

SPORTS // HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS

# UIL, THSCA join forces to implement a mandatory tackling certification program they hope makes football even safer.



Terrence Thomas | Aug. 28, 2018 | Updated: Aug. 28, 2018 7:36 p.m.



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Judson's Kevin Wood sacks Warren quarterback BJ Greene during the second half of their Class 6A Division I bidistrict football game at Rutledge Stadium on Friday, Nov. 17, 2017. Judson beat Warren 55-14. MARVIN PFEIFFER/mpfeiffer@express-news.net

Photo: Marvin Pfeiffer, Staff / San Antonio Express-News

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When it comes to high school football, Texas prides itself on being a front-runner.

Whether it's the quality of coaching or the state-of-the-art stadiums being erected, the Lone Star State doesn't take a back seat to anyone.

The same mentality was instrumental in an unprecedented combined effort by the University Interscholastic League and the Texas High School Coaches Association geared toward making the sport safer for its participants.

In October 2017, the Legislative Council of the UIL, which oversees extracurricular activities in Texas, passed a measure requiring every high school and junior high football coach to become certified in teaching tackling.

Texas is the first state to implement a mandatory program.

“The game is changing, and we have to be willing to change with it,” said D.W. Rutledge, the former Judson coach and current THSCA executive director. “By implementing a mandatory tackling certification, we’re continuing our legacy in Texas as leaders in high school football and taking necessary steps to move the game forward. Preventing injuries is paramount for all coaches and players, and we felt that as an organization it was our duty to seek out the best possible solutions to keeping our players safe.”

The certification process, which is available in on-site and online formats, began in July. Coaches have until August 2019 to fulfill the requirements.

Rutledge and Dr. Charles Breithaupt, executive director of the UIL, turned to Atavus, a Seattle-based organization, to oversee the administration of the certification process. Atavus focuses on tackling techniques and data analytics, and its clients include major college programs such as Ohio State, Michigan State, Nebraska and Washington.

“Being from Texas and a former football coach in the state, this means a lot to me,” said Rex Norris, head of football for Atavus. “A dominant tackle is a safe tackle, and we are excited to get to work helping coaches teach tackling techniques that will benefit their players and improve their team’s performance.”

Locally, the feedback has been positive.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Judson coach Sean McAuliffe said. “The association is smart enough and years ahead of the curve in the sense of the CTE stuff that gets a bad knock. To make Texas stand out even more, we’re now certified, and not only are we certified as tackling instructors, but it’s safety and first-aid.”

Susan Elza, UIL’s athletic director, said the decision to require coaches to become tackling certified was “proactive” and not a result of safety and health concerns such as concussions and CTE, a degenerative brain disease found in athletes and others with a history of repetitive brain trauma.

“Our focus isn’t there,” Elza said. “It’s (about), ‘How can we make the game better in the state of Texas? How can we make it better and safer for our football players?’ All of us are very passionate about the coaching profession and what it does for kids. I cannot say enough good things about the

At July's coaches' convention in downtown San Antonio, coaches were required to attain tickets to attend the tackling-certification session. The vouchers were a hot commodity.

"It's the kind of madhouse you want," Elza said. "Coaches are coming (to the THSCA clinic) to get better. It's just a positive thing."

Eight years ago while the head coach at Edison, Albert Torres, who is now the head coach at Harlandale, said he started using a "Hawk Tackling" training demonstration put together by Seattle Seahawks coach Pete Carroll and his staff. The NFL club focused on taking the "head out of the tackle," while still being physical.

"As coaches, we've always look for an edge in terms of learning," Torres said. "Most coaches I do know teach the right way and do it always for player safety. A lot of what (Atavus) taught, we've been doing it for a while."

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