

Rogersville Middle School Warriors

If you spend enough time watching football, you might see it. If you spend enough time playing football, you already know it. But spend enough time in Rogersville, Tennessee, and you are guaranteed to feel it: Football is more than just a game.

Rogersville is a small town burrowed in the foothills of northeast Tennessee, just over an hour's drive outside Knoxville. Settled in the 1780's by Joseph Rogers, it is among the oldest settlements in the state and boasts more than a couple historical quirks—Tennessee's oldest active church and the founding site of its first newspaper, to name two. It's a proud town. Some speculate that a sense of precedence evokes that pride. During football season, others point to Rogersville Middle School.

"Just about everyone that grew up in this town has a connection to this campus," said Greg Simpson, Principal of RMS. "You find that when you come from a small town, buildings like this are a staple in the community."

At Rogersville Middle, football is more than just a game. Jeremy Bailey, the school's head football coach, knows this firsthand; he was raised 16 miles outside of the town and attended RMS growing up.

"Once I started playing football, my whole outlook on going to school changed. It was something I wanted to do," Coach Bailey said. "Our students, most of them do come from tough backgrounds. And I know what they experience. So, having a football program that can provide them with everything they need is just a miracle opportunity."



Peyton Manning speaks to a crowd of Rogersville Middle School football players after their first practice outfitted in Riddell gear

Last August, Riddell—along with Tennessee folk hero Peyton Manning—visited Rogersville to recognize RMS as one of the inaugural recipients of an ‘18 in 18’ Smarter Football equipment grant, a distinction awarded to football programs that demonstrate commitment to smarter practice and play. The Warriors were granted a range of equipment and technology to help them continue to play smarter football, from helmets, to shoulder pads, to Riddell’s new InSite Training Tool – a web-based data center designed to help coaches identify opportunities to proactively influence player behavior and reduce exposure to impacts through improved training techniques and practice plans.

For Riddell, Smarter Football means leading innovation in product design and development to create more advanced protective technologies while promoting smarter practice and play. For the students of Rogersville Middle, the meaning extends even outside the lines of the field. Coach Bailey, revered within the school and community, doubles as a math teacher and believes that the tenets of responsible football permeate other areas of his students’ lives.

The culture of Rogersville Middle reflects this philosophy. It is a community filled with people who care unconditionally for each other, regardless of age, status, or background. The school’s acronym, RMS P.R.I.D.E. – Positive, Respectful, Involved, Determined, Equal – sums it up best, and Bailey is intentional in growing his student athletes into leaders and uplifting figures within the community. “For me, it’s all about having a cooperative learning environment – that translates well on the football field, in the classroom, and in the real world.,” he said. “When that’s the focus, you get kids who have pride in their school. They kept it neat, they take ownership, and they do the right things even when they’re not told to.”

“Just by putting on that uniform – whether they want to or not – those boys become role models throughout the school,” Principal Simpson said. “We’re fortunate to have students, that just so happen to wear football jerseys, that consistently show acts of kindness and mentorship to underclassmen. That has had a strong impact on the community.”

On the field, Coach Bailey emphasizes being proactive in player protection above all else. He has modeled his coaching strategies after successful programs from the Pop Warner level to the Seattle Seahawks, teaching *Heads Up, Eyes Up* tackling and scaling back full-contact drills in practice to focus on conditioning and fundamentals. Bailey also said that his staff has utilized frequent post-film study meetings to dig into ITT data and formulate smarter practice plans that emphasize breaks – or “thinking time” in Bailey’s words – to re-energize their athletes and sharpen their focus on technique.

“I’m a math guy, so for me it’s about numbers. It’s been great to have all that technology to pinpoint and fine tune where our problems are so we can apply the right solutions,” Bailey said. “I have a linebacker, for example, that’s notorious for leading with his crown. So we talked with his mother, showed her all the numbers and the impacts that he was having at the top of the helmet and told him, ‘You’ve got to get your head up or we’re going to have to pull you out of game’. That really got him focusing on the right things, and we started seeing those numbers drop throughout the season. We’ve been able to correct a lot of improper technique across the team this way.”



