

Balancing General and Sports-Specific Booster Clubs

For many years booster clubs have been a needed ingredient in fulfilling the funding needs for interscholastic athletic programs. Booster clubs once provided the perks and little extras that allowed athletic programs to thrive. With the changing economy on a national basis and the funding shortfalls seen on the state level, booster clubs have become a necessity for survival in many of our athletic departments. But despite the urgent need of such revenue streams, athletic administrators must always be mindful of some of the challenges and dilemmas that booster clubs can create.

I spent much of my career coaching in three schools. In all of those settings, the school was served by a general booster club that addressed the needs of all sports in a fair and equitable manner. All teams and backers pulled together as one and all shared equally in the benefits derived from the booster club. This was a great system then and is would still my choice for a support group today.

Some schools and communities do not see things the way I do. There are schools that have a general booster club. Others have individual booster groups for each sport. Still others have a general booster club as well as individual booster clubs for sports. This third model is extremely difficult to balance. Sometimes friction can arise between the groups and factions can be formed. In addition, some sports-specific groups can create challenges that could upset the balance of spending support between various sports. Some of the imbalances can be produced between similar male and female sports. When such imbalances arise, the athletic administrator must be proactive in creating a relationship with all boosters that does not allow the overall program to become out of balance as it relates to gender equity.

When I became athletic director at my current school, the school had a history of an overall athletic booster club as well as individual booster clubs for many of the sports. Less than half of the sports depended solely on the overall booster group for additional support. After lengthy discussions with many coaches, administrators and patrons it became very apparent that the individual groups were not going to go away. There was very little support above and below my administrative level to disband the system which had existed for years. Therefore, it became my mission to make both models work together in a manner that best served our student-athletes while staying in compliance with the guidelines of Title IX. This was a difficult challenge to say the least.

The first part of balancing the concept of an overall booster club and sports-specific booster groups was to make sure the overall booster club is on sound footing. In working with the overall boosters, it was imperative that the group had a good organizational model. A constitution was written (our current constitution was modeled from one found in LTI 611). By-laws were followed in the selection of officers, the timing of meetings, the methods of funds raised and the system by which funds were distributed to all teams. It was vital that all groups shared equally in the work of the club as well as the financial benefits derived from support for the booster group. It was also important to not violate any of the fund-raising guidelines subscribed to by our school district. Many of our smaller teams depended on the booster club for their very survival in tough financial times.

The hardest part of keeping the delicate balance between overall and sports-specific boosters was the development of a framework by which the sports-specific groups could operate independently. The concept of independence, while staying within guidelines that prevented an imbalance in benefits between sports, was an extremely daunting task. We approached the job of reigning in the sports-specific - groups without causing a mass mutiny on three levels. Much of our approach was based on guidelines for compliance to Title IX. We relied heavily on the work of Dr. Lee Green. The information contained in LTI 604 and his earlier publication *"The Level Playing Field"* provided great material to discuss with all parties. We are extremely grateful to Dr. Green for his work on behalf of the NIAAA. His examples were vital in helping us portray the proper role for boosters in fund-raising and staying compliant. Education of the various groups was critical in the success of our overall plan.

Many times when change occurs, those that are affected will go right over your head to an administrator on the district or building level. The first people we tried to sell on a cooperative plan were the Superintendent and building principal. Since they were going to be the first ones to receive complaints, we wanted them to be well versed in the problems sports-specific groups can create for a school and a district. Much of the information and many of the examples cited in the work of the NIAAA and Dr. Green were collected. Guidelines from the Office of Civil Rights and actual court cases provided in the materials previously discussed painted a clear picture of what could go wrong if booster clubs were left to their own devices. It became evident that all support groups must be given both structure and direction in their attempts to help boost the sports they served.

Armed with the support of upper level administration, the next group that needed to come on board was the coaching staff. Over a period of time, each head coach was asked to meet and discuss their needs. Those needs that could be served by the athletic department were noted. The role of the overall booster club in meeting needs was then addressed. Finally, if the coach had an individual booster club, frank discussions ensued to document what could and could not be done. As before, examples of court cases and OCR guidelines were reviewed. Many of the coaches had no idea of the effect their booster group could have on imbalances in the department. Furthermore, they were not aware of the legal ramifications that could develop for the entire school community if such imbalances progressed to the point of an OCR audit. An agreement was reached with each coach to aid in the training and development of booster groups that could aid their sport, but do so in a manner that was conducive to gender equity compliance. A final understanding was reached with those coaches whose booster groups elected a president or leader each year. It was agreed that each year the leader of each individual booster group would meet with the athletic director. The purpose of this meeting was to share information on the concept gender equity compliance. It was hoped that by sharing an open dialogue early in the process, mistakes could be avoided before problems developed.

The hardest group to sell on the concept of gender equity and balancing benefits for all teams in the department were the leaders of each individual booster group. Most sports leaders had “tunnel vision” and cared little about other groups and compliance concepts. As with the earlier meetings, there was much sharing of practical and legal examples of what could happen to a school if a booster group provided benefits that created an imbalance. Our meetings began with a sharing of the budget and how it is constructed for our athletic department. Time was also allotted for a display of our method of tracking spending and equity compliance over the years. Many of the examples used were those that are currently contained in LTI 511. As with our coaches, many of the boosters had no idea of what could happen to compliance balance by excessive fund-raising for a single sport.

With the support of upper level and administrators and our coaches, several agreements were reached with the individual sports booster groups that are still in place today. Each of the groups agreed to promote the general athletic booster club. Many require their team parents to join the general booster club before they can pay dues to a sports specific booster group. All are very supportive of the general group and are quite active in our booster program and seasonal events.

In each of our yearly meetings with group leaders, the coach and I stress the need for open and honest communication with the athletic director. Every fund-raiser is run through the athletic office for approval. A yearly budget for each group is also presented in order to make sure that spending does not create an imbalance. All purchases are done through the athletic office. The booster group makes a “donation” to the athletic general fund. Once the expenditure has been approved and the donation made, the athletic department makes the purchase and creates a paper trail. This system allows for an orderly method by which spending can be studied and controlled. While our individual boosters are not always happy with this system, they know that the policy is endorsed from the top down and is in place to prevent legal entanglements. This system has served us well for over a decade.

One positive effect of our work with individual booster groups has been the combination of many of the smaller groups. Several of our non-revenue sports have relatively small number. They concluded that by joining forces, they could aid each other in their work. Many shared the same facilities and could generate twice the support. This also helped alleviate spending imbalances in like sports since the groups were sharing both the work and the benefits. It also helped me as an athletic administrator because it eliminated competition between sports groups and possible spending imbalances.

Booster groups can be a great aid in meeting the complex needs of funding interscholastic athletics. They can often bridge the funding gap caused by budget shortfalls in school systems. Instead of alienating booster groups it is imperative to bring them into discussion. Frank discussions, education and sharing can create a culture of cooperation that benefits all student athletes and not just the few. We realize that problems can still arise from our work with booster groups. But we feel by tackling the possible problems early and head-on we can reduce the risk of long term disasters in compliance issues.

