A Game Plan

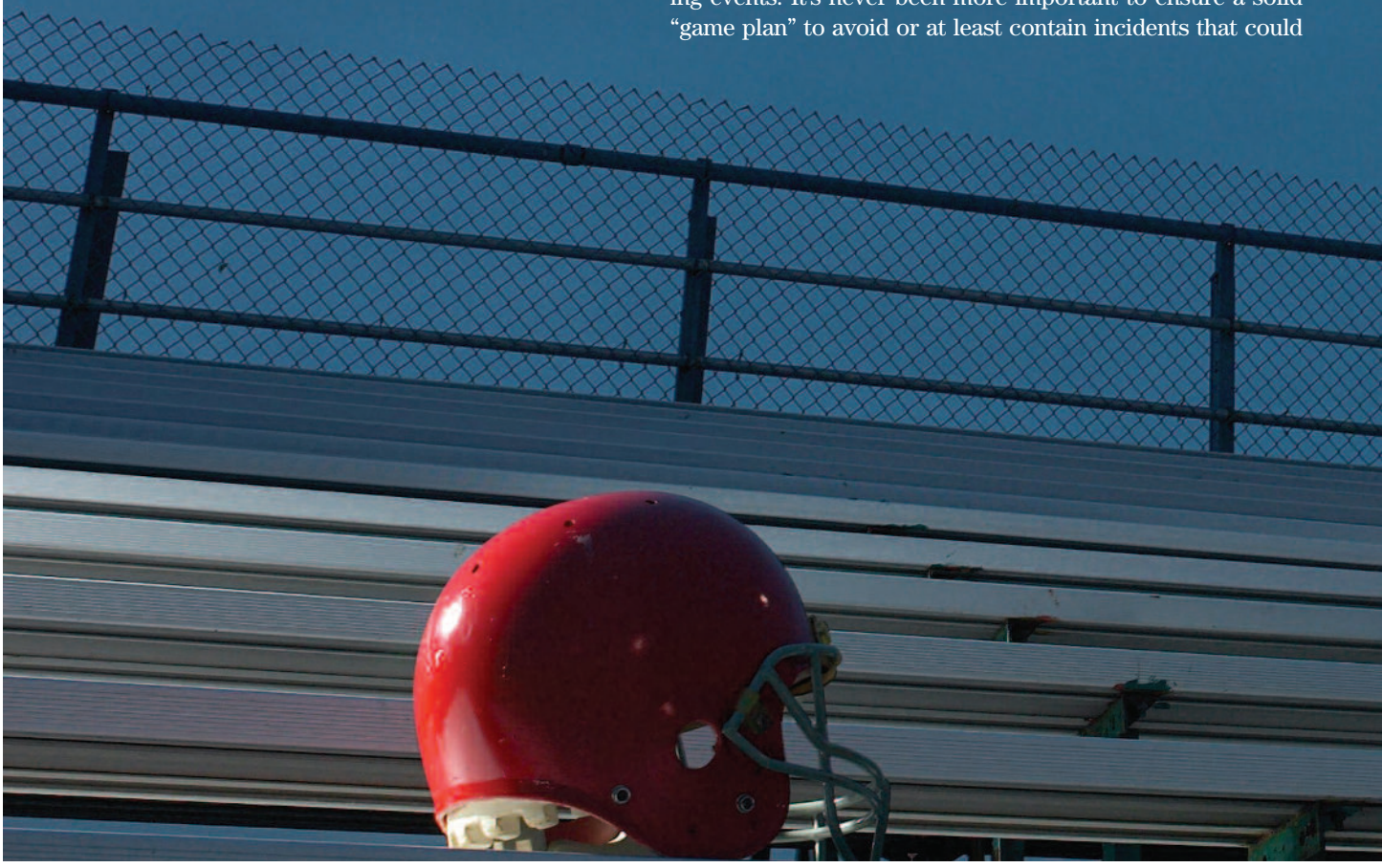
As violence at athletic events rises, teamwork can prevent tragedy

Kenneth S. Trump

A teenager is killed and nine are wounded in a series of fights following football games between long-standing rivals in suburban Dallas. Multiple fights break out at football games in Richmond, Va., leaving three police officers injured and nearly a dozen people arrested. Two teenagers are caught with firearms after sheriff's deputies set up metal detectors outside a Walterboro, S.C., football stadium.

