

## Palmetto's tackling approach producing safer, better results

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Palmetto finished its last game of the season Friday night disappointed it could not change the zero displayed under its name on the Southridge High scoreboard.

The Panthers are happy with a different kind of goose egg they posted this year.

Palmetto navigated through its best season since 2008 without any of its varsity players sustaining a concussion.

The reason: new tackling techniques the Panthers have implemented over the past two seasons that has resulted in a noticeable reduction of concussions over that span.

“We haven’t had one concussion on varsity all year and that’s unreal,” Palmetto coach Mike Manasco said. “It’s all basically about keeping the head out of the tackle.”

Palmetto defensive backs coach Bobby Vernon, a former football player himself who has played in a local rugby league over the past eight years, came up with the idea and worked with Manasco to implement it in practice in spring 2015.

“I was impressed by the way rugby players tackle, but more importantly how they tackle without a helmet and still manage for the most part to avoid head injuries,” said Vernon, who played football at Georgetown University. “I started thinking about how I can create a set of drills that can apply to American football.”

Palmetto players often practiced live tackling drills without helmets and shoulder pads so they become accustomed to not leaning in with their heads and have a better approach when pursuing a ball carrier.



Palmetto defensive backs coach Bobby Vernon runs a pregame drill with senior corner Christian Pierre-Louis (22).

The drills focus on maintaining leverage without exposing the head to potential high-speed collisions. Some mimic the “roll tackling” technique used by the Seattle Seahawks, where the tackler rolls himself and the ball carrier after contact, avoiding head impact while effectively bringing down his opponent.

Palmetto head athletic trainer Michelle Benz said football players reported 15 concussions during the 2012 season and 13 during the 2014 season. But in 2015, only four concussions were reported (two on varsity and two on JV), and none on varsity this season.

“When I told Mike I wanted us to tackle without helmets and shoulder pads, he first looked at me like I was crazy,” Vernon said. “A lot of kids want to make that big highlight hit and we don’t discourage that. We just discourage targeting with your head or targeting an opponent’s head. Kids have been taught for so long to get the head across, and that’s been the hardest thing to retrain.”

Senior defensive end Henry Martinez, a four-year starter, has personally experienced a clear difference.

“I had suffered a couple of neck stingers when I started playing,” Martinez said. “That hasn’t happened to me once since we started doing drills this way.”

In addition to the safety aspect, it has allowed their players to reduce the frequency of missed tackles and helped Palmetto become a much more efficient defense this past season.

The Panthers allowed 24 points and more than 150 rushing yards per game during the 2014 season. During this season that ended Friday night with the Panthers playing in their first regional semifinal since 2008, Palmetto allowed only 11.3 points per game and 113 rushing yards per game.

Vernon said he and Manasco have presented videos of the team’s techniques at clinics such as the Glazier Clinic in Tampa. It has received positive feedback from several different sources and from teams as far away as Germany that have begun incorporating elements of it.

“This is something kids can do year-round,” Manasco said. “We’ve been healthy aside from a few ankle or hand injuries here and there. But this has been tremendous and it’s helped our kids get better and stay safe. It’s something we’re going to continue to use.”

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