

6-man

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in the eight-man ranks, which has developed into a legitimate and competitive alternative to its bigger 11-man brother.

In the West, though, several schools struggled, not only to remain competitive, but also to field enough players to finish a regular season. Schools like Weskan, Natoma, Pawnee Heights and Ransom-Western Plains were dropped into a difficult routine of recruit, play a season, then fall in high-powered districts short of the playoffs. Sometimes there were forfeits along the way. Western Plains didn't even field a team in the fall; Natoma was forced to drop out by district time.

Pawnee Heights played its last full eight-man season in 2010, with a rule-10 coach, 12 players and no easy games in the Southern Plains-Iroquois Activities Association. The coach improvised four-on-four and one-on-one drills in practice, to keep the feel of offense vs. defense.

In 2013, Weskan, just a few miles from the Colorado border, had just 33 students and was lowest among bottom-10 enrollment schools not part of a co-operative agreement for football.

The Coyotes went winless in 2008 and 2009 but improved to 8-2 and 7-2 with early Eight-Man, Division II appearances in 2010 and 2011. They had 14 players, with five seniors, on the roster in 2013.

Marc Cowles, the Weskan coach at the time, and the Coyotes' administration started taking a hard look at the 2014 season.

Then, Cowles anticipated a roster of 11 players. That's doable, but risky, to make it through a nine-game regular season.

They approached neighboring Wallace County in Sharon Springs about a co-op agreement, but Wallace County's school board said "no."

Cowles didn't want to lose football as an activity. So, some six-man games were scheduled, officials rounded up, and played against some teams in the West.

The next winter, Cowles brought Wheatland-Grinnell principal and activities director Terry Ostmeier on board. Ostmeier told the KSHSAA about their idea to start a six-man division in Kansas for its next two-year football cycle, beginning in 2016-17 school year.

The KSHSAA was receptive, but firm. Its bylaws hold to a minimum of 24 committed schools before

The man, the game
Chester, Neb. High

School teacher Stephen Epler was inducted into the Nebraska High School Sports Hall of Fame in 1995

for the game he crafted in 1934 that was a "scientific alternative" to 11-man football.

Known for its focus on averaged-sized players with speed, six-man is played on an 80-yard field and utilizes strategy, rather than size. The quarterback is not allowed to advance the ball until it is first handed off to another player; all players on the field are eligible for a forward pass and the remainder incorporates all the facets of its bigger brothers -- except the potential for serious injury.

Because kicking is more difficult, PATs are worth 2 points, PAT runs 1; field goals are worth 4.

granting a new league. Weskan and Wheatland would have to get some additional commitments.

Otherwise, any participation would be considered independent of the state's current football system. Cowles and Ostmeier had about four firms, with about four more on the fence. There was a way to go.

Cowles took the head coaching job at Ness City for the 2015 season, but Ostmeier was still recruiting. There were plenty of schools, he said, including some in his own WKLL league, that felt the time was right for six-man.

"Our league had felt for some time, with our declining numbers and enrollment -- not only declining enrollment numbers, but declining numbers from the kids going out for football, we needed to do something," Ostmeier said. "Enable small schools to still have the enjoyment of Friday night and have a football game."

Meanwhile, at Pawnee Heights, the same situation was developing. Not only did the Tigers not have enough real numbers to roster a team, numbers of kids interested in football was going down, said Pywell.

After years of looking west, the Tigers found an answer by looking east in 2011.

The Larned Indians were also struggling, and a string of losing seasons had contributed to a roster drop to around 30 players -- difficult to remain competi-

tive at the Class 4A level.

A cooperative agreement between the Indians and the Tigers for football brought in not only some Tigers to boost numbers, but also immediate impact for the Indians as well. As a 5-10, 185 fullback, Pawnee Heights senior Chad Wallace finished the 2011 season with 641 yards on 125 carries and eight of the Indians' 13 touchdowns.

The Indians took on a new coach in 2012, but the Tigers stayed. As the Indians' wins, numbers and competitiveness increased under head coach A.B. Stokes, Pawnee Heights strong safety Jacob Hardiman and lineman Colton Henbest worked their way into the Indians' starting lineup.

Henbest graduated in 2016 and the co-op agreement between the Indians and the Tigers ended with the end of football season.

