

# Insider: How small-school football can survive with dwindling numbers

Kyle Neddenriep | Indianapolis Star



## Edinburgh football works through tough times

Edinburgh High School's long-suffering football team struggles with wearing out two-way athletes, and keeping the roster stocked.

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KNOX – The locker room is silent as Tony Slocum slowly paces in a mini-oval, staring at the concrete floor. On this cold and wet Friday

night, there may not have been a high school football team in the state as overmatched as the Caston Comets. The 15 players, their white pants stained red by the spray paint lining the Knox field, sit in metal folding chairs. Their eyes focus on Slocum, a sergeant with the Indiana State Police.

"This is not what we came to do, is it?" Slocum asks. "That's a good team, no doubt about it. But if we look ourselves in the mirror, we practice better than that. We talk about the little things, right?"

"Yes, sir!" the players respond.

"Fumbling the ball," Slocum continues. "Is that them or us?"

"Us," the Comets respond.

"Missing tackles when we have them right in front of us," Slocum proceeds. "Is that them or us?"

"Us," the players say in unison.

"Look," Slocum says. "I've told you more than once that I'm proud of what you've done this season. I still want you to be proud. We can look at teams that have more players than we have cancelled football games. You showed up every game, for every team. Whether they had a losing record or they were the No. 1 team in the state, you went toe to toe with them. So be proud of that. Be we don't practice to play like we did tonight."

A few minutes later, the Caston Comets shower and board the bus for the 50-minute ride back to Fulton, where the 228-student school —

one of the smallest football-playing schools in the state — is located. The score, a 61-6 Knox win, is still lit up on the scoreboard.

This is high school football from the other side. When sectional play begins Friday, the fact that the lights will be on at Caston for its game against Winamac is a victory of itself. Survival. In a season when three high school programs [have cancelled seasons due to low numbers](#), the Comets have persevered with 15 players — never mind the 0-9 record.

After the Caston and Knox players exchange postgame handshakes, veteran Knox coach John Hendryx asks Slocum if he can address his team.

“There is not a team in our conference who could have done what you guys did this year,” Hendryx tells the Comets. “I’m proud of you. I’m not even your coach and I’m proud of you.”

There is a lot to be proud of for this Caston team. But how long can football survive here if the numbers do not improve? When is just surviving enough? Caston is not alone facing these questions.

## **Park Tudor came up short, too**

The Indiana High School Athletic Association office on North Meridian is a long way from Fulton. But five minutes from IHSAA commissioner Bobby Cox’s office is an urban private school with a similar issue. Park Tudor, for a second consecutive year, [was forced to cancel a football game](#) when injuries lowered its already-low numbers to what the administration considered to be an unsafe situation to play a game.

After cancelling its Oct. 5 game at Monrovia, Park Tudor returned the next week to play at Frontier and will participate in Class 2A Sectional 38 on Friday, hosting Cascade.

But Park Tudor's situation might represent another crack in the foundation. Wood Memorial, a Class A program in Oakland City, announced in July it was cancelling its season due to low numbers. Two weeks later, Hammond Bishop Noll, a Class 2A program that won a state championship in 1989, announced it would field only a junior varsity program for two years when fewer than 20 players came out for the team.

Seymour's Trinity Lutheran, a program that played in the Class A sectional in 2013 and '14, disbanded for two years before returning in 2017. The program, which was not sectional-eligible this year, disbanded after three games this season. Trinity Lutheran had been using home school players and students from schools without football programs, which was not in compliance with Indiana High School Athletic Association rules if the school wanted to return to the association.

Taken separately, those situations are unique. Park Tudor had to cancel a game last season against Speedway. Wood Memorial is still recovering from [a hazing incident in 2016 that forced it to forfeit the season](#). Trinity Lutheran was not going to play in the sectional anyway and could have continued as a club team if it had wanted.

Cox recognizes there is an issue, but it extends beyond the state borders. He attended a meeting last month in Chicago with state association leaders from Illinois, Iowa, Michigan and Wisconsin for the

National Federation of State High School Associations.

"One of the topics discussed in the room was the welfare of high school football," Cox said. "You certainly feel like the awareness of concussions, and parents' reluctance in some situations, has contributed to a decline in numbers. But moreover than that, I think there are opportunities out there for kids to participate in other things. Soccer is growing. But I don't think you can pinpoint one particular reason."

