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Practice Makes Perfect?

Just how high are the priorities of high school football . When is a "camp" not a " practice"? And, voices of reason from some surprising sources

by Barry Friedman

The July sun, looking half asleep itself, is making its way through the Sapulpa sky; despite a cool breeze, varsity football players, jogging down the hill between Chieftain Stadium and the practice facility, are sweating, the stains of perspiration already visible on their shirts.

Once reaching the bottom, the team breaks into groups: two or three near the equipment shed, four or five near an area closest to the parking lot, seven at the far side of the field, they look like schools of fish in a pond.

Girls about the same ages in Chieftain blue and white—*trainers*, they're charitably called—drive around in golf carts, bringing them water and towels and smiles. Some players sit on the ground at this point, leaning back on their elbows to look at a sun that will soon torture them; some stretch; some yawn; and some hitch rides to the bathroom.

Coaches, with whistles and clipboards, fan out in all directions, placing blue cones, hurdles, and obstacle courses for upcoming drills.

The official start of football season is more than a month away.

The official start of football *practice* is more than a month away.

I am standing on the edge of the field with a former football coach, a big burly man who unapologetically loves this game and this town.

He looks as happy and as comfortable as a man can look this early.

Other coaches come by to say hello.

"Hi, coach."

"Hi, John," he says back.

"I never," he says to me after the coach leaves, "liked the idea of grown men calling each other *coach* all the time. That's why I call them by their name."

He introduces me, but we stumble over what to tell them I am doing there, for I am in Sapulpa at six in the morning to see a practice that may not be legal and which, in fact, may not even be a practice.

Dan has agreed to be my chaperone, in part, because he is beginning to worry about the consumptive, year-round aspect of high school football and perhaps, though he doesn't say it, because his son Frank, who's on the field now, got a concussion last year at one of these non-practices.

Whose Rules?

The OSSAA (Oklahoma Secondary School Athletics Association) is the governing body of all high school sports in Oklahoma, and its rules governing Oklahoma high school athletics in general and Oklahoma high school football in particular (especially summer practices) are as Byzantine as they are malleable.

(Section III Practice Regulations):

Practice without pads may begin twenty days prior to the opening of the current football season excluding Sundays (Tuesday, Aug. 10, for the 2004 season). Sundays shall not be counted when determining the starting date for the pre-season training period, nor shall practice be held on Sundays during the pre-season training period.

For the record, it was July 20.

What's happening 20 yards away is a clear violation, right?

Well, not exactly.

In Article F of the same regulation, it also reads:

Organized practice is defined as school personnel (those people who are designated as coaches or assistant coaches within the school district) or anticipated school personnel, directly or indirectly, giving individual or team instruction concerning fundamentals of football. School personnel may coach their team in summer passing leagues or summer camps (see camp regulations - Section XX.)

"Technically," Dan tells me, surveying the field, "this isn't a practice," and then adds, "Technically, I *guess* it isn't."

"But," I ask, pointing to a coach showing a group of running backs how to get a good, strong first step, "if it's not a practice, then should he be doing what he's doing?"

Dan smiles.

I see one coach approach a kid.

"Missed you at practice yesterday, son."

"Yeah, I know," the kid says sheepishly. "I had family in town."

In Sapulpa, this camp, called *20 Days of Commitment*, is a 2-hour long practice held in the early mornings. And it seems the players do not have to be coerced. In many ways, they are willing, if not eager, to schlep to fields in the early hours of the morning to practice lateral movements, run 40-yard dashes and lift weights.

At Union High School, by comparison, where sessions have been going on since June, there have been the following: *JV Team Camp, Varsity Team Camp, Summer Pride Conditioning Camp, Strength and Conditioning Program, Passing League, Linebacker and DB School, Linemen Camp, Quarterbacks and Receivers School, Varsity Passing League, JV Passing League, and L'il Redskin Football Skills Camp.*

We Need a Ruling?

David Jackson, assistant to the director, OSAA, in charge of football, says his organization keeps a hands-off policy toward the running of these camps, essentially leaving the running of them in the hands of local administrators and coaches. For the record, he reiterates, the official start of football practice is August 10.

"Until then," he says, "practice per se, cannot begin."

However . . .

If a school petitions the OSAA to run a football camp, and the organization sanctions it (Jackson can't think of one instance where OSSAA didn't), football coaches are allowed to give instruction, just as they would during an official practice.

