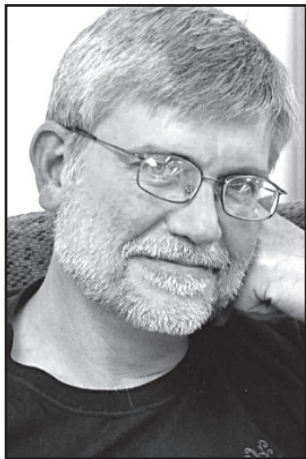


# Drop in prep football numbers puzzling national sports group



**By Mike Gilmore**  
The number of high school football players dropped by almost 26,000 during the 2016 season, and a national high school sports agency is wondering why.

A report released earlier this month by the National Federation of State High School Associations noted, however, that football still had the highest number of overall fall sports participants, with 1,086,748 in pads last season. An additional 61 schools added football to their athletic offerings last year as well.

“While we are concerned when any sport experiences a decline in participation, the numbers do not substantiate that schools are dropping the sport of football,” NFHS executive director Bob Gardner said. “The NFHS and its member

state high school associations have worked hard to reduce the risk of injury in high school football and we are pleased at the continued strength of the sport across the country.”

Nonetheless, numbers are down and have been going down for some time. A California study released last year noted that numbers had been going down at a rate of one percent per year over the past 10 years. Other states say the same.

In Minnesota, the number of 11-man teams have been holding steady, but the number of players have dropped by about 4,000 since 2003.

Texas still leads the

nation in football numbers – 163,000 at 1,064 schools in 2014 – but the sport has slid by 2.78 percent from its peak in 2010, despite having one of the fastest-growing populations in the country.

Kansas follows the national trend at about 2 percent. Dropping numbers – as well as head trauma concerns – led the KSHSAA in 2015 to institute a contact limitation plan that affects practices as well as games. The growing concern over chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) was given a boost that year by the biographical film, “Concus-

sion,” about Dr. Bennet Omalu’s fight against the National Football League for suppressing his CTE research on professional football players.

Other states point to CTE as a leading culprit in the roster drops. But it isn’t the sole reason. Minnesota acknowledges 1,355 concussions due to football in 2014, but there were the same number among boys – and girls – playing ice hockey. Their rationale seems to be one of simple demographics, where students may be simply choosing to play other sports in the fall. There has been a slight rise in 9-man football participation (a Minnesota variant of 11-man) but that may be because there are fewer kids to roam the halls.

Meanwhile, There’s no 9-man or 8-man option in Texas. It’s 11-man, 6-man or drive to find a school with one of them. Texas has the most participation in 6-man than any other state, with 260 public and private high school teams, at last count.

Smaller schools in Texas are different in that they are not as quick to consolidate, because the school often carries the identity of the community. College recruiters to Texas know that a good player is a good player, whether he’s used to 12 on the field or 22.

There is some data that shows slight increases in other fall sports, such as soccer or cross country, but there is no direct evidence to support whether students -- or students’ parents – are making that choice. At the same time, there is also data that shows more kids not participating in sports at all, and are roaming the halls

at practice time.

I don’t have any real numbers, but it seems to me that there are fewer folks in the stands as well on Friday. Not being a fan of prime time TV, I don’t know what the draw is, there.

I chose not to play football my senior year (1978) not because I was worried that I’d get a concussion. The year before, I had the newest helmet on the squad, just off the line from Riddell, with a cage and everything. In the 1970s, the focus was on knees, and my right knee injured as a sophomore just couldn’t take the punishment. I was a lineman, a center, and besides, we had three centers and long-snappers on the team. Or so my father – also my coach – said. Looking back, it was really his decision and he was the one footing the medical bills.

I still was connected to the team as equipment manager my senior year. Our team still hangs together after nearly 40 years. Point is, there are risks in everything you do.

I could be stepping on my dad’s soapbox here, but football as a sport teaches more than how to throw or catch, or block and tackle. It teaches social dynamics, group goal setting, perseverance, deliberation and a whole lot of other things that we seem to be losing sitting in front of a computer screen.

I can’t think of anything I’d rather do on Friday nights – but then, I’ve been going to Friday football games practically since I was born. I can’t imagine not going, or not being able to go.

See you on the field.

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to return by the second meet of the season. By the end of the cross country year, that time off could give him a slight edge.

“I’m actually hoping when it comes to the end of the season, my legs will be fresher than everyone’s since I sat out for five weeks,” he said. “I had a decent amount of training so I really don’t feel like I’ve lost too much.”

Last spring, Depenbusch missed a 3200m state title by a single second, and he was the final leg of Great Bend’s 4x800 team that lost the gold by just 0.19 seconds. He finished third in the 1600m run at state.

Missing for the Panthers this season will be Eric Vazquez, a state medalist in the 800m run and the 11th-place finisher at the state cross country meet last fall.

Lashley does have back a big class of sophomores, five of which gained state experience last year. Connor Griffith leads that pack

after a 40th-place finish at state last year. Jesus Sanchez also joins the team after missing state track qualification by a single spot last spring.

**Lady Panthers look to improve**

The Western Athletic Conference has boasted top teams in recent years: Garden City finished second in 6A last year, and Dodge City has two top-seven finishes the last two seasons. But the bottom of the five-team conference is no place for Great Bend.

“We want to be as competitive as we can be,” Lashley said. “We want to be competitive in the WAC especially because last year we were last. We want to turn that around and do well. With our five or six varsity girls, we want to try and stay healthy.”

Losing Karen Razo makes the task all the more difficult. A senior last year, Razo ran fourth at the 5A state championships as the lone state qualifier for the team.

But Lashley will have some nice talent back. Sophomore McKenna Esfeld battled injuries at the end of last year and finished 12th at the WAC meet. Senior Paloma Sandoval ran 20th at the league championships.

Senior LaCorra Bryant proved to be one of the top sprinters in Kansas last spring and will look to improve her distance game this fall after a 35th-place finish at the WAC meet.

Newcomers for Lashley include two freshmen and senior Baleigh Fry, a seventh-place finisher in the 800m run at state.

The Panthers opened their season at home on Aug. 31.

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