

Xavier happy to pay price for success

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Xavier Saints look like a college football team when their 86-man squad runs onto the field before games each Friday night, but that big squad comes with a big price tag.

It costs Xavier approximately \$700 to give each player all the equipment he needs with a helmet, shoulder pads, padded girdle, game pants and practice pants.

That comes to roughly \$60,000 to outfit the varsity, but it doesn't end there. The Saints also have 38 sophomores and 38 freshmen in the program, swelling the ranks to 162 players and swelling the investment to more than \$100,000 in equipment.

"The numbers are probably going to surprise people," said Stu Ballinger, who has been the equipment manager for the Xavier football program since the school opened in 1998. "The numbers are pretty phenomenal, when it comes down to it.

"We have \$100,000 in inventory in our locker room when we're not in season. There's no question about it. It's pretty phenomenal."

Xavier football players buy their own shoes, which Ballinger said can run anywhere from \$60 to \$200. And the Saints are required to purchase their own game jerseys - one for home games, one for away games - that run \$53 apiece.

"I'm sure we're near \$1,000 per kid," said Ballinger, adding the costs together.

A good pair of shoulder pads costs \$325. A helmet goes for \$200. Game pants are \$55. Practice pants are \$45. The padded girdle is another \$45.

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Different pieces of equipment have different shelf lives - some items last five or six years, while some of Xavier's helmets are 10 years old and have been "reconditioned" four or five times to keep them in good shape.

"It works, it protects us and we've been able to afford it," said Ballinger, who teaches at Xavier. "But the prices are starting to reach a point, you have to have phenomenal support."

Mike Winker, the activities director at Xavier, is the man who keeps a sharp eye on the football budget and pays the bills for having so many players in the program.

"It's a good hurdle to have," said Winker. "We're excited that there are that many kids out."

Nearly half the boys at Xavier are playing football, a much higher percentage than the other Metro schools, which have bigger enrollments and smaller teams that run anywhere from 40 to 60 players at the varsity level.

The Xavier Booster Club donated \$8,000 to help run the football program this year. The team raised another \$8,000 to \$10,000 by selling Gold Cards to people in the community, who can use the cards for discounts at area stores.

The Saints pulled in \$8,146 in gate receipts for their home game against Jefferson Sept. 6, then collected \$9,718 for the game against Prairie Sept. 13. That money goes straight into the athletic department to help pay the bills.

In addition to the equipment, Winker has budgeted \$3,600 for game officials, another \$2,000 for security at home games and \$1,800 for buses for each road trip. With so many players, the Saints need two buses for the varsity and another bus for the sophomore team on Friday nights.

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Winker does not frown about the high cost of doing business. A former football coach himself, he feels good about what's happening at Xavier.

"For those kids to have the pride in their school, to be with their friends and be on the sideline on Friday night, it's like the old days, when it really seemed important to have that jersey," he said. "And it seems like over the last 30 years or so, that's been lost at a lot of places."

Xavier won the Class 4A state title in 2006, reached the state championship game last year and is ranked No.1 in the state this season. Coach Duane Schulte credits his coaching staff, administration, families, players and the community for making it all work.

"All the credit goes to Duane and the environment he has created in over 16 years," offered Winker. "The kids want to be a part of that Friday night experience."

The Saints will face Dubuque Wahlert at the Rock Bowl at Loras College Friday night. That means three more buses and more bills to pay.

As Ballinger put it, "It's not an inexpensive sport."