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## Youth learn fundamental football

Wilmington league helps players with basics, on the field and off

BY BRIAN SMITH  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL  
11/21/2005

As the Howard High football team rolled to a 9-1 record and a berth in the Division II state tournament this season, Art Ames felt a sense of satisfaction.

Ames is a longtime volunteer coach with the Millard A. Naylor Youth Football League, run by the Wilmington Department of Parks and Recreation. Eight starters on Howard's team played in Ames' Raiders organization in the youth league. Seven other members of the Howard team, as well as numerous other high school standouts in the area, played for one of the other three organizations.

Sowing the seeds of such success was one of the goals when the league started 12 years ago. Founders Theo Gregory and Romain L. Alexander saw the league as a way to expose city youths to football.

"[They were] trying to come up with a league that would teach the kids of the city and give them some opportunity for tackle football," said Shawn Baker, program coordinator for the Wilmington Department of Parks and Recreation. "Sometimes kids didn't have that opportunity. So they started that league to try to get the kids acclimated to football."

The league's four organizations -- Raiders, Trojans, Huskies and Panthers -- each represent a different area of the city. Each organization has three teams based on age -- midgets are 6-8, juniors are 9-11 and seniors are 12-14. A support staff of 12 to 15 volunteers helps each organization run smoothly.

All three age divisions played their championship games Sunday at Baynard Stadium. The Panthers took two titles, beating the Raiders 20-7 in the midget division and edging the Raiders 8-7 in the junior division. The Raiders beat the Huskies 13-12 in the senior division.

Each age bracket also has a weight restriction: 78 pounds for



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Karrief Dean (left), coach Edgar Harris and William Jones of the Raiders confer on the sideline at Baynard Stadium during Sunday's senior division championship game in the Millard A. Naylor Youth Football League.



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Dominic Addison fields a punt for the Huskies during Sunday's senior division championship game in the Millard A. Naylor Youth Football League at Baynard Stadium.

midgets, 115 for juniors and 135 for seniors. Kids can play in their age division regardless of weight but must not exceed the weight restriction to run with or catch the ball.

The league's approach focuses on teaching the kids to understand the game and proper techniques.

"It's more basic skills," Baker said. "As the season develops, they develop a few more plays. The coach has about nine or 10 plays at the junior level; senior [division], they might have 12. They teach you how to hit, block and tackle. Those are the three most important things in football. If you don't block, hit and tackle, you're not going to win football games."

But the league goes beyond teaching football. It also gives the kids an organized activity. For those who come from single-parent homes, the coaches often serve as the only male role models in their lives.

"We try and teach them discipline and respect," Ames said. "That's where we start. We've got a lot of single-parent kids out here with no father figure, and they're just running wild like most inner-city kids do. We want to teach them some respect and discipline."

The parents appreciate that approach. Kids have an incentive to keep their grades up, lest they lose their spot on the team. The respect and attention the coaches demand carries over.

"It gives them some competition and makes them excel at a high level of play. But the biggest thing is the guidance they've gotten," said Will Jones, of Wilmington, whose sons C.J., 13, and Wesley, 9, play in the Raiders organization. "Art does a great job of motivating them to be the best. They talk about overcoming adversity, being proud of where you came from, and using football as a tool to teach that. They give the kids the tools and guidance for life."

The players also realize that the league's focus goes beyond football.

"So far, it's really fun," said Dobian Stokes, 13, who is in his first season playing for the Raiders. "I never realized that until I actually played and got the pads on. It's really about discipline, and it helps me with my grades in school.

"The hardest thing for me to learn was trying not to arm tackle, because it was my first year. The coaches expected a lot out of me, because they know I hit hard. I had to get my timing down."