

Making the numbers work on the field



EPITAPH: SCORECARD

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Think of a typical high school football team. Fifty members? A volleyball team. Fifteen more? A marching band and cheerleaders. Another 70 people? But Tombstone High School has a total of 400 students. How do they manage a field a competitive athletic program?

With surprising success, if you ask me.

The Tombstone High School football team ended its season at 4-6 after a 41-6 loss to Benson High School on Nov. 1. Their year was a tale of two teams, as they finished with a 4-1 record at home and 0-5 on the road.

"The last couple years, we've been playing real good at home and then not winning on the road," said Joe Thomas, who is in his second

year as head football coach. He graduated from the high school in 2002 and spent five years as an assistant before taking over in 2012.

Schools like Tombstone struggle as a result of long travel times. At 23.7 miles away, Benson High School was the closest of the 10 schools on the Yellow Jackets' schedule.

I went on Google Maps to find the exact distances.

Tombstone High School travelled a total of 388.5 miles to away games at Rio Rico High School, Safford High School, Morenci High School and Benson. They lost the five games by a combined 156 points.

But they seemed a lot more at home... well, at home.

Meanwhile, at home, they won four of five games,

with their only loss coming on Oct. 4 to Thatcher High School. Tombstone High School outscored their opponents by 130 points at home, and all four wins were shutouts.

The five teams, Baboquivari High School, San Manuel High School, Wilcox High School, Thatcher High School and Tanque Verde High School, travelled an average of 82.1 miles to get to Tombstone. They combined for a 8-16 road record in 2013, compared to a 12-17 mark at home, according to MaxPreps.com.

"We tried to tell the kids it's a football field, whether you're at home or away," Thomas said. "I don't know if they just feel comfortable at home, but it's just a fact that we lose on the road."

Since 2005, Tombstone's record is 34-56 over nine seasons, according to MaxPreps.com. However, their road winning percentage (13-32, .289) is much lower than their winning percentage at home (21-24, .467).

Travel not only has a big impact on the players' perfor-

mance, but also on academics and overall costs, Tombstone High School principal Robert Devere told me.

Devere said that participation in sporting events requires students to leave early from classes. Depending on the sport, students can miss two or three hours of school for every game. Generally, students need to leave before school ends for every sporting event, even if the location of the event is close.

Missing school could have an impact on the students' eligibility to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities, according to Devere.

"We have very high eligibility standards," he said. "We check our eligibility every week and you have to have a C in every class to participate. If you don't, you don't participate. However, a lot of kids miss a lot of class for sports and depending on the sports season, it's more than others."

In terms of athletic expenditures, buses cost over \$2 for every mile, which can add up depending how far

the teams make it in the season. For instance, the girl's volleyball team recently made state playoffs and had to travel 329 miles to Northland Preparatory Academy in Flagstaff, Ariz. They didn't win a set, losing 3-0.

Factor in the costs of coaches' stipends, equipment, field maintenance, officials and uniforms, and the district spends "a considerable amount of money on athletics," according to Devere.

"We are willing to pay that and the board's willing to pay that," Devere said. "They've been committed to this for many years and recognize the value of it that not all lessons come out of books in the classroom."

Regardless, Devere said the school would not be complete without extracurricular activities and encourage their students to participate in as many of them as possible.

"It's very important to have a real well-rounded high school," he said. "Some schools push kids as they enter as freshmen to choose what they concentrate on the whole

time and that's fine. We just feel it's better to give them a well-rounded experience."

Students at Tombstone High School are required to pay a \$1 fee at the beginning of the year in order to participate in all extracurricular activities. Schools generally charge between \$150 and \$250 per sport, according to Devere.

"Our board has made a commitment to our kids," he said. "Basically, they have said if you're going to commit within your high school career, we're going to commit to making it feasible for you."

As a result, the percent of athletes who go on to play in college is in line with the bigger high schools in Arizona, according to Devere. This success has attracted students from out-of-district, where over half of Tombstone High School's students come from, and has grown the enrollment at the school each of the past six years.

"We've got a small atmosphere, but we've got very good programs," Devere said.

I'd say the stats back that up.