

Alexandria Jefferson High School Football

RUSS HINRICHS

Varsity Football Co-Offensive Coordinator, Alexandria Jefferson High School

Russ Hinrichs Graduated from Jefferson in 1994. He worked as an assistant coach under Alexander head coach Dennis Kalpin from 1994 to 2007, working as volunteer assistant from 1994 to 1999. He became the Defensive Coordinator in 2000 for coach Kalpin, and remained in that position when Mike Empting became the head coach in 2008 and continued as such until 2013. He switched over to an offensive assistant in 2014 and is currently the Co-Offensive Coordinator for Alexandria. Coach Hinrichs has also served as the Head Baseball coach from 2008 to 2014.

Russ graduate from St. Cloud State University in 1999 and earned a Master's Degree in Education from Walden University in 2008. He has been teaching at Alexandria since 2000 in Special Education. His wife Patti also works in the Alexandria school system as an adaptive education teacher and they have two children, Thomas(10) and David(7).

The Alexandria Cardinals have a proud tradition of great football teams going all the way back to the program's only state championship in 1974. Alexandria made state tournament appearances in 1981 and 1986 and dominated the Central Lakes Conference and outstate football in the 90s. The Cardinals made state tournament appearances in 1994, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2001, and 2002. Since that last appearance in 2002 the Cardinals had made 5 section title games but we were not able to get over that hump and get back to a state tournament. That drought was ended this past fall when the Cardinals defeated Sartell to win the Section 8 5A title and advance to the state tournament. Our season came to an end with a loss to eventual state champion Elk River in the state Quarterfinals, but the seeds of success for the 2016 team were planted four years earlier with a change in practice philosophy, offensive philosophy, and a summer schedule that redefined the program.

Like many football programs in the state, we had seen our numbers decline over the last few years. As a football staff we knew that there were changes we need to make philosophically and in program building to both increase numbers and get back to the on-field success we were accustomed to. We decided that our number one focus was going to be increasing our participation numbers starting with our 9th grade group. From there we looked at changing our two a day practice schedule to make it more conducive to parents and kids work schedules. Finally, and maybe most importantly, we made the commitment as a staff that we would take a program to a team camp during the summer to both serve as an off-season training program and also build chemistry between the players and coaching staff prior to actual start of fall camp.

In order to increase our participation numbers, we had to start with re-thinking our fall camp practice schedule. We have increasingly seen more of our athletes choosing work at a young age over participating in activities. The strain of a practice in the morning and then one in the evening was a factor in our decreased participation numbers. As a result we made the change to develop a practice schedule that had all of our athletes out the door by 2:00 each day. Within our schedule we build in meeting times in the morning, a two hour practice, lunch, weight room, more meeting time, a walk through, special teams, and 7 on 7 period. As a part of that, our captains parents organize lunches every day for athletes which has also increased a community and family atmosphere to a program. It is a 'we are all in this together' mentality that we may have lost. This practice schedule also limits the amount of travel for the parents of the athletes who do not have their license. As coaches we meet everyday at 2:00 and are out of the building before 3:00 each day. We have a group of coaches with young kids and young families, so this schedule also provides balance in our lives during the busy fall season.

Another reality we were facing as a program is the competition for athletes with the other programs in our school and the increased era of specialization. Historically, the Cardinals have been a wing-T program, built on running the ball, balance in the passing game, and physically wearing our opponents down with our size and numbers. With our decrease in numbers and our difficulty getting a commitment for football from our bigger athletes, we were now on the other end of the spectrum. In order to be competitive with the large schools we play in our section and district, we were going to need a philosophical

change to how we did things as a program both in practice and games.

Prior to the state high league changes in practice regarding contact and length, you would not find a more physical practice than the one taking place in our program. We would hit every day, two a day practicing with full pads that were needed to prepare us for a schedule including teams that were always going to be bigger than us. As a result we were losing key players for Friday nights on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. It is now common for us to do little or no contact in practice all week prior to a game. We have made the philosophical decision to save the hitting for game nights. We want our athletes as fresh as possible and our goal is to have all hands on deck come game time. We also made the transition as an offense to a spread team, no huddle with run-pass options. We wanted an up-tempo style that we hoped would allow us to recruit some of those athletes who were basketball or baseball players who had previously not been playing football. This change in style of play has also helped our defense. Defensively, our kids see the same spread plays everyday in practice that many of the other programs are running. We no longer have to use valuable practice time teaching our scout players how to run inside zone or the run pass options that have become the norm.

A key component of our offensive success is a 7 on 7 schedule during the summer involving a passing league and select tournaments. It is all about getting our best athletes out during the summer together throwing, catching, and defending the pass. This has also helped our players learn the offense and defense and develop a chemistry together that was missing. This philosophy has allowed us to improve our program without hitting. As coaches we have stuck to a simple plan of taking what the defense is giving us. We are committed to being able to attack a defense multi dimensionally. We can run the ball inside, outside and off-tackle. We can throw screens, playaction, quick throws and deep throws. We can throw the ball outside, down field, in the middle of the field and an organized short passing game. We don't have a preference if we run the ball 50 times a game or throw it 50 times a game, it is a week to week game plan based on the defense we are seeing.

We wanted a scheme that is simple, easy for the kids to understand and execute, but also one that is going to test the defense vertically and horizontally on every play. There are games where we see defenses that we never saw teams run on film. We trust our athletes, put them in situations where they can be successful, and try to make it as fun as possible. This is a generation of kids who have grown up playing Madden Football on their play stations. Our goal is to have 70-80

snaps a game. This puts a tremendous stress on our defense, but our defensive coaches understand this and support this philosophically. As a defensive team we have improved in our pass defense as result of our offensive change, and we have developed a mental toughness on both sides of the ball.

Finally, we made the commitment as a staff to bring our program to a team camp at NDSU. The three day camp required us to hold four days of workouts in preparation for the team camp. When we finish the fourth day of pre-camp practice and prepare to

leave for NDSU, most of our offense and defensive schemes have been introduced and the players have a feel for how things will go in the fall. It is the beginning of our team building process and the excitement it generates continues to grow. The first year we took 31 players to NDSU, this year we have 71 players signed up so far and will have both a Varsity and JV team participate. The decision to attend the team camp and the things we get accomplished prior to and during the team camp is the single most important change we made in our program.

Football is and always will be a numbers game. We are selling to our parents and community that we can have up to 33 different starters every Friday night. There is room for all shapes and sizes in our program. The energy and excitement for Cardinal football has returned to our community and our numbers continue to increase. This fall we have the largest group of sophomores we will have had in many years. The next step for our program is studying the impact of tackling football at the 5th and 6th grade level. We will be partnering with TackleBar to introduce their program into our 5th grade program this fall. In the fall of 2018 we will move completely away from tackle football at the youth level. We acknowledge the concern of parents surrounding concussions in football and our goal is to get ahead of it at our youth levels. Football is the greatest team game ever invented and the extrinsic rewards young people gain from being part of a team cannot be undersold. We will continue to defend our great sport. The partnership we have worked to develop with our parents, administration, and community have made Vikings Savings Bank Field the place to be on Friday nights in the fall. ■