

Youth ready for impact

By Bobby Hart

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FARIBAULT — As their first day of preseason training camp came to an end Monday night, approximately 45 youth football players received some familiar uniforms.

Their jerseys were red and their helmet was decorated with a cardinal, giving the uniforms a close resemblance to those of the Bethlehem Academy varsity football team. That's no coincidence, according to Cardinal varsity football coach Scott Hanson, who hopes the youngsters will take a liking to their outfits long enough to wear one for him someday.

"The goal is for these kids to have a great youth experience, learn to love the game of football, have passion for the game of football and then have that carry over into high school," said Hanson, who aside from his high school coaching duties, is also in charge of the youth program.

Entering its third year, the BA Youth Traveling Football program has three teams of third- through sixth-graders playing in the Southern Minnesota Traveling Football League.

The BA youth program was a result of low numbers in the BA varsity program in 2005. Hanson and the current BA youth football Program Director Dennis Glenzinski, who is also an assistant at the varsity level, figured they needed to build the program from the ground up. That meant planting the seed of football in elementary school kids, who will hopefully blossom together through junior high and high school.

"We want to keep as many Divine Mercy Catholic Elementary kids at BA when they get to be in sixth grade, because football is a game of numbers," Hanson said. "The more kids you have the better it is for your program. At the high school level we've just kind of battled lower numbers of kids, and if we have a good



Sixth-grader Jacob Becker prepares for impact during a running drill Monday in the first day of Bethlehem Academy Youth Traveling Football training camp. The youth program is in its third year. (Bobby Hart/Daily News)

experience for these kids when they're young, it's going to help attract more kids, keep kids at Bethlehem Academy and keep kids in our football program."

The effects of the youth program jump starting the program is already apparent at the seventh and eighth grade level, which has grown to a class of 40 this year. Hanson said this is the first time in the eight years he's been around that there's been enough players to split the seventh- and eighth-graders into their own respective teams.

The hope is that growth will eventually work its way up to the varsity level. The Cardinals varsity team has 28 players this year, but Hanson's goal is to increase that number to between 40 and 50 kids in the future.

A large piece of that master plan was unfolding on the field in the back of BA Monday night as kids made their way through different drill stations. The youngsters practice with pads starting today, the second day of the three-day camp.

"The big part is we want to get in-

involved with them so we can teach them the proper way of tackling, the proper skills and all that kind of stuff, so they really enjoy it and have fun," Glenzinski said. "It's more important to us that they're having fun than winning right now. Because if the kids are having fun, they're going to stick with it and enjoy it."

They appeared to be enjoying it Monday as volunteer coach Dave Van Thomme handed the ball off to a group of smiling youngsters in a running drill. They finished off by lowering a shoulder into another coach with a pad at the end of the line.

"They sure like to hit and they're not even padded up yet," said Van Thomme, who is one of the pioneers of the youth program. "It's fun to watch the progression. You realize kids can do stuff that you wouldn't think they would, like pulling guards, they can do it. They're sharp and they watch, and that's what I like to see."

The youth teams play their first game in the eight-to-nine-game season Saturday, Sept. 6. They'll also get a chance to play at half time of a Cardinal varsity game this season, which could serve as a preview of things to come in the future of the BA varsity program.

"We want them to be proud to be Cardinals," said Glenzinski. "The more proud you can get them, the more they'll keep playing, and you'll get more and more kids. And more important than anything, they take pride in what they're doing."

— Sports Editor Bobby Hart may be reached at 333-3129.



Sixth-grader Drew Busch makes a juke move Monday at Bethlehem Academy during the first day of BA Youth Traveling Football training camp. (Bobby Hart/Daily News)