

TELEGRAPH SPORTS

Local Sports Coverage

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Current Redhawk football head coach and North Tama activities director Taylor Wurth, center, provides opening remarks during the Nov. 9 community meeting held in the North Tama cafeteria to address Redhawk football possibly moving from Class A to 8-Player.

Redhawks ponder move to 8-Man

Community meeting draws a crowd as North Tama football coaches address possibility of change

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Is eight better than 11? Keeping the North Tama football team flying high into the future was top of mind for the more than 40 members of the public who attended a community meeting on Nov. 9 to discuss possibly moving the Redhawks from 11-player to 8-player.

The meeting — held in the North Tama cafeteria — was organized by Redhawks head coach and North Tama activities director Taylor Wurth at the urging of former longtime head coach Tom McDermott.

McDermott, now retired, helmed the North Tama football team for a combined 17 years between 1973 and 2019, taking the team twice to the state playoffs.

Wurth said he was approached about the possible move to 8-Player following the end of the 2022-2023 football season during which the Redhawks finished 2-7.

“I want to be very open and honest about what’s happening tonight,” Wurth said to open the meeting. “I love 11-man football. That’s where my passion is ... On the other side of it, as the activities director, something that is important is to put our kids and our community in the best position possible to succeed.”

Wurth went on to say that while many in the community “love Redhawk football,” it is his belief that McDermott has a “commitment to Redhawk football more than anyone else in this room.”

Wurth then turned the microphone over to McDermott, who had prepared a thorough review of current and past football statistics for both North Tama football and 8-Player Iowa football.

History of North Tama football

While the Redhawks have been playing football as a high school team since 1895 — a game they won 4-0 against Dysart — the team has not always been a Class A team.



PHOTO BY SOREN M. PETERSON

Past Redhawk football head coach Tom McDermott, center, elicits a round of laughter from members of the public during a Nov. 9 community meeting held in the North Tama cafeteria to address Redhawk football possibly moving from Class A to 8-Player.

Through the years — like so many small schools across Iowa — as enrollment in the district has dropped, the team has dropped as well from Class 2A to Class 1A to the current Class A, a move that took place in 2002.

Currently, according to McDermott, there are 54 teams in Class A with larger BEDS (Basic Educational Data Survey) enrollment than North Tama and only one, Belle Plaine, with a smaller enrollment.

BEDS is an enrollment number from the Iowa Department of Education that utilizes enrollment from grades 9, 10, and 11 to inform the following school year’s assignments.

“We are the second smallest school playing 11-man football in the state of Iowa [today],” McDermott said.

Other than BCLUW, North Tama was the only Class A school playing in the Iowa Star Conference this past season.

Of the 63 regular season opponents the Redhawks faced from 2006 to 2012, McDermott shared that two of those have now consolidated with another district, 13 remain in Class A, while 48 — the vast majority — are now 8-Player football schools.

“Five years ago, I would have said no way in hell are we ever going to go to

8-Man,” McDermott told an audience that included both past and present Redhawk football players in addition to community and school board members, “but I see what’s happening around us, what’s happening to us, and I think we’ve got to consider it. I don’t know if it’s the right thing to do or not.”

8-Man football

In addition to North Tama’s current opponents being very different from the teams they used to face, the Redhawk squad itself has changed through the years — steadily shrinking in number from a high of 67 in 1981 to 30 in 2022.

Part of the reason McDermott thinks the district should consider going to 8-Player, he said, is that the coaches can no longer “give the guys rest anymore” like they need due to the small squad size.

And while 8-Player football is not much different from Class A football — scoring, timing and penalties remain the same — the differences are key, McDermott said.

With eight players on offense and defense as opposed to 11 and the field itself being smaller — 80 yards by 40 yards — the opportunity to rest and avoid injury is greatly increased.

And schools are taking advantage of the differences. The rate of schools mov-

ing from Class A to 8-Player has been on the increase for more than 20 years.

In 1998, McDermott said, there were only six schools playing 8-Player, but by 2004 nearly 50 schools had made the jump — increasing to 72 schools today.

The “cutoff” for BEDS enrollment for 8-Player became 120 in 2018. North Tama’s BEDS enrollment for 2022 is 103.

Small town, Redhawk football

Following McDermott’s presentation, Wurth opened the floor to questions.

Patty Calderwood — former athletic director whose son and husband played Redhawk football — took the microphone first, urging those in attendance to make a pros and cons list and share those lists with members of the school board.

“It doesn’t always matter what game we play, it matters that we play the game,” Calderwood said at one point. “And that we do what’s best for our kids.”

Several parents in the audience expressed concern about fewer starting slots being available on the roster if the district moves to 8-Player, as well as concerns regarding North Tama players being recruited to play college football from

an 8-Player team versus Class A.

Safety was also addressed by a member of the public as it relates to several smaller-statured freshmen on the Redhawk team this year who had to face much larger players on opposing teams.

“Hopefully [moving to 8-Player] we can avoid some of those mismatches,” McDermott responded, “but we’ll still always have injuries.”

The issue of fewer and fewer kids coming up through the ranks of youth and junior high football was also touched upon — by both parents and coaches — with a coach at one point stating “The numbers are not coming down the pike.”

North Tama Superintendent David Hill was also in attendance at the meeting. He briefly spoke in response to discussion about enrollment numbers.

“We’re not withering away,” Hill said. “Over the last five years ... average enrollment, it’s up by one to two students per year. That’s basically level enrollment over the last five years. We’re not dying, we’re thriving in a lot of ways.”

School board member Doug Dvorak also spoke, seemingly in favor of using McDermott’s guidance when making a decision.

“I just want to say I hate change,” Dvorak began, eliciting quite a bit of laugh-

ter. “But I think ... [we] have got to respect [McDermott] for saying and admitting it [that] five or 10 years ago there’s no way he would have considered [8-Player]. ... But after seeing the numbers and seeing coach McDermott accepting things — and looking at the future — we’ve got to give it some pretty strong consideration, I think. And look at the traveling we’ve got to do now to find these schools that are the same size as us. It’s not going to get any easier.”

“In my heart, I know that these kids can compete 11 man,” Wurth said toward the end of the meeting. “I know the pride in this community. I know the pride that former players, former graduates of North Tama have in 11-man football ... We’re not just giving up on our kids and we don’t believe in them — that’s not what this is.”

In the final minutes of the 90-minute meeting, assistant coach Andrew Knaack asked what the next step was in regard to making a decision one way or the other, to which Supt. Hill responded that the decision must be made by the school board.

“Based on what I’ve heard tonight,” Hill said, “I think the board needs to discuss it.”

Hill said the topic will be added to the agenda as a discussion item at the next regular board meeting.

“Then, from that point, if the board feels like they want to actually take action on it, they would need to decide to schedule a special meeting before December 15,” Hill continued — Dec. 15 being the deadline to notify the Iowa High School Athletic Association regarding a change.

The next meeting of the North Tama Board of Education is set for Monday, November 21, beginning at 7 p.m. in the North Tama Junior High Commons.

Members of the public would be allowed to speak during the public forum portion of the meeting as to their thoughts on the future of small town, Redhawk football.