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Planting the seeds of success In Jenks, X's and O's are taught about the same time as ABCs
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Talons player Kevin Thomas shows tackling techniques to first- and second-graders.
CHRIS GIBBARD / Tulsa World

Play -- Immediately after a preseason camp for little Jenks football players, 6-year-old Antjuan Overton runs a "belly" play.

s to a concessions stand for nachos.

When crunches of tortilla chips, Overton talks about wanting to play for the Trojans. Take a look at the landscape and his dream is instantly shared by every Jenks tot with a Y chromosome.

Overton is among the estimated 200 Jenks first-, second- and third-grade boys who participated in a two-day, full-pad camp in Broken Arrow (the event doubled as a "combine" before a youth draft). Helmets are almost as big as bodies and, as human bobblehead dolls, Overton's comment was overheard to say, "It's kind of like electric football."

Broken Arrow, appropriately, it's the power source for the state's most dominant high school football program.

Who's that guy tutoring tiny defensive linemen? That's Jenks High School coach Allan Trimble. Doesn't he have better things to do than tutoring tiny defensive linemen? Trimble is no dummy. He's planting a garden that should be ready to harvest in, oh, about a decade.

Trimble calls it giving back. It's the gift that keeps on giving.

Jenks High School has won seven of the last nine Class 6A football championships. Detractors are quick to cry

pointing out that Jenks and Union (which won the 2002 and 2004 titles) too often get impact transfer players.

Broken Arrow is the fact that uber-organized youth football programs in suburban Tulsa churn out hordes of trained-and-ready Frisco soldiers.

Trimble said he knows where his future players are coming from. He estimates that 90 percent of Trojan seniors were raised in the farm system. He stages clinics to introduce youth coaches to his offensive and defensive systems.

"Allan Trimble's involvement with the Jenks youth football program is the key," said Kyle Litterell, a former University of Tulsa player who coaches a Jenks third-grade team. "He is getting kids in the ninth and 10th grade that are already familiar with half the terminology and are familiar with the system."

guys, big business

Broken Arrow and other communities are investing -- a financial term is certainly appropriate -- in football futures. The Jenks and Broken Arrow youth football programs combined for more than \$600,000 in total revenues in 2003, according to documents provided to the Internal Revenue Service. The Union Youth Football Association's total revenue in 2004 was \$189,317. That buys a lot of nachos for Jenks' case, a lot of trophies.

Broken Arrow area high school programs reap dividends of youth football, according to Kurt Scheckel, who oversees "Mighty Mite" teams in the Indian Nations Football Conference.

"Phillips and Glenpool, they are doing what they are doing today due to their coaching staffs," he said. "But if you start kids on the second grade, teaching the fundamentals of the game, it makes it easier for the coaches when they come up into school. The less you have to teach them about the basics, the faster they can teach them about how they want to play the game."

Broken Arrow is the gold standard for Oklahoma high school football the last 10 years, was chosen as the centerpiece for this story. Take a look around and it all makes sense -- the Trojan dynasty, that is. Jenks is Jenks because X's and O's are taught at about the same level as ABCs.

Broken Arrow coaches are folks like Anthony Phillips, a former OU All-American who coaches one of Jenks' nine "Mighty Mite" squads (divided of first- and second-graders). His son, Parker, was the first pick in a "Mighty Mite" draft.

Broken Arrow coaches prepared for the draft by attending the pad camp / combine. Armed with clipboards and scribbling utensils, they roam the practice field to determine which kids they should covet. Coaches were on the lookout for size, speed, coordination and -- this is the important -- kids who aren't afraid of contact.

that Jenks conducts a combine and draft for wee lads, a former major college offensive coordinator replied, "Unbelievable."

Drafting isn't a Jenks-only gimmick. All communities with multiple teams in the Indian Nations Football Conference are bound to select players via draft, according to Scheckel.

Using little guys conjures meat-market images, but it's actually humane. It keeps the talent level of teams relatively even and is the alternative of loading all the best players on one roster and letting them mash outmanned squads into apple butter. (That happened years later. In 2004, Jenks High School outscored opponents by an average of more than 25 points per game.)

Being crushed is no fun and Trimble, already established as not being a dummy, stresses to youth coaches that football will be a failure -- or else. Kids who don't have fun will quit. And who knows if that kid could have someday blossomed into the next great player? Retention is paramount. Attrition is the devil.

"The longer you keep kids in the program, just mathematically you are going to have more good players develop," Trimble said.

One big part about the youth program is getting them in the program and then developing them and keeping them in the program. If they're not in the program, you are never going to know."

In Trimble's new book, "Coaching Football Successfully," he relates the tale of late bloomer Andrew Spankuch. As a sophomore, Spankuch was far from game-ready and quit to become a team manager. But Spankuch gave football another shot, worked on his academics and as a senior was voted Jenks' outstanding offensive lineman.

Kids in high places

Tom Cross, co-owner of the Tulsa Talons, oversees football operations for Jenks Trojans Athletics. A proponent of youth football, Cross led a team of Jenks and Union fourth-grade players to a sanctioned national championship in 2003. He makes the Talons' quarters available for JTA drafts. Talons players and coaches provided instruction during the pad camp/combine.

