

Football: Alexandria using Atavus to address tackling issues

By Eric Morken on Aug 22, 2018 at 6:00 p.m.



Alexandria's Matthew Zick (left) wraps up Riley Simonson during a drill at the Cardinals' practice on Aug. 14 as Dom Wilson (far left) and head coach Mike Empting (far right) watch on. This form, where Zick never brings his head across the ball carrier's body but instead hits with his front shoulder, is a part of a new tackling technique that Alexandria coaches are implementing to try to lead to more efficient and safer tackling. (Eric Morken / Echo Press)

Alexandria football coach Mike Empting entered the offseason looking to address a couple of concerns for his team.

The Cardinals have put together quite a three-year run on the field. They've been to three straight section title games and a state tournament in 2016, but Empting saw a need to get better on the defensive side of the ball.

"I don't think, over the last number of years, we were very effective tacklers as a team," he said. "I don't think we closed space very well. Once we made contact, we were giving up yards after contact. So I was looking for a way on how can we improve ourselves as tacklers."

Then there is the ongoing safety issue with football, in particular the push to try to eliminate head injuries as much as possible. The Cardinals had already taken steps toward a safer game. They hardly ever tackle during practice. They also implement the use of a product called Tacklebar all the way down to the fifth-grade level to eliminate tackling at all until seventh grade.

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Now the Cardinals have taken things even further with the help of a company called Atavus based out of Seattle. In doing so, they believe it will not only improve player safety, but also make players more efficient tacklers in the process.

“We’re going to implement this down to the middle school level,” Empting said. “I think if we start teaching our kids how to tackle from the time they start, then it’s the only way they know how. This I feel like is a much more natural progression.”

The common approach to teaching tackling over the years has been to have a defender get his head across the offensive player’s body to tackle with the back shoulder. That can lead to the head making the first contact on a takedown.

Atavus brings a rugby-style approach of tackling to football. Defenders never bring the head across the ball carrier’s body. Instead, they attack the hip area with their shoulder making first contact and generate their burst with a power step by planting and driving forward with the same foot as the shoulder they are tackling with.

“If you’re getting that power step into the ground with the same shoulder, you’re essentially running your leverage through the ball carrier,” Empting said. “You’re redirecting the ball carrier. It’s also teaching the kids how to punch with that shoulder at the same time. It’s really an effective method of tackling.”

Empting and a handful of other Alexandria coaches went to a tackling clinic at Concordia College in Moorhead this offseason and were sold on Atavus’ effectiveness in regards to safety and better tackling. The company is used by the Seattle Seahawks in the NFL and by Power Five college programs such as Nebraska, Ohio State, Washington and Michigan State.

Atavus puts together a whole tackling plan for Alexandria’s coaches to implement. They will then break down the Cardinals’ game film throughout the season and offer advice on where things are going well and where they can improve.

A work in progress

Empting said teaching this new style of tackling has been a process.

Footwork is incredibly important. They have walked through drill after drill before working up to game speed. The Cardinals were able to implement some of it in June when coaches could spend limited time with their athletes ahead of a team camp at North Dakota State University.

“There’s a lot of drills we’ve been doing, but the one hard part is people like me and (senior) Wade (Odland) are used to the old tackling method,” Alexandria junior safety Andrew Revering said. “Sometimes when somebody is running outside, we want to put our heads across. We’re not supposed to do that anymore, so it’s muscle memory. The drills we’re doing are supposed to help us with that. I think the more we do it, especially in a game, we’ll get used to it quick.”

Revering and Odland are both defensive backs who are often put in situations where they need to meet an offensive player in open space. Empting said a big positive of this new approach is that it takes away the cutback option for an offensive player because defenders are not lowering their heads to go across the body.

The power step -- planting and driving the foot forward at the same time of the tackle -- is especially important with the rugby-style approach. It helps the defender generate power to drive the ball carrier back while wrapping up. Slowly but surely, it’s coming together.

“As of now, I am doing more thinking than I would be usually,” Odland said. “But I think as we keep doing these drills and running through this new tackling form in practice to get more muscle memory, it will be more natural when it comes to game time.”

Getting to game speed

Empting has talked to his players about what they think of the new style. They are receptive, he said, even if it takes a while to adjust.

“I think about (the changes for safety), and I think it’s good,” Odland said. “This tackling form still works, and it gets our head out of the play more, so I agree with it. I can see how the tackling form before would be more dangerous than this.”

The Cardinals know the time is coming where they’re going to see how they adapt to this at game speed. Alexandria hosts a scrimmage on Saturday, Aug. 25, at 9 a.m. Then it’s on to the season opener in Andover at 7 p.m. on Aug. 30.

“At that point, we hope we have done enough drill work and taken them through enough practices to get it to a point where they don’t think,” Empting said. “I want them to react and play as fast as they can play.”

Empting isn’t worried about kids missing more tackles, but says they have had to reteach some things pertaining to leverage and how they contain the ball carrier on perimeter runs.

Some early growing pains might show up on game day. In the long term, though, coaches are confident this will create a safer game and a more efficient tackler for their players.

“It’s no different than learning a new defense or offense or playing a new position,” Empting said. “There’s a thought process that has to go into it. ‘What am I doing here? What am I seeing?’ This is just another piece of it.”

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