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Playoffs help show off stadium

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FREMONT -- Maple Heights played Toledo St. Francis in a Division II football playoff game Friday, but it was Don Paul Stadium that was on display.

The stadium, home to the Fremont Ross and St. Joseph Central Catholic football teams, has become a regular stop on the tournament trail. Ross, as hosts, makes some money -- but everyone in the area benefits.

"We have a great facility," Ross Athletic Director Art Bucci said. "Any time I can bring people to show off Fremont City Schools, I'm all about it. We do everything we can to be recognized."

Ross gets \$1,000 for the stadium rental. Many workers get a small stipend for their time and trouble, but given the hours they put in, the money works out to less than minimum wage.

"We're definitely not doing this for the money," assistant athletic director Mark Gedeon said.

The influx of people into the area is a boon for local businesses. Few stay the night, but many stop for gas or a meal. Gedeon said he received a call from people at the 818 Club, telling him the pregame crowd packed the restaurant named for its address on Croghan Street.

"When you hear stuff like that, you know you're doing good for Fremont," Gedeon said.

About 50 people -- many volunteers -- work to make the game experience a pleasurable one for fans making the trip from Columbus, Toledo, Cleveland or elsewhere.

"There are quite a few people who contribute to the success of the event," Gedeon said.

Pairings are announced Sunday, after the weekend's slate of playoff games, but sometimes facility directors know farther out if they have a chance to host a game. In the second week of the playoffs, Ross could have gotten a Division I game had Toledo Whitmer won. Instead, Toledo St. Francis and Avon Lake -- a regular playoff visitor to Fremont -- met at the Don.

Chris Berger, treasurer of the band boosters, would have loved a D-I game. The band boosters run the concession stand -- and get the profits from it. Berger declined to say how much that was, but said, "We're paying our bills."

She has found bigger schools lead to bigger crowds, and bigger crowds lead to more sales -- unless it's really cold.

"When it gets cold, people stay in their seats," said Ruth Gegorski, another helper.

By Tuesday, Bucci and Gedeon talk to athletic administrators for the teams that will be coming to Fremont to make sure they're comfortable with the plans.

By Wednesday, arrangements have been made for the hospitality room, in the team meeting room next to the locker room. Robin Mohr, who has been running the hospitality room for more than 10

years, said 99 percent of the food is donated from local restaurants such as Fricker's, Ponderosa, Lee's and Ole Zim's. The donors are well-trained.

"As soon as I tell them it's playoff time, they're right there," she said. "I don't even have to call some of them."

The first week is the toughest, when they have to bring equipment -- pizza ovens, roasters and coffee pots -- to the stadium. After that, they leave the gear there for the remainder of the playoffs.

In the old stadium, the hospitality room was maybe a third of the size of the current meeting room, with just two tables in the cheerleaders' room.

"We had pizza piled to the ceiling," Mohr said.

Now, they have good food -- and a facility to showcase it.

"We've had coaches take pictures and send them back," Mohr said. "They were that impressed."

Don Paul Stadium usually hosts a couple of playoff games a year. Between the first round of the playoffs -- where playoff teams can host at their home fields -- and the state finals -- where all the games are played at Fawcett Stadium in Canton or Paul Brown Tiger Stadium in Massillon -- playoff games are played at neutral sites, which are supposed to be equidistant from the two teams playing.

Next week, Ross could get another playoff game.

"It depends on if you can run a successful game," Gedeon said. "At Fremont Ross, we've proven we can do that."



Members of the game crew sample the hospitality room at Don Paul Stadium before a playoff game Friday between Toledo St. Francis and Maple Heights. (Vince Guerrieri | News-Messenger)