

A question of success: An internal school district investigation asks: How did the football program at Bellevue High School get so good?



David Nelson/Journal file

Bellevue head coach Butch Goncharoff celebrates with other coaches and players after his team defeated Concord, Calif.'s De La Salle in September 2004.

By Ryan Lambert and Jim Cnockaert
Journal Staff

Teenagers shouted through the tinted windows of luxury SUVs and sedans circling Qwest Field. Somewhere in the distance, the song, "We are the Champions," blared.

It was a few minutes past midnight Sunday, Sept. 5, 2004. The Bellevue High School football team had just snapped legendary Concord De La Salle's record 151-game winning streak in front of 24, 987 fans — the largest crowd ever to attend a high school football game in the state.

Before long, the score — Bellevue 39, De La Salle 20 — was running along the ticker on ESPN. It was the pinnacle of an unprecedented string of successes that would culminate three months later with a fourth consecutive Class 3A state championship.

How did Bellevue do it?

The Wolverines' long-term success drew state and national accolades, but it also sparked numerous rumors and much speculation. Most of it revolved around one question: Did Bellevue maintain its level of excellence by recruiting talented players from within and outside the school district?

Responding to written complaints to both the district and to the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association, Bellevue school Superintendent Mike Riley in March launched an internal district investigation "to take a very thorough look at the issue of improper recruiting of kids to BHS football."

Riley also was concerned by reports that Bellevue head coach Butch Goncharoff was being paid a fat stipend by the high school's football booster club totaling some \$122,000 over the past three seasons.

In fact, the investigation shows that no one in top administration — not Riley, not the high school athletic director, not the school's principal — appeared to be aware of the magnitude of the payments, which are not illegal and are duly reported on the club's tax returns.

The money is on top of the \$5,178 per season a head coach such as Goncharoff with 4-7 years of service is paid by the school district.

In the end, Bellevue's seven-month internal investigation produced 205 pages that found no provable "smoking gun" — evidence that the school broke the rules. The investigation, however, continues.

And the district formally requested that the state athletic association, which governs high school sports in Washington state, consider placing limits on what kinds of financial support boosters can give teams and coaches.

"There are important issues of fairness among schools raised by such booster club support that would have potential state-wide interest and impact," the district wrote on Sept. 11. The WIAA's executive board decided last week to survey high schools around the state to learn how much coaches are paid.

Investigating rumors

There was little question that during its four-year run of state championships that the Bellevue football program benefited from the talents of a number of young men who began their high school football careers at other schools but finished them at Bellevue.

For example, since Butch Goncharoff became head coach in 2000, seven of Bellevue's starting running backs came from outside the school's attendance area. Five of those running backs were transfers.

State athletic association rules prohibit any efforts by coaches or representatives of an athletic program to induce or pressure students to attend a school outside their normal enrollment area because of the student's talent.

The district's investigative team — Karin Cathey, a former principal at two of the district's high schools, Newport and Sammamish, and assistant superintendents Vicky Murray and Sharon Howard — was asked to either confirm or dispel rumors of whether those players or any others were improperly recruited.

Riley articulated his vision for the investigation in an early note to Murray and Howard: "There's no question that enthusiasm for Butch's program has inspired lots of folks — parents, other kids, folks from the community — to talk positively about BHS football. I'm sure many parents have told parents and their kids, 'You should play for Bellevue.' The question is whether Butch and his coaches engaged in this.

"When this all breaks, we're going to hear about ALL the stuff the BHS football program has done — recruited kids, provided huge dollars for all kinds of extras, paid for more coaches, practiced during the off season, and so on. The question is what, if anything, violates rules and policies."

A copy of the school's investigative papers and report, obtained this week by the Journal, omits the names of all current and former high school athletes. In the report, Cathey says the team's investigation raised the level of concern about a number of allegations, including those regarding the actions of Bellevue coaches that might easily be perceived as "recruiting."

Those actions included:

- Giving tours of the football facilities and weight room during the spring.
- Encouraging middle school students to enroll in the Boys & Girls Club summer football camp run by Coach Goncharoff.
- Holding conversations with athletes or relatives of athletes prior to their transferring from other schools to Bellevue High.
- Permitting students who were not enrolled at Bellevue High to use the school's weight room facilities.

Cathey concluded: "Even though there is no hard proof that this has occurred, I heard enough evidence from program participants to lead me to believe they probably occurred."

How it began

The district investigation was begun, in part, because of a Seattle Times newspaper report that detailed alleged recruiting violations by the girls' basketball coaches at West Seattle's Chief Sealth High School. Those violations would eventually prompt the WIAA to strip the Chief Sealth program of the Class 3A state championships it won the past two seasons.

But Bellevue district administrators also were concerned by several notes, including two to the WIAA that were forwarded to the Bellevue School District, that alleged similar recruiting improprieties by Bellevue football coaches and boosters.

