



TROPHY HOIST – Pawnee Heights players hoist the championship trophy after winning the 6-man State Championship in 2017 played on Dodge City's Demon Field. The Tigers' 62-12 win over Cheylin marked the school's first-ever state football title

(Tiller file photo)

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play. While the agreement was appreciated, the Indians' own struggles with roster numbers and records over the next five years wasn't the sport-saver Tiger fans were looking for.

Meanwhile, further west, Weskan coach Marc Cowles and Wheatland-Grainfield athletic director Terry Ostmeyer were hatching their own alternative to survival in Eight-Man Division II. In the spring of 2014, they took their plan to the Kansas Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association, who voted 8-1 in favor of a two-year, non-sanctioned six-man football league for the 2016-17 football cycle.

As soon as the word came down, Pawnee Heights jumped aboard, along with four other schools to form a seven-team league. To fill the schedule, teams would play home-and-home with a playoff bracket that led to championship and third place state-style games at Demon Field in Dodge City in the first annual Wild West Bowl.

The Tigers finished 6-3 in that first season, losing to 2016 champ Weskan 36-18 in a fast-paced contest.

First-year coach Jeff Chambers gathered his players and a good share of the community in the endzone after the game, promising that the Tigers would be back next year to get the trophy. "You could see it in faces, the way they all wanted it," Chambers said. "The people wanted it; the players wanted it. It was their chance to put a uniform on again and go represent their community and their school. That's the thing we wanted to make sure that we did just to give them something to be proud of."

The Tigers hit the weights over the off-season and were back on the field in 2017. After the Homecoming blowout, Chambers ticked off the remaining games to the championship in Dodge City, telling fans to "be sure and be there, because we will."

The Tigers ended the season unbeaten and 9-0, culminating in a 62-12 rout of Cheylin. Not only was the Wild West Bowl's big hardware PHH's first state title in several years, it marked the first football championship trophy of any kind in school history. Scott earned Six-man Offensive Player of the Year as well as first team honors as defensive linebacker and return specialist.

A three-sport athlete at PHHS, Scott will have some choices to make in his senior season. Chambers has been fielding calls from junior college football coaches in Kansas and Oklahoma, as well as offers from Sterling College, Fort Hays State University,

Kansas University and Kansas State.

Halfway home – In its second cycle and third season, the six-man association has grown to 11 teams in two divisions for 2018-19. Pawnee Heights now can boast its first full season slate (eight different regular season opponents) since 2010 as a member of the South Division, along with newcomers Rolla, Moscow and Ashland.

The North Division features Weskan, Bird City-Cheylin, Golden Plains, Natoma and Western Plains.

Wheatland-Grainfield, a six-man charter member, elected to return to eight-man for the upcoming cycle. "I'm pretty sure that they will be back," noted Pywell. "The school board decision was 4-3 to go to eight-man and maybe won't be sustainable; besides that gives them some tough established schools on their schedule."

"Their reasoning was that maybe their players would get more scholarship notice if they are involved with an eight-man program. That same argument was used at the beginning of eight-man when schools were considering dropping down from 11-man football."

"College coaches are more interested in the athletic abilities of individual players rather than a team's record," Pywell added. "We've already seen some quality individuals get looks from our six-man league. Football is football, whether there's 11, eight or six players on the field."

Meanwhile, the Kansas High School Activities Association's bylaws mandate that to receive its official sanction, a minimum of 24 schools must combine to form a new classification – similar to the process bowling went through to become a KSHSAA-sponsored sport.

But Pywell – who now serves as the six-man conclave's commissioner – noted that the program's success over the past two years has other small schools looking to join by the next cycle, as roster numbers and scheduling difficulties remain a part of football's ebb and flow.

"I can think of about four schools right off the bat that have expressed an interest," Pywell said. "There may be some more schools in the eastern part of the state that may turn to us."

"The goal is, of course, to get 24 schools signed up," he said. "That might be a ways off yet."

"But one thing I can tell you is, six man football in Kansas is here to stay, for those who want it. It's a great game and it's really fun to watch."

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Schneider expects Miller to remain in the backfield and will utilize Ibarra more as a wideout in 2018. In those seven games, Ibarra was second on the team last year with 114 yards and two touchdowns on nine receptions. Brayden Moore, last year's leading receiver, has graduated.

Junior Will Pray returns as a tight end after coming up with several catches last year.

All of Schneider's other returning offensive starters are back on the line. They include senior Jason Joyner and sophomores Tyler Joyner and Drew Taverner.

Defensively, Miller returns to the linebacker spot after leading the team with 75 tackles in the seven games listed.

Ibarra, back in the secondary, was second last year with 48 tackles in the seven games listed. He also led the team with three interceptions in those seven games.

The Kats do lose 41 tackles from Moore, and the two leading sack men up front in James Taverner and Dalton Rose, who combined for five sacks in the seven games listed.

Hinderliter returns to the secondary, Pray will play linebacker, and the Joyners and Drew Taverner will play up front.

With a wealth of returners back, Schneider said the goals this season are to improve each week, take care of the football, and make it back to the post-season.

The Kats can expect a

test in week one against a Sylvan-Lucas team that went 8-2 in 2018. The Mustangs did lose several skill players to graduation, including quarterback R.J. Haber.

The Kats open the home season on Sept. 7 against Ingalls. The Bulldogs are another

playoff team that went 7-3 in 2018. Ingalls returns junior quarterback Timothy Gillen, who threw for 617 yards last year. Gone to graduation is 1,100-yard rusher Mikel Osborne.

This year's Homecoming game is scheduled for Sept. 21 against Stafford.

Chase football 2018

Aug. 31	@Sylvan-Lucas
Sept. 7	INGALLS
Sept. 14	@Bucklin
Sept. 21	STAFFORD (HC)
Sept. 28	@Satanta
Oct. 5	@MINNEOLA
Oct. 12	@Otis Bison
Oct. 19	BURRTON
Oct. 25	Playoffs TBA

Have a Great Season! Go Eagles!



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