These incidents are but a small sampling of the scores of fights, assaults, riots, stabbings, shootings, and other criminal activity that have marred school athletic events in recent years. Nationwide, violence at school games—particularly at football and basketball games—is on the rise, and there have been a number of deaths.

To avoid a tragedy in the future, it's imperative that school officials pay close attention to security procedures at sporting events. It's never been more important to ensure a solid "game plan" to avoid or at least contain incidents that could



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for Safety

threaten the safety of students, parents, and other community members.

The good news is that many steps to bolster security do not require vast expenditures of school funds—just a greater commitment in time and attention. Focus on this three-pronged approach, and you'll make a difference in ensuring the safety of your sports events.

Step 1: Plan ahead

Smart planning means more than deciding on Thursday night that "we need to get a couple of police officers to work tomorrow night's game." To increase the likelihood of a smooth, incident-free sporting event, you've got to get an early start on planning.

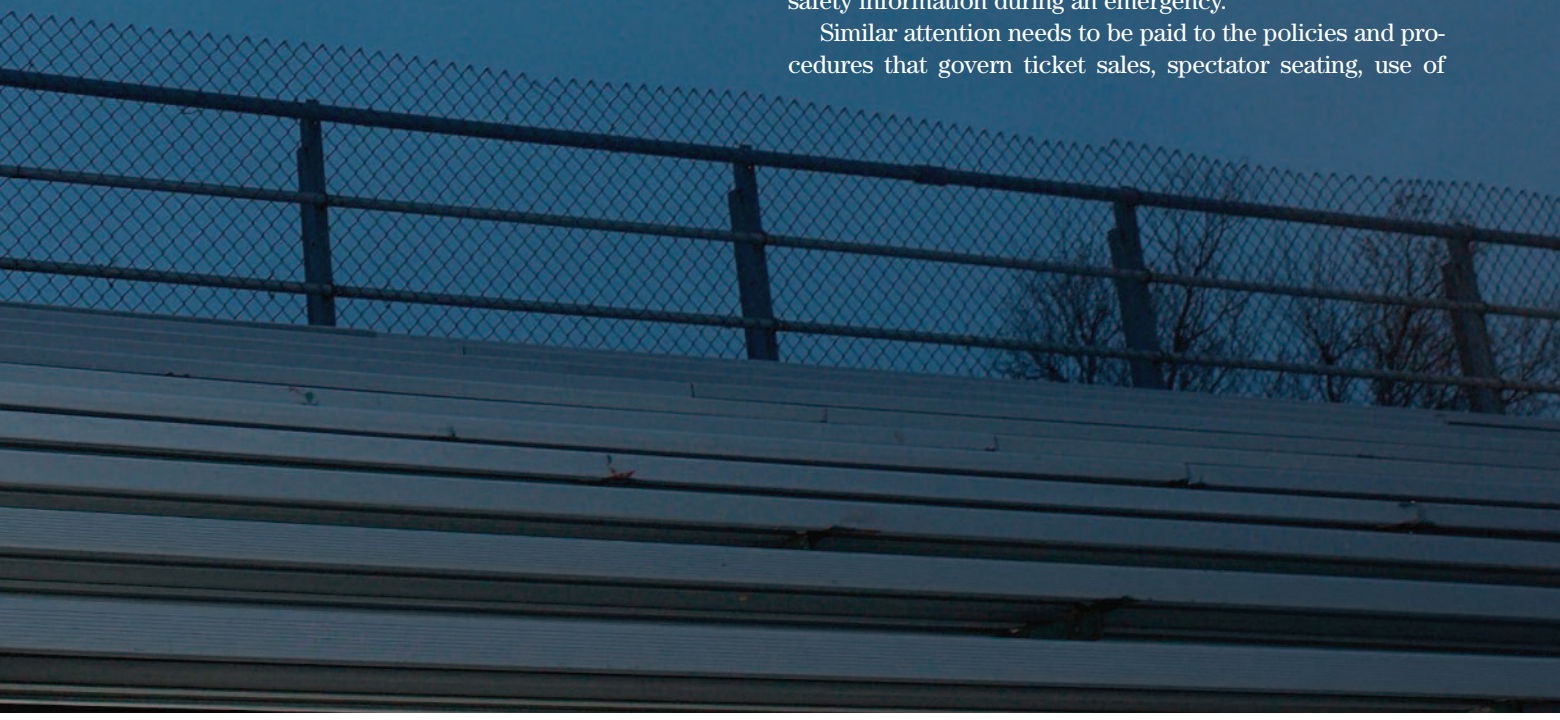
That early start begins with an assessment of your sports facility's physical security needs and existing safety procedures. Do you limit access to areas of the school and campus that are not needed during an athletic event? How many points of access are there to the stadium or gym—and are they adequately supervised during a game? Are there areas of the facility where people can gather out of sight?

