



High school football makes money, but not enough

Though high school football teams, like Fletcher, can bring in up to \$100,000 a year, it's not enough to turn a profit.

By **Mary Kelli Palka**

High school football games bring images of Friday night lights, packed bleachers and long lines at the concession stands.

In short, a popular money-maker for schools - the sport that makes enough money to pay for all the others. Or so you'd think.

And strictly at the school level, football in Northeast Florida generally takes in more money than it costs despite the rising price of transportation, field maintenance, equipment and uniforms.

But factor in coaches' pay and security, in some cases paid for by the school districts, and football can't cover its own expenses, according to interviews with athletic administrators and financial data from some area schools.

In April, when the Florida High School Athletic Association ruled that to save money that the maximum number of sporting events for teams should be cut by 20 to 40 percent, it spared football, and later cheerleading. (The association is going to meet this week to potentially reconsider the ruling after it was slapped with a gender-equity lawsuit.)

The reason for holding football harmless was because it is generally the highest income producer of all high school sports, according to the agenda for the association's June meeting.

That is usually true in Northeast Florida, where football can bring in more than \$100,000 at some schools, such as Fletcher High School in Duval County or Orange Park High in Clay County. Even when the annual revenue is less than \$30,000, like last year at Keystone Heights Junior/Senior High or Englewood High, football makes more than other sports.

Football's costs are also higher than any other sport. And when the money for salary supplements and security is included, the bottom line sees red.

"We (usually) don't make a profit," said Jon Fox, Duval County's athletic director.

At Fletcher High School, football ticket sales last year brought in about \$90,075; program advertisements and donations raised another \$15,700.

The program cost the school about \$76,700, excluding coaches pay and security. So at the school level, football makes money.

The district picks up the \$33,856 for coaches' supplemental pay and at least some of the \$10,768 in security costs. (Districtwide, the district spends about \$3.7 million on coaches' supplements and security costs for athletic events.) So add in the district costs, and football isn't turning a profit.

After teams' expenses are paid at the school level, whatever is left over at the end of the year in team accounts winds up in the school's athletic fund.

It's that money, plus some that schools' athletic programs receive from beverage machine contracts, that together pays for sports that don't have enough revenue, Fox said.

The amount that teams make - and spend - varies from school to school, sport to sport and even game to game. Weather, school rivalries and the team's record can all drive game ticket sales up or down. And the need to replace uniforms and equipment also varies from year to year.

For instance, records from Wolfson High in Duval County showed that its football team's gate receipts from its game against Forrest were about \$2,000. The team's game against Terry Parker brought in almost \$11,000.

In Clay County, the district also pays the coaches' supplements, which is about \$35,000 for varsity and junior varsity football combined at each school, said Mike Wingate, the district's director of secondary education. And he said schools pay for transportation-related costs out of a field trip fund.

Orange Park High collected about \$106,000 in revenue from football last year, including money from gate receipts, booster clubs, sponsorships and donations.

Not including the coaches' supplements and most transportation costs covered by the district and school's field trip fund, the football program's expenses were about \$76,498.

The extra money from football gate receipts and money from other sports' ticket sales goes into a school athletic fund and is then spread out to help cover costs of the school's other teams, said Clayton Anderson, the school's athletic director.

Wingate said the county's philosophy is "whatever revenue you bring in, it's going to pay for all of the sports."

Money raised by players or their parents through fundraisers usually stays with the team to cover extra items the team might need.

At Ridgeview High, where football brought in almost \$49,000 in gate receipts last year, that money and money from other sports helps cover other teams' costs when necessary.

The girl's cross country team hosts one meet a year, which nets about \$200. The team uses that money, along with some fundraisers, to cover some equipment and uniform costs, coach Al Nesi said.

But that doesn't cover all of the team's expenses, including travel-related costs for playoffs or necessary track upkeep.

He said he doesn't know where the money comes from, but the school's athletic director and principal help pay those expenses. He said his team's players get what they need.

"We're not doing this for the money," Nesi said. "We're doing it to build their self-esteem and self-confidence."

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