Gentlemen,

My name is Steve Milder and I have coached 8-man football the past 9 seasons and before that, 36 years of 11 man football. I will become President of the Iowa Football Coaches Association in January and have spoken to many schools making the transition from 11 man football to 8 man in Iowa. I’ve attached a copy of an article that I updated for the Iowa Football Coaches Journal last winter. If you want the ins and outs of the differences for coaches and athletes I can help. If you want more information on how the change was handled from the Athletic Association I’m not as well versed. I’ve sent this email to Todd Tharp of the Iowa High School Athletic Association that knows that side better than I. If you wish to call my cell is (563) 422-7293. I’m a school counselor and I go to work very early so the earlier the better. I hope the article will help explain some differences and I’ll gladly visit with you about 8 player football.

Sincerely
Steve Milder

The truth about 8-man football: Revisited 2016
By Steve Milder

Several years ago I wrote “The truth about 8-man football” for the IFCA Journal. This is my update with changes being made in italicized print.

Fifteen years ago I was quoted saying, “someday West Central will play 8-man football but I’ll never coach it.” Again, time has shown I didn’t know what I was talking about. Currently I’m not just coaching the 8-man game but I’m enjoying it more than I ever thought. I’m sure you’ve heard or even said something that questions the validity of the 8-man game. Is it “real football”? It’s just like arena football. It’s fast break football, all passing. I’m here to tell you that 8-man football is real football and maybe better quality football than we find in smaller schools playing the eleven-man game.

There are some differences in the game. You play on a smaller field 80 yards by 40 yards and have only 8 players. Your players can wear any number they desire and the end man on the line of scrimmage is eligible regardless of position or number. The kick-off is from the 30 and a touchback is put in play on the 15-yard line. There are a few others but you get the idea.

Dome Biasness

If your only experience of watching 8-man football is in the dome, you’ve gotten a poor view of the game. The dome with its permanent lines and make shift goal post emphasize differences. The game looks odd and like I’ve heard from others “it’s not real football.”
On the contrary when folks view the game from the sidelines of the proper 8-man field you’ll see the differences are very minor. Before switching, I made a journey to Blairsburg and watched an 8-man game with the crowd. The level of play impressed me. Nothing the past ten years has made me change my mind; it’s a good game that has a place in Iowa.

I also had game film sent to me and again after the first few moments my concentration went from the number of players to the quality of the game. The dome is a great facility but it really gives a distorted view of the 8-man game.

**Offense**

It’s not arena ball and some teams in 8-man do run an offense that looks like a fast break, but 7 of the eight quarterfinalists in 2009 were in the top 8 rushing the football. Winning close ball games often requires the ability to execute ball control and it seems winning teams do that very well. *Like all football today, having a quarterback who can run or pass is a big plus and most teams making it to the dome have these types of athletes.*

As an old Wing-T guy, I looked forward to balancing my offense. For the first 30 years at West Central we had an offensive ratio of 80 runs to 20 passes. I thought we had done better until I checked my statistics and found ratios of 78-22 in 2008 and in 2009 it was 85-15. *It got worse as in 2012 we rushed the ball 491 and threw only 59 passes. In 2014 it was 180 degree change as we threw the ball 336 times and rushed only 171 times.*

The ratio may not have changed but the yardage did. Even though the 2009 rushing total exceeded all 11-man teams I’ve coached, the nearly 1000 yards passing was the 4th most passing yards I’ve had at West Central, while the 2008 total was the 2nd most. In 2008 nearly 40% of our offensive yardage came through the air. *This has been true with the exceptions in 2012 and 2014.*

The biggest change on offense with the passing game was the TD to INTC ratio. The first two years in 8-man produced 31 touchdowns with only 7 interceptions. The 2009 ratio is the best ever and the 2008 is 3rd best. This is an area where the 8-man game does differ. The quarterback has fewer reads and can often find the open receiver with a pre-snap read. Thus we threw more TD passes in 2008 than ever before and topped that in 2009. *Because of the fewer reads the Quarterback has it was possible to do a complete switch in 2014 and still reach the play-offs.*

Because the games are not identical, all records for 8-man football are kept separate from the 11-man records. I use them for comparison but they are not the same.

**Defense**
When I inquired about changes in the 8-man game, Jason Sullivan of Janesville (now of Jesup) shared that, “anything that has worked for you on offense in the past will work in 8-man but on defense you’ll learn as you go.” I wondered what he meant. Every year that 8-man football has been played, I believe there have been improvements on defense. It was a difficult transition.

