

A tough decision looms ahead

By Larry Pritchett

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This past week there were some articles here in the Tribune discussing the thought about moving to eight-man football at Perkins County High School. No doubt that is a big decision to have to make for any school at any time.

High school sports in Nebraska or any state is a game of numbers. The more numbers you have the possibilities of finding better players should improve. But even schools that have numbers when placed in a class with schools with more numbers are at a disadvantage.

For example, when I coached at Imperial in the 70s we were for three of those years the smallest school in Class B. It isn't good to be the smallest school in any class because the difference from top to bottom is wide.

The bigger schools have more depth and that is helpful, especially in football. So when numbers become a problem, you start looking for solutions that will give your district a better chance to compete.

I still think that football is football no matter how many players you put on the field. In the old days I (not with leather helmets), had the opportunity to play a couple of years of six-man football, one year of a combined schedule of six- and eight- man as we made the transition to eight-man for my senior year.

Six-man might have been the most fun and the most difficult.

Speed in football is always a killer, but everyone was eligible for a pass, so as a center, I had a couple of plays where I was the number one option. Remember, speed is a killer in sports and it killed me because I possessed only the ability to spell speed, I had none. Eight-man seemed slower at first but it got faster. Both six-man and eight-man sometimes have scores that are higher than basketball games but it was still fun.

I then got my introduction to the real football game in college by playing the 11-man version.

I am sure that experience was the least rewarding, not so much because of the game but maybe more because of my skill level. But that is a story for some other time.

Perkins County has a deep tradition of excellence in 11-man football, multiple state championships, conference championships when we had those and many trips to the state playoffs. For many years numbers were never a problem.

During my first year as an assistant coach for Coach Haenfler, we had 89 boys in high school and 70 some out for football. Times have changed and numbers have changed and we have stuck with the 11-man version. Does that mean that a switch to eight-man should not be talked about? I don't think so.

As a coach, I always wanted to do everything possible to give our teams a chance to be successful. I think most coaches want that. So when numbers get to the point where it makes it hard to compete I think you take a look at alternatives. I think you have to take into

consideration how long the numbers might appear to be low. Is it just a year or so? You do have to take a look at the big picture also.

I think the worst situation you can have is to have low numbers and very few upper classmen. It is difficult to play freshman and sophomores against other teams of juniors and seniors. You tend to get more players hurt, and their skill levels seldom match up.

Scheduling might be easier if you were eight-man which would cut down on travel, but again I think the big picture is the most important.

My opinion that playing a couple of years in one and then switching back to the other is never the way to go. There have been a number of schools in out-state Nebraska that do that and end up not being very successful at either level.

There are some inherent differences in the games, some difference in rules, size of the field etc., but that would not be hard to overcome. So how do you make a decision?

Here is what I think: The district has administrators, it has an athletic administrator, it has football coaches, and they have the numbers that they can crunch and they certainly have the ability to put it all together and make a decision that is best for the district.

In my own mind, I would hope that 11-man football could survive, but I also realize that this isn't the last time that this question is going to be asked. Numbers will continue to be a problem in rural areas like Perkins County.

As much as people would like to think that this is paradise—and it is close in my mind—Wal-Mart, Target, General Motors, and others are not looking for land to build plants here.

Whatever decisions are made, we will live with and hope that it leads our athletes to success. See you at the games!