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AFL NATIONAL FEMALE COMMUNITY FOOTBALL GUIDELINES

2019



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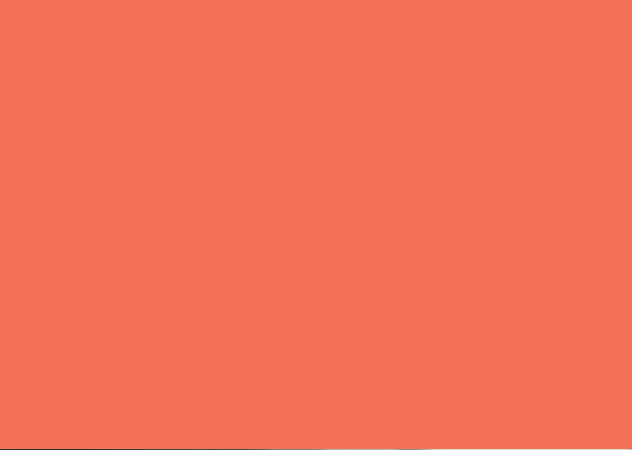
Purpose

The female football landscape across the country is developing rapidly and at varying stages of evolution. As such, the AFL National Female Community Football Guidelines (Guidelines) have been developed to provide clarity and guidance to community leagues (Leagues) and community clubs (Clubs) in establishing best-practice frameworks for female football.

In doing so, the AFL and AFL state bodies will work with Leagues and Clubs to enhance female player participation safety and experiences while also developing competition structures and female talent pathways.

Leagues and Clubs are encouraged to align, where possible, with these Guidelines. These Guidelines should be used in conjunction with the AFL's Australian Football Match Policy and the AFL's Female Football Club Guide.





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AGE GROUPS JUNIOR AND YOUTH GIRLS



Guideline

- ➔ It is recommended that, where possible, Leagues establish single-age groups for each year level for Junior and Youth Girls competitions. For Leagues where the female football pathway is not fully developed, it is recommended that Leagues establish two-year age groups or as many age groups as possible.

Rationale/Comments

The development of the participation pathway for females is critical to the long-term growth and development of the game.

AFL research recognises that single-age groups enhance player retention, as more opportunities are available for females to play age-appropriate competitions.

Guideline

- ➔ As per the **Australian Football Match Policy**, girls up to 14 may choose to play in a mixed-gender competition or a female-only competition.
- ➔ However, unless the girl is skilled, confident, physically capable and has the consent of her coach and parents, it is recommended girls aged 13 and 14 participate in a structured Youth Girl competition where possible.
- ➔ In instances where no age-appropriate competition is available, and a player requests to play in a higher female competition age group (above the recommended two-year age gap), parental consent must be provided using a Parent Consent Form. For example, a girl eligible for an under-10 competition requesting to play in an under-12 competition.

Rationale/Comments

Reduce the risk of injury and enhance the playing experience of female players by playing against players of similar age, size and ability.

Greater numbers of females playing in female competitions will enhance the female participation experience and retention as players play against those of similar physical capability.



GALA DAY RULES JUNIOR AND YOUTH GIRLS

(including School and/or 'Come & Try' events)

Guideline

Rules for Junior and Youth Girls football should follow the Australian Football Match Policy. However, regardless of participant age, application of the following rules for Junior/Youth Girl Gala Days/'Come and Try' events is recommended:

Tackling

- ➔ There should only be modified tackling for Youth Girls 'Come and Try' and School Gala Days;
- ➔ A modified tackle involves a player in possession of the ball being tackled by an opponent by wrapping both arms around the area below the shoulders and above the knees. The tackle may be from either side, front or from behind. A player tackling from behind must not push in the back;
- ➔ No players are to be deliberately dumped or taken to the ground in the act of tackling. If the player in possession of the ball is taken to the ground in the act of tackling, they will receive a free kick. If the umpire feels the player drops to the ground deliberately in order to receive a free kick, they will be penalised for holding the ball;
- ➔ There is no bumping, or slinging of the opposition;
- ➔ A player not in possession of the ball shall be awarded a free kick if held by an opponent.

Kicking off the ground

- ➔ Not permitted unless accidental.



Rationale/Comments

The standard rules, as per the **Australian Football Match Policy**, are not always appropriate to the level of skill or experience of the participants (largely first-time participants) at Junior/Youth Girl Gala/'Come and Try' events (including school events) and implementation of such rules could lead to greater risk of injury.

