

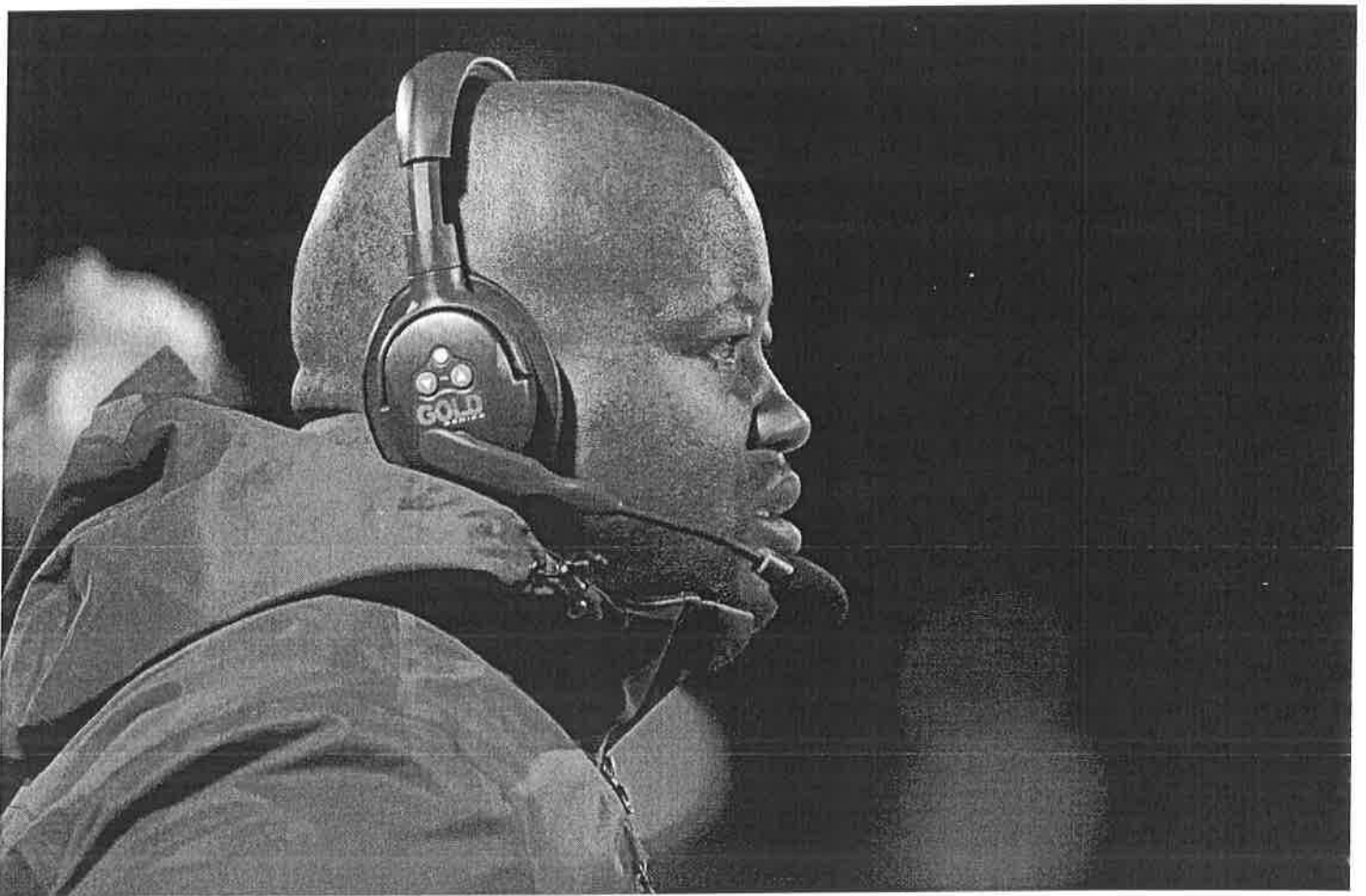
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## Bennett football forced to forfeit six games; teachers federation calls for investigation

Clevis Murray

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Bennett coach Steve McDuffie looks on during the first half at Lancaster.  
Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News

Clevis Murray

Bennett, the defending Section VI Class AA football champion, has had to forfeit its first six games this season after the section ruled it had used an ineligible player, Buffalo Public Schools assistant superintendent for athletics Michael House confirmed to The Buffalo News on Friday.

