



UNDER 12S · THE BREAKDOWN OPENS UP

FULL RUCKS AND MAULS

A guide for U12 parents — what changes at the breakdown this season, what the referee is looking for, and how to help your child.

CREATED 15 SEPTEMBER 2026

Under 12s is the season the **normal ruck and maul laws** arrive. At U10 only two players from each team could be in a ruck or a maul, and at U11 three. At U12 there is **no limit on numbers**, a player who rips the ball can **run with it**, and a ruck is simply at least one player from each team, on their feet, over the ball. More players means more to watch — this guide explains what is going on, so you can enjoy it, help your child, and follow what the referee is calling.

WHERE THE RULES IN THIS GUIDE COME FROM

Every rule here comes from **RFU Regulation 15, Appendix 6 — the Under 12s Rules of Play**, and the World Rugby Laws of the Game they build on. The RFU page reads “Effective from 1st August 2025”. Regulation 15 for 2026/27 took effect on 1 August 2026 and still names the Rules of Play as its appendices, which have not been reissued, so they were the current rules on the day this guide was created. Where RugbyReferee.net's **2026-27 U12 sheet** adds detail, we say so. If anything here ever disagrees with the RFU page, **the RFU page is right**. Where we give coaching advice rather than a rule, we say so. Links are at the back.

WHAT IS NEW AT U12

1 NO LIMIT ON NUMBERS

Any number of players from each team may join a ruck or a maul. The RFU lists it as a key element of U12 rugby: “*No limit on numbers contesting for the ball including in the maul and ruck.*”

2 RIP AND RUN

After a tackle, supporting players may **pick up or rip the ball and run or pass**. At U10 and U11 a ripped ball had to be passed straight away.

3 THE NEXT PLAYER CAN RUN

Once a ruck has formed, the **next arriving player can pass or run** with the ball. At U10 and U11 they had to pass.

4 THE HAND-OFF

For the first time, a ball carrier may **hand off** a tackler — but only **below the armpits**. See page 2.

WHAT STAYS THE SAME

The tackle must still be **below the base of the sternum** — the tummy or below. When the referee calls “**Use it**” there are still **five seconds** to play the ball, and then a **scrum** to the other team, as at U11. **Squeezeball** is still banned, and so is kicking a loose ball along the ground (fly-hacking).



KNOW WHAT YOU ARE WATCHING

RUCK OR MAUL?

Both are a contest for the ball once open play has ended. The difference is **where the ball is**: on the ground in a ruck, in someone's hands in a maul.

THE RUCK — RFU U12 RULES OF PLAY

"A 'ruck' is a phase of play where one or more players from each team, who are on their feet, in physical contact, close around the ball on the ground."

In short: **at least one from each team, on their feet, over the ball**. Players ruck by using their feet to win or keep the ball, without foul play.

THE MAUL — RFU U12 RULES OF PLAY

"A 'maul' begins when a player carrying the ball is held by one or more opponents and one of the ball carrier's team mates bind on the ball carrier."

So at least **three players** — the ball carrier and one from each team — all **on their feet**, bound on, and moving towards a goal line.

RUCK, MAUL — OR NEITHER?

RUCK

Ball on the ground. At least one player from each team, on their feet and in contact, close around it. Hands off — it is won with the feet.

MAUL

Ball in hand. The ball carrier is held on their feet by an opponent, and a team mate binds on.

NEITHER

Held on their feet, no team mate bound on. They may keep driving forward. Once they stop, the ball must be played away, and the opponent may try to grab it.

HOW MANY CAN JOIN?

U10

2 a side

Ball carrier or tackler, plus one

U11

3 a side

Ball carrier or tackler, plus two

U12 — THIS SEASON

No limit

Normal ruck and maul laws

ALSO NEW AT U12: THE HAND-OFF

WHAT IS ALLOWED

- ✓ The ball carrier may run and dodge tacklers, and may now **fend them off with their hand** — the RFU's words are *"using their hand below the armpits of the opponent"*

WHAT IS NOT

- ✗ A hand-off or fend **above the armpits** — the U12 rules list it as an infringement
- ✗ At U10 and U11 there is **no hand-off at all**

WHAT THE REFEREE GIVES

The U12 rules list a hand-off above the armpits among the things that are **not permitted**. Their free-kick list does not name it separately; it names **foul play**, offside, squeezeball, falling on players on the ground, pushing in the scrum and a high tackle. Your child's referee or coach can tell you how they apply it.

