

Hashimoto, Becky D

From: Riley, Mike (Michael N)
Sent: Thursday, October 12, 2006 2:07 PM
To: - Board; - Cabinet
Subject: The Journal and Bellevue Football

A column that ran today and my question to the writer

From: Riley, Mike (Michael N)
Sent: Thursday, October 12, 2006 2:05 PM
To: 'gjohns@juno.com'
Subject: A Question

Hi Greg,

I'm Mike Riley, the superintendent of the Bellevue School District. I think your article is balanced and I appreciate the accuracy of your information. I have one question, however. Do you think the district or the school could have told parents and kids that they could not attend the school or play on the team during the years of open enrollment? I doubt that we could do so legally, but even if we could, what would I say to someone: "I'm sorry, we think your kid should play football at some other school so we've denied your transfer"? Isn't it highly likely that the parent would have a legitimate gripe that her child was being deprived of attending his or her school of choice because he was, what, too talented in athletics?

I'm not trying to be glib, but I do think when we make choices we have to consider how things appear from multiple perspectives and play out for everyone involved.

Mike

Success borders on excess in Bellevue football program

After a couple weeks of poking around and pondering the Bellevue High football situation, I've come to this conclusion. If you're in the club, it's the greatest thing in the world. If not, you figure Butch Goncharoff and his band of wealthy boosters are the biggest cheaters this side of Barry Bonds.

The issue is how Bellevue, never before known for its football prowess, managed to put together four straight state championships and turn into a national power under Goncharoff, who last week found his name in Sports Illustrated for having been "cleared" of recruiting allegations.

Keep in mind the only clearance has been provided by his own school district. But bear in mind also that most often in these situations, it's the parents of talented players who recruit themselves, searching for the best possible situation for their kid in terms of exposure, coaching and competing for state titles.

If you win, they will come. And they'll bring their kids, in search of college scholarships.

As parents, all of us want what is best for our own children. Thus if our Little Johnny plays in or moved into the Bellevue program, we are thrilled at the winning environment as well as the hard-work culture created by Goncharoff. We love the life lessons being instilled. We are proud of the accomplishments. And, yeah, we enjoy seeing Johnny kick butt every Friday night.

But if our Little Johnny plays for a rival school, we aren't so happy in knowing some of Johnny's best teammates have instead transferred over to Bellevue. We feel like Johnny stayed true to his roots, attended the school in his own neighborhood and deserves his own best opportunity to succeed on a level playing field. And, no, we don't enjoy seeing Johnny losing 61-14 to Bellevue on Friday night.

Jealousy is an ugly emotion and some of that is in play with regard to the continuing swirl of allegations. But Goncharoff and Bellevue's boosters must also be honest. They've clearly benefited from an influx of skilled transfers in recent years.

And while the Bellevue District cleared Goncharoff of recruiting violations after its in-house investigation turned up no "smoking gun," it's worth noting there does seem to be plenty of smoke, if no fingerprints on the weapon.

Booster club excess

What we have are eyebrow raisers, including a \$55,000 annual stipend paid by the Bellevue Football Booster Club to Goncharoff the past two years. That in itself ought to be cause for pause for anyone interested in keeping perspective in prep sports.

0777

3/19/2009

We also have reports of athletes being asked to come play for Bellevue, just no proven link to coaches. And, yes, we have plenty of transfers, with 25 players originating from outside the school boundaries competing on last year's Wolverine team.

In that regard, a little education is helpful. Until student numbers reached capacity this fall, Bellevue always had open enrollment within its district, as do neighboring districts like Lake Washington and Seattle. And it is perfectly legal for any student to move with their parents into the district, or even request a transfer to Bellevue (or any school) while living in another community.

Washington state changed its laws about 10 years ago to allow students to cross district lines without paying tuition, if the school has room. However, Washington Interscholastic Activities Association rules say a student can't play varsity sports for the first year after such a non-residential transfer.

That's how you get someone like **1A 10A** the All-Everything running back who attended McKnight Middle School in Renton and lived in the Hazen High attendance area throughout high school, but received a transfer waiver to Bellevue before the ninth grade and then played varsity ball there his final three years.

Obviously Goncharoff wasn't going to turn **1A 10A** down when his parents showed up looking for the best opportunity for their talented son. Nor did he turn down other top athletes from Federal Way, Renton and around his own Bellevue District, though he did require at least two transfers to sit out the mandatory year after failing to prove residency.

Priorities run amok

I have no doubt the **1A 10A** family was doing what it felt best for its son. As were the parents or guardians of every other transfer who migrated to Bellevue. As are the Bellevue football boosters ponying up thousands of dollars apiece to keep an excellent coach from feeling the need to pursue other opportunities.

The tough part is, what's best for your son or your team might not be best for the whole. When you accept 25 players from neighboring schools, you create a superpower. You also create a competitive imbalance that breeds contempt.

And when you pay your coach large sums of bonus money, you push prep sports closer to a ledge already occupied by college and professional teams and pressure parents in other schools — parents already struggling to pay for summer camps, shoes and such — to keep up with the Joneses.

In an effort to reach great heights, Bellevue stepped on a few fingers on the way to the top. Maybe none of it was illegal, but it is unseemly. Call me old-fashioned, but I miss the days when kids just grew up, played at the neighborhood school and did the best they could with what they had.

I have great respect for the way Goncharoff has built up the Bellevue youth programs, fine-tuned an impressive Wing-T offense and encouraged a terrific weight-training program. These are huge elements of the Wolverines' success.

But when boosters are paying a coach \$55,000 and a district allows athletic transfers to flow in at an unprecedented rate, our priorities have gone astray. And in that regard, Bellevue High's football program also has proven to be No. 1.