Apparently, the answer then is both.

"Yes, they can practice within that setting," Jackson says, admitting there isn't much difference. "They are limited to two camps per summer, though," even though the specifics of running of the camp, the time spent at them, or the *quid pro quo* for players wishing not to attend is not something with which the OSSAA concerns itself.

The OSSAA says the camps have to be open to any high school player who wants to attend, but because most every school has its own camp, they essentially become summer practices for the host school.

For Dan, though, the specifics are important and should be of concern. He agrees with former TU Golden Hurricane and Indianapolis Colts player Sid Abramowitz that football is not a skill sport—in say the way tennis is—so it's not necessary to start players at 8 or 9 when their bones and joints and souls could do without the constant pounding.

Aside from the injuries, Dan says that for many kids, including his son, by the time they reach 17, the real problem is burnout.

A former basketball standout once told me that he, too, experienced a sudden distaste toward a sport he once loved, and it happened in the middle of a game.

"There I was standing, waiting to get a rebound after a foul shot, when it hit me: 'I hate this game.' At about the same time, the guy next to me starts talking trash—'Hey, I'm going grab this rebound. You're meat. I'm going to be in your face.'

"I'm like, 'I care? This sucks.'"

Frank agrees.

"Yeah, there's some burnout. I mean, I started playing when I was in eighth grade, and I wasn't any further behind than anyone else who started earlier."

Frank has no intention of playing college, so he doesn't view football as the defining element of his life, as do some of his teammates.

Statistically, at least, Frank has it right. Studies show that one out of every 100 high school athletes plays at a Division 1 school and only one of every 100 playing in a Division 1 school plays in the pros. And for those who do, they do so for fewer than three years. In Oklahoma, however, many parents are already clearing space on the mantle for the Heisman when their kids first break out with acne.

"Many of the parents," his father tells me, "have decided by the time their kid's in the 8th or 9th grade, they're going to play for OU."

Saying he thinks that football in Oklahoma is a little "out of whack," Frank tells a story where the team was told to run 50 40-yard dashes at one practice.

"After awhile, you're just so tired, your form is terrible. It's a waste."

Dan tells me that he has seen his share of "psychotic" coaches who encourage this, he has no problem with the current crop, but adds, "But, you know, they're still coaches."

Voice of Reason

One coach, Allan Trimble, from Jenks, agrees that year-round high school football is not in anyone's best interest. While saying the OSSAA's guidelines are fair and well defined, he agrees that these camps lend themselves to over-saturation.

"To me, personally, I think we need more restrictions," says Trimble, who's been a head coach for the past eight years. "If one team practices four hours a day, then others feel they need to keep up, and then where does it end?" he asks, knowing his views won't make him many friends.

"Since the camps are voluntary, well, sort of, they're not as intense as they are in the regular season."

Sort of?

"It's tough for a kid to take off three months in the summer—the level of competition is so great—so we have surrounded them with a program. And basically, if they're here, in town, we hope they'll give us a two-hour commitment."

Frank, though, sees it differently. When asked if he thinks the intensity is as high during the summer, he laughs, "Oh, yeah, yeah."

For his part, Trimble, says, "I tell them to stay with priorities: faith, family, education, and then football" and adds that he supports "soul-rejuvenation" for his players, including family vacations.

Trimble mentions those offensive linemen, running backs, and passing league sessions now being offered at schools as evidence of a disturbing trend.

"Where does it all end?" he asks.

It seems odd that someone would use the word *football* and *priorities* in the same sentence in Oklahoma, especially a football coach in Oklahoma, and especially one who's won seven state championships, but Trimble goes even further.

"I would love to have a summit on off-season practices, based on the NCAA model."

Specifically, Trimble says, "If I could be guaranteed 10 to 15 days of padded spring practice just like they do in college—after spring sports are over—then summer could be for conditioning only. I'd support that."

And he does, he says, because you can't expect kids who haven't had off-season conditioning programs to face players who have, so you need them doing something in the off season.

He does believe, though, that the less contact you have in the summer, the better chances of not having season-ending injuries, saying if a player gets hurt during the spring practice, he has all summer to get better.

"My job is to get kids successful under the rules, but I think we can accomplish the same with more structure."

