

The HIGHLANDS Current

Jazz Man
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With participation dropping, can Haldane and Beacon programs survive?

By Joey Asher

How do you maintain a high school football program when fewer boys are available to play?

It's not easy.

Just ask Jim Phelan, the coach at Beacon

High School. His varsity squad has 30 players. Somers High School, which has roughly the same number of students, has twice as many players.

Phelan calls the Somers program "the gold standard." It has a long tradition of winning and a robust youth program that

prepares players for the varsity level.

By contrast, at Beacon, "there hasn't been a consistent tradition of success," Phelan said. "What we'd like to do is establish a tradition and culture — a successful way that you do things."

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Woman's Remains ID'd After 42 Years

DNA solves mystery of body found in Fishkill

By Leonard Sparks

Anne Papalardo-Blake left 160 Fifth Ave. in Manhattan, where she worked at a Vidal Sassoon clinic, at 6 p.m. on March 18, 1980, telling co-workers she intended to meet her husband to look at an apartment in Queens.

Four days later, her family received a telegram from "Anne Blake" which, according to her son, said she was "under great pressure and needed to get her head together. See you in a couple of weeks."



Papalardo-Blake

Two weeks turned into 42 years.

(Continued on Page 9)

Where Will Indian Point's Water Go?

No clear solution for radioactive pools

By Brian PJ Cronin

Discharge, dispatch, dissolve or disregard?

None of Holtec's disposal options available for the radioactive water at Indian Point's nuclear fuel-rod cooling pools seems likely to make the public happy, even as the company continues to insist that its preferred plan of releasing the water into the Hudson River would be safe and no different from the water the plant released during its decades of operation.

The issue was raised again last week at the most recent meeting of the state's Indian Point Decommissioning Task Force, in the context of how Holtec has handled the situation at nuclear plants it is decommissioning in Massachusetts and New Jersey. A representative for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission told *The Current* that any release at Indian Point would be "carefully controlled and within

(Continued on Page 3)



THE BAND IS BACK — It drizzled on Spirit of Beacon Day on Sunday (Sept. 25), but so what? For the first time in three years, Main Street was filled for a festival and parade. For more photos, see Page 16. Photo by Ross Corsair

Two Players Explain Why They Play

By Joey Asher

Jack Hartman, Haldane

To hear Jack Hartman tell it, there was never much question of whether he was going to play football. The Hartmans, who live in Garrison, are a football family. His father was a linebacker. So was Jack's older brother. "My mom gets excited when she sees football on TV," Jack said.

When Jack was in the first grade, his parents signed him up to play tackle football for the Philipstown Hawks. Now Hartman, 16, is a junior defensive lineman and center for the Haldane varsity.

"I just love the sport," he said. "I love the brotherhood. It's not all about how good you play. It's about the bonds you get when you play with other people."

He added, with a laugh, that he also enjoys tackling people or knocking them down and not getting in trouble.

He is aware that fewer boys play football. He has friends who decided not to play or stopped playing because they feared serious injuries. But he emphasized that they made the decisions; it wasn't their parents pressuring them to quit. "Some people, as they grow up, realize there are risks," he said.

He has never suffered a serious injury and said he isn't too worried because "so many injuries can be prevented by playing smart. You shouldn't lead with your head."

Jack works as a busboy at the Hudson House in Cold Spring, his first job. He isn't sure what he wants to do as a career. His father is an operating engineer, working with heavy equipment. He might follow in his footsteps, just like in football.

Leib Perez Novas, Beacon

Leibinson Perez Novas — "Leib" to his friends — grew up playing baseball and was a good third baseman. Baseball is part of the culture of his family, which hails from the Dominican Republic, the home of immortals such as David "Big Papi" Ortiz, Albert Pujols and Pedro Martinez. His three younger brothers all play baseball.

When Leib was in seventh grade, his Uncle Manny suggested he try football. "I love the physicality," said Leib, 17.

Leib is a middle linebacker, wide receiver and running back for Beacon. He is a team captain and would like to play in college on an athletic scholarship. "I don't care what college," he said. "I'll go wherever they offer the most help financially."



Jack Hartman



Leib Perez Novas Photos by J. Asher

He knows that many parents won't let their sons play football. And his parents showed concern, at first. "When I started playing in middle school, they saw me all banged up," he said. "They asked me if I really wanted to play. I told them that I loved it."

He allowed that he was disappointed that there are only two other seniors on the team this year. "It's going to be a long season," he said. Indeed, as of this week, the team is winless. But he said that "only pushes me to work harder."

