Adaptation on the Plains: The Development of Six-Man and Eight-Man Football in Kansas

by Christopher H. Lee

Prior to the mid-1930s, small Kansas high schools, like those across the Plains, faced the problem of what sports their athletic programs were to offer in the fall. Sporting events, especially in small-town high schools, had become important community events, as Robert and Helen Lynd discovered in their studies of Middletown High School from the 1890s to the 1920s. They found that "the formal nucleus of school study becomes focused and articulate, and even rendered important in the eyes of adults through the medium of the school athletic teams." Leaders such as Elihu Root, Theodore Roosevelt, and Henry Cabot Lodge lent "the dignity of their offices to sports such as football and boxing that had once been the realm of children and ruffians," according to sports historian Donald J. Mrozek, because sports yielded values that were favorable to society. It was only natural that parents and their children in rural areas desired a full athletic program like that available to their urban kindred.

The fall season presented a special problem because most rural schools did not have enough able-bodied boys to play conventional football, and other sports such as basketball and baseball were seasonably inappropriate. An alternative was developed in 1934, however, by Stephen E. Epler while he was at Chester, Nebraska. By altering a few basic rules, he discovered that football could still be played with only six players. Epler took a popular sport and adapted it to the conditions of the Plains, providing small high schools with a desired sport they could utilize. Some coaches recognized the superior qualities of this game fairly soon, while others did not try six-man until after World War II. Mahaska became the first school in Kansas to play six-man football when it joined the Little Blue League, of which Chester and three other Nebraska schools were members, in 1935. The Kansas Athlete, a publication of the Kansas State High School Athletic Association, confirmed that Mahaska had initiated the six-man game in Kansas. In the same article, published in December of 1955, the journal also pointed out that eight-man "is played considerably by small high schools in Illinois"; this game was later adopted in Kansas as conditions changed.

By 1936, a scant two years after its introduction, six-man had already received national attention in the Athletic Journal. Epler, in an article entitled "A New Deal for Football," demonstrated the need for a type of

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football other than eleven-man. In polling the secretaries of forty-five state high school athletic associations (Arkansas, California, and Massachusetts were not included), he found that more than ten thousand high schools out of almost eighteen hundred did not play football; of the latter number, however, almost seventeen thousand high schools played basketball. To Epler this meant that there were many high schools, mostly small ones, across the nation that probably wanted to play football but could not. Cost and the threat of injury were the main impediments, he speculated, as eleven-man teams required more equipment, as well as younger and smaller boys to fill out rosters. Epler thought many of these small schools were prime candidates for his six-man, which was much like the established game, only safer. Around 156 schools, or one out of every forty-eight which played football, already utilized six-man. Six of the ten states in which this game was played were the Plains states of Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

Nation’s Schools also lauded six-man in 1936 since it satisfied the three parties to the game—administrators, players, and spectators. “Those handling the game are convinced that it is an excellent autumn game for the small school,” said the journal. The author, F.L. Showacy, claimed, “The players are enthusiastic since it gives them an outlet for their football interest. The spectators are manifesting their approval by coming out to the games in ever increasing numbers. It satisfies even the most rabid football fan.” He complimented the work of Epler and listed the Little Blue League, where high school enrollments were from thirty-five to one hundred, as one of the nation’s first six-man leagues.

National media attention continued into 1937-1938 as the Athletic Journal ran several articles on six-man. A. W. Larson, of Sykeston, North Dakota, wondered if six-man was “perhaps a child of the depression. Expenses had to be kept down; cutting down the number of players cut down expenses. Perhaps it came with the sudden demand for things on a small scale like miniature golf, table tennis and parlor baseball.” He added, “It is a great game for the spectators. They see more of the plays than they ever saw before in the regular game.” The plays could involve any player catching and carrying the ball; thus, the “six-man offense is tricky and colorful, the defense must be resourceful and alert.” Larson thought that these qualities could be enhanced further since the game was still in its formative stages. He insisted, however, that the game be kept as close to the eleven-man game as possible.