Tacklers are protected the other way too: a tackle must still be below the base of the sternum.



THE RULES

THE BREAKDOWN AT U12

THE TACKLE	Held by one or more opponents and brought to ground , with the arms, below the base of the sternum. The referee calls " Tackle — release ".
THE TACKLER	Lets go immediately and gets to their feet before they may contest the ball or block the pass.
TACKLED PLAYER	On "Tackle — release", passes immediately, rolls away, or places the ball towards their own team.
SUPPORT	The team with the ball supports only from behind , and must not stand either side of the ball carrier to block tacklers.
THE CONTEST	Supporting players may pick up or rip the ball and run or pass ; pick it up and run if no ruck has formed; or join to form a ruck — from their own side , driving over the ball.
NEXT PLAYER	Once a ruck has formed, the next arriving player can pass or run .
HANDS OFF	World Rugby, Law 15: " <i>Once a ruck has formed, no player may handle the ball unless they were able to get their hands on the ball before the ruck formed and stay on their feet.</i> "
"USE IT" — RUCK	Once the ball is clearly won, five seconds to play it. Otherwise a scrum , with the throw-in to the team that did not have the ball.
"USE IT" — MAUL	The ball must be made available within five seconds . If it is not passed away, a scrum to the team that did not have the ball when the maul began.
THE 9	Can pass, or pick up and go — but not box kick (RugbyReferee.net 2026-27 U12 sheet; box kicks are not permitted at U12).

OFFSIDE AT THE BREAKDOWN

AT THE TACKLE	Two offside lines, at the hindmost part of the tackled player and the tackler . Every other defender must get back behind them.
AT THE RUCK	The hindmost point of any player in the ruck.
AT THE MAUL	The hindmost point of any player in the maul.

IN THE LAWS: JOINING SAFELY

Ruck (Law 15): join on your feet from behind your offside line, alongside — not in front of — the hindmost player, and bind as you make contact, never after. Head and shoulders no lower than hips. Never jump on top of a ruck or collapse it. **Maul (Law 16):** join from onside, bind on the hindmost player, head and shoulders no lower than hips; never collapse a maul or drag an opponent out of it.



WORLD RUGBY · BREAKDOWN READY

BREAKDOWN LAWS: DOS AND DON'TS

THE ONE PAGE TO READ THIS SEASON

With no limit on numbers, every player at a U12 breakdown needs to know their job. World Rugby's **Breakdown Laws — Dos and Don'ts** sets it out player by player. It is written for referees, coaches and players, and it is short. Here it is in brief, with a note wherever the U12 rules add something.

passport.world.rugby/injury-prevention-and-risk-management/breakdown-ready/breakdown-laws-dos-and-donts

LAW 14 · TACKLE

THE TACKLER

DO

- ✓ Release the ball and the ball carrier **immediately** once both are on the ground
- ✓ Move away from the tackled player and the ball, or get up
- ✓ Be **on your feet** before trying to play the ball
- ✓ Let the tackled player release the ball and move away
- ✓ Get back onside immediately

DON'T

- ✗ Play the ball while still on the ground
- ✗ Stay in the way — roll away and do not impede play

At U12: arms must be used, and the tackle must be below the base of the sternum.

LAW 14 · TACKLE

THE TACKLED PLAYER

DO

- ✓ Place or play the ball **immediately**
- ✓ Show a quick, clear presentation of the ball as you land
- ✓ Roll with your momentum if you have to

DON'T

- ✗ Take a second movement to buy time — rolling, crawling or bouncing
- ✗ Stop, then re-roll, or crawl on your elbows once your momentum has stopped

At U12: on "Tackle — release", pass, roll away, or place the ball towards your team. Squeezeball gives away a free kick.

LAW 15 · RUCK

THE FIRST ARRIVING PLAYER — THE JACKLER

DO

- ✓ Be on your feet, joining from **behind the offside line**
- ✓ If you were also the tackler, show a **clear release** first
- ✓ Support your own body weight the whole time
- ✓ Target the ball and lift it legally

DON'T

- ✗ Go to ground and then reset
- ✗ Handle the ball once a ruck has formed

At U12: a player who rips the ball may now **run or pass**.