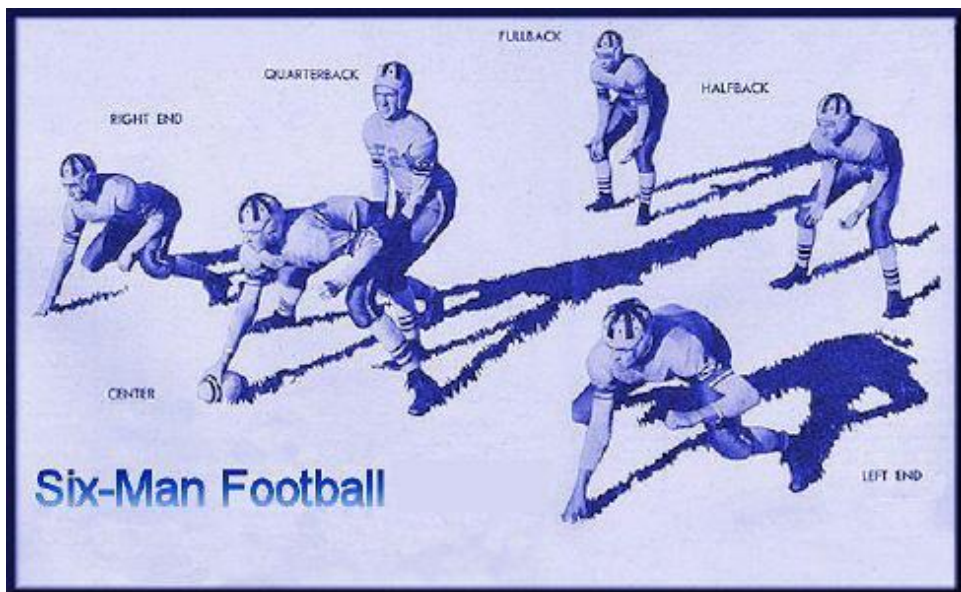
School administrators agreed last August to part as friends to go their separate ways: Larned, which now boasts a roster of more than 60, is doing fine in the Central Kansas League in Class 3A.

Pawnee Heights looks forward to dressing out in its own red and blue.

"We are really happy for Pawnee Heights and wish them well next fall," said Larned High School Principal Troy Langdon. "The co-operative agreement was a win-win for both schools. Now it's time for both of us to move on."

"We're not walking away because we're unhappy," Pywell said. "It's because we've got enough kids walking our hallways now actually participating in a fall sport that this makes sense. When we started this, both Larned and Pawnee Heights needed each other."

"Without the agreement, our kids wouldn't have had that opportunity. It's been good kid-wise, school-wise, relationship-wise, between the two schools."



Set for six -- The uniforms may have changed some since the game was created, but not the concept. USD 496 Pawnee Heights, along with seven other Western Kansas schools, will be playing their own independent schedule of six-man football in the fall.

(graphic by Mike Gilmore)

Now, the Tigers are looking ahead to next fall, with a full slate of eight in round-robin play, good for the next two seasons. The eight are planning their own playoffs, with the championship bracket in Dodge City.

The schedule also takes into account traveling distance; some games will be played in the afternoon instead of the traditional 7 p.m. kickoff. Some games will be played at neutral locations in between.

Including the Tigers, the teams involved will be Ransom-Western Plains; Bird City-Cheylin; Weskan; Rexford-Golden Plains; Natoma; Colby-Heartland Christian and Wheatland-Grinnell.

There was some last-minute nailbiting on the schedule; Heartland wasn't sure that it would have enough players for a team. Things are fine now, though.

Out of the eight, Pawnee Heights is the only squad that will be making the switch directly from 11-man to six-man. "They've been playing a variety of eight-man and six-man games already," Pywell said.

And while the state is still waiting to throw in its chips on a sanctioned six-man division, the Tigers are 'all-in' for football. All the teams, meanwhile, are maintaining their regular

leagues for other sports.

"We're still keeping to our own individual leagues, us eight have just agreed to build this consortium, this independent division for football," Pywell said.

"We're still the Tigers,

we're keeping all that. But for football, we're going to have to go all-new with everything. We're going at it full-tilt," Pywell said.

"Everybody over here is excited, that's for sure. It's great to have our own team again."

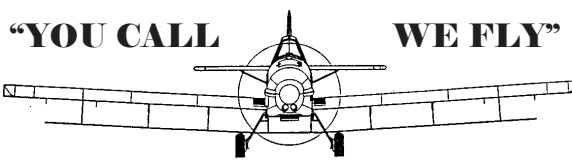


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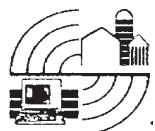
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