

Interscholastic Athletic Administration

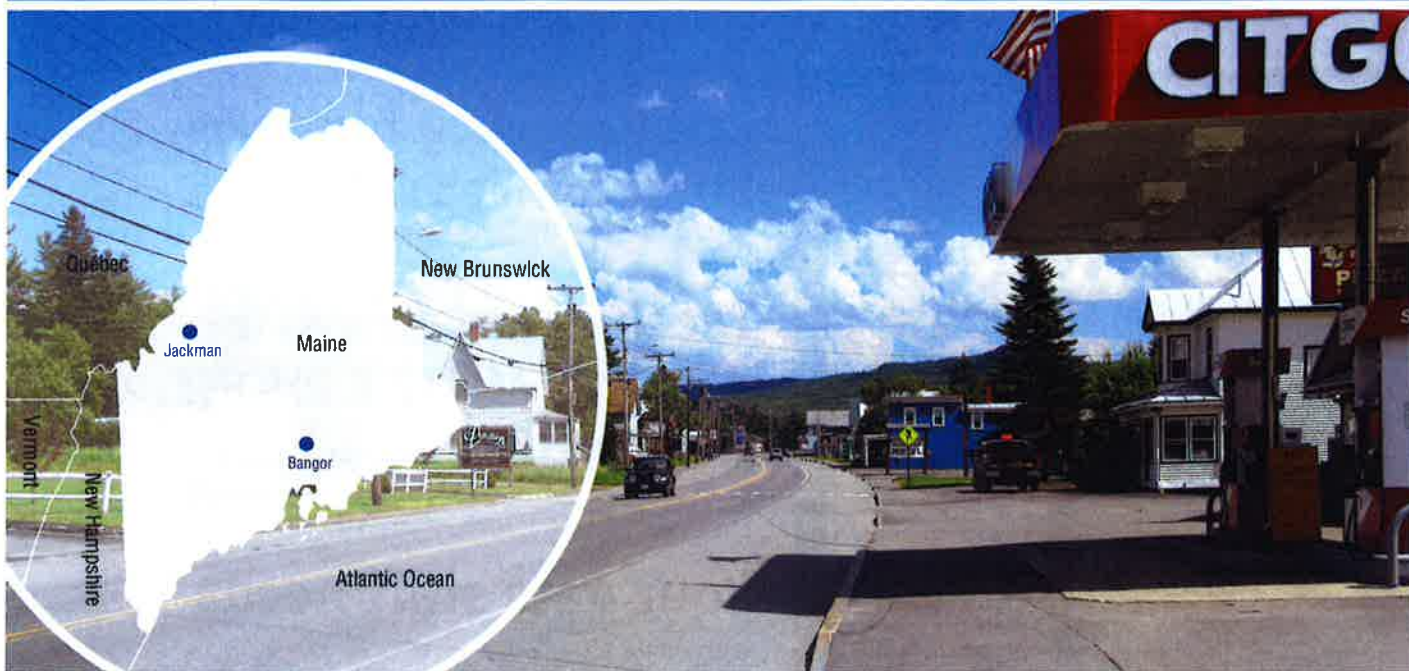


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The NIAAA champions the profession of athletic administration through educational opportunities,
advocating ethics, developing leaders and fostering community

Playing the “One-Man Band”:

Serving as an Athletic Administrator in a Rural or Small School Setting



By NIAAA Publications Committee

Located only 15 miles from the Quebec border, Jackman, Maine, lies in a heavily forested section of the state's northwest corner and has experienced a major economic downturn in recent years. The community's school includes students of all ages from kindergarten through high school, and only 60 students are currently enrolled in grades 9-12. The nearest McDonald's is approximately one hour away, and the population of moose in the area far exceeds that of human beings in this remote area. Anthony Amero is the athletic administrator at Forest Hills Consolidated School in Jackman, and has served that school in this capacity for 18 years.

Given the geographic isolation of Jackman and the small staff employed at the school, Amero plays a variety of roles at Forest Hills. In addition to administering the small athletic program at his school, he also serves as a business education teacher and the school's boys basketball coach. In 2013, Amero's team won the Maine small school division state championship, the first in the history of Forest Hills. He also works as the student council advisor and is the disc jockey for all school dances. The ultimate “jack of all trades”, Amero has gained a deserved reputation in Maine as an advocate of the state's small schools and is a past president of the state athletic administrators association. In addition, he has earned the

Certified Master Athletic Administrator certification.

