Forest Park Coach Bill Santilli (red shirt) and Assistant Coach Dave Graff (riding the blocking sled) watch as Trojans football players drive into the blocking sled during the first week of practice.

CRYSTAL FALLS—“We knew the numbers game was going to hit us,” said Forest Park varsity grid Coach Bill Santilli. “We just never anticipated it would be this year.”

There are problems at Forest Park. Part of it, says the coach, is that this year’s players didn’t show the kind of off-season dedication you would expect from an elite U.P. Division 8 school. As a result, the team was behind schedule when practices officially began last week.

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But the bigger problem is roster size. Numbers.

Transition: Eighteen seniors helped the Trojans to a 9-2 record and the Division 8 regional title game last fall. Now they’re gone. Only a few returnees played extensively on the 2011 team.

The experienced players back are DB-flanker Derek Aberly, OL-DL Taylor Nocerini, RB-OLB Dennis Mongar, OL Mac Phillips and OLB Zach Painter.

Compounding the problem is an extremely low turnout. Only 33 took part in the first week of practice, with just 12 JV players. Just 19 varsity on the first day. “That is so depressing,” said Santilli.

It’s certainly poor for Forest Park, which had over 50 players combined in recent years. A recruitment drive started last week, but school officials decided Monday to scrap the JV team for this fall—the sophs and frosh will be varsity reserves. Not having a JV team will hurt the football program in future years.

Slow start: When the Trojans hit the blocking sleds late last week, they heard the same thing over and over: “Too slow! Again!”

Forest Park football is known for its power and precision. Neither was in evidence. Granted, it’s the first week, but Santilli said the Trojans are way behind. Example: They only got through half of the normal Day 1 practice plan Santilli has used for years.

The players were active all summer, doing things like biking, running and basketball. But Santilli said just a few lifted weights regularly. As a result, “We are not real strong physically. Football is a physical game, and that has always been one of our strengths.”

Few campers: In July, only two players took part in all three days of the Iron County Football Camp at Iron River. Eight others only took part in the 7-on-7 drills.

“If our players had taken the initiative to attend Iron County Football Camp for at least one day,” the coach said, “we would have at least been acclimated to the sport.”

Instead, “We came into camp [last week] as if we were playing this game for the first time in our high school careers.

“Not that we can’t catch up. But football season comes fast.” The scrimmage is Friday, and the season opener is a week and a half away.

How about the two who did take part in the Iron River camp? “They did fine.”

Missing man: Sorely missed is sophomore Lee Graff, who was promoted to varsity late last season. Graff injured a knee last winter and needed reconstructive surgery. He will miss the entire season.

He will be missed both for his playing and leadership skills. “He would have been an integral part of our team—a two-way starter. He brings a desire to the table—other kids follow his example.”

What now? “I want to focus our attention on those athletes who have the desire to play. Our challenge will be to bring them along as quickly as we can and try to generate that enthusiasm among them so we can be competitive this year.”

Next up: The Trojans scrimmage West Iron and Florence at Nelson Field on Friday at 9 a.m.—it’s open to the public at no charge. Season opener is at home against Bark River-Harris Aug. 24.