Two Rogersville Middle School football players line up for a drill

Rogersville Middle's 2018 football season was an overachieving year by Bailey's estimation, and a sentimental one, too. Riddell visited Rogersville during the team's bye week before their third game, a highly-anticipated matchup against rival Church Hill. At the time, RMS was 1-1 on the season and coming off a blowout loss to Unicoi.

"Everybody had given us no shot against Church Hill," Bailey said. "But in that off-week, receiving all the equipment from Riddell and getting to meet Peyton, from that point on, our students changed. Their belief in themselves changed."

Rogersville took the perennial powerhouse to overtime in that game, eventually losing 38-36. But, as Coach Bailey said, something changed in his football team that week. The Warriors won all but one of their next five games to finish the regular season with a 5-3 record and went all the way to the semifinals of their region's Sectionals before losing to the Chucky-Doak Black Knights. "Once they got that equipment, they felt unbeatable. There were no more excuses," Bailey said.

The ripples of RMS receiving the grant reverberated not just on the field, but throughout the greater community, as well. It was nothing short of an event, and major events in Rogersville are felt in the hearts of everyone.

"It still hasn't sunk in how big it was to have Peyton Manning at Rogersville Middle School," Bailey said. "It energized everyone to the point that we had parents jumping on board to fix the field house, then the Pop Warner league jumping in to fix our chain-link fence. We were even able to hand down our spare equipment to some neighboring programs. It didn't just benefit our school, it benefitted everyone in the community.

"But the value of this grant goes even further than new equipment or the publicity. More than anything, this is for our community and for our kids. Something like this shows them - even though we're here in small, rural, east Tennessee, in a pretty poverty-stricken place - we still have opportunities if we just work hard," Bailey continued. "That hard-work mentality will stick with all of us forever."

That spirit of toughness and togetherness, galvanized by the mettle of the Rogersville Middle School Warriors, is not likely to fade soon. Bailey said that he is consistently fielding calls and visits from neighboring schools curious to learn more about their new equipment and ITT, and that, for students and parents, interest in football is on the upswing. The optimism throughout Rogersville is palpable, and at the heart of it is a football program dedicated to playing smarter.

"That's what I'm the most proud of," Bailey said. "That this school and this football program can have an impact on Rogersville that goes beyond points scored or games won, and that this community can inspire others to come here and be proud to be a Warrior."

Juniata Thundercats



At its most elegant, the game of football is played under the presumption of togetherness. A team cannot function properly without being in unison – in a flash, any athlete on the field can shift the paradigm of a game, and every player is wholly dependent on one another. Relative to other popular American sports, football is unique in this way. Tennis and golf are solitary endeavors. In basketball or baseball, a player’s responsibilities are more rigidly defined. But football requires perfect harmony, and that harmony can be a great teacher of the importance of community, camaraderie and mutual accountability.

Bryant Paden, co-founder of the Juniata Thundercats – a Pop Warner Football Program in Northeast Philadelphia for youth ages 5-15 – would agree with this sentiment. Paden and coach Lee Taggart organized the Thundercats as an avenue for kids in low-income areas to find responsible mentorship and a fun, constructive after-school activity. Because of the emphasis Paden and Taggart put on heads-up tackling techniques, smarter conditioning strategies and reducing contact in practices, the Thundercats were awarded a Smarter Football equipment grant by Riddell in 2016.

“The team started as a mentorship program, where kids could come and learn conflict resolution skills, leadership skills, things of that nature,” Paden said. “We figured adding a sports component would make it easier to draw people in, and we knew that through sports we could teach them a lot of valuable lessons. The teamwork-based mentality of the game has been perfect for what we set out to do in the community.”

The impetus behind the curriculum of the Thundercats program – which, in addition to practices and games, includes community service requirements, Life Skills classes and guest speaker engagements – is to “build the total person,” in Paden’s words. The program is the platonic ideal for the good that the game of football can do, even for kids without NFL aspirations. It’s a stepping stone, a place to form a sense of one’s values to then apply in the real world.



