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## **Friday Night Fights**

### ***Preparing security plans for sports events***

By Thomas A. Gavin

Since 9/11, security has been an oft-discussed issue for educators. Certainly there is always a possibility that international or domestic terrorists might target a school, but the chances of this happening are somewhat remote. In addition to those threats, events such as the attacks at Columbine have resulted in schools focusing much of their safety concerns on the armed student intent on targeted violence. As a result, enhanced access control procedures, surveillance cameras, and lockdown drills have become an ingrained part of the “new normal” at today’s schools.

While working to prevent such occurrences, we must not lose sight of the more mundane day-to-day threats to students and staff. The fights in the bus circle, disruptions during class’ changes, and the bullying that occurs throughout the school must be dealt with. To that end, one area that poses safety concerns is the Friday night football game.

Even if your school has never experienced problems, the potential always exists for disruptive incidents that threaten the safety of students, staff, and guests. The responsibility for safety at extracurricular events is shared both by the school and the law enforcement. Each brings unique perspectives, so your plan should be developed collaboratively by your school resource officer (or a representative from local law enforcement) and a designated member of the administrative team.

#### **Where do I start?**

The first step in developing a plan is to identify and analyze previous problems that you have experienced during extra curricular events. This information can be located in police reports, school incident reports, injury reports, discipline referrals, or if all else fails, anecdotal information from administrators or law enforcement officers who have dealt with problems at your facility in the past.

Once you have the information, you must identify the common characteristics between the events. Do fights at a football game always take place in one area? Is one group, such as freshmen or non-students, frequently involved in the fight, or are they the cause of it? When do fights occur (before the game, during halftime, after the game)? What preceded the fight (an insult from a visiting fan on the home side stirring up trouble, a boyfriend/girlfriend issue, etc.)?

The key to controlling problems is to identify the underlying causes. All too often, once information is initially reviewed, you can know what the problem is and immediately develop a solution. Unfortunately, this may be premature and may not be the best choice; particularly in terms of cost effectiveness.

For example, if you discover that many fights take place in the stands, a traditional response is to “throw a body” at the problem and station an officer or administrator there. However, if you completely analyze the situation, you might learn that the fights are between fans trying to watch the game and the people who rudely stand in front and block their view. The solution may be as

simple as finding a way, through signs or fencing, to eliminate the people who stand and block the spectators' views. Then you don't need to employ human resources except where necessary.

Unless your district or school has unlimited resources, you should not "throw people at a problem." Developing a solution should first involve brainstorming, followed by a solution that does not require a warm body if at all possible. One school, when faced with students who crossed over to the opponent's side of the field and started getting into fights, restricted fan movement by installing a fence between the visitors and home sides. Once the students selected a side, they could not cross back over

Good signage is another cost-effective response because it carries an air of authority. Most people are accustomed to following signs that direct them or clearly state expectations (e.g. "No Smoking"). You can print a lot of signs for the cost of one law enforcement officer being paid at a time-and-a-half rate.

### **Who handles the problems at the game?**

In my district, Pinellas County, Fla., we have learned lessons from security personnel at professional sports stadiums in the Tampa Bay area. At the home venues for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays, the Tampa Bay Lightning, and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, minor problems are dealt with by stadium staff before law enforcement gets involved. Similarly, at the high school level, school-based personnel should be responsible for first addressing non-criminal behavior by adults and students. Examples include being too loud, using profanity, throwing things, standing or congregating in "no standing" zones, or horseplay.

In these instances administrators should focus on the expected behavior and take appropriate action. If the offending person is defiant or fails to respond, the administrator should warn them that they could be asked to leave if they fail to modify their behavior. If the person does not respond positively, then law enforcement should be summoned. The administrator must be prepared to describe the persons' behavior and the tactics used up to that point. Officers cannot make an arrest for rude behavior, refusing to sit down, using profanity, or generally making the event unpleasant for those around him.

The officer can eject the person from the facility at the request of an administrator, and refusing to leave can result in a trespassing arrest in most states. Since laws change from state to state, you should discuss these issues with your law enforcement representative as you develop your overall plan.

### **What is the role of law enforcement?**

Officers are present to assist administrators in maintaining a safe environment. As you prepare a safety plan, consider the deterrent effect that a uniformed professional officer presents to those in attendance.

Maximum visibility is suggested as fans move into and out of the stadium. Some schools for example, feel strongly that the SRO should work the ticket booth until the game actually starts. This provides security for all the money coming in, but the SRO also knows the students and can readily spot troublemakers and those under suspension who should not be at the game. After the game starts, the home SRO is usually most effective when floating or roaming, checking hot spots.

Other law enforcement should be posted in major foot-traffic areas so arriving patrons see them as they move toward their seats. Once the game begins (or just prior to the opening kickoff), officers should move to their assigned posts.

