

Herald-Tribune

SPORTS

Classical Academy of Sarasota latest area school to tackle 8-man football

Patriots head coach and AD Matt Favero will guide team's jump from flag football to 8-man tackle football in the Sunshine State Athletic Conference



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Published 10:38 a.m. ET July 8, 2022 | Updated 4:19 p.m. ET July 8, 2022

SARASOTA — Another area school is taking the plunge into tackle football.

After five successful seasons on the flag football circuit, The Classical Academy of Sarasota will play 8-man tackle football in the Sunshine State Athletic Conference this season.

“There is a good group of guys who were in middle school and graduating to high school. They all wanted to play football,” said head coach Matt Favero.

Favero coached the TCA middle school flag team and this past year coached the middle school and high school teams. This summer he also became the school’s director of athletics.

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Favero surveyed The Classical Academy brass to see their thoughts on making the jump and if it was feasible financially.

“SSAC 8-man was a natural next step for us,” Favero said.

The Patriots were having difficulty finding flag opponents — their schedule last year consisted of seven games, playing three teams twice and a fourth once.

But when word got out about TCA’s jump to the SSAC, the Patriots’ schedule filled up quickly. From as north as Holiday to Ave Maria in the south and as far east as Vero Beach, the team has nine opponents for the 2022 season.

"It was really easy to get it," Favero said of his schedule, crediting SSAC football commissioner Gage Brown with making it seamless.

But now comes the hard part.

The Patriots had a 20-man roster during flag season and expect to have around the same for the tackle football team. With about a 50-50 split of boys and girls among the 150 high school age students at TCA, Favero is hoping to find a few more players before the season begins.

Currently, none of the players have tackle football experience, which leads to another slew of challenges.

"This will be the first time for them in every situation they've been in," Favero said. "They are learning all the fundamentals from scratch. We were a very good flag team, but it doesn't mean we'll be a very good tackle team."

Favero has done his homework on making the jump. He has consulted with Sarasota Christian School's Jacob Spenn, who is in a similar situation.

Spenn originally wanted to get into 11-man tackle football, but when the Blazers' numbers were not there, he too decided to opt for 8-man.

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Ironically, the teams are not in the same division. The Classical Academy is in the SSAC 8-man South Bay Division while Sarasota Christian is in the North Gulf Division.

In order to get a feel for the 8-man game, Favero attended a St. Petersburg Canterbury game and later watched the Shorecrest Prep vs. Lakeside Christian playoff game last season.

Favero's defensive coordinator, Tom DeLarge, has 8-man experience. But other than that, Favero took to the internet and YouTube videos "just to see what the game looks like and feels like."

For now, the Patriots will play their home games at the Robert L. Taylor Community Complex field off Myrtle Street. The school plans to build its campus across from the Faith Baptist Church it rents from on Fruitville Road. The Patriots can practice at the two fields at the church.

Along with football, TCA offers high school and middle school football, basketball, four volleyball teams — two high school and two middle school — track and field, cross country, golf, men's volleyball and girls beach volleyball.

As for Favero, he is a Sarasota native born at Sarasota Memorial Hospital. He played youth football for the Ringling Redskins. As a 130-pound freshman football at Booker High before transferring to Sarasota High.

The 34-year-old helped with in the intramural program at Liberty University in Virginia before returning to the area as a youth pastor at Faith Baptist Church.

He knows the challenges of an upstart program.

"We feel our guys are going to be competitive, the attitude is there," Favero said. "The biggest thing we have to do is drill in the fundamentals of football. That's going to be our biggest obstacle to overcome.

"It's a process. We're literally taking it rep by rep."

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