

A fresh perspective

SI.com taking look at sports agreement between Sheffield High School and Abraxas juvenile facility

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In case you live under a rock - yet still subscribe to the newspaper, Sports Illustrated is in town.

Specifically, the national magazine and online publication - in this case, online - is capturing a story about a high school football team, an entire town, and a bunch of visitors that most of the community has accepted as their own.

The Sheffield High School football team - and track and wrestling teams - seemingly would not exist without the school's 20-year cooperative agreement with the Abraxas juvenile detention facility, in Marienville, which specializes in intensive drug and alcohol treatment for boys.



Why, might you ask?

Numbers.

The agreement helps Sheffield High School - in declining student population - keep its sports teams. It's obvious how it might help boys from Abraxas.

But to what degree might be extremely underestimated.

Especially if Sports Illustrated has picked up the story for its online "Underdogs" feature, with the billing, "Inspiring stories in high school football." The crew has been here since Thursday and will continue to follow the team through Saturday's home game against Otto-Eldred on Wolverine Mountain.

We're talking about a team that's 0-7 this season, and a program transcending sports.

"This story came at a perfect time for us," said Sheffield head coach Dave Fitch, who also works at Abraxas, which is a 25-minute drive for him from home. "Our season certainly has not gone the way

we hoped. We had a few key injuries even before our first game along with a few Abraxas players that quit early, which left us very young in a few key positions to start our season. The past two weeks, even though we have played better, we still did not win. This story, we hope, will give us the motivation needed to get our first win Saturday, and obviously the kids have been super excited all week."

But it goes way beyond that for Fitch.

"This co-op has saved our program, changed people's lives and gave players different ways to think about people and allow second chances in life," he said. "Working at Abraxas, I get to see many of our players change in school, treatment and thinking and planning their futures. The normal fan or even my coaches don't get to see that, which makes my position even more rewarding."

There are currently 17 players who are students at Sheffield High School, and only five from Abraxas on the Wolverines. But, at the beginning of every season, there are many as a dozen from Abraxas.

"We start with 12 Abraxas players and four alternates every year," said Fitch. "We lose some during the year for many reasons."

One reason might be for a better life.

Or not.

But the opportunity is there.

"I hope the awareness is that the kids from Abraxas are normal kids that were either misguided or made poor decisions that they are working to change and our co-op gives them that opportunity," said Fitch. "And, for Sheffield, the kids are seen as accepting them for who they are, and are open year-in and year-out to making a team with 12-to-16 kids they have never met before, but by season's end develop lasting friendships and memories."

"The town has been so supportive of the co-op," he said. "Some are still on the fence, but the supports well outweigh the naysayers. Every year (an Abraxas) kid changes his thinking and leaves our program to go and be successful... Every year a Sheffield kid changes their perception on acceptance. We have had a great season. Wins and losses are nice, but not as nice as changing lives."

There have been successes on sports fields that have helped opportunities off the field.

One former Abraxas student, Kalil Slaughter, went on to become a Sheffield High School student, live with guardians in Sheffield, and win state championships in track. The town embraced him as their own, and Slaughter - from Philadelphia - embraced the town right back. There's more to be said about the SI Underdogs story by coaches, the school and the athletes.

"It will be a great story- no doubt in my mind," posted Rita Goldthwaite, one of many posts to Facebook this week.

"Many people have changed their perception of the co-op," said Fitch. "I think Kalil's story started to change the way people think because they really got to see a change happen."

Players, coaches from Sheffield-Abraxas co-op give unique insight to SI.com

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BY CODY ELMS , Times Observer

In 1995, then Sheffield head football coach Corey Copley, who is now the school's Athletic Director, was facing the unfortunate reality of declining student athletes. However, one football coaching magazine, five head coaches and 20 years of an unbelievable amount of time and sacrifice later, the Sheffield-Abraxas co-op has become not only an inspiration for the football program, but one for the community as well.