The example of Amero is typical of many athletic directors who serve student-athletes in small or rural schools throughout the country. Working in a small school setting requires an athletic administrator to be flexible, versatile and willing to fill a variety of roles. True Renaissance men and women, rural athletic directors are among the most accomplished multi-taskers in the profession. The very nature of their job descriptions – including responsibilities as teachers, coaches, club advisors, field maintenance personnel, and, yes, administrators – makes it difficult to compartmentalize their work. They are among the most critical and influential members of their communities.

Making this already difficult position even more challenging is the fact that rural athletic administrators frequently have very limited financial or human resources to perform their duties. They are faced daily with the prospects of planning and implementing quality programs for their student-athletes with very few capital assets. In today's economic climate, they often manage older indoor athletic facilities that resemble a scene from a half-century ago. To these athletic directors, doing more with less is much more than a dictate from the community; it is a daily fact of life.

Small school and rural school athletic directors, however, lead programs that have some of the most passionate fan bases in the country. Like Hickory, a fictitious community

depicted in the movie *Hoosiers*, their schools serve as a hub of social and cultural life in their areas. Their facilities are used for major municipal functions, including town meetings, voting and community forums, and frequently also are utilized for dinners dances, and other fundraising events. A Friday night basketball game on a cold winter night is also a rallying point that brings people together to support a community's youth people in their efforts. Community pride is on full public display from the opening jump ball to the last buzzer, and a small town's sense of self is often tied into the final result.

Given the versatility required to perform their duties and the intimate nature of the communities in which they work, rural and small school athletic directors work in some of the most pressure-packed positions in the nation. In order to provide a high quality program for the small student population that they serve, they demonstrate ingenuity and creative problem solving skills that are positive exemplars for their colleagues in larger markets. Playing the "one-man band" and doing it well requires both long-term and short-term planning and a reliance on their professional instincts. Success in these settings does not come by accident.

Being Tugged in Multiple Directions: The Coaching Dilemma

Given the size of their faculties, athletic directors in rural schools are oftentimes the in-house experts on education-based sports. As a result, it is not uncommon for the small school athletic director to also serve as a head or assistant coach for one or more programs. In some extreme cases, rural athletic director/coaches have even coached more than one team at one time.

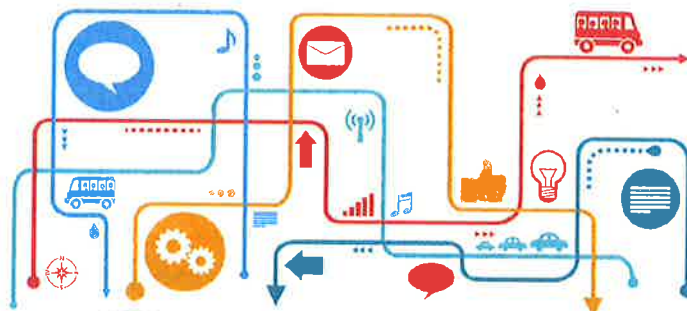
Regardless of the expectations placed upon them by their positions, small school athletic administrators do not forego the game management duties that come with the role. Serving as the high school basketball coach does not excuse one from also being responsible for crowd management, safety and security of officials and other game personnel, and the occasional mechanical failure. As a result, small school athletics personnel must work very closely with their school administration or key faculty leaders to ensure that these details are managed. If necessary, a small stipend should be included in the budget to compensate people performing this essential work. Other systems incorporate coverage of athletic events as part of after school duty expectations.

Recruiting quality coaches is another challenge inherent in a rural school setting. In many cases, the geographic isolation of a community renders the applicant pool very thin when an opening occurs. Many classroom teachers who may make excellent coaches use these opportunities for stepping stones to work in a larger setting and are, in effect, transients. Furthermore, as Robert Holmes, the principal/athletic director at Dexter Junior/Senior High School in Dexter, Kansas, notes, requiring that teachers coach one or more sports can be a deterrent to attracting quality classroom teachers. "We

simply don't have the certified staff members who want to coach," he notes. "We want to be competitive so we don't force them to coach as some small schools do."

As a result, many athletic administrators in these settings must employ local community members, whether paid or volunteer, to coach the high school or middle school teams. For example, Aaron Straub, the athletic director of Elk County Catholic High School in St. Mary's, Pennsylvania, relies almost exclusively on volunteers to serve his small private high school. Given the small size of the teaching staff at the school, 71 of Elk County's 75 coaches are non-faculty personnel.

In many cases, the individuals selected to serve in these roles are parents of participants, which can portend a possible conflict of interest if not addressed. At all times, athletic directors faced with the prospect of incorporating non-faculty coaches should make a strong effort to educate their staffs about the philosophy of education-based athletics and provide them with opportunities for professional development.



