

Pirates-Rebels rift leads to talk of Port youth football

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV
Wednesday, 25 September 2013 19:33

<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/092613/rebelsSM.png>

Port High official says coaches are ready to start their own junior program if Saukville club doesn't change

Two football institutions — the Port Washington High School Pirates and the Saukville Rebels — are at odds over how youngsters are taught the game, and a Port High administrator said this week that if the dispute is not settled soon it could result in the creation of a Port youth football program that would likely replace the Rebels.

“There is definitely a disconnect right now, but we do have a card in our pocket,” Athletic Director Thad Gabrielse said during an interview. “If we don't see some changes in the Rebels program, our football coaching staff is prepared to start its own youth program as early as next season, and we believe the kids will follow.

“Unfortunately, I think that would cut the legs out from under the Rebels. We don't want that to happen. We appreciate everything the program has done over the years, but there needs to be changes.”



Gabrielse, who briefed the Port Washington-Saukville School Board Extracurricular Programs Committee on the rift Monday, said head coach John Bunyan met with Rebels leaders and coaches not long after taking the reins of the Pirates program last year in an effort to encourage coaching continuity between the programs.

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“We want to see more of a focus on the fundamentals of football so when kids get to the high school level they are better prepared,” Gabrielse said.

But beyond urging technical changes in the way football is coached, the Port High administration is concerned with the Rebels’ philosophical approach to the game — how coaches deal with players and conduct themselves on the field and how playing time is divided among children, Gabrielse said.

“Through eighth grade, playing time shouldn’t be an issue,” he said. “It should be about teaching kids and giving all of them an opportunity to play the game of football. We want to see the Rebels program move from a selective one to an inclusive one.”

Lending urgency to the concerns of Port High officials is declining participation in Pirates football. A total of about 80 boys play on the high school’s freshmen, junior varsity and varsity teams, significantly fewer than in the program’s heyday.

Gabrielse said there are a number of factors responsible for the trend — fear of injuries, especially concussions, and the highly competitive North Shore Conference, which has made it difficult for the Pirates to qualify for post-season play in recent years.

Another factor, Gabrielse said, may be the Rebels, the 53-year-old youth football club that has long been the de facto feeder program for the Pirates.

“We hear about things like playing time and character issues, about kids being called out by coaches on the field,” Gabrielse said.

“There’s no place, not even at the high school level, for the Bobby Knights of this world,” he said, referring to the retired college basketball coach who was as famous for his boisterous style and volatile temper as he was for winning games.

Rebels President Larry Donohue disputed Gabrielse’s claims that the youth program discourages participation with its coaching philosophy, but said he is committed to working with the Pirates staff to ensure the youth program is more consistent with the high school’s approach to football.

Changing a system that has operated without input from the high school for half a century, however, is difficult, and Port High’s heavy-handed approach, which has included threats of starting a competing youth program, hasn’t helped, Donohue said.

“That really pissed some of our coaches off, so much so that some of them are dragging their feet,” he said. “I told John (Bunyan) when he first came to us that we’d do whatever we can to help the program, and I told the guys the same thing, but this is a program that has been around for 53 years. It’s hard to change things overnight, and it’s hard for some guys to deal with how this is being handled. Keep in mind these are volunteer coaches. They don’t get paid a cent for all the time they give to this program.”

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“In John’s defense, he did offer to get his coaches involved in our program. We just need to get our guys on board with that.”

Donohue said it’s ironic that after years of essentially being ignored by Port High, the Pirates want to be involved in the Rebels program and are now making demands and setting deadlines.

“We’ve wanted to build this relationship in the past and really didn’t get anywhere with it because there wasn’t any interest on the part of the high school,” he said.

While Donohue said he is willing to change the technical aspects of the Rebels coaching approach, he is baffled by accusations that the program excludes children and that its coaches don’t treat players properly.

“I don’t know where that’s coming from,” he said. “We’ve never cut a single player from our program, and we’ve never turned a kid away because his family couldn’t afford the registration fee. I always found a way to make sure those kids can play.”

Donohue said he is also surprised by a Port High suggestion that the Rebels leave the All-American Youth Football League to join a less competitive league.

Gabrielse said playing in a less competitive league would foster greater success and encourage more participation, to the point that the program would hopefully be able to field two teams at each grade level, give children equal playing time and prepare that many more players for the Pirates team.

“We’ve been a part of the AAYFL since its inception, and we just don’t have the numbers to field two teams at each grade level,” Donohue said. “I really don’t know what this is all about.”

He said he suspects it may have something to do with community bias.

“There has always been this dispute within Port involving Saukville,” Donohue said. “They (Port parents) want their kids to have green and white uniforms and play for the youth Pirates, not the Saukville Rebels.

“Honestly, though, I think we can probably work this out. I hope we can.”

Image Information: A photo taken in 2010, the year the Saukville Rebels celebrated its 50th anniversary, shows Nick Dallgas, who now plays for the Port Washington High School Pirates,

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rushing for yardage.