Leib has had a few injuries. He once broke a thumb and last year suffered a concussion when he hit another player while leading with his helmet. "I was dizzy for a week," he said. But he learned his lesson. "I only hit with my shoulders now."

He said football has taught him life lessons. "It's about keeping your head up and facing down adversity," he said. "It gives you experience working as a team and you learn dedication and responsibility."

He hopes to leverage those lessons with a career in real estate and construction. "I don't want to be working for someone else when I'm 30," he said. "I want to be my own boss."

FOOTBALL (from Page 1)

The coach hopes to rebuild a pipeline from the recently rejuvenated Beacon Youth Football league as well as the middle school level, which had 57 boys last season in grades 7, 8 and 9.

For Phelan and other area coaches, however, it's a difficult time to build a tradition. Participation in youth football has been on the decline in the U.S. for years; in New York state, the number of varsity players dropped 31 percent between 2010 and 2021, according to surveys by the National Federation of State High School Associations, and 48 high schools have dropped football, combined with other schools or switched to eight-player squads, rather than the standard 11.

For this story, we spoke with local coaches, parents and medical professionals about the challenges facing high school football in the Highlands. If the number of participants drops too low to field teams, what will happen to programs at smaller schools such as Haldane and Beacon? Will they merge with other schools? Can they play only eight boys at a time? And who will replace the current players without robust recreational leagues where beginners can learn the game?

Falling student enrollment has played a role, as it has in every sport; participation in boys' soccer, which is also played during the fall, has dropped 16 percent since 2010. But following well-publicized lawsuits by former NFL players who are experiencing the effects of years of hits to the head, football has the added challenge of addressing parental concerns about concussions and the potential long-term damage from the high-impact sport.

"I have friends whose parents won't let them play," said Leib Perez Novas, 17, a captain for the Beacon Bulldogs. "It's a physical, hard sport."

Roger Pielke Jr., a professor at the University of Colorado who has followed the national trend in a series of reports called "After Peak Football," notes that nationally, the number of boys ages 6 to 18 playing tackle football fell by 25 percent between 2008 and 2019, to just under 2 million. He suspects that participation will soon fall

below 1 million, or the lowest it's been in 25 years.

"The problem of concussions and head injuries hasn't gone away," he said.

Finding players

Fielding a team can be especially challenging at smaller schools such as Haldane, which has about 300 high school students. The varsity this year has 24 players, and Ryan McConville says that a full squad has always been top of mind during his nine years as head coach. "It's a work in progress every year, for sure," he said. Haldane is one of the smallest schools in Section I, which includes Westchester and Putnam counties; it's so small that it plays the same team every year — Tuckahoe — for the Class D sectional championship.

What is a smaller program to do? Recruit like crazy. "We recruit in the hallways," McConville said. "If they're not playing soccer or running cross-country, we're saying, 'Why don't you give football a try?'"

BB We recruit in the hallways. If they're not playing soccer or running cross-country, we're saying, 'Why don't you give football a try?'

- Haldane Coach Ryan McConville

McConville, at least, has a consistent base. Enrollment at the high school has remained steady over the past decade, although the K-12 numbers are down 11 percent. Enrollment at Beacon High School, however, has dropped by 16 percent, to about 900 students. Statewide, enrollment has dropped by 12 percent and with it, participation in high school sports has fallen 26 percent.

One option to counter those dwindling numbers is to merge with another program. In Yonkers, for instance, the eight high schools combined their football teams in 2018 into two squads. It's been done at Haldane



Haldane Coach Ryan McConville talks with his players during a spring 2021 game.

File photo by Skip Pearlman

NEW YORK NUMBERS

FOOTBALL	2021-22	2018-19	2017-18	2015-16	2000-01	1969-70
Schools	478	502	536	548	531	526
Players	25,796	31,685	30,210	32,387	32,493	26,000
8-MAN						
Schools	39	31	6	0	0	29
Players	784	685	95	0	0	750
BOYS' SOCCER						
Schools	636	674	682	668	658	468
Players	20,396	22,891	23,229	22,902	23,632	15,000

Source: National Federation of State High School Associations

with other sports — hockey and softball have combined with larger programs at Hendrick Hudson and Putnam Valley, respectively — but “we’ve been able to sustain our [football] program without having to do it,” McConville said. It’s been discussed at Beacon, as well, said John Giametta, the athletic director, but finding a suitable partner of about the same size would be a challenge.

Other schools have converted to eight-man football, said Todd Nelson, assistant director of the New York State High School Athletic Association. With eight players, a school needs 12 academically eligible and healthy to compete, compared to 16 for an 11-man team, he said.

