

## Ozark Youth Football more than just a game

By: Steve Casson, sports editor [sports@ccheadliner.com](mailto:sports@ccheadliner.com) | Posted: Tuesday, August 13, 2013 12:29 pm

Austin Campbell moves up to the line of scrimmage, checks his helmet and chin strap, then gets ready for the snap. He waits for the command, "Ready, set, hike." Campbell puts a block on a rushing player allowing the ball carrier to gain yardage.

There's a big smile on Campbell's face after the play because he did his job. It was only practice, but it might as well have been in a game. Before stepping on the field the 8-year-old was watching football instead of playing it.

"He would watch football on TV with his stepdad, Josh," mom Lacy Price said. "Then we found out the (Ozark Community Center) offered the activity for the kids and Austin wanted to try it."

Ozark Youth Football is The O.C.'s version of Mighty Mites or Pop Warner for future football players. The program is run through the Ozark Parks and Recreation Department.

It started in 1992 with one division of fourth-, fifth, and sixth-graders along with \$8,000 in donations to buy equipment. It has now grown to more than 200 kids.

Phil Montgomery, sports supervisor at The O.C., said teams range from 115-120 kids in the fifth- and sixth-grade divisions with 80-100 kids in the third- and fourth-grade divisions.

"There are a lot of sports pulling kids in other directions," Montgomery said. "We try to get more kids involved but it varies from year to year."

A direct feeder program for high-school football, Montgomery said children develop a better understanding of football fundamentals.

"Kids that have played in the program are better off when they get to junior high," he said. "It doesn't mean you can't start then, but it sure helps to start younger."

Price doesn't have a problem watching her son suit up in shoulder pads and carry out composed contact plays in practice.



### Ozark Yourh Football

Riley Brown stares intently at a defender before running a defensive drill in practice Aug. 8.

“I’m going to let him give it a try. Hopefully he will be all right,” she said. “I think it will toughen him up a lot, too.”

Three groups of players trained at various places in Finley River Park Aug. 8 as overcast skies and rain threatened to pounce on players. The youngsters could care less as they listen intently to coaches John Sayer and Joey Mills bark out instructions.

Campbell sets his feet near the line and waits for another snap count. Mills stops just before the hike and instructs the lad on foot placement.

“Don’t point your leg,” Mills said. “We don’t want to give the defense any idea of where you want to go.”

Moving his left leg even with his right, “Yes coach,” Campbell said with resolve.

Don Ligon Jr. stands near the softball field fence along the right field line watching intently as his son, Peyton, runs the same drill in centerfield—the team’s makeshift practice ground. Peyton, who had reservations about playing because he was scared of getting hit by older kids, lines up in formation. Ready, set, hike.

“Being a third-grader and playing against the fourth-graders, he was a little more nervous going in to the first few days of practice,” Don Ligon said. “But now there is a complete 180.”

Having a program that’s been a positive influence, he said, is a great opportunity for kids to see what lies ahead in football.

“He’s very optimistic about playing now,” he said. “(Peyton) wasn’t even sure about playing until two days before the draft, now he loves every bit of it.”

On Aug. 19, the youngsters will get a chance to step on the Ozark High School turf thanks to Tigers coach Mark Bliss. He has presided over the Charity of Choice scrimmage the past two seasons. It’s an event that highlights youth through varsity football programs while giving back to charity.

“We let the different age groups take the field with the high school players for 30-45 minute increments and end the night with our varsity team,” Bliss said. “It’s just a little showcase allowing the parents and community to see what we have coming up the ranks.”

Proceeds raised this year will benefit St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital, the Muscular Dystrophy Association and Care To Learn.

Wesley Peek’s stepson Austin Shepard, who practiced with Campbell, is on the field ready to block for the quarterback. Looking intently as he studies potential rushers, Shepard gets ready for the next play. Ready, set, hike.

“This program teaches the kids a good work ethic and team-building skills,” Peek said. “Even when I was young I had older players who mentored me and helped me mature a little bit.”

Growing up in Michigan, Peek had the chance to mentor the younger kids through his high school basketball team. It was a chance to be a role model and pay forward his mentorship.

“I still look at coaches that I had in the past and put them in a great light because of what they taught me,” Peek said. “It was not just in sports, but it was how to be a man.”

Practices run Monday, Tuesday and Thursday with the first scheduled game Aug. 24. Six more will follow through Sept. 28.

For Price, driving her son to practice every week is something she won't get tired of any time soon, although it may be a different story for Campbell.

“He was really tired today,” Price said. “He said, ‘I'm going to sleep good tonight.’”

sports@cchheadliner.com