"As I'm sure you know, Bellevue High has been recruiting football players for years and the activities on behalf of their booster club are appalling," Rhanda Rosselot wrote to WIAA executive director Mike Colbrese.

Judy Jones, the parent of a 3A Kingco football player, also wrote to Colbrese: "3A Kingco football has not had a level playing field for

years due to Bellevue High School's recruitment and stripping of talent from other Bellevue schools."

In initiating the investigation, Riley wrote in March: "I think when we have all the facts, we're going to have to sort out what's 'legal' and what's not.

"We might say in aggregate that the amount of stuff going on is wrong even if every individual act is acceptable or legal."

As it reviewed such allegations, the investigative team interviewed the athletic directors and head football coaches at the district's three other high schools: Interlake, Newport and Sammamish. Each man related stories he had heard about so-called Bellevue recruiting, but none could offer any concrete evidence of it.

Among the interviews noted by investigators were these:

- Interlake head coach Luke Huard related a conversation he had with former Bellevue assistant coach Calvin Clements (now a volunteer at Newport) during a conference in Portland. Huard said he complained to Clements that there appeared to be a lot of (Interlake) kids looking at the (Bellevue) football program. Huard claimed that Clements said to him: "Your kid ... needs to come to Bellevue to get better coaching. He can do better here than at IHS."
- Clements was the focus of other questions because of allegations that he had allowed a student who was playing football at the school to live with him, that he had taken a student to dinner before the student transferred to Bellevue, and that, along with a friend, he had sold vitamins and supplements to athletes in the locker and weight rooms at the school.

Cathey wrote that Clements had told her he did allow the student to stay at his home for a while, but that he was helping the student get through some personal troubles. She said Clements denied taking the prospective transfer out to dinner and selling any products to athletes.

- One of Huard's ex-Interlake players, now a college student, told Bellevue investigators that two of his former high school teammates had been approached by Bellevue boosters and coaches at the end of their sophomore years about the possibility of transferring from Interlake to Bellevue. One did transfer; the other stayed at Interlake.

"I know both were approached by (the) BHS coaching staff about transferring, which I see as recruiting," the former Interlake player wrote.

- Investigators raised a number of questions about whether three players who had attended high schools in the Federal Way School District had legally transferred. All three appeared to have maintained their Federal Way addresses, but were able to do so because they had received a district waiver to attend Bellevue High.
- A player who took advantage of open enrollment at Bellevue High for the 2005-06 school year said he first learned ... about the BHS football team while he was in middle school. He told investigators that while he was attending a middle school track meet at Bellevue in the spring of 2005, other boys told him that BHS football coaches would give tours of the school's weight lifting room. He said he went there and met several of the coaches. He played JV football during the 2005-06 school year at BHS.

Cathey wrote: "When I asked ... whether anyone from BHS had tried to recruit him or had tried to convince him to transfer to BHS, he said, 'No, not really,' but also hesitated a little, so I asked him to clarify, but he said that he had been given lots of good information about the program by the coaches he had met in the weight room and during the summer football camp."

- The most damning allegation came from the older brother of a current Kentwood High School football player. The brother told investigators that he was contacted by a representative of the Bellevue football program purporting to be Goncharoff about the possibility of his brother transferring to Bellevue. He said that conversation occurred after his brother was approached by the cousin of a former Bellevue player about the benefits of playing for the high-profile Bellevue program.

Goncharoff told investigators that he did speak to the brother, but only after he first received a voicemail message from the brother asking for a return call.

Ultimately, investigators found it difficult to move beyond conflicting "he-said, he-said" statements. The report concludes: "There could have been some improper solicitation or recruiting that has taken place over the years, but so far we have not been able to confirm that (it) occurred."

Boosters' stipend a concern

Riley responded in a note to Howard and Murray: "I talked to the board in detail about Butch's situation at BHS. They are satisfied, pleased in fact, with your investigation, Sharon, and are happy to hear that there is no substantive evidence that he's taken part in recruiting.

"While they are worried about the potential embarrassment of his salary, they don't fault him, not quite anyway, and they think the responsibility should fall on the WIAA to make rules about this kind of thing — or at least take an official position."

It is clear from Riley's early notes to Howard and Murray that he was troubled by the amount of money the football boosters are giving to Goncharoff, writing that he believed the salary issue should be explained fast.

"I think you should ask Butch about this immediately. I don't want this information circulating around without having his explanation to go with it," Riley wrote.

When Howard met with Goncharoff, he told her that he had received \$55,000 that year (2005-06) and the previous year, and that he thought he'd gotten \$12,000 in 2003-04. Goncharoff also said the booster club gives a \$500 stipend to each of his coaches — a total he estimated to be about \$4,000.

