

Cover story: Tigers bringing back Friday night lights in Rozel

By MIKE GILMORE
ROZEL -- New pads, new helmets, new jerseys, new players, new coaches and new attitude.

A lot of things are new for the Pawnee Heights Tigers in 2016, but the feeling is not.

Football is back. "We've been waiting for this a long time," said USD 496 Pawnee Heights Superintendent Danny Binder, as fall sports practices began last week in Rozel. "Excitement and expectations are high. The feeling is good."

First year head coach Jeff Chambers comes to Pawnee County from Kinsey, where he coached 11-man football until 2010, when the Coyotes dropped to eight-man.

The drop to six man brings Chambers, a 26-

year coaching veteran, back to his early days as coach on the Oklahoma-Texas line; more than a few Texas, Oklahoma and Colorado prep football players have been recruited to the next level from the six-man ranks.

At Pawnee Heights, "there's a lot of new stuff to learn," Chambers said. "Because it's six-man and because of not having a football program here. Football is still football; whether it's 11-man, eight-man or six-man, but there's a lot of re-learning to do."

"The good thing is that the kids are young (with four seniors on a 15-player roster). They are listening and they've been working their tails off."

For instance, in six-

man, a first-and-10 is actually a first-and-15. Because running is easier, scoring on the run is worth one point. Extra point kicks, because they are harder to defend, are worth two points; a field goal is worth four points.

Speed is crucial. "When I first started looking at the head coaching job, I looked at who they had running track," Chambers said. "I can tell you that there are some good athletes here. It's a good role to step into, because there are some quality kids."

On offense, "if you have speed and can get to the edge without getting touched, you are going to score," Chambers explained. On defense,

see **Tigers**
page 20



First day of practice: The 2016 edition of the Pawnee Heights football team gathers around head coach Jeff Chambers for a post-practice talk on the Rozel practice field last week. The Tigers will be fielding their own 6-man football squad this season, after a five-year co-op with the Larned Indians. Their first home game is Sept. 2 hosting Ransom-Western Plains. (photo by Mike Gilmore)

Western Kansas bringing new style to 6-man football in 2016

By MIKE GILMORE
ROZEL -- Six-man football is coming back to Kansas in the West, thanks to Pawnee Heights and seven other Western Kansas schools that love their Friday night lights, but have struggled — due to roster numbers and other reasons — at keeping them on.

The weeks leading up to that first home game on Sept.

2 against Western Plains is the same in six-man as any other team; there are two-a-day practices, new helmets get new power logos, new jerseys are handed out and the Tigers are prepping for their first soap scrimmage in five years on Friday in Rozel.

Pawnee Heights Activities Director Mark Pywell said that

while football is a mainstay of fall sports, the real reason for the move to six-man is so that schools with smaller enrollments can still offer a sports activity for their students.

"What this allows us to do is keep an activity here in Pawnee Heights," Pywell said. "That's what all these schools are concerned about.

Keeping an activity alive for their kids walking the halls."

Kansas has known about six-man football, same as other states across the country, since Nebraska schoolteacher Stephen Epler downsized the 11-man version back in 1934.

The game became immensely popular, as by 1951, more than 2,300 schools in

48 states were taking it up.

But, not so much in Kansas. There have been flirtations, some as recently as 2003; but it hasn't caught on the same as eight-man football has.

Kansas' answer to football in smaller schools has been

see **6-man**
page 18

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