong decision. Allow the players a safe environment to occasionally fail, improving their resilience and creating a learning opportunity.

As well as the differentiation and the progression, we also need to ensure we have the regression of the drill. There is no point in players undertaking a drill that they are never successful in, as they will lose confidence in their ability to complete the skill.

There are a number of ways to create pressure within drills, such as:

Increase Space

Reduce Space

Set a time limit

Include a decision-making element to the drill

Give the player a choice in the technique / skill being executed

Provide a stimulus to react too

Add a competitive element to the drill

Add eye wash to the drill

Reduce vision to increase reaction speed

Start the player in a negative position in relation to the skill

Add a game like scenario, down and distance, time in game or score line

***NB.** These are key training elements for coaches. We can call the plays, but the players have to make fluid decisions in the skills and techniques they execute to ensure the play is successful.

All of the above can not only develop the element of pressure within the completion of the skill but can also provide game like scenarios / situations that the player will find themselves in.

There is one final element to everything in relation to athlete development and that is film as much as you can of these individual skill development drills. We all have the ability to use the cameras on our phones but ideally allow another player or coach to film these drills allowing visual feedback and reinforcement for our athletes and additional coaches feedback.

We have a great opportunity ahead of us to develop our players core fundamentals and skills. So, when they are able to return to tournaments and competition, or kitted practices, these skills are so embedded and developed that they become reactionary rather than delayed through a thought process.

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