With the game receiving national attention, as well as the approval of Kansas State High School Activities Association (KSHSAA), thirty-three high schools in Kansas played six-man in 1938. It was met with a spirited response in most places; a good example was the reaction by towns in northern Kansas. In Bogue and Burr Oak most of the towns’ businessmen closed their shops so that they could attend the games. Burr Oak made its first game an event, electing cheerleaders and scheduling a preliminary softball game between the local girls and those from Ionia. Soon the game took on all the trappings of other established sports. After its local team had won eight straight games, the Haysville Review declared the team the “Northeast Kansas champions,” and ranked it high in the state for six-man football. A year later, the Bogue Messenger boasted, “Although this is only their second year to play football, our 6-man football team is showing the world just how the game is played.”

These were not the only towns visited by six-man as it spread throughout the state. The Emporia Daily Gazette in 1938 predicted that “it probably will be only a year or two until most of the small schools hereabouts will be having a fall football season. The 6-man game is attractive to the small school because it requires less capital, less equipment and less manpower.” That same year the Ulysses News said that six-man had “taken root and grown like the proverbial beanstalk.” By 1939, Bluff City was able to stage a regular homecoming ceremony, complete with king and queen, while the high school band provided the music. With this development, the Bluff City News gave the new game an enthusiastic endorsement: “Six-man football is ideal for small schools. It retains the basic features of 11-man football and at the same time enables a small school to have football when otherwise it would be almost impossible.”

Rule makers for six-man purposely made these “basic features” as close to those of eleven-man as possible. The 1940 interscholastic football guide put six-man rules in the text only where they differed from eleven-man rules: there was not a separate rulebook for

six-man. The first difference a fan might notice was the size of the field. Since there were fewer players, the field was reduced to 80 yards by 120 feet. This eliminated twenty yards from the length and forty feet from the width of an eleven-man field. Scoring was slightly different, with a field goal through widened goal post zones counting four points and points after a touchdown worth two points if kicked and only one if run.

The other differences were meant to limit the offense, which had the advantage in six-man. Before the ball could be advanced across the line of scrimmage, a clear pass had to be thrown by the player receiving the center's snap. This rule also prevented dangerous pileups from line plunger. To attain a first down, an offense had to gain fifteen yards instead of ten in the standard four-play series. Other changes, such as only three men having to be on the line of scrimmage instead of seven as in eleven-man, were also in the rulebook. These were mainly just common sense changes. Otherwise, the rules of the two games were essentially the same.


As more people became familiar with these minor differences, six-man in Kansas skyrocketed, sparking a resurgence for high school football overall. A KS H S A A sports participation survey stated that during the 1939-1940 season, 73 schools played six-man while 318 schools had eleven-man squads. Furthermore, "The combined total of 11,758 was the largest number of individual football participants since records have been kept and was a hike of more than 700 over last year." With sixteen additional teams in each category in the 1940-1941 season, the total number of teams (423) as well as the number of participants (11,929) set new records. Six-man was boosting football in the face of the waning depression.

In the post-war period, six-man continued to enjoy popularity with the strengthening of leagues. This further development of leagues compelled more schools to go to six-man since they had to play the same type of game that others in their area were playing. As Ray Max Landstrom, a student of the game, noted, several coaches went to six-man simply because of "difficulty in scheduling games, other league teams playing six-man ball,

[and] to form a six-man league." This was not to say that large schools went to six-man. Lundstrom reported that seventy-four percent of the responding coaches said that the enrollment of their schools ranged from twenty-six to seventy-five students. It was certain, however, that the actions of area schools and limitations in travel did influence some schools to go six-man.10

Six-man probably reached its peak in the early to mid-1950s, as the school consolidation movement eliminated only the smallest schools. The KSHSAA listed in its journal more six-man teams for the 1955 season than ever before, although many schools moved back and forth between six and eleven-man.11 This reflected the changing nature of the development of six-man, as enrollment patterns tended to indicate what schools would do concerning football. If several schools in a league gained boys, they might switch to eleven-man. If they lost enrollment, they might decide on six-man.