Cox acknowledged there "are a couple of other programs right on the edge of shutting down." According to numbers provided by the NFHS in August, football participation was down 3.4 percent in Indiana for the 2017 season, from 21,589 players in 2016 to 20,849 in 2017. Nationally, football participation numbers dipped by more than 20,000 from 2016 to '17, though that represented only 1.1 percent of players overall.

But there are also local schools that have added football in recent years. Covenant Christian, sectional-eligible for the first time in 2015, is 9-0 and ranked No. 9 in the state this week in Class A. Traders Point Christian, after several years of building its program, will play Covenant Christian on Saturday at Avon in its first sectional game. Eastern Greene, a little more than a decade after starting its program, [played for a Class A state championship last season](#).

Cox said the start-up programs able to achieve success have a long-term vision.

"You can have an interested small group of parents and students currently in high school and that's great," Cox said. "But what does the

fifth and sixth grade look like? Do you have a youth program that you can develop? Is there a connection there to the high school? There are a lot of things that go into the development of a program."

Cox believes high school football is "in its best shape ever" in terms of health and safety, citing baseline tests and post-concussive tests, better tackling techniques and equipment. There are other options, too. Lacrosse and cross-county are fast-growing sports. Specialization cuts down on a number of multi-sport athletes from previous generations. But safety is the issue Cox hears the most associated with football.

"I don't think we can dismiss concerns parents have," Cox said. "I don't think it is an alarm sounding, but there is more heightened awareness of the game today. But it is something we have to continue to talk about: What do we need to do to improve the experience, so parents can rest assured their young people are going to be safe?"

## **Real trouble could be coming**

An informal survey of the football programs in Central Indiana at the start of the season showed numbers were steady at most schools, even up in some areas. Brownsburg, for example, added a freshman "B" team for the first time. Mt. Vernon added a freshman team after going without the previous two years. Beech Grove's numbers were up across the board.

But multiple athletic directors said the real trouble could still be coming, citing lower numbers at the middle school level.

One of the local programs that has long battled numbers is Edinburgh.

Last year, first-year coach Jason Burton — a 2011 Edinburgh graduate — boarded the school bus for Milan with 13 players. The Lancers lost 75-0.

There were 21 players at practice on Monday as Edinburgh prepped for a Class A sectional game at Cambridge City Lincoln.

“We’re fighting a lot of those same battles with the attack on football and our small community aspect,” Burton said. “But in some ways it is the same uphill battle that we are always fighting.”

Edinburgh is located in Johnson County, next door to traditionally strong large-school programs like Center Grove and Whiteland. Columbus North and Columbus East, a 10-minute drive down U.S. Highway 31, are tough every year. But Edinburgh has not shared the success of its neighbors. Since 1960, the Lancers have just six winning seasons and none since 1993.

Shawn Kelsey, an Edinburgh police officer and assistant football coach, did not win a game as a player at Edinburgh over a four-year span from 2004-07. His sophomore year, there were just 13 players on the team.

“I don’t see injuries or concussions here as being the issue,” Kelsay said of Edinburgh’s football issues. “To be honest, Edinburgh has more talent than most small schools. But can you get those kids to come out for football? That has always been Edinburgh’s biggest struggle. You have to get some wins for kids to buy into what you’re doing.”

The wins have not come so far this season. Edinburgh is 0-8. But this week’s opponent, Cambridge City Lincoln, is also winless.

"If we get a little more fire in us, maybe it will inspire more kids to come out and play," junior quarterback Tyson Sackman said.

Edinburgh has a reputation as a basketball school, but football is important. The fans show up and support the Lancers every Friday night, win or lose.

"That's what keeps me out here," senior receiver and safety Hunter Dean said. "It's pride and passion for the school. What we need to do is win a football game."

Burton is working on it. The uphill battle is real for program that has not won much at all in 60 years. He talks to other small-school coaches for ideas. Wes-Del, a Class A program, brought nearly 50 players to Edinburgh for a game on Oct. 5 (a 56-0 Wes-Del win).

