

Trial information

Ban on 'deliberate heading' in competitions and matches at U-12 level and below

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The International Football Association Board

Münstergasse 9, 8001 Zürich, Switzerland

T: +41 (0)44 245 1886

theifab.com

Trial of a ban on ‘deliberate heading’ in competitions and matches involving players at U-12 level and below

Background

There are concerns about the potential negative impact on players’ short- and long-term health/welfare with regard to potential head injuries resulting from:

- deliberately heading the ball
- being accidentally hit on the head with the ball (especially unexpectedly or from short range)
- attempts to head the ball (especially ‘aerial challenges’) that lead to the head making contact with:
 - another player’s body (elbow, head, etc.)
 - the ground
 - a goalpost

These concerns are exacerbated when children are involved, as their bodies, brains and motor skills are still developing and they may not have the physiological strength or the expertise to reduce potential risks. Consequently, some football authorities have already introduced restrictions on heading in practice/training for younger players and it is therefore logical to extend such restrictions to matches.

Although a ban on deliberate heading may remove some risks, it might also increase others, e.g. players trying to kick ‘high’ balls, which could result in the kicker being injured (e.g. by falling awkwardly) or injuring another player by kicking them in the head or upper body.

Therefore, decisions about heading bans must take into account the relative risks of heading at different ages, whether a ban inadvertently results in other risks and the major impact that banning heading at all levels would have on the way football is played.

Considering the importance of this matter, The IFAB has approved a trial to investigate the effects of 'deliberate heading' becoming an offence punishable by an indirect free kick.* The trial will be conducted in competitions and matches at U-12 level and below, where there are restrictions on heading in practice/training.

**It was felt that, in the initial stages, a direct free kick (and especially a penalty for a header by a defending player in their own penalty area) would be too harsh for such young players.*

Protocol

- Deliberately heading the ball is an offence punishable by an indirect free kick
- The indirect free kick is taken from the point where the ball was deliberately headed except:
 - where a player of the defending team deliberately heads the ball in their own penalty area – the indirect free kick is taken ~~from the penalty mark~~ on the side line of the penalty area closest to where the offence occurred
- Deliberately heading the ball is not a cautionable (yellow card) or sending-off (red card) offence unless it:
 - stops or interferes with a promising attack (yellow card)
 - denies the opposing team a goal or an obvious goal-scoring opportunity (red card)
 - occurs often enough to be considered 'persistent misconduct' (yellow card)

Explanation and guidance

Deliberate header/heading:

- A deliberate header will usually involve:
 - a player moving their head and/or body:
 - towards the ball and/or
 - into the path of the ball
- When judging whether a header is 'deliberate', account should be taken of whether the player had the time/opportunity to avoid the ball – this will be influenced by:
 - the speed of the ball
 - the distance between the ball and the player when it is played by another player or rebounds from the goalpost or crossbar, etc.

Location of indirect free kicks in the penalty area:

- An indirect free kick awarded ~~for~~ when a defending player deliberately heads heading the ball inside their own penalty area is taken from the side of the penalty area and not the penalty mark because:
 - early application of the protocol demonstrated that taking the kick from the penalty mark created a risk of injury (particularly to the head) to defenders when the ball is deliberately kicked at the defenders in the hope of it deflecting into the goal.
 - ~~○ under the current Laws, if an indirect free kick is awarded to an attacking team for an offence inside the goal area, the free kick is taken on the goal area line (parallel to the goal line), which creates major problems with trying to keep the defending players on the goal line, between the goalposts~~
 - ~~○ an indirect free kick taken from the penalty mark is more advantageous for the attacking team, which thus partly addresses the concern of some that an indirect free kick is not a strong enough punishment~~

Competition feedback

Competitions participating in the trial will be required to collect a range of data and feedback for submission to The IFAB (*exact details and methodology to be determined*).