School consolidation became a bigger factor towards the end of the 1950s, affecting the size and number of schools playing football. When six-man first appeared in Kansas, there were 732 accredited high schools in the state. By the 1950s, Kansas schools were feeling the effects of people moving from rural to urban areas. This meant that small rural schools, the type attracted to six-man, were in danger of elimination. By the 1959-1960 school year, there were only 616 accredited high schools in the state. Of this number, only 175 had an enrollment of less than fifty-one and only 292 had an enrollment of less than seventy-six. This number continued to drop in the 1960s as more small schools were closed as a result of consolidation.12

Since line play was de-emphasized and scoring revolved around the kicking game, not all coaches and players liked six-man. Further, with every player on the field eligible to catch a pass and the fifteen-yard first down, six-man had become, as one student of the game put it in 1955, "a passing and endrunning affair."13 These differences could cause serious difficulties for its participants. The speedy athlete who was capable of


In 1935, the Mahaska Rural High School team was the first to play six-man football in Kansas. A member of the Little Blue League, its opponents were Nebraska schools.

The year 1956 was also the first year Kansas experimented with eight-man when Windom High School gave it a try. A year later, Dwight coach Norton Hartsook, whose team had played six-man, became a "rabid booster" of eight-man after his team played two games of it in 1956. "I think eight-man is the thing for small schools," Hartsook told a Topeka Daily Capital reporter. "Any team that can play six can play eight-man. Those two more men give you a place to use a couple of big men who might otherwise sit on the bench. And it makes it more like the 11-man game." Coach Glen Gayler of Walton had similar views, as recorded in a Hutchinson News article. He predicted that eight-man would soon replace six-man throughout the state. "We like it much better," he said, "mostly because it permits better line play and makes for a closer and more entertaining game."

Six-man football was on the decline both in Kansas and the nation while eight-man was growing. Between 1950 and 1956, the number of schools that played

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15. Hutchinson News, September 27, 1957. This refers to a game played in 1956. While the school introduced eight-man football to Kansas in fall 1956, official play of eight-man did not begin until 1957.

Six-man football in Kansas reached its peak in the 1950s. Midway through the decade, the Tescott team won the six-man state championship.

Coach Gene Heisecker (second from left) introduced eight-man football to Wisdom High School in 1956 after requesting plays from coaches in Nebraska. Shown is the school’s eight-man team of 1957, the first year in which the school officially played the game.
eight-man nationally increased from 90 to 460. Of these, 350, or eighty percent, had previously played six-man football. By 1958, at least forty-eight schools in Kansas played eight-man. One of the schools that tried it out for the first time in that year was Williamsburg High School, coached by Louis Coppac. As Hartssook had done, he adapted his offense from eleven-man formations by dropping two linemen and a back. Neither Hartssook nor Coppac had ever seen an eight-man game played before they coached their first game of it, and publications on the game were scarce, according to both men.17

Although some schools played both eight and six-man during the transitional era, the latter was slowly disappearing in Kansas. Not only did school consolidations eliminate some of the smaller schools, but eight-man also continued to win more converts. Schedules published in the Topeka Daily Capital football special editions showed that at least 97 teams played eight-man in 1960; 102 did the same in 1961; and 114 played eight-man in 1962. These figures reflected only the schools that reported their schedules; there may have been many more trying this new game.18

A school that went from six to eight-man in 1961 was Alton, where the squad was piloted by veteran coach Everett Gouldie. Although he coached the first eight-man game he ever witnessed, Gouldie’s Wildcats achieved the longest winning streak in Kansas high school football—fifty-one games from September 1962 to the mid-1968 season. Gouldie, who coached all three types of football between 1929 and 1988, asserted that “eight-man, in my opinion, is the best football game there is.” His opinion was based upon the wide-open play, which players enjoyed. “There aren’t many plays for 3 yards and a cloud of dust like in eleven-man,” he explained. The fans seemed to like it better, too, because it was easier to see what was happening. Although eight-man had some of the same qualities of six-man, Gouldie found the former to be a “natural replacement” for the latter.19