So much so, that when word reached Sports Illustrated Producer Alex Hampl, while doing a shoot on the Kittanning and Ford City High School merger, he started following the program through newspapers and online. This led to Hampl inquiring with Copley about making the co-op a part of Sports Illustrated's award winning online series "Underdogs." After several weeks of researching and conversations with both Copley and Wolverines' head coach Dave Fitch, Hampl and his Supervising Producer, Collin Orcutt, realized that this really was a great story and one they wanted to tell.

"It's a fun opportunity," Copley said of the coverage. "I can't imagine anybody that's been a part of it that isn't excited about the opportunity. Obviously being from the beginning, through it all, there's some gratitude that I feel that it's (the co-op) where it's at now. What I like best about this thing is that we did not self-promote this. It's coming to us. The program caught somebody's eye along the way. We haven't really been out there pushing it, on how great this is.



Cameraman Corey Wascinski of Sports

Illustrated, films Sheffield's Myquandre Stevenson during Thursday's practice.

Dave Fitch understands more than anyone the difficulties of the unique situation. Having once been a defensive coordinator under former head coach Scott Park, and now in the midst of his fourth season (0-7) with the top job, while also working at Abraxas, Fitch is eager to credit former players, coaches, and administrators for their hard work at making the co-op a success story.

"This is not just about this year, or just the football team," Fitch said, "but for every player who has ever been a part of our sports

"Underdogs" which is, like Fitch, in its fourth season, was first launched with the idea of sharing inspiring high school football stories. According to Orcutt, the very first piece that the crew did was on a team outside of Washington D.C. at Friendship Collegiate Academy.

"I think within the first five minutes of filming we realized that this was a much more compelling series than we ever thought it could be," Orcutt said.

So what would bring a Sports Illustrated series that once traveled to the northern most point in the United States, Barrow Alaska, some 300 miles, by two air planes into the Arctic Circle, all the way back to the heart of the Allegheny National Forest?

Inspiration.

"The goal behind the series itself is kind of what we're tackling," Orcutt explained. "Trying to find inspiring stories about the sport. I think that's when the series is at its best. People can relate to the human stories. It doesn't necessarily matter that people are playing football. That's a hook for some, but it's that you can relate to them."

HAMPL added that the series has covered both large and small schools, some of which compete for state championships at the highest level, but that the common thread between all these stories has been the human element and how relationships are developed through football, while bettering themselves personally.

"Once we started reporting," HAMPL said of the Sheffield-Abraxas co-op, "we confirmed that this was a case of that. That everyone on this team is kind of really getting something out of it besides the x's and o's of football and technique."

Like many other stories that HAMPL and Orcutt have covered for "Underdogs", they are approaching Sheffield's without any preconceived ideas about where the tale of two culturally different groups of kids will take them.

"The thing that really drew us to it, was just that a situation where this is unique," Orcutt said. "This isn't like every school. People are using this to expand their horizons and learn more about other people, to maybe better themselves at new opportunities."

Once the program caught the eye of the duo, and they agreed to cover the Wolverines, it became a matter of understanding who the people involved are and what their motivation and hopes and dreams are.

That understanding of a community and the discovery of how it all comes together is what they enjoy the most.

"That's kind of the best part of doing any series like this," Orcutt said. "When it gets passed the point of going up to do the story and gets to the point of meeting the people."

So how does the head coach of a unique small town football co-op of only 23 players, react to the opportunity to go beyond the sports pages of this very newspaper and into the connected world of SportsIllustrated.com?

He's hopeful.

Hopeful the national exposure will allow other schools to open their minds and take chances on non-traditional co-ops that will teach both sides valuable life lessons on and beyond the playing field.

"For Sheffield, the community, I hope the story comes through of how the town's people support the team as one, and does not look at the co-op anymore as a wedge, but a necessity to keeping the sports programs alive," Fitch said. "For the Abraxas community, I hope the story comes through of a facility that truly supports opportunities for their clients to become successful well after they discharge."