Paden speaks to a group of players at the Thundercats’ first practice after being awarded a Smarter Football grant in 2016

What’s more, they’re finding success, both on and off the field. This season, the Thundercats had two groups make their respective league Championship games, and all but one of their affiliated teams finished with winning records.

“The greatest satisfaction to me, though, is when I see kids grow up and come back and they tell me how important I was to them or how much football has meant to them. Our success stories are when kids go out and find a job and take care of their family, and we’re seeing more and more of stories like that as time goes on,” Paden said.

“There are some kids who, if we didn’t get a hold of them, could have ended up in a bad situation,” Paden continued. “That’s why this is so important and why we’re so grateful to Riddell for the equipment we received. A lot of these kids who can’t afford to play would never have access to these opportunities without it. Stuff like this keeps the program alive.”



Thundercat players receiving their new equipment from Riddell's Smarter Football grant program

And it is essential that programs like the Juniata Thundercats stay alive, for the good of underserved communities across the country, and for the future of football. Paden, Taggart and the group of young athletes they mentor are a constant reminder of how much this game can mean as it relates to community-building and that the Smarter Football movement is only just beginning.

“The grant did so much for making us a more confident program,” Paden said. “I don’t know what we would have done without it, but for now we’re just happy we get to keep playing the game of football and, in doing so, taking care of our community.”

Brimley Bays

When Tom McKee accepted the position of head football coach at Brimley High School in 2015, the program needed change. Enrollment was down, community involvement was a far cry from the team's days as a "powerhouse" in the early 1990s and a run of minimal on-field success had left students and staff dejected. In a school full of athletes, football was nearly forgotten.

Then, in 2016, Brimley applied for and won a Riddell Smarter Football grant, a turning point for the program. In their first year outfitted in all new Riddell equipment, enrollment jumped from 14 players, only enough to field a Junior Varsity team, to 28, adequate for both JV and Varsity teams.

"Any time you can put state-of-the-art products in front of administrators, parents and athletes, it sells everything we're doing. From the quality, to the pride it gave us, and then to the availability of always being there to support us, Riddell has been a great partner to have," McKee said. "And the community has been very supportive. For the first time in a long time, Friday nights in Brimley are an event again."



The Brimley Bays' offense lines up for a snap

Brimley's philosophy reflects the heart of Smarter Football: playing the game the right way and growing as a person because of it. On the field, McKee introduced the principles of Heads Up tackling at Brimley and delivered multiple .500 seasons, a marked improvement over years past. The school also opened its arms to a neighboring district without the resources to field their own football team and allowed two students to join their ranks – a tremendous show of sportsmanship that has trickled into their in-game attitude as a team. McKee recounts all of this with pride, but points to a different set of statistics when illustrating how far the program has come.

“One of our biggest successes was that first class of 14 students had a 100 percent graduation rate, with 13 of the 14 going to college and one to the military. They’re going to be good people down the road. As a coach, it’s not really about what goes on during games – it’s what those kids turn into five, ten years down the road that has an impact,” McKee said.

Though 2018 was McKee's final season as head football coach at Brimley, the impact of his tenure – which can be summarized by the program's mantra: *Build a Tradition* – and Riddell's contributions will live on.

Apple Springs Eagles

The tenets of Smarter Football – proactivity, growth, innovation – are universal. Regardless of location, if football is revered in a place, the seeds of a progressive future for the game can take root there. And as those seeds blossom, the communities they inhabit benefit on a deeper level. Apple Springs High School, situated in the heart of Davy Crockett National Forest in Apple Springs, Texas, is an exemplary program that, in everything they do, embodies the positive impact that playing football the right way can have.

It all starts with a philosophy, and head football coach and superintendent Cody Moree defines the program's ethos as predicated on being heat smart, hit smart and head smart. The team makes a concerted effort to not engage in strenuous practices when the heat index is too high (in East Texas, not a rare occurrence), limit one-on-one contact drills to one day a week and teach heads-up tackling techniques. From a mentorship perspective, the Apple Springs coaching staff also focuses on leveraging the lessons learned on the football field into the off-field development of their players into responsible young adults.