Part of the reason for eight-man as a “natural replacement” was its greater similarity to the rules of

eleven-man. According to the National Federation of State High School Association’s (NFSHA) 1955 Official Football Rules Handbook, “Eleven-man rules are used except only five players must be on the line at the snap and only four in the free-kick defensive zone. Also, only three players are ineligible for a forward pass and for forward handling.” The regulation field was also smaller than the eleven-man field; like six-man football, the eight-man field was 80 by 40 yards.20

Eight-man became entrenched in Kansas, as well as in many other Plains states. A NFSHA national sports participation survey revealed that in 1970-1971, 657 schools with 14,593 participants played eight-man. In 1969, when the KSHSAA developed a state play-off system for football, an eight-man division was included. Nashville-Zenda defeated Lucas 54 to 18 in the first championship game before fifteen hundred spectators in Russell.21

Since being institutionalized by the KSHSAA, eight-man has added several schools to its roster. An example is Midway-Denton. In 1981 this school switched from eleven to eight-man because other area schools its size were doing the same and Midway did not wish to compete with larger schools in eleven-man. Midway’s coach at the time, Mark Juhl, was not pleased with the decision to switch; he thought that it was “second-rate football.” Juhl did not realize that nearly a third of the state’s 361 schools that participated in football played eight-man. He soon changed his mind about the game, however. After he viewed tapes from a coach in Turpin, Oklahoma, who used a distinctive offense, Juhl developed his own offense which featured a running game with well-practiced multiple fakes. Opposing defenses rarely knew who was the ball until substantial gains had been made; the offense had three points of attack, which tended to spread the defense. Midway-Denton, now coached by Mark Martin, has continued its mastery over opponents, winning state eight-man championships in 1981, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1986, and 1987.22

In 1983, other 1A (a class designation for the smallest high schools) schools were forced to make the same decision made by Midway in 1981: switch to eight-man or play larger schools. The KSHSAA in 1983 eliminated

By the early 1960s, six-man football was being replaced by eight-man football in Kansas. In 1966 the eight-man champion was Buc hill High School.

IA football play-offs but divided eight-man into two divisions. This has aided the growth of this game during an era of decline in the number of schools in Kansas, according to Kaye B. Pearce of the KSHSAA, who also stated that the number of schools playing eight-man has increased since 1983.22 This is an accurate statement, for while in 1969 only 55 of 390 high schools in Kansas played eight-man, in 1987, 111 of 362 played eight-man football. (See Table 1.)

Another trend, obvious through the same period of time, is geographic. At first, the eight-man game was largely confined to central Kansas, where it remains popular, but the game also has spread east and west. The evident logic behind the expansion is that consolidation of tiny schools in western Kansas has moved them from six to eight-man, while loss of rural population in the school districts of eastern Kansas has moved school teams from eleven to eight-man. A third trend has been for the eight-man game to grow west of old Highway 81, the traditional demarcation between eastern and western Kansas. This has been true of the simple numbers of schools playing eight-man football, but the percentage of schools doing so is also higher.24

The schools of western Kansas have taken the lead in further institutionalizing the game through the formation of the Kansas Eight-Man Football Association (KEMFA), composed predominantly of schools from that part of the state. Formed in 1986, after interested eight-man coaches met in Salina and Hays and consulted with similar organizations in Nebraska and Oklahoma, the goals of the KEMFA are to promote an eight-man all-star game that recognizes deserving players and coaches, to create a unified effort in affairs dealing with eight-man, and to provide a newsletter specifically about eight-man.25

With these innovations in place, the imagination and extra effort of the administrators, coaches, and players has paid off. In addition to tracing the origins and development of six and eight-man football in Kansas, an examination of economic and social aspects of this phenomenon might help to explain why such lengths were gone to in overcoming the obstacles to this Kansas institution.

Willard Waller, who studied the cultures of high schools in the 1930s and 1940s, concluded that "of all activities athletics is the chief and most satisfactory. . . . At the head of the list [of athletics] stands football." A. B. Hollingshead, who examined youth in a midwestern community, agreed, saying that "greater public sup-

22. KSHSAA Administrative Assistant Kaye B. Pearce, telephone conversation with author, November 17, 1986.
TABLE 1

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<td>1987</td>
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*12/213 indicates 12 out of a total of 213 schools.

port and school interest were centered on the football and basketball teams than on all the other extra-curricular activities combined. The school athletic program served as a collective representation of the school and community."

