

# Six pack

## High schools turn to 6-man football to keep programs alive

Fans come from across town to watch their sons, neighbors, grandsons and nephews play football.

They watch from either the small set of bleachers, painted in school colors, or the back of their pickups parked next to the field — a field surrounded by corn, a silo, chickens and houses.

Four cheerleaders lead the pep squad, which has fewer members than an English class at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, in a round of cheers.

The teams are suited up, the coin is tossed and the starting six — that's right, six — players are announced to the crowd.

For four years, six-man football has been commonplace in Rising City. In Nebraska, it's a piece of history.

In 1934, Stephen Epler, a coach in Chester, designed six-man football for a graduate studies project at NU.

The game caught on and in the early 1950s, six-man football reached its peak. More than 180 high schools played the game — almost half of all the football teams in the state.

As school enrollment began to in-

crease during the baby boom, many schools found themselves too large to participate in the sport. By the mid-1960s, six-man had died in Nebraska and was close to extinction everywhere else.

Six-man returned to Nebraska about a decade ago, after the farm crisis drained the population of many rural areas and school enrollments began to decline.

Rising City's team, an eight-man squad for more than 30 years, switched to six-man four years ago because of dwindling school enrollment.

This year, Rising City, 20 miles southeast of Columbus, is one of 28 high schools in the state competing in six-man. Four other states also participate in six-man: Texas, Colorado, Montana and New Mexico.

In six-man, the field is shorter, the game is faster, the rules are different and the scores often run high.

Many of the rules differ from 11-man football:

- All players are eligible for a pass.
- The quarterback can only run with the ball after it has been pitched once.
- A team scores two points for extra-point kicks and one for runs or passes.

- A field goal is worth four points.
- The field is 80 yards by 40 yards.
- It takes 15 yards to make a first down.
- The game ends if one team leads by 45 points.

To prevent a premature ending to a game, a team must work together.

"You have to have a lot tighter team," said Jason Siffring, a junior on Rising City's team. "No one can let up or the other team will win."

"You have to learn to work together, to work as a team."

Offense is the key to the game. A good athlete can shine because he stands out among the small number of players on the field.

"You get to see a really talented athlete in action in six-man because one man can really dominate the process," said Rising City coach Joe Krysl. "One excellent athlete on a team can make the difference."

"Whoever has the quickest, strongest guys is going to come out ahead," said assistant coach Bob Drews.

Six-man lets boys in almost every high school in the state play the game.

"One good thing about six-man football is that everyone gets to play," Siffring said.



(Clockwise from upper left) Rising City team members dress in the shop classroom because of the lack of locker room space. The volleyball team uses the locker rooms when there is a game before the football game.

Fans sit in the back of their pickups to watch the first football game.

Rising City coach Joe Krysl reacts to a bad play during the first game.

Assistant coach Bob Drews, left, and coach Joe Krysl sit among pads and jerseys while figuring stats after a game. Tradition is to partially undress in the gym before going into the locker room.

Rising City cheerleaders and pep club cheer after the team scores a touchdown.

The 13 members of the Rising City football team make the one-block trek from the school to the football field.