The problem with maintaining an 11-man team with few substitutes is that it increases the time a player is on the field and the risk of injury, said Dr. Mark Hecceg, a clinical and sports neuropsychologist based in Irvington. “When you’re playing offense and defense, you’re taking more hits,” he said.

B Gone are the days when you had eight-hour practices and you hit a sled all day. Kids today are different. It needs to be more entertaining.

- Beacon Coach Jim Phelan

Schools in New York have fielded eight-man teams since at least 1969, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations, although they had disappeared by 2017, when six teams and 95 players revived the format.

By 2021 the numbers had grown to 39 schools and 784 players, and the New York State Sportswriters Association now posts a separate weekly ranking. Nearby schools that have made the change include Pawling, Pine Plains/Rhinebeck and Spackenkill.

Playing safer

Like many coaches, McConville and Phelan have shifted their teaching methods to make practices safer — and, they say, more fun.

“Gone are the days when you had eight-hour practices and you hit a sled all day,” said Phelan. “Kids today are different. It needs to be more entertaining.” That may mean incorporating audible calls to change plays at the line of scrimmage as professionals do. “They hear the guys in the NFL do things and they want to do those things,” he said. “So you integrate it into your plays.”

McConville said practices are safer than they’ve ever been. “We are not going to smash heads for two hours,” said the coach, who played for Haldane and St. Lawrence University. “No one is going to improve that way.” Instead, the players practice with low-impact drills such as those with “tackling rings” that promote safe hitting practices.

McConville said that, unlike when he played at Haldane from 2000 to 2003, his players rarely practice in full pads. “People weren’t paying attention to concussions like today,” he said. “We wore full pads four days a week.”

Rule changes also have been made to penalize, sometimes with ejection, dangerous hits such as helmet-to-helmet contact.

Meghan Crowe, the Haldane trainer, said she doesn’t see many concussions among the injuries she treats for football.

Like McConville, Horacio Reyes, whose son Gabriel plays for Haldane, noted that the equipment is better and the techniques to avoid dangerous contact far more advanced than when he played middle linebacker for Cardinal Hayes High School in the Bronx.

Hecceg, the sports neuropsychologist, agreed the game has become safer but he believes more changes are needed. “We’re good at identifying when there is a big hit,” he said. “But we don’t necessarily diagnose symptoms well.” Too often, he said, high school players who may have suffered a head injury will be allowed to return to the game. “When in doubt, sit them out,” he said. “We don’t do that well.”

Strong tradition

Pielke noted that despite health concerns, football has a counterweight: the local community. “A strong football culture will sustain a school’s program,” he said.

Indeed, high school football is thriving in traditional hotbeds, such as in the South, he said. Participation in Alabama grew by 32 percent between 2010 and 2021, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations. During the same

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Zinnia Quinlan (4) breaks loose on a run for the Peekskill flag football team.

Photos provided

Girls' Flag Football Looking for Space

By Joey Asher

Boys' high school football may be on a slow decline in New York high schools, but girls' flag football is breaking down the sideline.

The spring sport was introduced in 2021 in New York as a pilot and became official this year, including at Peekskill High School, where 50 girls tried out for 24 roster spots, said Austin Goldberg, the athletic director.

Zinnia Quinlan, 15, showed up after being invited by a friend. “I didn’t know anything about it,” said Zinnia, who also plays volleyball and basketball.

She caught on quickly and ended the year with a touchdown and an interception. “The quarterback threw the ball and I caught it in the end zone,” she said. “I didn’t even know it was a touchdown.”

The surge in interest among the girls



Zinnia Quinlan

in Peekskill stood in contrast to the boys' football team, Goldberg said. Like many high schools in the state, Peekskill, which has about 1,000 students, had to battle to fill its roster: The varsity had just 20 players in 2021, although that increased to 30 this season.

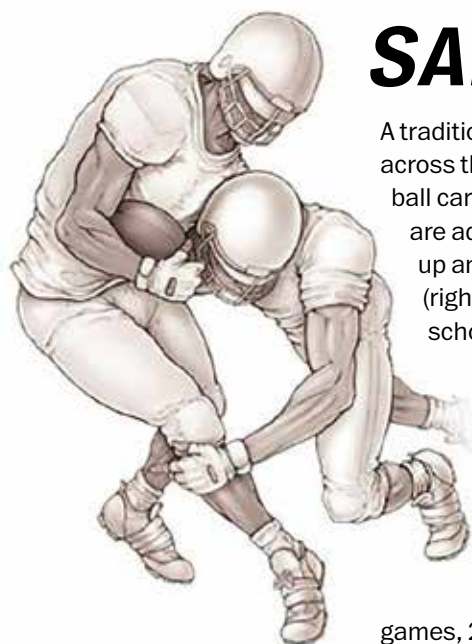
The statewide flag football program was funded by the Giants and Jets, New York's professional (men's tackle) teams. They anticipated 24 schools but heard from 51, with 1,020 players.