LAW 15 · RUCK

OTHER ARRIVING PLAYERS

DO

- ✓ Enter **alongside, not in front of**, the hindmost player
- ✓ Be on your feet, joining from behind your offside line
- ✓ **"Drive not dive"** — bind onto opponents and drive
- ✓ Move a jackler legally, by levering them out

DON'T

- ✗ Enter from the side — through the "gate" only
- ✗ Dive in, or tackle arriving opponents
- ✗ Target or drop your weight onto a jackler's legs

At U12: no limit on how many players join the ruck.

Why World Rugby wrote it: referees were given these guidelines in March 2020. There was no new law — only a re-focus on existing law, so that players show the referee their actions at the breakdown are **accurate and legal**.



FOR VOLUNTEER REFEREES — AND CURIOUS PARENTS

REFEREEING THE BREAKDOWN

With more players arriving, a U12 breakdown moves quickly. This routine takes it in the order things happen. The routine is practical advice; the rules it enforces are the RFU's.

- 1 WAS THE TACKLE LEGAL?** Arms used, contact below the base of the sternum. Any hand-off kept below the armpits.
- 2 RELEASE.** Call “**Tackle — release**”. The tackler lets go and gets up; the ball carrier passes, rolls away or places the ball.
- 3 RUCK, MAUL OR NEITHER?** Say it out loud, so everyone knows whether hands are allowed.
- 4 GATE AND FEET.** From their own side, alongside the hindmost player, bound, on their feet, heads above hips.
- 5 OFFSIDE.** The hindmost point of any player in the ruck or maul; at the tackle, behind the tackled player and tackler.
- 6 “USE IT”.** Five seconds — then a scrum to the team that did not have the ball.

STILL A FREE KICK AT U12

RFU U12 Rules of Play

- Foul play
- Offside
- Squeezeball
- Falling on or over a player lying on the ground with the ball — or on players with the ball between or near them
- Pushing in the scrum
- A tackle above the base of the sternum

A free kick is a tap or a kick from hand; opponents go 7 metres back.

NOW A SCRUM

- Ball not used within five seconds of “Use it”, at a ruck or a maul
- Ball that does not come out of a ruck or maul
- Ball that becomes unplayable
- A fall on a player that the referee is **absolutely certain** was accidental — play stops and the team that had the ball gets the scrum

The RFU's rule: “A player is assumed to have fallen voluntarily unless the referee is absolutely certain the fall was accidental.”

SQUEEZEBALL — STILL BANNED

Squeezeball is when the ball carrier goes to ground **head first** (touching or close to the ground), usually parallel to the touchline, holds the ball to their chest and, on the ground, **pushes it back between their legs**. At U12 it gives away a **free kick**, and nobody teaching or coaching rugby may teach or encourage it. World Rugby's Rugby Ready calls it “a potentially dangerous technique”, not permitted below U19.

WANT TO REFEREE PROPERLY?

England Rugby's entry course is **Ready 2 Referee**, and Devon RFU supports new referees locally. Both links are on the last page.



YOUR PART IN IT

HELPING YOUR CHILD

AT HOME

Coaching advice — keep contact for training.

- **Practise the strong position.** Feet wide, knees bent, back flat, chest up, eyes up. Rugby Ready asks for head and shoulders above the hips at all times.
- **Practise the bind standing still.** A whole arm wrapped around, hand to shoulder — the bind comes first, then the push.
- **Talk decisions, not collisions.** With no limit on numbers, the best players often choose *not* to join a ruck. Ask your child what their job was.
- **Leave contact to the coaches.** Rucking, mauling and clearing out belong at training.

ON THE TOUCHLINE

- **Praise the right things** — staying on their feet, joining through the gate, a quick decision to run or pass.
- **Don't shout "get in there!"** A player piling in off their feet or from the side gives the ball away.
- **Respect the referee.** It is very often a volunteer, refereeing to help children learn.
- **Cheer effort** from both teams. Our values are the game's values: Teamwork, Respect, Enjoyment, Discipline and Sportsmanship.

CONCUSSION

The UK Concussion Guidelines for Grassroots Sport sum it up in five words: **"If in doubt, sit them out."** Nobody should return to sport within 24 hours of a suspected concussion, and the guidelines advise calling **NHS 111** within those 24 hours.

England Rugby's free **HEADCASE** e-learning has a version written for parents of age grade players. It explains how to recognise concussion and what to do.