Calendar Concerns: Challenges in Building a Schedule

Although most small schools do not offer a wide range of athletic activities, athletic directors working in these communities face significant challenges in building their contest schedules. Given that many rural schools exist on the geographic fringes of their conferences or states, finding opponents of similarly-sized schools within a reasonable travel radius can be difficult. As a result, many smaller schools are forced to travel great distances in order to find appropriately matched competition, which can be detrimental to the academic needs of student-athletes.

In the case of Forest Hills, the geographic span of its conference poses major barriers to developing a competitive schedule. In addition to a few schools located near the Canadian border, the conference includes an island community. Access to that member's school is obtained after a two- to three-hour bus ride and an hour-long trip on a ferry.

Athletic directors have employed a number of different strategies to address these concerns about long travel and finding appropriate competition. They include:

1. Incorporating Friday/Saturday doubleheaders at a single site and alternating the host school from year to year (while housing student-athletes and coaches in home stay situations)

2. Scheduling boys and girls contests on the same date and same site to maximize the use of travel resources and increase supervision
3. Using neutral sites, including larger schools or recreational facilities, that are located midway between the two schools
4. Playing doubleheaders in sports such as baseball and softball
5. Identifying potential small-school opponents in other conferences (or without any affiliation at all) that could be potential opponents
6. Forming partnerships with neighboring schools in larger conferences that may create opportunities for appropriate competition

In addition to minimizing the costs for fulfilling schedules, strategies such as these also require athletic administrators from small schools to work together very closely to provide opportunities for their brand of school and student-athlete. The *esprit de corps* among rural and small schools can be particularly strong, if for this reason alone.

Another factor that athletic directors of small schools must encounter in their work is that their students, like themselves, must be extremely versatile for the school to operate. Particularly in a rural setting, a school's student-athletes are also its student government leaders, organizers of community

service, and its musicians and performers. In some cases, they may be multi-sport athletes within the same athletic season. For example, a school's soccer team may be comprised of a number of athletes who also participate in the cross country program.

The rural school athletic director must use creative scheduling to avoid these conflicts. Athletic directors must work closely with other staff members to ensure that students have an opportunity to attend to the large number of responsibilities that they may have. Ensuring that a basketball game is not scheduled on the night of the annual holiday concert or major craft fair is integral to not only maintaining harmony within the faculty, but also for creating the conditions for a well-rounded educational experience for students.

Managing Limited Resources

As mentioned earlier, athletic directors in small schools find themselves in a position where they have to do more with less year after year. Limited budgets for education-based athletic program are just one piece of the equation. Many athletic directors in these settings have to assume the roles of groundskeeper, custodian, game security, and, frequently, the coach. Holmes in Dexter, Kansas, embodies the versatility required to lead a small-school program. In addition to serving as the principal and the athletic director, he notes, "I have

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been involved in marking the football field, putting tape on the floor during volleyball and basketball seasons, and marking/dragging the baseball and softball fields during the spring.”

Athletic directors in small schools are creative in turning these challenges into opportunities to foster community pride and build community partnerships. Oftentimes there are individuals in the community who may have a strong interest in maintaining or lining one’s athletic fields on a volunteer basis. Similarly many large capital projects, such as baseball or softball dugouts or the erection of a new scoreboard, have been accomplished through the volunteer labor and in-kind donations of community members. Oftentimes a simple act of thanks in the form of a plaque, school apparel, or public recognition is all that is required in these cases.

The relationships that an athletic administrator forms with local people are critical to ensuring the resources necessary to finance the athletic program. The same individuals who offer their time and talents to help enhance one’s facilities or programs will oftentimes be an athletic director’s staunchest advocates when the school budget receives a public review.

At the Intersection of the Past and the Future

The future of rural schools in the United States is at a

crossroads. The rising costs of educating students have prompted a public outcry for efficiencies in school management. Consolidation efforts in many states have led to the closing of many smaller schools as their student populations are folded into the schools of neighboring communities.

For athletic directors like Amero who work in isolated outposts such as Jackman, Maine, their communities proudly hold on to the local school as the last vestige of an earlier time where people exercised control over education. In a town that features numerous empty storefronts and closed restaurants, Forest Hills Consolidated School is a legacy from the community’s past and a vital part of Jackman’s fabric. Recognizing that fact, Amero has worked tirelessly to celebrate his school’s place in the community by developing an athletic hall of fame to celebrate the accomplishments of its alumni.

If athletic programs like Forest Hills are to sustain themselves in these challenging times, it will be incumbent upon athletic directors like Amero to advocate for their students and use creative approaches to solving the problems that they face. The future prospects for education-based athletics in small and rural schools depend upon the efforts of athletic leaders working in concert with one another. As they have for years, rural school athletic administrators are among the most dynamic, talented and creative professionals in the nation and deserve to be recognized as such. **IAA**



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