Contact

- ➔ Deferring the introduction of full tackles is based upon the need to provide players with the best possible conditions to learn, develop and improve their disposal skills by reducing congestion and pressure on the player in possession. It is also important that girls who are new to the game can first learn, and develop the skills required, to safely receive tackles. All skills are eventually taught and learned, but there is an appropriate sequence for doing so. Players new to the game but keen to be first to the ball often have not yet learned how to protect themselves when faced with picking the ball up from below their knees and an opponent running at them to do the same;
- ➔ If the composition of teams opposing each other has a variety of experience levels (ie. a player who has game experience versus a player who is new to the game), then the ability to give or receive a full tackle safely will be compromised;
- ➔ For these reasons, tackling alternatives are preferred, to allow the participant's skills to develop while providing the highest consideration to player welfare.

Kicking off the ground

- ➔ In a player's development years, the ability to enhance the skill of picking up the ball takes precedence over the need to kick it off the ground. This provides players the opportunity to learn to confidently put their head over the ball to pick it up off the ground.

COMPETITION RULES

SENIOR WOMEN

Guideline

Align all Senior Women's football competitions, where/when possible, to the following **AFLW competition rules**:

- ➔ 16-a-side (4-5 player bench);
- ➔ Unlimited rotations;
- ➔ 17-20-minute quarters (inclusive of any time-on);
- ➔ Size 4 ball;
- ➔ Free kick for last disposal out of bounds (between the arcs);
- ➔ Boundary throw-ins to occur 10m in from the boundary

Rationale/Comments

To encourage Leagues to adopt the AFLW rules to **assist female players to be able to hone their skill and ability under nationally consistent rules**.

Research suggests 16-a-side women's competitions will:

- I. Improve average on-field player quality given the player depth profile and enhance competitive balance;
- II. Generate scale to establish additional teams and tiers of competition;
- III. Increase opportunity for all players to be involved in the play;
- IV. Create a less-congested and freer-flowing match (supported by data analysed by the AFL across numerous matches).

MINIMUM AGES

SENIOR WOMEN'S COMPETITIONS

Guideline

As a minimum, to participate in senior women's competitions, girls should be turning 16 years of age during the year the competition commences.

A player **may seek to play in Senior Women's competition when they are under the minimum age** by written application to the League submitted by the player's club, accompanied by written consent of the player's parent or guardian using a Parent Consent Form. Approval by the League may only be granted in exceptional circumstances and in accordance with the relevant considerations in the Australian Football Match Policy.

Rationale/Comments

- ➔ Ensure the **safety of all participants** and to provide consistency in application nationally, noting that players aged below 16 will typically have the opportunity to play in youth competitions.

**COMMUNITY CLUB
SUSTAINABILITY &
COMPETITIVE BALANCE
SENIOR WOMEN**



Guideline

When possible, Leagues are recommended to introduce a competitive balance framework for the Senior Women's competition (as per the Senior Men's), through a tailored Player Points System Policy.

AFL state bodies have developed tailored frameworks for Player Points Systems for senior women's competitions which takes into consideration nuances specific to the female football space.

Note: Leagues should liaise with their AFL state body for further information regarding the development of a Player Points System. Player Points System policies may need to be tailored to address local issues/circumstances and be approved by the relevant AFL state body.

Rationale/Comments

The future sustainability of community football relies upon highly competitive Leagues. While we expect that female football will continue to grow and expand, it has become evident that some senior women's competitions lack the competitive balance that is required for player, club and competition development.

Female football is still in its developmental phase, with limited depth and varying standards of players. The resultant uneven nature of competitions has repercussions for **player retention and competition sustainability**.

AFL state bodies have developed Community Club Sustainability Programs to address these concerns. The general philosophy behind these programs is based on the following objectives:

- ➔ Assisting the equalisation of community competitions;
- ➔ Promoting player loyalty and junior development;
- ➔ Improving the sustainability of community clubs by minimising player movement;
- ➔ Supporting the role volunteers undertake in managing their clubs by:
 - I. Reducing the need to recruit new players;
 - II. Providing a more competitive environment on-field that encourages more volunteers to support at club level;
 - III. Providing resources and education.

Player Points Systems

- ➔ A Player Points System is also designed to differentiate between certain levels of community football. It is acknowledged that community football is made up of players at different levels and an effort has been made to categorise these community footballers based upon their playing history and achievements;
- ➔ The overall aim of a Player Points System is to assist clubs in managing their recruitment strategies and to provide them with a tool that encourages player retention and minimises the freedom of movement currently enjoyed by players, which is often at the expense of even competitions and sustainable clubs;
- ➔ A Player Points System is designed to provide a consistent approach across competitions and at the same time recognise and accommodate the varying standards between Leagues.