Nowhere was this more true than in the small-town high schools of Kansas. But unlike eastern, metropolitan schools, they required adaptations to bring football before cheering crowds. Especially with the advent of the Great Depression and the erosion of the rural population, the football team, the school it represented, and the town itself were in danger of withering away. Action was necessary.

This was perhaps more true of the small towns located in what sociologist Carl F. Kraenzel in *The Great Plains in Transition* termed "the yonland." Towns in the yonland were losing jobs and eventually people to towns in "the sultanland," which contained "the main arteries for wholesaling, business, industrial, educational, health, governmental, and social function" in a given area. Yonlands were "in-between areas," which relied upon the sultanlands for the movement of goods and the availability of services. Thus, facilities were limited in towns of the yonlands. This differentiation usually began when some towns continued to have rail service while others lost theirs, or when a major highway went through one town, bypassing others. As this situation developed, it was only natural for yonland towns to try to maintain some type of autonomy and dignity, as well as for businessmen to fight harder to stay solvent.

A writer for *Nation's Business* in 1938 also realized this trend, writing that "business must realize that six-man football is having an effect on the buying habits of villagers and farmers. It is creating new markets, reviving and enlarging old ones." Key in this upswing was the return of some old shopping habits: "Yes, 'Saturday Night,' that grand institution once dissipated by the motor car, has been returned to the small town. Pied Piper football is leading farmers back to small-town buying." These old shopping habits were examined by Penny Clark, who used Alta Vista as a case study of what happened to many small towns on the Plains in the early to mid-twentieth century. The ritual of going to town on Saturday was significant. Rural families went to town for entertainment, social contact, and an opportunity to trade. Businessmen in Alta Vista looked forward to this opportunity to sell their wares to people from outlying areas and generally stayed open as long as potential customers were around. This changed as Alta Vista became a "yonland" community. The new highway through town was the avenue for this change. With the development of the automobile and truck and better roads, more goods were shipped by road rather than by rail. Better transportation also meant that people could shop elsewhere. Alta Vista evolved to offering only limited services; a blow to community identity came with the closing of the high school in 1969.

In the early to mid-twentieth century, the local football game not only brought people to town and enhanced community spirit, but it also provided a recreational/social event. It was another place to meet people. In this era, people had a need for recreation, perhaps more than ever, for the Crash of 1929 brought many hardships. Football, for many, satisfied this need. As historian Thomas D. Isen has pointed out, "People on the plains have developed the ability to make mental order and create a time and a place for recreation even within their evidently inhospitable landscape." Isen also observed, "People cannot find recreation by traipsing off into pointlessness; rather they seek ordered activity that will reassure them as they go through familiar, but not demanding, routines." Perhaps one of the most classic examples of a comfortable routine with social and recreational overtones is the school game with fans coming out in force and parking their cars "around a carefully chalk-lined field, there to honk their horns at any aspect of the action that pleases them."

In conclusion, six-man, and later eight-man, football allowed smaller schools to continue to offer interscho-

lactic athletics. School consolidation later made it possible for more Kansas schools to have eleven-man squads, but many did not go to eleven-man football because of costs to school budgets. Six and eight-man football became products of and alternatives to the effects of school consolidation. These adaptations are reminiscent of Walter P. Webb's thesis of people on the Plains taking an eastern institution and adapting it to their own environment. In this case, the game of eleven-man football was transformed to meet the conditions of economics and populations of the scattered towns on the Plains.

It is no wonder that Kansas schools developed and embraced these innovations as necessary to having football as part of an athletic program. Attempts to mimic the ways of larger schools would have been disastrous, while doing nothing would have affected community life. These alternatives have allowed rural Kansans to go through familiar and comforting motions in common with other folk. . . . [These include] fall practice, pep rallies, chalking the field, staged entrances onto the field, coin tosses, half-time pep talks in the locker rooms, and of course, Monday's definitive post-mortem at the barber shop.  