"This is where Jenks' state championships start is right here," Talons offensive coordinator Mitch Allner tells kids during an end-of-camp monologue. "You guys stay and play together and you guys are going to win a state championship."

At the camp, Allner confirms that he meant every word.

"I grew up in Iowa and we don't start organized football until the seventh grade in Iowa," he said. "These kids have a big jump on us. It's a great thing and the thing that you really like about it is you see all the parents out here supporting the program and supporting everything that goes on. That's what makes a great program. The way that they run things and the way Allner runs this program is, in my opinion, the best I have ever seen in high school sports."

Jenks Trojans Athletics president is Taft Price, meteorologist at television station KTUL. One could joke that only Jenks and Tulsa are powerful enough to count weather as an ally.

Price suggests to Allner that maybe kids shouldn't be playing tackle football at such a young age. Shouldn't they be playing hide-and-seek instead of middle linebacker? Take a look before judging, he says.

Every kid in the draft pool gets picked. Every "Mighty Mite" gets to play at least two quarters. Every kid can audition for a favor, unless they exceed weight limits for ballcarriers.

Phillips said children didn't play football at such a young age when he was a kid, so he was initially skeptical.

"The more I am around it," Phillips said, "the better I feel about how it is constructed and how the kids adjust to it. It's a good program."

University of Tulsa player Scott Brown, who oversees Jenks' third- and fourth-grade programs, said the first impression

get is that Jenks is over the top in regard to football. "But if you get underneath it, there are a lot of good things that go on here," Trimble said.

He believes youth football programs should focus on participation rather than winning at all costs.

Now that since 1996, we have gotten better every year at trying to surround those kids with coaches and parents that have their own interests in mind," Trimble said.

Biggs, who coordinates the "Mighty Mite" program, said some parents don't want to keep score and others want to keep score. It's all about the game. Perhaps it's as serious as you want it to be.

Litterell said his third-grade team practices three times a week. Other Jenks youth teams practice more frequently. Litterell conducts scouting reports on third-grade opponents (they are not distributed to players, he said). He watches film of opponents and, in the next couple of years, he plans to start introducing film study to players.

Litterell already has introduced players to frozen treats. He said every kid walked out of a recent scrimmage "with a big grin and a big appetite, and that's the way it should be."

Litterell got his first taste of Jenks youth football last year and he became involved primarily because he wanted to make sure it was fun and not too serious.

When he was trying to figure out how good the Jenks program was, I was worried they might go overboard," he said. "After my experience last year, it was the opposite of that. They put tons of effort into making it safe and tons of effort into making it fun. The coaches work extremely hard and the games get competitive, but when it's all said and done, we all err on the side of the kids."

Litterell has enough "Mighty Mite" teams to stage an in-house league. Third-grade through seventh-grade teams compete against teams from other communities affiliated with the Indian Nations Football Conference. Litterell recalled a year when Jenks produced one of the top four seventh-grade teams in the INFC playoffs. He said it's "scary" when all that talent comes together on one team.

The message to other communities is clear: Want to keep up with the Joneses? Better start keeping up with the sons of the Joneses.

Draft

Litterell finds future in third-graders

Litterell said he used to fare well in NFL fantasy leagues, but he hasn't drafted a fantasy player in years. He prefers what he calls the "real thing."

Litterell coaches one of Jenks' youth football teams and may have struck gold during a preseason draft for third-graders. He selected one of the top 12 prospects on his draft board.

Litterell and his assistant coaches evaluated kids in the draft pool and compiled a wish list, complete with numerical rankings as to which player. Talent was the primary consideration, but Litterell also evaluated get-along potential of draftees (and parents) and how well players fit into his schemes. "I don't want any Terrell Owens on my team," he said.

Youth football teams under the governance of Jenks Trojan Athletics and the Indian Nations Football Conference conduct drafts. Kids are more likely to stay interested if competitive balance exists. But you can't blame a guy for wanting to put together the best team possible, even if winning is considered secondary to raising good little human beings. "We're all competitive," Litterell said. "I want to win."

Litterell, a former University of Tulsa player, did plenty of predraft homework. During a pad camp/combine for first-, second- and third-graders, he and his assistants took turns watching players in different position groups go through drills. The coaches compiled

and huddled before the draft to finalize strategy.

the time Litterell typed his player rankings, he had exhausted eight hours getting ready for the draft. That doesn't count year-end evaluation. He occasionally watches a youth baseball or basketball game and wonders if a point guard or shortstop would be a good football player.

Tom Cross, who oversees football operations for Jenks Trojans Athletics, believes Litterell will field a winning team because Litterell is here.

Litterell said he once was an assistant coach for a Jenks youth team that produced eight Division I-A players. Two of them, Rod Smith and Sean Mahan, are in the NFL. Litterell then became head coach of a youth team, guiding a group of players from first through seventh grade. Now he's going up the ladder again, this time with a son on the roster.

Litterell is far from the only coach who does meticulous predraft research. One coach came equipped with a color-coded prospect list that he evaluated the spectrum.

When there is Trey Biggs, who is coaching a team of first- and second- graders. His first-grade son, Josh, compiled the predraft list and wanted all of his friends on the team.

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