

Pastor gives strength to Cedar Valley gridgers

Written by Tom Fruehling
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Their team name of the Huskies notwithstanding, the 16 boys on the Cedar Valley Christian varsity eight-man football squad are less than husky.

“Let’s face it,” said Coach Ed Betsworth, “we’re kind of small.”

So when, like a bolt out of the blue, he got an offer this summer from a new school parent to serve as a volunteer strength and conditioning coach it seemed like a gift from above.

Betsworth had not met Darin Ulmer, who serves as full-time minister of the two-year-old Community Baptist Church in downtown Marion.

“Being a pastor, I envisioned some skinny little guy,” the coach said. “Then Darin showed up, and there went that perception.”

Ulmer, 40, is instead a big, burly guy who’s lifted weights for fun and fitness since the seventh grade and threw the shot put and discus back when he was at Linn-Mar High School and in college at William Jewell in Liberty, Mo.

He packs 305 pounds onto his solid 5-foot-11 frame and can bench press 385 pounds.

“I’ve always just enjoyed picking up heavy objects,” said Ulmer, whose wife Sara also happens to be a one-time competitive power lifter.

“I have a passion for weight lifting. And I see a Biblical basis for athletics. The apostle Paul uses a lot of sports metaphors.”

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Physical training, the pastor contends, can go hand-in-hand with spiritual training.

With two of his four sons (to go with three daughters) starting at Cedar Valley this year and going out for football, Ulmer figured he could help the players bulk up some.

Sophomore son Kenan practices with the varsity but can't compete since he transferred from Linn-Mar, while eighth grader Micah is on the newly formed junior high squad.

"We haven't had a weight training program before," said Betsworth, whose second-year team opens play Friday against HLV at Victor in hopes of improving on its winless debut season. "One problem is, we don't really have a weight room."

What equipment the school does have is in a garage where CVC Principal Jeff Pospisil teaches auto mechanics and the drama department stores its scenery.

Twice a week since football practice began in early August, Betsworth puts some barbells along with a single blocking sled in the mobile equipment trailer that he's hauled out to the practice facility at St. Joseph's school in Marion.

And Ulmer has added to the conditioning arsenal with two huge tractor tires that he has the players lift and roll over.

"That's good for every part of the body," he said of the make-do training equipment. "Besides building up their strength, I'm trying to develop the explosive movements you need in football."

Huskies senior Isaiah Sherman, a life-long asthma sufferer who was able to play a team sport for the very first time last fall, said he thinks the weight training will pay dividends this year.

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“In our first season, we were learning plays but we really didn’t get physically stronger. Now I’m losing fat and putting muscle there instead,” he said.

Neither he nor any of his teammates remember the old Charles Atlas comic book ads where the world champion body builder promised to transform skinny kids who were continually tormented by having sand kicked on them at the beach. But Sherman said he already sees a difference in this year’s team.

“Weight training, I feel, was one piece that held us back last year.”