

# GAME CHANGER ? THE SFA GUIDELINES ON HEADING FOOTBALLS

## Game Changer? The SFA Guidelines on Heading Footballs

The Scottish Football Association (the “SFA“) has recently published [updated guidelines on heading footballs](#) for children aged from 6 to 17 years old. The guidelines recommend that children under the age of 12 do not head the ball in training, while for under 16s it should be regarded as a low coaching priority and a gradual introduction to heading for under 18s.

### A “Historic Study”

The guidelines were published following a [historic study](#) undertaken by researchers at the University of Glasgow (the “**FIELD Report**“) which suggests that footballers are three times more likely to die from a degenerative brain disease and five times more likely to die from Parkinson’s. Despite this, the evidence stopped short of demonstrating that there was a direct link between heading the ball and degenerative neurocognitive disease.

The issue of brain injuries within the footballing community in Scotland has come to the fore recently following the deaths of well-known Scottish footballers such as former European Cup winner, Billy McNeil. Accordingly, the guidelines come at an important time for football as governing bodies are increasingly under pressure to ensure player safety is appropriately managed.

### Concussion Concerns

The new SFA guidelines come at a time when there is renewed focus on head injuries, particularly concussion, in sport. There are concerns that many concussions can go unnoticed resulting in a risk of ‘[Second Impact Syndrome](#)’. This can occur when a player returns to the playing field too soon after an initial concussion and receives a second blow either to the head or to the upper body.

The threat of concussion together with the longer-term risk of brain disease highlighted in the FIELD Report therefore demonstrates the desire by the SFA to mitigate future risks for young players.

The SFA refer to the concussion guidelines set out in the existing Scottish Sport Concussion Guidelines – ‘[If in doubt, sit them out](#)’. Those guidelines provide that in any situation where there is doubt, players should be removed from the pitch. It is therefore crucial that those responsible for young players fully understand the risks of concussion and ensure the current guidelines and protocols are adhered to.

### Potential Legal Issues

The FIELD Report together with the SFA guidelines highlight the need for governing sports bodies and clubs to be alert to the potential risks and their exposure to liability in any potential claim. Unlike the USA (where restrictions on heading are already in place) claims for damages in respect of brain injuries in sport generally remain uncommon in the UK. The measures put in place in the USA were introduced following a lawsuit filed against the United States Soccer Federation by concerned parents and players. Class actions to recover damages arising from brain injuries allegedly caused while playing sport [are more common in the US](#) and has impacted most major sports, most notably [American Football](#). It seems likely that, at some point, similar types of claim could emerge in the UK.

Ultimately the guidelines were not put in place to take the fun out of the game but to demonstrate a responsible approach to safeguarding the health and welfare of young players. Although the SFA guidelines may have proved controversial they represent an important contribution to the debate on the legal and ethical issues surrounding head injuries in sport in the UK.