

# AFCA MAGAZINE

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2019

VOL. 9, NO. 1

# SHAPING LEADERSHIP

William & Mary Head Coach Mike London





# The Evolution of Shoulder Tackling

Photo: RoadTripSports.com/Chuck Cox

Tackling, unlike many aspects of football, hasn't seen significant change over the years. But the advent of shoulder tackling provides new perspective on one of the foundational elements of the game.

By Adam Reed

This year, for the first time ever, Texas high school and junior high coaches were required to become certified in teaching tackling as part of their official University Interscholastic League (UIL) Certification Program.

The Texas High School Coaches Association (THSCA) worked hand-in-hand with the UIL to pass this new legislation which holds coaches accountable for how they are teaching tackling, primarily because of rising concerns about player safety and the potential impact of concussions on the future of the game and the future of its participants.

"You're coaching those kids up, and you're coaching them to be tough, and they just didn't have the awareness of the hazards of concussions, and because of that, coaches didn't respond," THSCA Executive Director D.W. Rutledge says about the decision to make tackling certification mandatory statewide. "Once we started having more professional development lectures and talking more about hydration and more about concussions and trying to find a protocol for sending them back into the game and started developing some of those things, there was so much more awareness in the coaching profession, and I think that awareness has helped the game."

The need for reducing the risk of concussions in order to keep players safe played a huge part in Rutledge's support of this legislation, and in the midst of all the focus on player safety, shoulder tackling has emerged, both in Texas and across the country, as an excellent option for minimizing helmet contact.

While the THSCA has mandated certification training for its coaches through a particular training platform called Atavus, Rutledge acknowledges that many organizations have taken up the mantle of educating coaches on shoulder tackling. Relatively new on the scene is USA Football's

Shoulder Tackling Tackling System. Plus there are a variety of equipment suppliers serving football coaches with equipment specific to teaching shoulder tackling.

"There are several groups out there that do tackle training and have been working on trying to take the head out of the game," he says.

The emphasis on studying tackling for safety reasons has shone a light on how few coaches take a comprehensive approach to teaching tackling. While the move to shoulder tackling as a response to player safety concerns seems to be an appropriate step toward a safer game, the evolution of tackling that has resulted provides reason for excitement.

"Frankly, that's something that we've never done, going through it and really evaluating exactly how you're tackling," Rutledge says. "It used to be, 'put your eyeballs on the numbers' or 'square your hips,' just catchphrases like that, but now we're teaching how to track a ball carrier. How do you track him? How do you get body position on him? What's the head placement on different positions? You still see some really aggressive tackling going on. It's not like it's backed away from that."

"Coaches have done themselves a disservice by not taking the time and really evaluating and discussing and working through how are we teaching tackling. What are the progressive steps? What's the system that we want to put in place to teach tackling? It just hasn't been done in a lot of places."

Rutledge raises several questions that many coaches may have never even considered. Whether coaches believe in shoulder tackling or not, every coach can benefit from a deeper analysis of the concepts surrounding the shoulder-tackling style, and hopefully become not only a safer team, but a better tackling team as well.



# TACKLING MATTERS.

ATAVUS CAN HELP YOU IMPROVE  
PERFORMANCE AND **INCREASE SAFETY**

**VISIT US AT BOOTH #4111**

at the AFCA Annual Convention in San Antonio

ATAVUS.COM / 1-877-4ATAVUS

## USA FOOTBALL SHOULDER TACKLING SYSTEM SHOWS COACHES HOW TO LEARN THE SHOULDER TACKLE

USA Football Shoulder Tackling System Shows Coaches How To Learn The Shoulder Tackle

National governing body USA Football is demonstrating an approach to shoulder tackling that helps coaches learn why it's important and teaches student-athletes how to safely perform a shoulder tackle. Their steps include:

- 1. Teach** – Learn the “why” behind specific techniques, including body placement, strategy and physiology. This “why” should be illustrated to your players as you're teaching them the techniques.
- 2. Install** – Learn how to implement the system with instructional drills. These drills progressively build upon one another and develop the fundamentals critical to the Shoulder Tackling System.
- 3. Troubleshoot** – Installation goes beyond just coaching your players to use the proper techniques. Included within the system are key coaching points and resources to help you troubleshoot common problem areas.
- 4. Assessment** – Check your understanding of the fundamentals, techniques and theories behind the system through knowledge checks.

### Time For Change

Rex Norris, head of football at Atavus, is an active coach with over 25 years of experience, and nearly two decades of experience as a defensive coordinator. Coaching runs in the family for Norris. His father, Rex Norris Sr., had an impressive coaching career including stops at Texas A&M, Oklahoma, Arizona State, Florida, Tennessee and Texas at the college level, as well as four stints as a defensive line coach in the NFL for the Lions, Broncos, Oilers and Bears.

Norris sees the evolution in tackling as a natural response to ever-changing offensive schemes. Unfortunately, while coaches have become more and more creative with the advent of more complex route trees, RPOs, different personnel groupings and exploiting one-on-one matchups, tackling has not kept pace.

“The way in which the game is played and the way in which offenses attack the defense has produced a greater understanding of space and time,” Norris says. “They have created more space for the offense and less time for the defense. The types of tackles players are engaging in, the type of contact they are experiencing and the angles they are taking have all changed.”

For Norris, it's peculiar to see coaches failing to take a more comprehensive approach that is one of two foundational components of the game. The phrase, “It comes down to blocking and tackling,” continues to be parroted by coaches, and yet, only half of that duo seems to be given the appropriate attention.