We had played our gap-control 5-3 or 3-5 for nearly thirty years and felt the transition to a 3-3 set to be a natural fit. Boy, I was wrong. The loss of the extra defensive back eliminated about 80% of the games we played in defensive package. Our defensive structure was faulty and a disciplined team could pick us apart. We learned that every player on defense is in a brawl. He must beat the blocker and make the play. We can’t angle our defense and figure our MLB can make every tackle.

I’d heard you must play man to man. I tried it in 5 on 5 passing and it was a disaster. We were more successful in zone coverage but seemed to play the best when we gave a man pre-snap read and played zone. In a big loss to Preston we failed to pick-up their zone drop and a play that looked wide open ended up in an interception that turned our game around. When you’re faced with twin receivers on both sides (22 wide) and you have only 8 defenders it’s difficult to get pressure on the Quarterback and cover the receivers. In 2012 we played all man to man and are making that decision based on personnel. Lately we’ve settled on a combination based on defensive calls and offensive sets.

As Jason said “you’ll learn as you go”. The one thing that I’ve seen is more physical play than the last few years of 11-man. Taking your poorest 3 players off the field has allowed skilled athletes on both sides of the ball to show their stuff. A quick player in the middle of the defense can make a lot of tackles. This remains true, as important as speed is on offense, in 8-man football speed and athleticism really shows on defense as well. College coaches have noticed that also.

We have played many different fronts and stunt packages in 8-man football. Once in a while you can confuse offenses but you are limited to what you can do, especially against spread formations.

Kicking Game

We don’t spend as much practice time on the kicking game as we did in 11-man football. About half of all kick-offs go into the end zone and the teams that can’t kick for touchbacks tend to squib kick. You would think with all the points that this would be a bigger part than it has become.

We kick extra points with 6 linemen and have had a few blocked. We had to widen our stances a little from foot to foot to 6 inches. Our snap has to be near perfect or we check to a two-point attempt. We tended to kick in games where we felt we were the better team. Yet our percentages were not as good as they were in the 11-man game. Some teams kick every time and are very successful. One school in our area snaps the ball deeper and has had great success.
In big ball games, we normally have gone for two points with mixed results. We have spent more time on 2-point plays. We’ve made more than 50 percent and have had nights where they all seem to work and nights where they were the reason we lost. It was an easy decision with the 6’8” end in 2008. *Several times we’ve emphasized that the winner of the game would come down to the extra point conversions. We even won one game with fewer touchdowns.*

I’ve always said that the punt was my least favorite play in football. In 2008 we punted only 6 times, of which my varsity punter only punted 3 times in 10 games. In 2009 we were a bit more daring on offense and punted 16 times in 12 games. Both years we used both conventional punt formations and quick kicks. Again you need to spend more time on protection with just 5 linemen. *We’ve punted more the past several years as we have not won as much but have found that protection can be a problem and you need to have some twists and even a rugby style kick in your package.*

Overall, I see little difference on punt returns. You try to lock on to your man or set the wall and let your athlete make a play. We put one man deep and even with the narrow field had only a couple teams pin us against the sideline. I found that in the 11-man game we had little success with 1 deep and played two deep almost all the time.

**Wrap-up**

I haven’t hit all the issues that go into the decision to move to 8-man football. Schools have shared with us and we would be glad to visit with anyone on the following issues, travel, gate receipts, recruitment of players, and fan support.

Penalties are the same as 11-man game or are they? The yardage is the same even on the shorter field making the 15-yard penalties hurt more. We had consecutive pass interference calls and our opponent went from their 25-yard line to ours.

The two games are not identical and never should be viewed as the same. Both are football and allow small schools to keep their identity and keep young men involved. The offensive side of the ball is a blast. My defensive coordinator has trouble sleeping, but things are getting better.

It’s my hope that I have answered some of your questions. If you want to know more feel free to contact me. It’s great to have the opportunity to share my experience.

**Additional INFO:**

**You have to travel more**- we’ve found ourselves playing the same teams we played 10 years earlier in Class A football. Travel was not significantly longer.

**My son will not be recruited to play college ball**- We’ve had more kids playing college the past 6 years than any decade in my 40 year career. Actually, you get a better opportunity to show
your skill. In 2015 I had the most former high school players playing college football in my career.

**Lower gate receipts** - We have not had very many Wapsie Valley size crowds, but found that Valley and Central crowds were no larger or smaller than Preston and Springville. The biggest part of the gate is your crowd and our fans (most) like 8-man football better than the 11 man game. *Weather seems to be bigger factor that the type of game you play.*

**Not real Football** - Granted the game is not the same as 11 man football. You will score more points in 8-man and 11 man, records should be preserved because you will break most of them in this game. Our players who made the switch went to Riceville in 2009 and said no, it’s not the same game it’s a better game. *My player going back to the 11 man game in college have had very few problems.*

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