Eight of the teams are located in Section I, which includes Westchester and Putnam counties: Peekskill, Somers, Brewster, Mahopac, Scarsdale, Lakeland, Hastings and Greenburgh-North Castle. Section IX, which includes Beacon, did not take part in the pilot, but Kingston launched an intramural league and Middletown hopes to field a team next year. Beacon's athletic director, John Giametta, said he would survey students to gauge interest.

Todd Nelson, the assistant director of the New York State Public High School Athletic Association, said that, because of its immediate success, flag football has already been recognized as an “emerging sport.” That means a committee will be formed to create uniform rules and determine whether the NYSPHSAA should host a state championship.

Brewster High School won the Section I tournament this year and played a short exhibition game at halftime of a Giants preseason game on Aug. 21 at MetLife stadium.

“Football is such a part of our culture,” said Dean Berardo, the school's athletic director. “We all know the benefits of participating on an athletic team. This is just another way to play.”



SAFER TACKLES

A traditional tackling method of putting a “head across the bow” (left) — or in front of the body of the ball carrier — can lead to serious injuries; coaches are advised to tell players to keep their heads up and make contact with their inside shoulder (right). A survey published in 2020 of 68 high school coaches in Texas found that 75 percent preferred to teach head across the bow or “split the number” [head to chest] tackling, although 81 percent said they also advised tacklers to “keep your head up” and 78 percent to “see what you hit.” Only 13 percent said they preferred to teach the (safer) shoulder tackle. Another study estimated there are about 259,000 injuries annually during U.S. high school football games, 26 percent of which are concussions.



Images: Orthopaedic Journal of Sports Medicine

FOOTBALL (from Page 21)

period, it increased 13 percent in Oklahoma and remained steady in Texas.

New York has football powerhouses such as Somers and Arlington, but at the latter, Coach Michael Morano concedes his program is an anomaly. “Most programs are shrinking,” he said. “Ours is exploding.”

Last year Arlington had 159 players on its freshman, junior varsity and varsity teams, up from 115 when he took over as coach in 2016. That’s despite a 19 percent decrease in the high school enrollment over the last 10 years.

Morano said he believes the program has grown because of the momentum of consistent winning, a strong football tradition and an investment to expand the stadium, which can hold as many as 5,000 people. With more than 2,600 students, Arlington High School plays in Class AA, reserved for the state’s largest schools.

Somers High School, which has 1,000 students, has seen success with a program where the players mentor younger athletes, said Coach Anthony DeMatteo. It has 190 students ranging in age from 8 to 13, most of whom play tackle, or “contact,” games, rather than flag football. Enrollment at Somers High School has been steady but K-12 enrollment is down 17 percent over the past decade.

Jake Polito, 17, said that while growing up he was encouraged to play on the line, blocking for the quarterback and running backs because of his size. “I was always the tallest and biggest kid in my class,” he said. He was reluctant, because the position usually elicits few cheers or glory, but that changed when a lineman on the Somers varsity became a mentor. “I fell in love with the idea of being a lineman,” he said. After he graduates next year, he will play for the Naval Academy.

Despite the headwinds, the Haldane and Beacon coaches say they are trying

to emulate the football culture they see at Arlington and Somers.

McConville says he understands that youth football must be a pipeline. “The goal is ‘one team, one community, one mission,’” he said. To that end, the longtime youth football program in Philipstown, the Hawks, was rebranded as the Blue Devils, the Haldane mascot. “Everybody is now a Blue Devil,” McConville said.

Unfortunately, the pandemic turned the league into drill sessions rather than competition. Its teams play flag football against each other, McConville said.

In Beacon, Andrea and Terry Davis have fought to revive youth football, which suffered from low participation and was hit hard by COVID.

Andrea Davis said her goal is to teach not only the rules of the game but teamwork, leadership and discipline. Her uncle, Vernon Way, a Beacon detective, started the

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local Pop Warner league in the 1960s. “He used to say, ‘Kids who play sports, stay out of courts,’” Davis said.

Last spring the Davises rebranded the Beacon Bears as Beacon Youth Football and had 70 students in grades 3 to 5 turn out to play flag football. Andrea Davis said they’re expanding the program to grades K-6 and, if interest continues to grow, will move to tackle.

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