



FOOTBALL. THE SPORT IS A REALLY BIG BUSINESS

By Kerry Schmidt 10-17-2004

The sport of football is a business. Big business.

Many millions of dollars are spent on stadiums, training facilities, luxury boxes and scoreboards with huge plasma TV screens, equipped with instant replay.

Much of the money comes from city/county/state budgets, usually funded by a tax levy or bond issue. Other large amounts come from “booster clubs.”

Of course, you say. Old news. Every NFL city does this.

No, sports fans, I ain't talking about the NFL or large colleges.

High School Football! That's what I'm talking about!

According to a number of high school commissioners around the country, there is an “arms race” going on in the football programs.

Over 25 programs have raised many million dollars each for state of the art fields, practice facilities, equipment, et al.

Take Valdosta, GA. They just finished a \$7.5 million renovation of their stadium, including the new Sprinturf surface, armrest seats and luxury boxes. Also, another \$2 million was spent on the same high-tech lighting that was just installed in Daytona Speedway.

Their present coach, Rick Darlington, gets an annual salary of \$87,500 and the boosters threw in a \$37,000 Dodge Ram Hemi 4X4. Plus a Thursday night TV/radio show that adds several thousand more.

The new stadium seats over 10,500 and season tickets are simply not available. There is a 20-year waiting list, and current tickets are handed down in wills and are often a bitter part of divorce settlements.

Their annual football budget is nearly a half million bucks.

In comparison, nearby Valdosta State College, currently ranked No. 10 in Division II, averages less than 7,364 this year and last season had games with fewer than 4,000.

Valdosta High's football budget is more than \$100,000 above the college team.

Of course, winning is expected. They have won 892 games in 92 years.

To hire Darlington, Valdosta fired Coach Mike O'Brien after the 2002 season, where they lost in the second round of the playoffs. O'Brien's record was 70-20-1, with a state championship in 1998.

Denton and Round Rock, Texas each have new stadiums that cost over \$20 million - apiece, including Plasma TV scoreboards worth \$750,000 each!

Charles Breithaupt, director of the organization overseeing Texas HS sports, admits there is a race to “keep up with the Joneses. When one gets a new stadium, the other needs one.”

While Texas and Florida may count for nearly half of the 25 largest dollar football programs, other states (see Valdosta) are in the arms race.

Basketball may still be king in Indiana, but Lafayette Jefferson High just built an \$8 million stadium, including the oh-so-high-tech scoreboard, of course, as well as a 22,000 square-foot athletic complex.



OFF THE WALL SPORTS

You can put your name on the weight room – for a mere \$750,000. Or for the budget minded, \$30,000 will name the coaches offices, and for the slums, each locker can bear your name for \$750.

West Monroe High (LA) installed a \$400,000 synthetic field last year, is shelling out another \$340,000 on turf for its TWO practice fields and a local bond issue will finance a \$2.3 million field house.

Richland High (Columbia, SC) just built a \$3.7 million stadium, with voters passing a \$98.3 million bond referendum for same.

Nearby Dorman High has a \$4 million stadium that seats 10,200 and they sell “seat licenses,” just like the NFL. They have sold over 2,000 at \$100 each.

North Hills High (Pittsburgh) spent \$10 million renovating their stadium, with synthetic turf, a 6-lane track, new press box and a 13,000 square-foot field house.

Enough. You get the idea.

And besides Coach Darlington’s deal at Valdosta, other big-time HS coaches do OK, especially in Texas.

Scott Smith makes \$93,000 as coach/AD at Odessa Permian, the school on which the movie, “Friday Night Lights” is based.

Midland Lee’s Randy Quisenberry takes in \$87,065.

Topping out is Highland Park’s Randy Allen, who took home \$100,882 as coach/AD in 2003-04.

Oh, and by the way. The average teacher’s pay in 2003-04, according to the Texas Education Agency is \$41,033. Hey, they need to learn X’s and O’s, not algebra or science.

But not all schools need to spend a half million a year and build \$10 million complexes to be successful.

Concord, CA’s De La Salle High has an annual budget of \$50,000, plays in a 20 year-old stadium with a tiny 1200-square foot weight room – locker room – shower, et al.

De La Salle lost their first game this season. Thus, dating back to 1992, their record is 151-1. Yes, that’s right. Their loss snapped a 151 game winning streak, which included 47 wins over teams ranked in the top 25 in the nation by USA/Today, making them the most successful high school program in the last 25 years (USA/TODAY).

DeMatha, an all-boys Catholic school in Hyattsville, MD, has not lost more than three games in the last nine seasons. Their stadium? They don’t have one. No practice field either. They play at a public park or “a lot of away games,” said Coach Bill McGregor. The players drive themselves to the games and dress in their cars.

But for the most part, especially in the south, HS football is perhaps more of a business than a sport.

Wait, change that. Down south, HS football is a religion. A well funded religion.