Trimble, his seven state titles notwithstanding, has by most accounts actually tempered the excesses and turbulence surrounding the Jenks football program since he took over from Ron Lancaster. Trimble says that for the kids' sake, he'd like to "bring back more of the fun" to the game.

But Dan cautions there are problems with even that.

"Get this? Little league football practices, the padded ones, have already started. Here in July! . . . mind boggling."

How Did It Get This Way?

"Many think that summer football camps," says Ron Elders, also of the OSSAA, sprung up "because of all the basketball camps in existence. Football coaches saw that and thought they deserved the same situation."

Asked about possible abuses, OSSAA's Jackson again reiterates, "I don't know anything really bothers us the way it is set-up. We haven't seen or heard anything that would be over the boundaries. Nobody has ever come to us with a problem."

Jackson concedes that if his organization received information about the length of time kids are at practice, it might step in, but hasn't gotten any. In that case, he says, he'd turn the matter over to the local high school administration.

Incredibly, the OSSAA has nothing in its bylaws about the number of hours a team can practice, even during the school year, so a coach is free to run practice as long as he wants, and if the local administration doesn't stop him, the OSSAA won't, either. Sure, the athletes themselves could complain, but Frank thinks that's unlikely.

"Players won't say anything because they don't want to be singled out."

Frank, Dan, and even Trimble are bothered that the OSSAA doesn't regulate the length of practices during the school year.

Trimble says he also can't remember if the OSSAA ever handed down a sanction on this issue, but does recall a time when a coach was featured in the paper on a blocking sled yelling at players in pads—this at a time when contact was not allowed.

Trimble laughs, "Even then, I think he just got a letter."

One of the unintended, or maybe it *was* intended, OSSAA guidelines is that any potential infraction, serious or technical, is difficult to articulate and, hence, impossible to punish. When the rules don't clearly define parameters, they're easy to bend, obfuscate, or ignore. To the OSSAA, if nobody's complaining, nothing's wrong.

To stretch the cliché, it's not that its rules have no teeth, it's that the organization is speaking out of both sides of its toothless mouth—one telling coaches that practice may not start until August 10, the other telling them how to get around it.

The Business of Oklahoma

That sports are a business is not new, but that sports at the high school level are, may be. Recently, a local Oklahoma bank decided to sponsor the Jenks-Union game, guaranteeing \$10,000 and \$15,000 per year to be divided evenly between the two schools, in exchange for exclusive rights to the game.

Ed Fariss, senior vice president of MidFirst Bank Tulsa, said his bank is committed to developing innovative ways of contributing to education in Tulsa and throughout Oklahoma and then added, presumably with a straight face, "We see this as a great opportunity for two successful and popular athletic programs to act as a conduit for contributing to their schools' academic needs."

Back in Sapulpa, at the *Steak and Eggs*, a place resembling what the Chatterbox Café from Lake Wobegon must look like, nobody is talking about bank sponsorships or moving the school's games to 40,000-seat Skelly Stadium.

Everyone knows everyone here, and one imagines it is a scene going on in diners in Henryetta, Ponca City, Poteau, Keifer, and towns all over Oklahoma.

The Chieftains were 3-7 in 2003, and the defeats may have been too much for some. On an unofficial Chieftain website, the following message was posted:

Anyone interested in taking over the website for the 2004-2005 Season, should contact us and we will help get you started. We have really enjoyed doing the website but would pass it on to someone else if they are interested. Thanks!

Dan tells me that the problem for Sapulpa is that while it has one or two great players on the team, Jenks and Union have a dozen, so he thinks a 7-3 record in 2004 is one with which everybody would be pleased. In fact, Union comes to Chieftain Stadium on October 29.

In last year's game, played in Tuttle Stadium, The Chieftains got spanked 41-6 by The Redskins (in what must have been the most politically incorrect blow-out of the season).

One local Sapulpa sportswriter spun the game this way: *The No.1-ranked Union Redskins weren't able to take their starters out after the first quarter against Sapulpa Friday . . .*

Still, it's summer, so smiles and optimism are still possible around the *Steak and Eggs*, even if a picture of The Last Supper hangs slightly askew on the wall.

"I think," Dan tells me, after his omelet arrives, "that coaches are simply demanding what parents want," just as one of those parents and his teenage daughter pass by the table.

"You think football is powerful in Oklahoma," he laughs, "get into a fight with a band director."

It is just then the two smile at Dan, who smiles back.

"Hey, coach," the man says.