The player, who was a junior varsity football player last season for Sweet Home as an eighth-grader, didn't complete a New York State Public High School Athletic Association transfer notification form, which is required to be filed to the section for a transferring player to be eligible.

Due to the use of an ineligible player, the Tigers went from 4-2 overall and 2-0 in Class AA, to 0-6 and 0-2, before Friday night's game against Niagara Falls at All-High Stadium.

Bennett, which made the state Class AA championship game last season, entered the week ranked No. 10 in the New York State Sportswriters poll in Class AA and No. 1 in The Buffalo News large schools poll.

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“We had an unfortunate situation where Bennett had a student-athlete who had been playing JV football at Sweet Home High School last year,” House said. “We had no knowledge of this and he was an eighth-grader (at Sweet Home).”

"This student did participate in our regular-season contests and unfortunately it was deemed by Section VI he was ineligible. This student is a bona fide student at Lewis J. Bennett High School and does live in the City of Buffalo."

Four of the five Section VI teams in Class AA make the playoffs, so it's possible the Tigers could qualify as high as the third seed. Bennett beat Niagara Falls, 42-14, on Senior Night and is now 1-6 overall and 1-2 in Class AA. Bennett faces Hutch-Tech (0-7) next week in the last game of the regular season.

Due to the violation and Section VI policy regarding NYSPHSAA infractions, Bennett coach Steve McDuffie was not allowed to coach the game Friday. Former St. Joe's coach Bob O'Connor led the Tigers.

Section VI became aware of Bennett possibly having an ineligible player when the information was provided to the organization, Section VI Executive Director Mark DiFillippo said.

"There was information that was provided to my office that Bennett may have an ineligible player," DiFilippo said. "I called the BPS athletic office, presented the information to them, they did their investigation and confirmed they did use an ineligible player. Based on the NYSPHSAA rules, any game they used an ineligible player with had to be forfeited."

House said BPS learned of the issue Tuesday and immediately filed the paperwork upon learning the athlete played JV football. House said the section office received the paperwork Friday.

"This is a clerical or procedural matter," House said. "I don't have the resources or investigative abilities to go and investigate every middle school student coming in whether they played high school sports or not."

DiFilippo said the section will try to process the paperwork as quickly as possible, but it's unknown if the player will become eligible before the season is over.

Buffalo Teachers Federation President Philip Rumore wants an investigation into what happened that led to the forfeited games.

“I am very angry,” Rumore said, “because of what it is doing to the kids on the team and the student – over paperwork.”

Rumore said he’s especially concerned about the impact on the student at the center of the controversy who some could blame for what happened.

“We want an investigation on what exactly happened,” Rumore said.

“Rules are rules, we know that,” he said. “But there’s also the spirit of rules. Nobody knew an eighth-grader was playing JV. How do you inflict this kind of punishment on the team and that student?”

Rumore also wants officials to ask the schools that played against Bennett whether they want to be declared the winners of the forfeited games.

As a result of the forfeits, Lancaster and Orchard Park – the two teams that Bennett beat in Class AA – were undefeated entering their game Friday night.

The Legends scored 16 points in the fourth quarter to break a 14-14 tie and went on to a 30-14 victory. Lancaster is 7-0 and 4-0 in Class AA with one regular season game remaining and has locked up the top seed in the playoffs. A field goal by Cannon Converse and rushing touchdowns from Jacob Zimmerman and Micah Harry provided the fourth-quarter points for the Legends.

Orchard Park (6-1, 2-1), as the second seed, could end up playing Bennett in the Class AA semifinals. The Quakers face Niagara Falls next week in the regular season finale.

**By Clevis Murray**

**Sports Reporter**