

Football

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not just at Western Plains. More than a half dozen schools have dropped from 8-man to 6-man football in the past two years in an effort to field a team.

Western Plains switched to 6-man in 2015 after not being able to scrape together a team in 2014. But this year, with graduation and youth moving away, only one boy of the school's 32 high school students was still coming to practice.

Ritchie, however, didn't take the option for another season off. Every Monday this fall, he has been loading a small bus with boys from the elementary and junior high in Bazine, driving them 30 miles to the high school at Ransom. He stands on the field with his whistle – teaching 14 boys wearing red and yellow flags not only the rules of football, but the thrill of the game.

"I feel like we could do more, I should do more to get kids excited about the sport of football again," said Ritchie as he sat in the science room before a practice.

"A lot of kids want to sit around and stare at a screen. We fight that as well. We fight enrollment numbers, I can't do anything about that. But what I can do is give kids opportunities to get outside and play. Instead of just staring at a screen – let's go outside and play and have some fun."

Ritchie, along with the administration, wants to make Western Plains football great again.

Small town Saturday night

There wasn't much to do in Ransom on a summer Saturday night.

In the early 1970s, the Cromwells, like most in this small town, only had one channel on television. Not that Nolan Cromwell ever wanted to watch much television, nor did he really pay much attention to life outside his western Kansas roots.

The future Rams safety and four-time Pro Bowler admits he didn't even know where Kansas State or the University of Kansas were located until the recruiters came calling. No, in the eyes of 17-year-old Cromwell, there wasn't much to do here if you didn't like sports. But then again, there really wasn't anything else he wanted to do. Many Saturday nights, he and friend Eugene Flax would head over to Principal Ralph Kenworthy's home and ask him for the keys to the high school gym.

"He would give us the keys and tell us 'you're responsible.' We would open the side gym door and 20 to 25 people ranging from sixth to seventh grade to 45 years old would come in and play basketball. We would play until 12:30 or 1 in the morning."

Born in 1955, Cromwell is the fifth of William "Buck" and Lucille Cromwell's eight children. Buck was cooperative grain manager who moved the family around with his different management jobs, said Cromwell's sister, Darlene Tillitson, who still lives in Ransom and works at the bank. Before moving to Ransom for his junior year, Cromwell attended school at Kensington, Lenora and Logan. Cromwell was a student at Ransom High School his junior and senior year.

All the Cromwell kids were athletes. After school and chores, Cromwell spent free time playing sports with his siblings. That included his two older brothers and their friends.

"They always included me, and you learned to love the game and the excitement about the game," he said from his home in Washington state.

"I didn't know any different," Cromwell said, adding, "I didn't pay that much attention to college or pro football at that time. I just wanted to be better than my brothers."

The community was centered around school, sports and farming, said Cromwell, describing the support like a scene from the movie, "Hoosiers."

"When we would go play a football game or basketball game, a lot of the time there would be 20 or 30 cars following the buses to the games," he said, adding it didn't matter if the game was in Dighton or as far as Hugoton.

Back then, Ransom had several big families with athletic farm kids, said Tillitson.

Horns Rated 1st in State



There were the Flaxes, the Lutters, the Albers, to name a few. The class size averaged around 25 students – enough to field a 11-man football team.

The weight room was used minimally – boys built their muscles working on the farm or for other farmers by throwing bales and doing other manual labor, said Cromwell, who worked for area farmers.

They were a hard-working, close-knit team, he recalled. "We had great chemistry," he said. "We had so much fun practicing and playing. We would even design plays. We would take the offensive guard and put him in the backfield."

Cromwell was strong and quick, which allowed him to excel at every sports he played at Ransom. He was a three-time state champion in track. He also earned consensus all-state honors in both basketball and football. Ransom only lost one game in the two years Cromwell was their quarterback – a close game to Dighton.

It didn't take long for recruiters to take notice. The letters started coming his sophomore year at Logan. K-State and the University of Kansas made trips to games. Oklahoma called. Principal Kenworthy even sported purple to help with the decision, said Tillitson. In the end, Cromwell chose KU where he would play football and run track.

Shrinking population

Like most rural Kansas towns, Ransom, population 300, is built on agriculture – a fact marked by the tallest building, the white elevator.

