

Early start to season not good for middle school coaches

By Randy Cavin
Sports Editor

Is the first week of school too soon for the middle school football season to open? The answer is “yes,” according to the head coaches for the four county junior high football teams.

Gleason head coach Noah Lamkins, Martin’s Kyle Pack, Dresden’s Justin West and Greenfield head coach Hal Blackman all agree that Aug. 9 is way too soon to be starting the football season.

Most, if not all, of the teams will play four games in August and a couple even played in a jamboree the first weekend of the month. That is entirely too many games in what is typically the hottest month of the year.

Looking back 30 years ago to 1988, the season did not begin until Aug. 25. In 1998 it started Aug. 27. It began to inch up in the calendar and by 2008 it had started Aug. 21.

Even five years ago it was still beginning later in the month on Aug. 22. So why is it now starting Aug. 9? The answer is simple — basketball.

“A lot of it is the basketball,” Blackman said. “Those coaches want to get the basketball going. That season used to extend past Christmas. Now it is ending before Christmas. That is because some coaches are coaching both the high school and junior high teams. They want to concentrate more on their high school teams after Christmas and get ready for the district tournaments.”

Now all but one middle school in the county finishes up the season in early December at the completion of the county tournament.

West is the head coach of the Dresden Middle School football team and the boys’ basketball squad. Several of his football players also play basketball for him. However, even he agrees this is too soon to be playing football.

“I wish we could start later in the month,” West said. “These kids are having to get out here to practice in July because school starts so early in August and then we have a jamboree to play in the first weekend. Then we jump right into the season itself. Basketball begins a week or two after the season is over.”

This year the football season will be completed at the end of September for Dresden, Greenfield and Gleason. Martin is a member of the TMSAA, which holds playoff games into October.

Pack also has several of his players on the basketball team. Head coach Andy Sliger of the



boys’ basketball normally has a big roster with several non-football playing boys on it. So it does not affect him as much when the football team is participating in the playoffs.

Martin has its season opener five days later than the rest of the county’s teams. But Aug. 14 is still an early date.

“I am pretty sure Coach Sliger’s starting five players are on the football team,” Pack said. “With us being in the TMSAA, we have to set schedules according to the playoff schedule. It is like anything else, everybody just tries to work together and do the best they can.”

It actually benefits Sliger because it gives him time to play his non-starters more than he does after football is over.

Starting the first week off of school this year put a burden on Gleason and Greenfield. Both of those head coaches always deal with small rosters and it is difficult to get all of their players at practice in July. Several of them

are away on family vacations, trips with church youth groups and other youth activities that may require them to be away from home and practice.

“I don’t like starting this early,” Lampkins said. “Most of my guys will only have three days of practice when the season begins. They will not be conditioned to play a football game. They will not have enough practice to know what to do.”

Lampkins brings up a good point about the conditioning. There are concerns about injuries to these young men. Blackman already has two of his players with either their right arm or right wrist in a cast.

Then there is the heat to deal with. The TMSAA is the middle school version of the TSSAA, but it still abides by the same heat policy. Dresden, Greenfield and Gleason are not TMSAA member schools, but they have to have TSSAA referees working every game and they must go by the heat policy.

It gets hot and very humid in August here in West Tennessee. All activities must stop when the heat index reaches 104 degrees. That puts a burden on the coaches when they have to practice in July when they are trying to get ready for an early August season opener.

It gets too hot to hold afternoon practices, so they hold them in the morning before the heat index reaches the 104-degree heat index threshold. That means practice begins at 8 a.m. or even 7 a.m., which puts pressure on the parents to get their child to practice on time.

With school starting Aug. 6 and the season beginning three days later, coaches will have to practice in the afternoon heat after classes are over. If the heat index is still too high, then they have to wait until the evening to practice,

which causes families to have to make more sacrifices, such as late dinners and cutting in on needed family time when both parents have jobs.

No parent wants to get a call from the coach or the school informing them that their child has had a heat-related illness during practice.

It is a bit different for high school teams. The TSSAA sets the calendar. It does not set it by when the first day of practice begins. It sets it by going backward from the state championship games, which conclude the first weekend of December.

Three southern states — Alabama, Florida and Louisiana — begin high school football in late August, while Kentucky, Georgia and Mississippi start the season around the same date that schools in Tennessee does.



MARTIN MIDDLE — (Sitting from left): Cate Nanney, Wren Adkins, Alexis Jaramillo, Madison Wallsmith, Emma Cook, Aspen Thompson, Selena Hernandez, (second row) Makena Greer, Maddie Morrison,

Lexie Jones, Hailey Rogers, Anna Hobock, Addison Cary, (third row) Braedyn Hazlewood, Kinzey Naney, Gabby McKnight, Katie Butler, Christina Gammons, and Anniston Carter. Not pictured: Kaylin Pham.