It is important that Leagues receive appropriate guidance from their AFL state body regarding the development of a Player Points System given the experience in developing such policies and the nuances with respect to female football.

APPOINTMENT OF UMPIRES FOR FEMALE COMPETITIONS

Guideline

Leagues should incorporate the following processes to assign or **appoint the most suitable umpires** across all competitions (male or female):

- ➔ Leagues are to determine the ranking of all competitions and assign League-appointed umpires (irrespective of gender – both competition and umpire) in order of competition priority;
- ➔ Umpires (male and female) are to be assigned to competitions based on their experience/skill level and the League ranking of the competition;
- ➔ Female umpires are not to be limited to female football (and vice versa); rather, female umpires can umpire both male and female football;
- ➔ If there are insufficient numbers of League-appointed umpires to cater to all levels of competition, club-appointed umpires for lower-priority competitions are satisfactory (irrespective of whether the competition is male or female and should be based according to the League ranking of that competition).

Rationale/Comments

Some community competitions appoint umpires of an inappropriate standard, compared to the level and priority of that competition within the League; this is more often the case for female football, especially where there is a **misunderstanding that female umpires must umpire female football**.

Inappropriate allocation of umpires can jeopardise the integrity/standard of the competition, as well as impact player and umpire retention due to negative experiences. Player and competition development can also be hindered by poor decision-making due to the inexperience of developing umpires, and player welfare can be put at risk.

UMPIRING FEMALE COMPETITIONS

Guideline

While an umpire may consider the intent of a player in their decision-making, if a breach of the Laws of Australian Football has occurred, appropriate action such as a free kick must be applied, particularly with respect to 'protecting the ball player'. For example, while a player may accidentally or incidentally cause prohibited contact to an opponent, even though that player's intent was not to do so, a free kick must be awarded.

Rationale/Comments

To ensure the **health and safety of female players** new to the game who may be relatively inexperienced, particularly with respect to tackling.



COACHING FEMALE FOOTBALL

Guideline

The **recommended minimum standards** for coaches of Junior/Youth Girls teams is Foundation Coach Accredited (formerly Level 1 AFL Coach Accreditation).

The **recommended minimum standards** for coaches of more experienced Youth Girls and Senior Women's competitions is Level 2 Coach Accredited.

Coaches should access the resources and videos on the *coach.afl* platform to assist in the design of warm-up and training sessions to ensure coaching of the correct techniques.

Rationale/Comments

- ➔ The coach of a team plays a critical role in relation to a **player's development and experience**.
- ➔ These coaching standards are the equivalent to coaches of Junior and Senior male teams.
- ➔ Enhanced coaching standards across female football, from Junior through to Senior, will help to elevate the standard of female competitions across each state and territory.
- ➔ All coaches are required to become accredited members of CoachAFL via the *coach.afl* platform.



FEMALE-FRIENDLY FACILITIES

Guideline

The AFL, AFL state bodies and Leagues will assist clubs where possible to achieve the best-possible facilities to **enhance the experience for all participants**. Female players and umpires should have equal access to facilities and equipment. Examples of this, as provided by the AFL's **Female Football Club Guide** and the AFL's Facilities Guidelines, include:

- ➔ Equal access for females to the facilities and equipment, including that female teams are not always allocated late-evening timeslots for training where possible;
- ➔ Gym equipment is suitable for use by females such as availability of appropriate weights;
- ➔ Change rooms have lockable doors on cubicles (or curtains on showers);
- ➔ Club facilities are clean and hygienically presented;
- ➔ Unisex amenities including sanitary disposal bins placed in every toilet;
- ➔ Adequate lighting in the car park;

It is encouraged that clubs utilise both home and away change rooms during training, so males and females have access to separate change rooms, and provide female participants at least a 10-minute "lock-out" period before males are allowed in the room.

Clubs should invite women and girls to provide input into how to improve their facilities.

Rationale/Comments

Historically, facilities have been designed primarily to meet the needs of male participants. Today, some facilities are outdated and do not provide suitable amenities that attract and sustain women and girls. To **encourage more women and girls to become active and involved**, user-friendly facilities are required to practically integrate females into training and match-day environments.

It is critical to ensure that all females participating (whether they be volunteers, players or umpires) have access to welcoming facilities in their community.

As per the AFL's **Female Football Club Guide**, improving access for girls and women involves taking a closer look at the physical environment of the club facilities, equipment and rules. While there are ideal facilities for clubs to aspire to, it's important to realise that girls and women will still come to the club if they are clean and hygienic and not necessarily 'ideal'.

