

School teams get creative to fund Bridgeport sports

By **Linda Conner Lambeck** Published 7:15 pm, Monday, August 7, 2017

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The Harding High School football team received new helmets for the upcoming season, in Bridgeport, Conn. Aug. 3, 2017.

BRIDGEPORT — If Warren Harding High School wrestlers get to face off this winter, the \$18,000 tab will be footed not by taxpayers, but by contributors to a GoFundMe account set up on the team's behalf.

Same for Central High fencers and soccer players. The Central High tennis team got a group called FirstServeBridgeport and some private donors from Westport to take up their cause.

With budget cuts eating away at classroom positions and total uncertainty over 2017-18 funding, this poor urban community of more than 21,000 students can't do what suburban districts like Shelton and Trumbull have done and charge families a fee to play extra curricular activities.

Shelton no longer does, Trumbull is phasing it out. Instead, Bridgeport teams are turning to crowdfunding.

"It's horrible but a lot of sports teams and coaches have to rely on it for survival," said Andrew McConnell, a long time coach for Central's boys tennis team. "Sports are such an integral part of development in high school."

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So in addition to teaching back serves and building character, city coaches like McConnell are becoming fundraisers, tapping contacts, forming nonprofit corporations and turning to internet sites to give students in the second largest school district in the state an opportunity to participate in varsity sports program.

In the 2016-17 school year, the district, faced with making a reported \$15 million in cuts, chopped \$200,000 from its athletics budget leaving it with \$811,364.

Several sports were cut. Some — like Harding wrestlers and the Central tennis team — survived by finding alternative sources for funding.

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"We work really, really hard to raise the money for these kids," said Tyrone Elliott, part of the coaching staff at Harding High and president of Adversity to Prosperity, a small nonprofit created to provide funding for student athletics. "We understand that the city is in a tough situation, the Board of Education is in a tough situation and we are trying to make it easier for them while looking out for our kids in the best way possible."

"It becomes very difficult," John Ramos, an assistant wrestling coach at Harding, said. "It takes a lot of hard work and dedication but we love these kids and believe in them."

Not new

Bridgeport Public Schools are no strangers to finding alternative sources of funding. A good number of teachers solicit donations on Donors Choose, a classroom crowdfunding website that provides equipment and experiences the general budget can't.

A relatively new middle school sports program is being kept afloat through an annual Field of Dreams Foundation fundraising efforts.

And this fall, the district will officially launch a Foundation for Excellence in Bridgeport Public Schools. Two years in the making, the foundation will give donors nine areas in the district to support, from academic intervention services, to early college enrollment, to the district's talented and gifted program.

"It is what it is," Adiel Rivera, a senior lineman on the Harding High football team said of the need to rely on gifts. "I don't think it's fair but when it comes from a person like the mayor, it's really important. It shows he is thinking about you."

Rivera and other members of the team gathered last week at the school to accept a donation of 45 new helmets, two watering stations and a set of home and away jerseys. The gift was the result of a match between the mayor's office and Adversity to Prosperity. Each came up with \$8,537, both parties said. Needs Clearinghouse, an organization that matches needs and donors, facilitated the deal.

It is unclear how the city, which has pledged very little in new funding for the school district in the new fiscal year, came up with its share of the funding.

"I think you have the best stuff here, the safest helmet out there," Ganim said, clutching one of the new, well-cushioned helmets which replace hard plastic ones that were 10 years old and expiring.

Can't count on it

Not all district fundraising efforts are successful.

Central lost its lacrosse team because it could not self-fund.

Fencing, a winter sport, was able to self-fund in the 2016-17 school year and some new donations are expected in the 2017-18, according to the team's GoFundMe page.

At Central, McConnell said Athletic Director Chris Johnson has been really helpful in helping coaches tap into external resources to help their teams. The tennis team turned to FirstServe Bridgeport. The nonprofit raised funds to purchase a van that it lets both the Central boy and girl tennis teams use to get to away games.

FirstServe has also helped the team with equipment, sweatshirts and scholarships.

"We use tennis to kind of hook kids and help them stay involved. This year we gave a \$5,000 scholarship to one of the players on the team," McConnell said.

"Going forward, I doubt I will use GoFundMe, which takes 10 percent of what's raised. We definitely will try to cultivate our donor base," McConnell said.

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