“Football coaches have done a great job of analyzing blocking,” Norris says. “But when it comes to teaching tackling, it's almost just a check in the box.”

Perhaps coaches view tackling in a violent, helmet-first manner as inseparably tied to the identity of the game. Perhaps they have simply taken it for granted for far too long.

Whatever the excuse, Norris has some pretty strong feelings about the need for a change in the way tackling is taught, practiced and executed sport-wide. “You either love winning so much you are willing to change, or you hate change so much you are willing to lose,” he says.

Some may assume that because of his position, Norris is a huge believer in technique above everything else. To the contrary, Norris believes in understanding and teaching concepts before technique even comes into the equation. Technique alone isn't the answer to poor tackling.

“You've seen some crazy tackles out there, but no one taught them that technique,” Norris explains. “The reason their technique looks like that is because they are uncomfortable.”

In order for coaches to effectively implement any technique, including shoulder tackling, they must instill the requisite concepts surrounding why the technique is effective and how the technique should be executed. This proves impossible until coaches understand the concepts surrounding tackling from snap to whistle and not simply where contact is made.

It should be no surprise then that the onus falls on coaches to familiarize themselves with how players are making contact within their defensive scheme, why they are failing to be effective, and how they can put them into a position in practice that will teach them to be more effective in the game.

“Coaches make a mistake when they look at technique as the only answer, but then only look at the part of the technique that involves making contact,” Norris says. “You have to look at pre-contact technique just as much as contact technique. We have players who track very well but aren't confident in hitting, and we have other players who love to hit but aren't comfortable in space.”

Norris teaches tackling in a three-phase process that accounts for everything the defensive player will encounter

from the moment the ball is snapped until the ball carrier is successfully tackled. The first phase involves the evaluation process, where the defensive player must determine if they will have an opportunity to be a tackler.

Teachable components during this phase include proper pursuit angles and how to disengage from, shed or avoid blockers. At its heart, this phase of the tackle involves getting players into the right place at the right time, putting them in a position to make an effective tackle.

In the next phase, players must make sound, split-second decisions. While maintaining proper leverage, defenders must know their aiming point for where to hit the ball carrier, as well as the portion of their body they are going to make contact.

Only when players are comfortable with all these concepts will the act of actually executing contact come into the equation. Far too often, coaches skip the first two phases of what players experience every down, but then expect players to be excellent at executing this final phase.

As part of executing contact, Norris says proper timing in coordination with footwork is the most under-coached aspect of effective tackling. Players need to maintain momentum and power throughout the tackle by ensuring they take what Norris calls a “proper power step into contact.”

A good example of this concept would be the boxer who throws their whole weight into a punch. The difference

between a glancing blow and a vicious knockout often comes down to the fighter’s footwork.

To drill these concepts, Norris recommends coaches change their mindset about tackling expectations. Viewing tackling success by simply analyzing a player’s or a defense’s made tackles vs. missed tackles should be avoided.

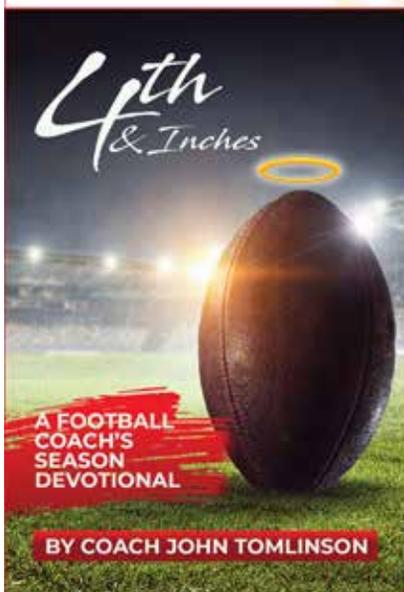
“Everyone wants 90 to 100 percent accuracy in their tackling,” Norris says. “But when we put players in a decision-making drill, that’s not what we are asking for. We’re actually trying to challenge their decision-making while they execute. So, we’re not looking for 90 to 100 percent accuracy. We want a competitive drill that puts them under pressure.”

If coaches focus on achieving improvement by placing players in uncomfortable scenarios, they can continue to elevate the bar for tackling efficiency indefinitely. 100 percent consistency won’t ever be achievable, but drilling tackling in this manner provides far superior results versus training to a minimum standard in practice, only to find out on a game day that the tackling still needs work.

Coaches often speak about getting better every day. Shoulder tackling may not be the silver-bullet solution to every team’s tackling woes, but at the very least, it provides an excellent framework for an evaluation that may be long overdue.

**Editor’s Note:** *The American Football Coaches Association does not endorse one type of tackling over any other type of tackling system* .

**4th & Inches: A Football Coach’s Season Devotional**  
by Coach John Tomlinson, was written to assist coaches on all levels to find balance, peace and fulfill their purpose on and off the field.



In **4th & Inches**, coaches will find motivation, inspiration and the faith they need to give their all to their organizations, their teams and their spirit. **4th & Inches** will pour a spiritual energy back into that will fuel your coaching success!

ORDER YOUR COPY OF 4TH & INCHES TODAY!  
[www.coachjohntomlinson.com](http://www.coachjohntomlinson.com)

**POWERBLOCK**<sup>®</sup>  
COMMERCIAL DUMBBELLS

Replace up to 22 pairs of  
dumbbells in the space of 1

Sizes available:  
4-32, 10-50, 5-90  
12.5-125 or 12.5-175 lbs  
per hand



877-316-9856 Brochure [powerblock.com](http://powerblock.com)