It still has a hospital and a grocery. But the community isn't immune to depopulation.

In 1930, Ness County had more than 8,350 people. Today, there are about 3,000 residents. Better technology and machinery allows farmers to work more land than their ancestors, which shows in the U.S. Agriculture Census statistics. Ness County has 557 farms – half of the number before the Depression and nearly 200 fewer than when Cromwell played football.

The waning populace has brought about consolidation across Kansas, including along the two-lane K-4 Highway where Ransom is located. Towns that once had their own high school – like Clafin, Marquette and Assaria – have all consolidated with neighboring communities.

"I think people have been ingrained so much that you graduate high school and move away to bigger and better things," said Ritchie.

Ransom consolidated in 2004, changing from the Ransom High School Longhorns to the Western Plains Bobcats. The district includes five communities: Ransom, Utica, Arnold, Brownell and Bazine. Ransom has the high school and an elementary. Bazine, population 330, has an elementary and the junior high.

Even with consolidation, Western Plains is one of the state's smallest districts. The school is small enough that Ritchie teaches not only junior high science at the building in Bazine, but also geography and kindergarten through eighth grade health and physical education.

After not fielding a team in 2014, Western Plains joined other schools in the same predicament, forming the state's 6-man division in 2015. This year, Kansas has eight schools playing 6-man, although two – Western Plains and Colby's Heartland Christian – are forfeits on the schedule.

Ritchie said in the end, there were four boys coming to practice. Three were from Healy High School, which the district had a cooperative agreement with for football. The other was a Western Plains junior.

The Western Plains administration began meeting about what they could do to bring football back to Western Plains, said Pat Flax, the school's athletic director.

"I didn't pay that much attention to college or pro football at that time. I just wanted to be better than my brothers."

Nolan Cromwell, former four-time Pro Bowler for the Los Angeles Rams

"It was 'what do we do to make sure this won't fade away,'" she said.

The Ransom Rambler

It wasn't until college that Cromwell earned the nickname "Ransom Rambler." "It came from someone who wrote an article when I went to KU," said Cromwell. "I think it had to do more with my junior year – because of the offense we ran."

His junior year, he switched from starting as safety to the starting quarterback. He didn't pass much and he was injured his senior season. But as a junior, he ran for 1,124 yards and was named the Big Eight Player of the Year.

His parents attended all his siblings' sporting events, he said. They would get up early on a Saturday morning and drive the camper to Lawrence. The Cromwells were usually the first to arrive in the parking lot. "We swear she invented the continental breakfast," Tillitson said the family joked of their mother. "She packed food and if anyone showed up all, she was going to feed them."

Cromwell remains in the Top 12 for KU's all-time rushing leaders, and the only quarterback ranked that high. A second-round pick in 1977, Cromwell spent his entire 11-year career with the Los Angeles Rams where he was one of the NFL's premiere safeties.

Cromwell was the National Football Conference's defensive player of the year in 1980, made four Pro Bowls and was on the Rams' 1979 Super Bowl team. He also still holds the Rams' franchise record for career interception return yards at 671, and is second in career interceptions with 37.

After his playing career ended, Cromwell coached until 2014. Today, he enjoys retirement, which includes visiting his two children, as well as hunting and fishing.

Left: A 1973 yearbook photo shows the Ransom Longhorn football team.

Below left: A 1973 yearbook page shows senior Nolan Cromwell at bottom center.

Photos by Lindsey Bauman/
The Hutchinson News

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The letter
With Western Plains dedicated to revive football, Ritchie wrote a letter about the program, which was sent out to parents and posted on the school website.

He talked about pride and community spirit. He quoted Vince Lombardi: "The difference between a successful person and others is not a lack of strength, not a lack of knowledge, but rather in a lack of will."

Ritchie, who grew up in the area and played sports at Lewis High School, knows the school is the heartbeat of rural communities. "If you lose your school in your community, you lose your community, period," he said.

Whether it is right or wrong, football and other sports programs are part of a community's identity, he said.

"If your team is not in the newspaper in the box score, people forget about you," Ritchie said. "We do too much good things out here at Western Plains – academically and everything else, that we don't want to be

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