Goncharoff told Howard that he began to receive stipends from the booster club after Bellevue won its second state championship in 2002, when he mentioned that he might not stay in coaching because it was taking too much time away from his business (Bay City Printing in Bellevue). He felt that, as much as he loved coaching, the financial hit was too great.

Howard wrote: "After that conversation, the booster club just offered him the supplement. He said he never talked with them about any amount and that there is NO expectation tied to it."

Goncharoff, who said after Friday night's game against Interlake that he had no comment on the district's report, has enjoyed strong support at Bellevue High, and in the district. In 2005, Judy Bushnell, a school board member, addressed earlier rumors.

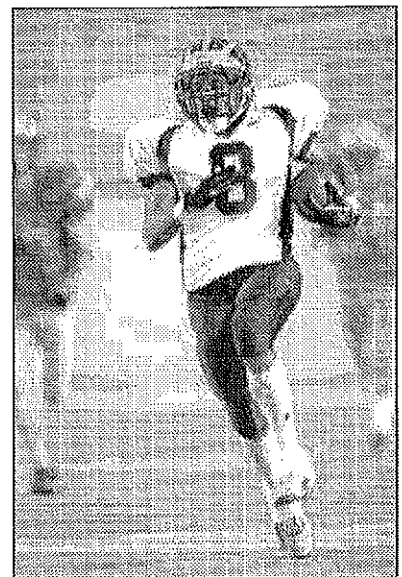
"I think Butch is an absolutely straight shooter. He is very ethical and is successful mostly because he sets very high goals for kids and is a consummate teacher.

"The interesting thing is that Butch was successful early on.... Until last year very few of his players were of individual skill/calibre to be recruited. He won because they worked together," Bushnell e-mailed Howard in September 2005.

"What we can't prevent is that people hear what a good coach and person he is and want their kids here... so they move."

<http://www.kingcountyjournal.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061001/NEWS/610010322&SearchID=73258628227961>

Excerpts from the school district investigation



"What do you suggest I do with this?"

Patrick Hagerty/Journal file

"I think you have to investigate it. Confront Mike Bacigalupi (Bellevue High principal) and Chris Hoffman (athletic director) with the concerns. We need to find out what is 'true' and what is urban legend. If we don't, the paper will if they get a hold of it."

Bellevue's Keith Rosenberg rushes his way to a 97-yard touchdown run during 3A state semifinal action against Lynden at the Tacoma Dome in 2004. Bellevue won the contest 41-21 to advance to the 3A championship game, which the Wolverines also won.

— March 9 e-mail from Bellevue Superintendent Mike Riley, replied to by Deputy Superintendent Karen Clark.

"I think when we have all the facts, we're going to have to sort out what's 'legal' and what's not. We might say in aggregate that the amount of stuff going on is wrong even if every individual act is acceptable or legal."

— March 26 e-mail from Bellevue Superintendent Mike Riley

Subject line: "A smoking gun found"

"This website will open up the form that the BHS boosters filed showing on page 7 a payment to Butch the sum of \$55,000."

"I think you should ask Butch about this immediately. I don't want this information circulating around without having his explanation to go with it."

— March 30 e-mail from Sharon Howard, assistant superintendent, to Mike Riley, and Riley's response.

"In the end, I want to either fully support or fire Butch, one way or the other. So I think we need to be clear about what's in and what's out of bounds."

— March 31 e-mail from Mike Riley.

"In my summary of my conversation with Luke Huard (Interlake High School head football coach) he mentions a King County Journal reporter who he believes is doing research into athlete recruiting. Do you think it would be a good idea for me to contact this reporter?"

"Thanks for the information. Do NOT contact any media or newspaper reporter — that won't be helpful....I don't think we want to stir that up when we have enough work to do ourselves."

—May 2 e-mail exchange between investigators Karin Cathey and Sharon Howard, who is also the school district's general counsel.

"I failed to uncover any provable "smoking gun," but I did have my level of concern raised."

— June 22 e-mail from Karin Cathey summarizing her investigation.

"Despite intensive efforts to uncover any possible wrongdoing, in each situation examined, reasonable efforts to document or otherwise substantiate expressed concerns have failed to confirm any substance to allegations made. ...

"It is important to note that at this point it appears that because BHS has such a successful football program that it is the target of unsubstantiated rumors and/or jealousy that detracts from the real quality of a program that serves a great many students and families in positive ways."

— Sept. 8 memo to Superintendent Mike Riley from Vicky Murray, assistant superintendent and a member of the investigative team.

"In the course of investigating the concerns of possible recruitment violations we learned that the Bellevue High School Football Boosters Club has given substantial sums to BHS football coaches in the past few years. We understand this practice does not violate any current WIAA rules, state law or District policy....Nevertheless, because there are important issues of fairness among schools raised by such booster club support that would have potential state-wide interest, we believe this subject is an appropriate one for WIAA consideration and rulemaking."

—Sept. 11 letter from the Bellevue School District to the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association.

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