

Andover football program in jeopardy of early exit – Chris Jackett - Eagle

Sixteen of 21 varsity players set to graduate in spring

By Chris Jackett
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BLOOMFIELD TOWNSHIP — The Andover football program is scheduled to combine with Lahser's in fall 2013, but the Barons might not make it to the 2012 season due to dwindling participation.

"The ability to field a football team is at some risk. We're looking at who we have in the pipeline, and there's just not enough students," Bloomfield Hills Schools Superintendent Rob Glass announced at the Oct. 6 Board of Education meeting. "We're not giving up without a fight on this one. Between the end of the season and the start of the calendar year, we're going to see what we can do."

Andover High School's football program has 44 players. Of the 21 varsity players, 16 are seniors, and just three are juniors. Declining enrollment and the lure of other activities contribute to the dwindling football numbers.

"It's a struggle. We played last night with 15 kids," Jim DeWald, Andover's third-year coach, said of the team's 35-28 loss to Flint Northwestern Oct. 6. "It's tough. It's hard at practice. Numbers, obviously, in football mean more than any other sport. I think the programs in general around Oakland County are down a little bit."

The team is 0-7 this season, although five of those losses were by seven or fewer points. Among four of the first six games, the team lost by a combined nine points.

Seniors are 4-30 during the past four seasons, and the program's last winning season was a 10-2 campaign in 2004.

"Our kids are good. Our kids' mentality is they're fighters and workers," DeWald said. "It talks a ton about their character and their heart. People don't understand we're dealing with limited numbers. It shows tremendous character and tremendous heart."

The consolidation of the Andover and Lahser High School teams in 2013 will create more stability through numbers for the unified program.

"It's going to help tremendously," said DeWald, who noted that next fall is up in the air for Andover's final season as a separate program. "It just depends on what the numbers look like next year. You never know. Kids are sometimes un-committable. When you're dealing with little numbers, two kids can be a big deal.

"Every male in the school knows who I am. I've asked them all to play football. It is what it is, and I hate to say that."

With high school consolidation a major talking point in the community, Lahser softball has often been used as the example of meager student-athlete participation numbers, but they are not the only ones.

"At Lahser, there are teams that are on the bubble every year," Glass said. "Not necessarily as high profile, but this is what happens when your student population dwindles, and it's part of the reason we're looking at consolidating the high schools."

Coach DeWald said anyone interested in joining the football team next fall can stop by his office at Andover, where he is also a teacher.

“We’ve discussed how our last year, how we simply cannot have our last year as Andover without a football team,” Andover Athletic Director R.J. Guizzetti said. “We have to have a football team here next year. We cannot allow our program to die out a year before the consolidation. I’m confident we’ll make it work.”

Guizzetti said the team will be open to allowing student-athletes to play on two fall sports teams at once if it would help the football program, and both coaches agree. Boys soccer players currently play on the boys tennis and football teams, but that often leads to missed practices or games for one sport.

“We are open to that, and we do allow that. They could make it work, but we’re cautious about how it’ll affect the kids,” Guizzetti said. “It’s a huge time commitment. You can only do so much when it comes to getting kids.”

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