

ROOSEVELT — [Matt Labrum](#) believes football helps create great men.

And it is that belief and his passion for the game that led the Union High School head football coach and his staff to suspend all 41 players from the team because of off-field problems ranging from cyberbullying to skipping classes.

“We felt like everything was going in a direction that we didn’t want our young men going,” said Labrum, an alumnus of the program he’s coached for the past two years. “We felt like we needed to make a stand.”

So the coach and his staff gathered the team together after Friday night's loss to Judge Memorial Catholic High School and told them he was concerned about some of the players' actions and behavior off the field. He then instructed them all to turn in their jerseys and their equipment. There would be no football until they earned the privilege to play.

Jenn Rook, whose son Karter is a sophomore on the team, was waiting outside the school that night.

“They were in the locker room for a really long time,” she said. “They came out, and there were tears. Those boys were wrecked. My son got in the car really upset and (said), ‘First of all, there is no football team. It’s been disbanded.’”

Junior [Jordan Gurr](#) said he, too, was shocked.

“When they said we’re going to turn our jerseys in, I thought, ‘Oh, I’ve never been cut.’ I figured we’d just been cut. There were no more games. I was sad,” he said.

The coaches told them there would be a 7 a.m. meeting the next day where they would have an opportunity to re-earn a spot on the team.

“We looked at it as a chance to say, ‘Hey, we need to focus on some other things that are more important than winning a football game,” Labrum said. “We got an emotional response from the boys. I think it really meant something to them, which was nice to see that it does mean something. There was none of them that fought us on it.”

## **Cyberbullying**

One incident in particular moved the coaches to action. A few days before, guidance counselors informed the coaches about a student who believed he was being harassed and bullied by football players on an anonymous online chat program called ask.fm — something Labrum and his staff had never heard of before last week. Because the social media website allows users to hurl insults from behind a screen name, there was no way for coaches or counselors to know who was harassing the young man, who is not a member of the football team.

“We said, ‘We’ve got to make a change,’” said Labrum, who met with the student who was bullied on Monday to offer an apology. “We were pretty open with (the players) about what we’d heard. We don’t want that represented in our program. ... Whoever it is (doing the bullying), we want to help get them back on the right path.”

But there were other issues that concerned the coaches, including failing and skipping classes and showing disrespect to teachers.

“It had gotten to a new level,” said Labrum. “We felt like we weren’t respecting the teachers, what they were trying to do inside the school, other people’s time. Overall, our program wasn’t going where we wanted it to go. We weren’t reaching the young men like we wanted to reach them.”

So they stopped playing football and started discussing character.

## **Union character**

“I think football molds character,” Labrum said. “We want to help our parents raise their sons. We want to be a positive influence. We want to be an asset.”

During Saturday's team meeting, Labrum gave the suspended players a letter titled "Union Football Character," explaining exactly what the boys would need to do if they wanted to earn their jerseys back.

"The lack of character we are showing off the field is outshining what we are achieving on the field," the letter said. "It is a privilege to play this wonderful game! We must earn the opportunity to have the honor to put on our high school jerseys each Thursday and Friday night!"

Instead of practicing during the days leading up to a homecoming game against Emery High this Friday, they were told to perform community service, and attend study hall and a class on character development. They were also required to perform service for their own families and write a report about their actions.

The players were told they also need to show up on time and attend all of their classes. And those with bad grades were told they must show improvement if they wanted to play.

School administrators who learned of the decision to suspend the team the day before it happened, said they supported the move and saw it as more of an opportunity than punishment.

"As I thought about it, I've got 100 percent confidence in our (coaching) staff," said Principal Rick Nielsen. "They are just excellent men. Sometimes we do think we're bigger than the game."

## **Parental support**

No parent complained about the decision to the administration. Most expressed support and gratitude.

Jenn Rook admits that her first reaction to the suspensions was to hurry off to find a coach to corner, but then her son told her about what led to the decision.

“OK, that’s not so bad then,” Rook said. “I do support it. These boys are not going to be hurt by this. It’s a good life lesson. ... It’s not a punishment. I see it as an opportunity to do some good in the community.”

Like Rook, Jeremy Libberton was initially concerned when his son Jaden, a junior, told him what happened.

“I thought, ‘Why is this a team-type issue when there should be individuals that should be held accountable?’” Libberton said. “But then I talked to several other parents, and there is really not a way to track this to specific people. I wish we could in this case.”

He talked with Labrum Saturday.

“After I met with him, he’s got my support,” said Libberton. “I’m encouraging my boy to stand strong, to stand with the team and get through it. ... If there is not unity with me and the coach, then I become part of the problem.”

### **Better people**

Of the seven team captains elected at the beginning of the season, only two were re-elected after Saturday’s team meeting. Gurr was one of them. He said he is a naturally quiet person, but now understands the need to speak up when he sees questionable behavior.

“I’m a pretty silent person, so I didn’t really say much,” he said, acknowledging that it's difficult to confront your friends when they're out of

line. “We’d talk to them after practice sometimes; we’d run. It didn’t work out very well.”

He sees his role as team captain much differently this week than he did during the first two months of the season.

“It gives me a second chance,” Gurr said.

Junior quarterback [Tye Winterton](#) said he believes the break from football will make them better players — and better people.

“I definitely didn’t want to turn in my jersey,” said Winterton, who is an honors student. “I love playing. But I trust the coaches and believe in what they’re doing.”

Football to most of the young men is the one thing they look forward to all day.

“It’s probably one of my most favorite things to do,” said Winterton, who also plays soccer and basketball for Union. “I was aware of some things that were going on. ... I’d never heard of (ask.fm) until coaches said it.”

Senior running back [Gavin Nielsen](#) said he had an ask.fm account but shut it down because he decided it was a waste of time. He also noticed that some of his teammates were skipping classes and struggling in school, but he didn’t always say something.

“One of my weaknesses that I wrote down,” he said, referring to an exercise the players engaged in during Monday's character class, “was that I wasn’t holding people accountable on the field and off the field. As a leader, on the field and off I have to hold people accountable.”

His passion for football hasn’t diminished, but Nielsen said he does have a new perspective on what it means to wear the Union High uniform.

“I still have the love for it and everything,” he said Monday while leaning on a shovel he was using to remove weeds as part of his community service.

“But it helped me realize, it’s not all about football.”