There is not a singular answer. But Burton believes strengthening the youth league and building a year-round strength and conditioning program will eventually pay long-term dividends.

"Our administration wants football and the community cares," Burton said. "We just need to grow those numbers. In a school our size, we should be able to get eight or nine kids per grade playing in high school."

## **Eight-man football a possibility?**

If numbers deter more schools from fielding a football team, one possibility could be eight-man football. While Cox said there has been no discussion to this point about the potential of eight-man football, it is popular in Midwest states like Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Iowa



and Michigan. Several states, mostly notably Texas, also have six-man football.

Cox pointed out that many of the states with eight- or six-man football are those with schools separated by large distances. Some states also have "co-op" programs where players from two separate schools combine to play on one team.

"We've not had any proposals to consider eight-man football," Cox said. "That might be something for a committee to look at. If you only have seven schools doing it, it's probably not a meaningful event."

There was eight-man and six-man football in Indiana at one time. The Pocket Athletic Conference in southwest Indiana started an eight-man league in 1948 with Rockport, Richland, Poseyville, Oakland City, Mt. Vernon, Owensville, Cannelton, Tell City, Dale and Petersburg as participants. The Wabash Valley League was also eight-man league until 1963, made up of Cayuga, Covington, Ladoga, New Market, Perrysville and Veedersburg. Other schools like Kentland, Morocco and DeMotte played eight-man until the 1960s.

Several local schools — Center Grove, Beech Grove, Lawrence Central, Pike, Greenwood, Speedway, Decatur Central, Plainfield, Danville and Franklin Central — played six-man football for at least a brief time in the late 1930s and/or early '40s.

"I don't know the intricacies of it," Burton said of the eight-man game. "I'd have to read more into it. But our community is pretty old-fashioned. I think it would take a lot to convince them to change."

## **A threatened tradition**

Standing on the visiting sideline at Knox on a rainy, 37-degree Friday night, it might cross your mind why anyone would sign up for this.

Caston fumbles on the third play of the game — and again on the sixth play. A punt hits the back of another Comet and bounces backward. By the middle of the first quarter, Knox leads 21-0. By halftime, it is 54-0. Caston has zero first downs.

But if you are standing there, in the rain, you might see Chris Smith. He is the only senior on the Caston team, but he is on crutches, wearing his No. 79 jersey, sweats and a ballcap. Smith's season ended two weeks ago when a chop block tore up his knee. As the points pile up in Knox's favor, he shouts encouragement from the sideline.

"I can say 100 percent that I love every kid on this team," Smith says after the game. "I see the improvement from first-time varsity players from the beginning of the season to now. It might not always look like it, but there is. I'd do it all again, even if I knew exactly what was going to happen."

If you are standing there, in the rain, you might see Hunter Schanlaub. The 6-6, 215-pound junior is listed as a tackle and defensive end. But he plays quarterback. So much goes wrong. But Schanlaub, who lives in unincorporated Twelve Mile, keeps getting up. Finally, in the second half, the Comets score a touchdown.

"The mentality is we have to have heart," Schanlaub says. "At some point, you know it's not possible to win. But you use it as practice for the next game. You put stuff on film, go hard. That way you know what you are doing right and doing wrong. If you quit, you have nothing to get better about."

If you are standing there, in the rain, you might see Hunter Schafer. Schanlaub is his best friend. Like Schanlaub and Smith, Schafer is a team captain. But he does not play. Schafer, who has cerebral palsy, is in a wheelchair. Schanlaub helps him to midfield before the game for the coin toss. When the game starts, he watches every play from the sideline.

"That kid is a brother to me," Schanlaub says, breaking into a wide smile. "Seventh grade, he literally ran into me. We found out we both had the same name. I started hanging out with him outside of school. My mom is his caretaker at school. He's like a little brother. I love that kid."

Schafer was going to graduate this year. But he changed his plans so he could graduate with Schanlaub in the same class and walk across the stage with him. "He's out there every game just like the rest of us," Schanlaub says. "He's a football player."

If you are standing there, in the rain, you might see the Caston team line the chain-link fence after the game and thank their friends and family for coming. There are hugs and handshakes. There are smiles and laughs.

If you are standing there, in the rain, you wonder what happens if this goes away.

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