Hot temps, earlier season combine for changes to football practice

It doesn't feel much like football weather with temperatures in the lower 90s and a heat index inching toward 100 degrees.

Despite the sultry air outside, the Gothenburg Swedes and football players across the state are hitting the field this week amid cautions from experts about heat-related illnesses.

"We've always been affected by the heat," said Gothenburg High School head football coach Craig Haake. "But now, when football season keeps getting pushed closer and closer to July, we really notice it."

The Swedes spent last week conditioning in the evenings after the days' average high temperatures were 85 degrees.

Official practice began on Monday under an overcast sky with reasonable temperatures and a light breeze.

"This won't last," Haake said.

Gothenburg's schedule for the 2009 football season includes an early-week game. The Swedes will host Wood River on Friday, Aug. 28.

That means practice started Monday for Gothenburg and 15 other Class C-1 teams scheduled

for early games. The rest of the C-1 schools can't begin practice until next week.

And like the Swedes, many of those teams with early games conducted conditioning sessions in the heat the previous week.

"We never discourage kids from getting a drink or taking a break if they think they need to," Haake said.

And there are always at least two or more drink breaks scheduled into practice regardless of the temperature.

"Get a drink whether you want one or not," Haake shouted to his players midway through their second session Monday morning. "Sometimes you have to force them."

Haake said in the "olden days" when he was a high school football player, his team had true two-a-day practices at 6 a.m. and 2 p.m. the entire week before school started.

Some coaches still work kids at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.

Haake takes a different approach.

Instead of one practice in the morning and one in the evening, Haake schedules two shorter practices in the morning separated by 45 minutes to an hour.

The Swedes work out from 7:30-9:30 a.m., take a break and come back between 10:15 and 10:30.

“We usually get done before it gets too uncomfortably hot,” he said. “Plus, that doesn’t give the kids time to get sore in between.”

Another precaution the Swede coaching staff has taken is a shorter warm-up before early-season games.

“We used to be on the field for an hour or an hour and 15 minutes before a game,” he said. “Now we do less than 50 minutes. The heat zaps you and we need to conserve as much energy as we can.”

Sometimes, issues with heat still occur. Haake said a couple of years ago, a player showed signs of heat exhaustion during practice.

“We tried to get him cooled off right away,” Haake said. “That meant a trip to the shower room.”

Players most affected by the heat, Haake said, are those who have spent their summer inside with air conditioning.

“You can really tell the difference,” he said.

There are lots of warnings out for athletes this time of year. The Nebraska School Activities Association’s sports medicine advisory committee has studied the issues regarding acclimatization of football players in early season practices when heat and humidity can create health and safety problems.

The committee recommends practice during the cooler parts of the day with frequent water and rest breaks. Members also say no early season football practice should exceed three hours and two practices should be separated by scheduled rest and recovery time.

Officials from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services say heat waves can be silent killers.

“The body normally cools itself by sweating. When the humidity is high, sweat doesn’t evaporate as quickly. That prevents the body from releasing heat, causing its temperature control system to overload,” said Dr. Joann Schaefer, chief medical officer and director of the Division of Public Health.

HHS offers the following advice for athletes and others:

Slow down. Reduce activities and stay in a cool place as much as possible. Work outdoors in early morning or in the evening.

Don’t dry out. Drink plenty of water, and don’t wait until you are thirsty to drink.

Dress for hot weather. Wear light-colored and loosely-fitted clothing to help maintain normal body temperature.

Get out of the heat. Spend as much time as possible in an air-conditioned place, for at least a few hours a day.

Don’t get too much sun. Sunburn makes the body’s job of heat dissipation harder.

Haake and his coaching staff try to head those warnings.

“We can’t control the weather or the game schedule,” the coach said, “but we do try to keep kids from getting sick because of it.”