

## Benchwarmers benefit bottom line

Written by Mark Dukes

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Bake sales and car washes once were the staples of high school booster club fundraising efforts. They still may be viable, but more and more schools are banking on Benchwarmers to line the athletic department coffers.

Benchwarmers is a raffle card with prizes awarded based on how many points three National Football League teams score each week. A card costs \$25 and is good for the 17-week NFL season. Teams are drawn randomly by a computer.



Typically, the highest three-team point total wins \$300 a week, with \$125 for 2nd, \$75 for 3rd, \$50 for 4th and \$25 for 5th. The lowest point total each week gets \$25. Based on these payouts, schools are awarding \$10,200 in prize money during the NFL season.

Jefferson, Kennedy and Washington booster clubs have Benchwarmer programs, and they have been a fundraising godsend. Card buyers may designate a contribution to a specific sport, with \$3 of each card going to that sport.

“It’s invaluable for us,” Kennedy activities director Aaron Stecker said. “With the booster club and other support, we’re able to provide our sports teams anything in terms of equipment and training aids. It’s an extra opportunity to create a great experience for our kids.”

Kennedy began participation in the Benchwarmers program in 2007 in conjunction with Dyersville Beckman High School. Beckman and Iowa City Regina both offer larger prize pools, with winners each week getting \$500. A year later, Kennedy went off on its own.

Stecker estimates Benchwarmers proceeds donated by the booster club represent “a solid 25 percent of total funds raised, probably closer to one-third.” Benchwarmers, the annual golf outing and membership drives are the three main vehicles Kennedy booster club uses to raise money for the athletic department.

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Kennedy has sold about 1,200 tickets this year, down from the 1,762 sold in year one. Washington and Jefferson card sales are fewer than 1,000, according to the schools. Net proceeds each year for Cougar athletics have ranged from \$18,000 to \$31,000.

“Gate receipts are steady but they aren’t what they used to be, and costs continue to go up,” Stecker said. “So obviously this really helps.”

A few observers have questioned the legality or morality of high schools making money off the results of NFL games. But Stecker said it’s approved since the game is considered a raffle.

“We have to have a gambling license, considering it’s a raffle,” Stecker said. “When it first started, we had to have it approved through the Iowa Gaming Commission. They approved the cards. Since the three teams each week are randomly selected, that’s why it fits into the raffle category.

“Some folks questioned it, some families looked at it as gambling. But the state of Iowa has given its clearance.”

A plate of chocolate chip cookies can bring in a little dough, and washing a few sedans can help the budget. But Benchwarmers is proving to be the new cash cow for high school booster clubs and athletic departments.

*(Mark Dukes is former sports editor of the Cedar Rapid Gazette. He is co-host of The Gym Class radio show weekdays from 3-4 p.m. on KGYM-AM 1600.)*