Facility grants are available from the AFL, AFL state bodies and government, to help fund necessary upgrades to ensure facilities are female-friendly. The AFL supports Leagues and clubs applying for facilities funding in line with the AFL's Facilities Guidelines.



Guideline

Leagues are to work with clubs/venues to provide **female-friendly umpiring facilities** and to ensure, as best as they can, that the following standards are in place:

- ➔ A sanitary disposal bin should be placed in every toilet;
- ➔ Facilities should be clean and hygienically presented;
- ➔ Where possible, closed cubicles should be provided (lockable doors on toilets, showers with curtains);
- ➔ In the event that closed cubicles are not available, procedures need to be in place that provide adequate privacy for female umpires;
- ➔ Officials' change areas close to the playing fields.

Rationale/Comments

Umpiring-specific facilities are largely inadequate for female umpires.

Where provided, **umpire change rooms should be designed to be female-friendly**, while also accommodating the fact that matches often have a mix of females and males umpiring at the same time.



PREGNANT PLAYERS

Guideline

The AFL respects the rights of women who are **pregnant**, breastfeeding or the carer of a child to participate in community football and is committed to providing support to assist them to do so. The AFL prohibits any actions that may amount to discrimination against a player because of the player's pregnancy, breastfeeding or status as the carer of a child.

- The AFL respects and supports the rights of pregnant players who, in consultation with medical professionals, elect to continue to participate in community football, provided that at all times the health and wellbeing of the player and their unborn child is paramount;
- All players should agree to, as soon as possible after becoming aware that they are pregnant, and on an ongoing basis throughout their pregnancy, obtain and disclose to their club coach regular medical advice which sets out the player's doctor's opinion regarding:
 - I. the risks associated with participating in the community football competition and associated training and events while pregnant;
 - II. taking into account their individual circumstances, whether it is safe for the player to continue participating in the community football competition and associated training and events;
 - III. any other information that the doctor considers relevant.
- The club may seek additional information about a player's pregnancy as reasonably required;
- All information provided by a player about her pregnancy must be kept strictly confidential unless the express consent of the player is provided. Announcements regarding the player's pregnancy should only be made in consultation with the player.

It is recommended that:

- After a player becomes aware that they are pregnant, the player should receive medical clearance and sign an Insurance Declaration Form prior to participation;
- Clubs ensure that all pregnant players are advised that the Australian Football National Risk Insurance Program may not cover them while pregnant.

Rationale/Comments

While many sporting activities are safe for pregnant women, there may be **risks that apply to some women during pregnancy**. Those risks will depend on the nature of the sporting activity and the pregnant woman's circumstances. The AFL respects and supports the rights of pregnant players who, in consultation with medical professionals, elect to continue to participate in Australian Football competitions, provided that at all times the health and wellbeing of the player and their unborn child is paramount.

The purpose of these guidelines is to:

- Set guidelines for players' continued participation in community football competition during pregnancy;
- Provide, so far as possible, a safe and inclusive environment for all participants.



IMPROVING PERFORMANCE AND REDUCING INJURIES

Guideline

- ➔ Players of all ages should perform dynamic warm-up activities (i.e. progression of movement skills) such as jumping, landing, deceleration and changing direction. For younger age groups, coaches should incorporate these activities into games with a focus on fun and enjoyment.
- ➔ The following fundamental **football skills** should be a focus of female player education and training:
 - Tackling (tackling and being tackled);
 - Ground balls;
 - Aerial contests.
- ➔ Leagues, clubs and coaches should access the resources and videos on the *coach.afl* platform to assist in the design of warm-up and training sessions to ensure coaching of the correct techniques.



Rationale/Comments

- ➔ As many girls and women are relatively new to football, they may have had limited training **on the safe execution** of tackling, ground balls and aerial contests (situations in which head, neck and upper limb injuries are more likely to occur). Most concussions in AFLW occur from tackling, being tackled, or collisions during contested ground or aerial balls.
- ➔ Injury reduction programs can **reduce the risk** of serious knee, head and neck and upper limb (shoulder, wrist and finger) injuries. Similar activities in other sports have resulted in a reduction of lower limb injuries by approximately 50%.
- ➔ Most serious knee injuries in females **occur in non-contact situations** such as during deceleration, change of direction or landing on one leg from an aerial contest.
- ➔ Injury-reduction programs can **improve physical function, durability and athleticism** – which may enhance player and team performance.
- ➔ These activities may **reduce drop-out** due to injury and improving physical competency for **increased player enjoyment and retention**.



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