

# 'We're all learning together.' Ex-NFL star leads small school with big dreams.

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## Football Returns to Sayre School

Ten years after finishing second behind Peyton Manning for the National Football League's Most Valuable Player award, and six years removed from his retirement from the NFL, Chad Pennington is about as far from professional football as possible.

In an ideal world, Pennington [wouldn't have been named the head coach](#) when Sayre School decided to revive its football program after four decades of dormancy. He'd rather coach his two sons, Luke and Gage, at The Lexington School, [where he has coached since 2012](#) and

continues to coach, and watch them learn from someone else at the next level, where he now coaches his oldest son, Cole.

But the more Pennington spoke with Sayre administrators about their intention to bring football back, the more it became clear to them that having him in the program was essential to getting it off the ground.

So here he is, in a locker room that three months earlier had never housed a football helmet, beside a field that two months earlier didn't have goal posts, tightening the screws on a player's back pad the night before Sayre's first varsity football game since 1977.

"With my dad coaching for 30 years, I think I probably took for granted the little things that I did or didn't see him do, or were already in place," Pennington said. "So when you're starting it from scratch, all those things show up and it's mind-boggling and can be overwhelming, sometimes, all the things you have to think about."



Sayre's Daniel Clinkinbeard ran for a touchdown against Bourbon County. "I just always try to keep it focused on the kids," Sayre Coach Chad Pennington said. "If I was caught up in winning and competing, I would go somewhere else to coach. I would go to college or the pros and try to be in that industry."

**Matt Goins**

## **Catalyst**

Football games require a football field on which to be played. Aaron Simmerman, the director of the Sayre Athletic Complex, had about two months to help create one after the school finalized its decision on football in June.

Goal posts, a scoreboard and all the various elements surrounding those things went up swiftly, albeit with some complications — back-stop netting for kicks had to be re-installed after a July storm ravaged

the first installment and required the pouring of new concrete. The same storm [ripped the roof from one of the complex's buildings](#).

Simmerman, a former football player [who won a state title with Bourbon County in 1997](#) and coaches Sayre's defense, has been sole overseer of the 60-acre facility for the last nine years. He has enjoyed watching the complex — which was purchased in 2005 and originally only had a baseball field and no concession stand — grow into an all-encompassing venue for the school's outdoor sports programs.

The addition of football has already spurred interest in bringing stadium lights, one of the amenities not yet present at the facility. There's no immediate plans set in stone, but their addition seems inevitable because of the value it could add beyond the ability to play games after 7 p.m. in the fall.

"Football is becoming a catalyst to get all these other things in place that will benefit other sports," Simmerman said. "We'll not be playing soccer games at 5:30, six o'clock. It will potentially benefit boys' lacrosse and girls' lacrosse. Soccer, they can host regionals. We're really hoping that involvement in the student body, boosters and parents, will be that thing that springboards this place to provide a better experience for all these kids.

"What is the future plan since we brought in football? Does that involve a huge press box? Another concession stand? Big concrete bleachers? A track? All of those things, the wheels are turning from our department's standpoint and people involved with Sayre School."





Sayre fans reacted after Daniel Clinkinbeard ran for the school's first touchdown since 1977 during the Spartans' 15-0 win over Bourbon County.

**Matt Goins**

## **Player leadership**

That Sayre is playing *any* varsity contests this season is a small miracle. Its original plan was to field freshman and junior varsity teams before a couple of seniors, Nick Clark and Garrett Nail, approached Pennington after an address he made to the school near the end of the spring semester.

“(They) came to me and said, ‘Coach, if there’s a way you can allow seniors to play, we would love to put on that helmet,’” Pennington said.

"As I thought about it I felt like having player leadership is so important, and ownership in the program is key. And if these seniors are that passionate about playing and being pioneers of a program, we have to find a way."

Pennington spoke to the Kentucky High School Athletic Association, which informed him that seniors could play in junior-varsity contests as long as Sayre's opponents were informed about it and OK with it. That wasn't a problem, since Sayre's seniors in most cases have less football-playing experience than freshmen at other programs.

Since the season started, Pennington was able to lock in a couple of varsity contests, including a neutral site game against Jenkins at Kentucky Christian University, to let his nine seniors experience football under Friday night lights before they venture off to college.

The experience has been surreal, Nail said.

"I was primarily a football athlete before I decided to come here," Nail said. "I saw how good the academics were around here and saw the school culture and I knew it was the right place for me to go to high school. And considering that I wasn't probably going to be a D1 football player someday, I had to be a little realistic about my decision."

Nail made a big sacrifice, athletically: He lives in Georgetown, meaning he would have been part of one of the state's top programs if he enrolled at Scott County High School. He might have made a solid linebacker for the Cardinals at 6-foot-1, 200 pounds, but those measurements make him one of the biggest students enrolled at Sayre.

"So by default I ended up being a lineman," Nail said with a laugh. "That's pretty sad, 6-1, 200, being the biggest guy in the school but it's been fun. I love D-line and I'm a team player so a little bit of O-line never hurt anybody."

Clark played middle school football, too, but always preferred baseball and basketball, both of which he has continued to play at Sayre. Nail quickly convinced Clark to be a trailblazer on the football field after Pennington's initial pitch to the school, and now he plays quarterback and safety for the Spartans.

Having an opportunity to play is fun, but he can't wait to see Sayre grow in the years to come, and loves knowing that he'll be able to someday experience a homecoming football game and cheer on his alma mater.

"As time goes on I'm thinking that Sayre's gonna be more competitive and I'm excited to come back and watch them, 'cause we've got a good team," Clark said.



Sayre's Nick Clark, left, and Jack Foster, clapping, rallied the Spartans in the locker room before the program played its first football game since 1977.

**Matt Goins**

## **The wrong direction**

Sayre on Aug. 20 played its first football game since 1977. The Spartans won 15-0 against Bourbon County in a JV contest that was called at halftime because of lightning. The Spartans lost their first varsity contest last week at Indiana's Rock Creek Community Academy, 13-6, a respectable showing for a program that the night before staged its first Friday night walk-through in 41 years.

Pennington wasn't sure what the end product would look like before



the game at Rock Creek, but he had high expectations for how Sayre would conduct itself. Mistake-free football isn't part of the game plan.

"I'm gonna mess up, our staff will, our kids will, and it's OK. We're all learning together," Pennington said. "One thing you find about football is even if you're moving in the wrong direction, if everybody's moving in the wrong direction together something good normally happens, so that's what we always talk about."

Pennington hopes to see Sayre grow into a competitive program in the KHSAA's Class A division, [the state's smallest](#), over the next five to 10 years. He says the program should be on the cutting edge of techniques, health, safety, scheduling and equipment. He's a big proponent of kids having a multi-sport experience, and wants to see the program share as many of its athletes as possible with other programs at the school.

And, above all, he hopes the kids in his program have an experience they can look back on and cherish regardless of what their record in the win-loss column said about their time in it.

"I just always try to keep it focused on the kids," Pennington said. "If I was caught up in winning and competing, I would go somewhere else to coach. I would go to college or the pros and try to be in that industry. That's not what it's about for me. It's about investing time into young men that are in (their) high school years, that are so important, and that are looking for a foundation to be set, and I enjoy trying to set that foundation. And I enjoy trying to partner with their parents to just be a small part of their growth, to where when they look back upon their high school football experience, they can go, "You now what?"

That football experience really helped make me the man I am.'"

So here he is, in a locker room that three months earlier had never housed a football helmet, beside a field that two months earlier didn't have goal posts, eagerly awaiting the next time he's asked to tighten the screws on a player's back pad.