Several Apple Springs football players huddle up during a game

Apple Springs was awarded a Riddell Smarter Football equipment grant in 2018, and according to Moree, the influx of new equipment vitalized their program and community.

“It was a godsend for us because we are a very small and property-poor school district,” Moree said. “And in our town, football is a huge catalyst for community involvement. Getting that grant and ensuring that our kids were in the very best protective equipment available has allowed us to excel in a way we couldn’t afford ourselves.”

Football is legendary in the state of Texas, at large, but Moree said that the team holds a special place in the hearts of Apple Springs residents, given how small and rural the community is. When the lights go on at Apple Springs High on autumn Friday nights, the Eagles are the only show in town.

For Moree and the rest of the program, it was surreal to see hordes of local media outlets and rival schools flood into Apple Springs upon receiving the grant, eager to learn from them and spread their story (an “anomaly” in Moree’s words). The team also received a personal video message from Peyton Manning, an enormous confidence boost to go along with all new gear.

Now, one year later, Apple Springs High is continuing to look to the future.

“To me, it’s all about education and technology,” Moree said. “This game is important – in my opinion, it’s a microcosm of life, in that you learn to work together, contribute, know your responsibilities, appreciate other people and so on... We’re out here trying to bring that to the forefront, and we know Riddell is too, so we’re proud to be a part of the Smarter Football movement.”

East Anchorage Thunderbirds

East High School in Anchorage, Alaska prides itself on inclusiveness. This faction of the institution's identity is deeply ingrained – East High is the most diverse high school in the country and the largest in its state. Head football coach Jeff Trotter, though, takes the idea of inclusivity even a step further, citing practical benefits to keeping his athletes active and engaged.

“It’s just my philosophy,” Trotter said. “We had games where 13 kids get carries. Even if they’re only in for a few plays, we want our athletes to always have a next-man up mentality and feel accountable for everything going on with the team. When that’s a focus, good things happen.”



East High CB/WR Colton Herman breaks free in a matchup against the Colony Knights

Good things also happen when players are safe, and as a Doctor of Physical Therapy with over 25 years of football coaching experience, Trotter said proactive player protection is his number one priority. This sentiment echoes in the East Anchorage Thunderbirds' practice plans, which are form-focused, emphasize the Hawk Tackling method and entail far below the maximum full-speed contact allowed for high schools. This, combined with thoughtful life-skill curricula, led to the Thunderbirds being awarded a Riddell Smarter Football grant in 2017.

The grant could not have come at a better time for the school, which, according to Trotter, didn't have enough certified helmets to outfit the number of students on their football roster when they applied. The majority of the \$10,000 granted was funneled into new helmets and shoulder pads for the team.

"The kids felt like they were getting best equipment you could get and because of that, there was definitely an attitude change as far as confidence in what we are doing," Trotter said. "There was a lot of buy-in and that in turn helps us teach technique and strategy effectively."

The team is a boon for the East Anchorage community, especially given a tremendous run of on-field success: The Thunderbirds have won two state championships in the past three seasons and ended 2018 the no. 1 ranked high school football program in the state of Alaska. Off the field, Trotter and his staff are committed to growing their athletes into positive influences in their community, as well. Through a program called Work for Relief, East High football players are linked up with local businesses and put to work as a way of offsetting ancillary costs related to football that can put pressure on families.

"We run our program like a business so that when our kids graduate from the game – because only so many continue to play after high school – they're equipped to succeed in whatever walk of life they choose," Trotter said. "I think football is conducive to that kind of education, it's why we work so hard to conserve the sport and play the right way."

East High will implement Riddell's InSite technology in select athlete's helmets in their upcoming season to further the program's pursuit of practicing and playing smarter football. And with programs such as theirs equipped with the tools to succeed, the game of football – and the communities it touches – are sure to be in good hands moving forward.