



August 15, 2009

## Area high school kickoffs coming earlier

By VINCE GUERRIERI  
News-Messenger

Fremont Ross High School football coach Derek Kidwell said it doesn't matter what time games start.

The Little Giants, like many other area teams, normally start football games at 7:30 p.m. But they'll play one game this season at 7 p.m. — when they head to Toledo to play Whitmer on Sept. 4.

"All we do is hop on a bus 40 minutes earlier," Kidwell said. "I don't think it matters with kids. Once the competition starts, they'll perform."

But the competition is starting earlier. The Toledo City League starts its night football games at 7 p.m., and several other leagues have followed suit this year.

Games that once started at 8 p.m. have been pushed forward to accommodate the new wide-open offenses that have filtered down to high school football. A lot of passing means the clock stops more often, and games are longer.

Ohio High School Athletic Association guidelines say only that regular-season football games cannot start after 11 p.m. Tim Stried, director of information services for the OHSAA, said there is no plan to change that.

There is a policy in place for playoff games, however. They start at 7:30 p.m. on Friday and 7 p.m. on Saturday, unless there are no lights at the host field. In that case, games are played Saturday afternoon.

When Fremont Ross was in the Buckeye Central Conference, they started games at 8 p.m. That was largely because of the travel time involved in what was jokingly referred to as "The Lear Jet Conference," which included Newark, Lancaster and Zanesville.

After the Little Giants moved into the Great Lakes League in 1991, start times were moved to 7:30 p.m.

The Sandusky Bay Conference played its games at 8 p.m. until the mid-1980s. Conference secretary and treasurer Stan Stewart said start times were pushed to 7:30 p.m. based on requests from local media. Administrators also thought making the games earlier was a good idea.

"They thought it was a better idea to start games earlier and get out of there," Stewart said.

Stewart noticed some games were taking longer, which was the impetus for moving back to 7 p.m. starts.

The Blanchard Valley Conference — encompassing 10 schools in Hancock and Putnam counties — will start games at 7 p.m. this season. Commissioner Dean Butler, also the athletic director at Liberty-Benton, said offenses with more passing — and thus, more first downs and incomplete passes, both of which stop the game clock — are taking over. That makes games longer.

"We're going to a passing-style of game now," Butler said. "Games weren't over with until 10:30 at night. By moving things up to 7, we're going to get done at a more reasonable hour."

There was a need in Toledo to switch to earlier starts, but for an entirely different reason. Fights at

some games led the City League to play afternoon games, Toledo Public Schools Athletic Director Ed Scrutchins said. When they resumed playing on Friday nights, they made the games start at 7 p.m.

"We did an earlier start to get the game over quicker to get the kids home earlier and out of the streets earlier," said Scrutchins, also the commissioner of the City League.

Butler said this isn't the first time the league has looked at starting games earlier, but this is the first time they were sold on it. The nine schools in the conference unanimously approved the switch.

"It's something I tried to pursue quite a few years ago," Butler said. "At that time, they didn't want to do it because they didn't feel there was any need to."

That's the situation the Suburban Lakes League is in now. The seven-team league — whose fate is uncertain because of schools moving in and out of the conference — starts games at 7:30, and it doesn't seem that will change.

"It came up in a meeting last year and there was no interest, at least at this point, to move it up," league Commissioner Jim Yeager said. "We're going to play at 7:30 p.m. in the foreseeable future. Of course, it'll be looked at if more leagues move their times up."

When the Northwest Ohio Athletic League — the oldest high school athletic conference in the state — voted to switch to 7 p.m. starts this season, they found another problem: Getting referees.

The change voided 215 contracts with officiating crews the league had already signed. The crews signed new contracts, but the problem of getting officials for a 7 p.m. start time is one of the reasons the SBC hasn't changed game times.

Officials are required to be at the field at least an hour before games start. Larry Morrison, commissioner of the Northern Lakes League — and former commissioner of the Great Lakes League — said that the league's referees, all in the Toledo area, were thrilled when the NLL announced it would start its games at 7 p.m. this year.

But when referees come from Cleveland, Toledo or Mansfield — as they do in the SBC, Stewart said — the travel time might keep them from officiating a 7 p.m. game.

Baumgartner said another reason the NWOAL made the switch was to accommodate junior varsity start times.

Typically, junior varsity games are played the morning after varsity games, and some players would play both varsity and JV. They would come home around midnight after a game, and then have to get to a 10 a.m. game the next day.

But will it stop at 7 p.m.? Will the length of games prompt a change to 6 p.m.?

Area administrators think not. Butler thinks 7 p.m. can make games end earlier, without putting too much of a crimp on fans' schedule for the day.

"There's no reason people can't go home, get a bite to eat, get cleaned up and get to the game," Butler said.

Morrison, whose league unanimously approved the switch to 7 p.m. starts, thinks this will be the end of the issue.

"I don't think it'll go much earlier than that," he said.

E-mail Vince Guerrieri at [vguerrie@gannett.com](mailto:vguerrie@gannett.com).

---



Fremont Ross will play game at 7 p.m. this season and the rest at 7:30. The trend around northwest Ohio is to move kickoffs to 7 p.m. Above, the Little Giants battle Lima Senior. (News-Messenger file photo)