

# Middle school football expanding

By **DEREK WILEY**  
*Of the Keizertimes*

Middle school football in Salem-Keizer will look more like high school football in 2016.

Along with more practice time and at least one additional game, maybe two, schools are abandoning the heavyweight-lightweight model for varsity and junior varsity squads.

At least one coach on each team is also required to take Heads Up concussion training.

The changes come from recommendations by a committee, made up of coaches and administrators, formed by Matt Biondi, director of middle school education for the Salem-Keizer School District.

Principal Julia Dewitt and coach Thomas Larimer represented Whiteaker.

"One of the things we heard from our community was they wanted a longer season," Dewitt said. "The football season was pretty short. They wanted a full season that was comparable to what they were used to in clubs."

In the past, teams have played six games but will get at least seven this season and possibly eight, depending on the number of teams each school fields.

"The hope is that everybody will get eight," Larimer said. "The school district said we're losing too many kids to these youth leagues so let's make our product more compelling. But at the same time not abandon our motto, which is based on every school having an opportunity for every kid at a low cost."

Biondi hopes the switch to varsity and JV teams will result in more kids participating.

"I think that's going to be a real positive thing and it will also allow students who haven't played football before or who don't have the skill or experience, they'll be able to start with other students who are similar to them," he said. "Our goal always is to just have a great environment and sportsmanship for our students but we also want to increase participation."

"Every play that I run is a McNary play. Every piece of terminology is McNary terminology."



Thomas Larimer,  
Whiteaker Coach

Larimer said he had several kids on his heavyweight team last season who would have benefited from playing on a JV squad.

"You could have a player who was two pounds too light who was awesome playing on the lightweight team when he could have been the best player on the heavyweight team," Larimer said.

"You could have a lineman who was really big and not good at all and never have played and he would be playing against the best big kids. Last year I had several overweight kids that should have been playing the line on a JV team full-time and learning instead of being backups on a varsity team and not getting to play as much."

But just because a kid has never played before, doesn't mean he'll be placed on the JV.

"Last year I had a number of kids that had never played that were some of the very best kids on the team," Larimer said. "Those kids need to know that they can show up to play football when

they've never played in their life and that they're going to be valued and that they're going to be good."

For the first time, Whiteaker held a three-day spring camp in May and will have fall practice the week before school starts.

Each student must have a physical and the cost to play is \$45.

"Just like high school, the kids will show up for preseason practice and I'll determine which kid will be on which team," Larimer said. "We can move kids up and down each week."

Dewitt is pleased with the safety measures the district has put in place.

"I'm very proud that the district has supported that (Heads Up) and are actually funding that," she said.

Larimer is looking forward to another season at Whiteaker.

"I'll never forget when my son Marcus, who's now the offensive coordinator for me at Whiteaker, he was in eighth grade, we were playing Claggett, two undefeated teams that were so evenly matched that

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Whiteaker Middle School head football coach Thomas Larimer instructs a group of eighth graders during an early practice.

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