

Worth the Price



FROM PAY-TO-PARTICIPATE FEES TO BAKE SALES,
INTERSCHOLASTIC ATHLETICS AT WEST MUSKINGUM STILL
EXIST DESPITE NO SCHOOL FUNDING

It's early August and the practice fields are buzzing with activity up on the hill at West Muskingum High School. And yes, those practice fields are literally up on a hill, which is appropriate considering the financial uphill climb that student-athletes, coaches and families face each school year to represent the sports teams of this rural mid-size school about 45 miles east of Columbus.

Financially speaking, the school district isn't too much different than many school districts across Ohio right now. To say that the budget is tight is an understatement. There are more questions and uncertainties than answers and stability on this campus located a stone's throw from the old National Road, which played such a key role in making Ohio a gateway to westward expansion of the United States in the 19th century.

By Tim Stried, OHSAA Director of Information Services



But one thing is for sure – the odds of a dollar in the district’s budget ever being allocated for athletics again are slim. In 2006, the school board was forced to eliminate anything in the budget toward athletics.

“We saw that coming and started to prepare,” said Daryl Satterfield, the athletic director for the high school and junior high. “The members of this community weren’t going to let sports and music and clubs cease to exist.”

The Ohio High School Athletic Association says that interscholastic athletics are vital to schools, communities and Ohio’s youth. School sports are an extension of the classroom and support the academic mission of schools. Nowhere else is that better defined than at West Muskingum, where nothing is taken for granted and everyone plays a part in helping 19 sports suit up in the blue and gold for the Tornadoes.

“Sports are important here,” said Don Jeffers, the booster club president. “We felt like we had to do something to keep those opportunities available for the kids.”

With the school funding crisis in Ohio, some are starting to question if sports should have a place in a district’s budget, despite the fact that athletics typically account for only one to three percent of the finances. Pay-to-participate fees are often looked at as the answer, however they often end up limiting participation. On the other hand, school fees are still usually much lower than the high costs of non-school programs like AAU, junior Olympics, travel and club teams.

“We got within 100 votes of passing a levy,” said Satterfield when asked if there was hope of athletics being funded again anytime soon. “We’re preparing for another try, but the unique thing about this is that even if a levy passes, we’ll probably never get back to having paid assistant coaches.”

You read that correctly. Other than a couple assistant football coaches, all assistant coaches at the school are volunteer. Consider, too, that head coaches took a 15 percent pay cut when pay-to-participate fees were enacted and they took another 10 percent cut a couple years ago to help balance the athletic department budget.

In 2010, the OHSAA conducted a statewide survey of pay-to-participate fees. At that time, about 42 percent of the respondents said they had pay-to-participate fees. That number is most likely higher now and the OHSAA will conduct another survey next year. It is the Association’s plea that districts keep fees as low as possible so that participation remains as high as possible.

But faced with the loss of all extracurricular activities at West Muskingum, members of the staff and community stepped up to save them. The booster club took over payment for all costs associated with athletics, from coaches’ salaries and officials’ fees to team uniforms, transportation and equipment. Electric, water and heating bills add up quickly, and even nets and field paint have to be accounted for.

Pay-to-participate fees and a host of other measures were enacted to save athletics at the school and the West Muskingum Sports Council was established to oversee payment of the bills.

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– Don Jeffers, West Muskingum Athletic Booster Club President



“The Sports Council is strictly a management group,” said Jeffers, who noted that most sports also have their own parent support group. “The Council coordinates fundraising in the community and determines how much the pay-to-participate fees have to be each year. In addition to the fees, we rely on gate receipts, donations, concession sales, bingo, a walk-a-thon – you name it. If there’s an event in the community where we can cook food, we’ll be there.”

Several of the school’s athletic facilities needed an upgrade, which is nearly impossible considering the fundraising and pay-to-participate fees only cover the costs of running the athletic department.

“We keep the fees as low as possible,” Satterfield said. “We try to do everything we can so that any family that wants to play sports here can do so.”

That means there is no fund for capital improvement projects. The school hasn’t hosted a track meet in five years because the track has sunk in one corner, and the lights on the football field, which are the same lights that went up in 1963, are so weak that many began to question if the school should host games. Once again, though, the community and parents stepped up.

“Considering the track, the lights and improvements to locker rooms, bleachers, restrooms and concession stands, it’s a \$400,000 project,” Jeffers said. “Within six months, the Football Fathers Club came up with the \$70,000 for the lights, which should be installed before our first game. We’re up to about \$120,000 overall.”

Pay-to-participate isn’t exclusive to athletics at West Muskingum. The music programs and extracurricular clubs are also funded by their own pay-to-participate fees. For sports, the fees are \$295 per sport this year for high school students and \$225 per sport for junior high students. For three-sport athletes, the third sport is half price and students on the free lunch program pay \$50 per sport.

According to the OHSAA’s most recent survey, those fees are not the highest in the state. For that, the school can thank a pair of two large grants that recently came in from area foundations, among several other corporate donations, which are slim considering there is no town within the school district to provide support from private businesses.

Participation numbers at the high school aren’t what they could be. Head football coach Jeremy Ketchem opened camp with 24 players and is also facing the fact that West Muskingum has the fewest number of boys in the school among all Division IV schools in the state.

“It’s not just a pay-to-participate problem,” Ketchem said. “It’s also a society problem. It’s easier to stay home and play video games. We haven’t had a freshman football team in five years and some kids wait until they are a junior or senior to come out for the team since their playing time when they are younger might not justify the fee.”

Contrast the situation at West Muskingum with that of its eastern neighbor, Zanesville City Schools, which recently was able to eliminate pay-to-participate fees. Zanesville took several budget restructuring steps so that pay-to-participate fees weren’t needed, thus encouraging participation and embracing athletics as a part of the educational process.

Unfortunately, that is the exception to the rule across the state these days. The OHSAA tries to remind communities that students who participate in school sports tend to have higher grade-point averages, better attendance records, lower dropout rates and fewer discipline problems than the general student population.

“Another really tough thing about all this is that we’re losing great teachers due to better job security elsewhere,” said Jeffers. “Everyone here has to sacrifice so kids can participate. We have come a long way, but we still have a tremendous journey in front of us.”

Perhaps the ironic twist to all this is that Satterfield takes phone calls on a regular basis from schools around the state asking how West Muskingum keeps its athletic department going.

“We’re actually ahead of the game in some respects because we are already funding our athletic department on our own,” Satterfield said. “Sometimes when this situation happens in other school districts, they just don’t know what to do, so they call us and ask how we are doing it.”

“We feel that we have done our homework and created a system of checks and balances,” Jeffers said. “There are still a few bumps in the road, but it works.” ©