READ MORE: PARENTS, WELFARE AND CONCUSSION

AGE GRADE RUGBY

[RFU — Age Grade Rugby overview](#)

englandrugby.com/play/parents-guardians/age-grade-rugby-overview

CONCUSSION

[RFU — HEADCASE concussion information](#)

englandrugby.com/run/player-welfare/headcase

UK GUIDANCE

[UK Concussion Guidelines for Grassroots Sport](#)

sportandrecreation.org.uk/campaigns-and-policy/concussion/concussion-guidelines-for-grassroots-sport

BEHAVIOUR

[RFU — Code of conduct](#)

englandrugby.com/play/parents-guardians/code-conduct

FREE COURSE

[RFU — HEADCASE e-learning](#)

englandrugby.com/run/player-welfare/headcase-e-learning

Questions? Speak to your child's coach or your Parent Rep. For the scrum at U12, see our companion guide, **The five-player scrum**.



SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

FIND OUT MORE

The rules come from the RFU; the laws, definitions and safety programmes from World Rugby. Every link was checked on the day this guide was created — tap a title to open it. Links on welfare and concussion are on page 6.

THE RULES

U12 RULES

[RFU — Under 12s Rules of Play \(Reg. 15, Appendix 6\)](#)

[englandrugby.com/run/rules-governance/rfu-rules-and-regulations/regulation-15-age-grade-rugby/regulation-15-appendix-6-u12-rules-of-play](#)

NEXT SEASON

[RFU — Under 13s Rules of Play \(Reg. 15, Appendix 7\)](#)

[englandrugby.com/run/rules-governance/rfu-rules-and-regulations/regulation-15-age-grade-rugby/regulation-15-appendix-7-u13-rules-of-play](#)

ALL AGE GRADES

[RFU — Regulation 15: Age Grade Rugby](#)

[englandrugby.com/run/rules-governance/rfu-rules-and-regulations/regulation-15-age-grade-rugby](#)

ON ONE PAGE

[RugbyReferee.net — U12 regulations, season 2026/27 \(PDF\)](#)

[rugbyreferee.net/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/2026-27-u12s-RRNet-RFU-Regulations.pdf](#)

THE LAWS AT THE BREAKDOWN

DOS & DON'TS

[World Rugby — Breakdown laws: dos and don'ts](#)

[passport.world.rugby/injury-prevention-and-risk-management/breakdown-ready/breakdown-laws-dos-and-donts](#)

DEFINITIONS

[World Rugby — Definitions \(ruck, maul, bind...\)](#)

[passport.world.rugby/laws-of-the-game/definitions](#)

THE RUCK

[World Rugby — Law 15: Ruck](#)

[passport.world.rugby/laws-of-the-game/laws-by-number/15-ruck](#)

EVERY LAW

[World Rugby — Laws of the Game 2026 \(PDF\)](#)

[passport.world.rugby/media/jxrnmpk/2026en-laws-of-the-game-compressed.pdf](#)

THE TACKLE

[World Rugby — Law 14: Tackle](#)

[passport.world.rugby/laws-of-the-game/laws-by-number/14-tackle](#)

THE MAUL

[World Rugby — Law 16: Maul](#)

[passport.world.rugby/laws-of-the-game/laws-by-number/16-maul](#)

SAFE TECHNIQUE

THE BREAKDOWN

[World Rugby — Breakdown Ready](#)

[passport.world.rugby/injury-prevention-and-risk-management/breakdown-ready](#)

RUCKING

[World Rugby — Rugby Ready: The ruck](#)

[passport.world.rugby/injury-prevention-and-risk-management/rugby-ready/the-ruck](#)

INJURY PREVENTION

[RFU — Activate injury prevention programme](#)

[englandrugby.com/run/player-welfare/activate](#)

EXPLAINED

[World Rugby — Breakdown explained](#)

[passport.world.rugby/injury-prevention-and-risk-management/breakdown-ready/breakdown-explained](#)

MAULING

[World Rugby — Rugby Ready: The maul](#)

[passport.world.rugby/injury-prevention-and-risk-management/rugby-ready/the-maul](#)

CONTACT & LOAD

[RFU — Age Grade contact training, match load and recovery](#)

[englandrugby.com/run/coaching/coach-resources/contact-guidance](#)

REFEREEING

JUNIOR RUGBY

[RugbyReferee.net — Refereeing junior rugby](#)

[rugbyreferee.net/refereeing-junior-rugby](#)

LOCALLY

[Devon RFU — Become a rugby referee](#)

[devonrfu.co.uk/become-a-rugby-referee](#)

REFEREE COURSE

[RFU — How to book a Ready 2 Referee course](#)

[help.rfu.com/support/solutions/articles/103000161012](#)