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Friday night lights glow after flicker

Ransom football tradition being revived

Story by Amy Bickel | Kansas Agland



■ Western Kansas town making an effort to rekindle fame it had as home to NFL great Nolan Cromwell.

RANSOM – If there is discouragement behind the eyes of Luke Ritchie – it's difficult to tell. It's Monday afternoon. The Western Plains High School football coach stood with his whistle to his mouth, directing 14 boys running across a neatly mowed and painted field. They line up – as they've been doing all afternoon. A small but fast youth runs through the struggling offensive line – and coach Ritchie quickly blows the whistle. "It doesn't matter how good your running back is if you don't block," Ritchie tells them. They look at him inquisitively – a group of boys ranging from fifth graders to high school juniors. Only a couple have ever played football competitively. "My suggestion is on Saturday or Sunday, watch some real football," he tells them. "Can you watch it on Netflix?" asks one boy. Afterward, Ritchie doesn't sugarcoat



Photos by Lindsey Bauman/The Hutchinson News
Above: Coach Luke Ritchie talks to players before the start of a flag football game on Sept. 30 in Ransom. Center: Taniel Knutson makes a catch during a receiving drill at flag football practice on Sept. 26. Top: The sun sets over the football field.

his words. "This is what I'm dealing with." Fall is marked by combines cutting corn and milo – a time when the air turns crisp and the days shorten. It also brings out community spirit across Kansas as residents – wearing their school colors – head for the high school gridiron. Yet, here, on the football field at

INSIDE AND ONLINE

More photos from Ransom's flag football program, **AD ASTRA B1**

Read a letter from coach Luke Ritchie, at **KansasAgland.com**.

Learn about the growth of Kansas' six-man football league, **SPORTS, D6**

View all photos and a video by photographer Lindsey Bauman at **KansasAgland.com**.

Ransom, a former football powerhouse in Ness County where All-American and NFL Pro-Bowler Nolan Cromwell once played, Ritchie and other school officials are doing everything they can just to keep the Friday night lights burning. The rural Kansas prairie has been slowly depopulating since World War II. Fewer farmers are farming more acres. Families are smaller. Youth aren't returning – heading to bigger cities to find work. The population shift is apparent in student enrollment and on field – and

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 Luke Ritchie, Ransom community
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