Administrators or other school personnel working the games should wear identification that readily indicates who they are and that they have lawful authority to enforce board policy. Although your students may know you, a visiting student or parent does not. Wearing a vest, a polo shirt with your name embroidered as “Assistant Principal,” or even a school board picture ID it will go a long way to minimizing problems.

Consider why police officers wear their uniforms, or security personnel at concerts have T-shirts that say “Event Security” on them. Wearing a polo shirt that has your school logo on it is insufficient, since everyone from the band boosters to the cafeteria manager has a shirt with the school logo. It is strongly suggested that your school picture ID card be worn in a fashion that ensures that it can be seen.

### **Where are they going to work?**

In developing your security plan, you may find that assigning staff to an event may be the only solution. As part of the planning process, you must ensure that personnel resources are distributed throughout the venue and assigned specific tasks. If individuals are not assigned a specific location and task, you likely will see administrators and officers gathered in small groups eating popcorn and discussing the day’s events instead of working the crowd.

Therefore, develop a security plan that places your personnel where they will provide the most bang for your buck. Don’t place a highly trained and very expensive law enforcement officer in an assignment that a minimum wage security guard can handle. If the assistant principal who handles the freshman class is working, they should be assigned to the area where freshmen usually sit.

Identified problem areas are an obvious location for school personnel. A key to keeping problems from escalating is to, first, prevent them from starting at all, or secondly, bring the necessary resources in immediately to prevent the problem from growing. For example, if people are standing in a “no-standing” area, ask the first three or four people to move along. It’s much easier than trying to move a large group that feeds off one another.

### **Conduct a briefing**

Prepare an assignment packet with a map of the stadium for each person (including law enforcement) that is working the game. The packet should include a map with the various posts as well as an individual assignment sheet for each person that is working. The assignment sheet should contain the person’s locations, duties, and times they are to be at their post.

Everyone should be apprized of their duties and responsibilities in a group setting. In addition to the briefing packets, have a large school map to use as a visual aid as you brief all personnel. The administrator in charge of the event can address the overall plan but the SRO or SRO supervisor should brief the law enforcement personnel and answer questions about assignments. This briefing sets the tone that this is a well-organized event with expectations for all involved, and it provides you with an opportunity to discuss potential problems or intelligence information

that has recently come to light, such as potential fights, gang activity, or students who are on suspension.

### **Recommendations**

1. When you arrange for off-duty officers with local law enforcement, tell them when and specifically where to report for the briefing. Officers may arrive on time, but could spend the next 15 minutes wandering the campus trying to find you.
2. Introduce off-duty officers to the members of the administrative team.
3. Provide each with a packet that includes their assignment sheet and a map.
4. Discuss important issues, such as, "We had a big fight today and tensions are high between the seniors and juniors."
5. If available, issue portable school radios for law enforcement officers who don't have them. The officers likely will be on their department's frequency and school personnel will be on another frequency.
6. Make sure the administrators are all on the same radio frequency, and ask the SRO to discuss with other law enforcement which radio frequency to use.
7. Conclude with an opportunity for questions, and a reminder of what time they must be on their posts.

### **Exterior concerns**

In many instances, few problems occur within the stadium. This cannot be said for other places. Parking areas and pedestrian routes from the parking lots to the stadium must also be reviewed for threats. Assaults, robberies, and auto burglaries are concerns in areas away from the stadium. Consider funneling pedestrians into "safe" corridors by using cones, fences or even ropes. Satellite parking areas are a good place to utilize non-sworn security guards, parent volunteers, or others that will work for a low wage.

Other recommendations include outfitting a golf cart with a portable flashing yellow light -- chances are your state will not let you use a red or blue light -- so those working remote parking lots can create a deterrence as they move about. If available, issue a portable school radio to these personnel and include them in the initial briefing.

Just as you do with others working inside the stadium, these personnel should be given an assignment sheet that should include when to call someone, whom they should call when a problem arises, and what actions to take when they see something suspicious ("...be the best witness possible but take no action yourself").

### **How many people do I need?**

The answer is: It depends. Many factors dictate the number of people you will need, including budget constraints, the number of personnel available, the size of the anticipated crowd, the intensity of the rivalry between the two teams (including the importance of this game), community

issues, gang activity, and other community events (such as other football games) that will increase or decrease the number of potential troublemakers at your venue. Of course, any data that might indicate the types of problems that you can reasonably anticipate should play a big part in your plan for upcoming games.

Each locale and each school district are unique. You have your own problems and issues that require collaboration between school administrators and local law enforcement. This article is not meant to be a comprehensive treatise. Instead it is meant as a primer for administrators or school resource officers charged with developing plans that will enhance the safety of extracurricular events.

Although this article focused on the Friday night football game, the principles discussed here apply to virtually all events hosted at your school.

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