This is the time to consider using surveillance cameras at the admissions gate, game field, or gymnasium floor, and such public areas as concession stands, walkways, and restroom entrances. It might make sense to install cameras in parking lots, as well. You also need to evaluate the lighting in and around the stadium, locker rooms, parking lots, ticket area, and the school's perimeter.

Well in advance of an event, you need to contact your counterparts at the opposing team's school to discuss safety concerns, security procedures, and emergency guidelines, as well as to ask about rumors or recent incidents at the other school that could spark trouble at the game. Have there been fights between students of the two schools? Are there ongoing gang rivalries that could lead to trouble if gang members show up to watch the game?

Advance planning also is necessary if adequate training is to be provided to police, security personnel, and others staffing a sporting event. Before anyone sets foot in a stadium or gym, he or she needs to know the sports facility's layout, how to monitor a crowd, deal with agitated spectators, respond to a fight or riot, manage a medical emergency, and efficiently evacuate an area. Announcers using the public address system should be trained in how to communicate safety information during an emergency.

Similar attention needs to be paid to the policies and procedures that govern ticket sales, spectator seating, use of



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parking lots, and other activities surrounding an event. This is the time to decide whether to restrict the use of large purses, book bags, backpacks, or other items that could be used to sneak weapons into a facility. Consider an admissions policy that gives the school the right to search spectators at the admissions gate and outlines the rules surrounding the use of metal detectors and bag searches.

Other rules worth consideration include denying spectators reentry to the sports facility if they leave during the game—a simple way to reduce opportunities for spectators to sneak a weapon past security. A code of conduct regarding sportsmanship also is worth developing for all involved, including players, coaches, cheerleaders, band members, and spectators. These rules should be posted throughout the facility so that everyone knows the behavior you expect at an event.

Because many acts of violence occur before and after a game, it's important to review your plans for traffic flow, parking, and security around the facility and the parking lot. Consider denying access to cars that arrive after a designated time, such as during the second half of a game. Set aside designated areas—monitored by police or school staff—for students to be picked up by parents.

Also review your procedures for clearing and locking down the sports facility after the game, and clearly designate who will be responsible for each step of this process.

Finally, limit the potential for conflict by minimizing contact between athletes and spectators from competing schools. Maintain separate locker rooms for the home and visitor teams. Arrange for team buses to pick up and drop off players at opposite ends of the sports facility to minimize interaction before and after a game. Separate spectators with clearly designated seating areas, with the home team's fans in bleachers on one side of a stadium or gym and the visiting team's fans on the opposite side. If possible, you should set up separate concession stands in each area.

If ongoing problems persist even after preventative security measures have been in effect, you may need to take stronger action. Some school districts have changed their game times and days in response to violent incidents at evening games. Others have limited the number and type of spectators—to students and parents, for example—to diminish the risks of trouble stemming from community conflicts involving former students or adults with no current link to the school.

Understanding safety risks

When safety issues arise at school athletic events, it's often one of six factors at work. By understanding these factors—and preparing to deal with them—school officials can greatly reduce their impact, and players and fans can enjoy their games in safety.

Factors to considering when planning:

Crowded stands: Some athletic events attract thousands of spectators—students from both participating schools, students from other schools, former students, parents, and members of the community. A large crowd can contribute to a dangerous situation by the anonymity it provides for those who wish to cause harm.

Inadequate adult supervision, visibility, and mobility. Where there are too few trained adults overseeing an event, misbehavior that leads up to violence can go unnoticed until too late. Also, would-be troublemakers are emboldened when they fail to see supervisory personnel near at hand.

Intense emotions. Emotions can run high among spectators, especially during games involving major rivalries. The larger the crowd, the more intense—and potentially dangerous—these emotions can become.

Increased access to—and vulnerability of—the school's physical plant. At athletic events, there are many, many more people than usual in the stadium, athletic field, parking lot, gym, locker rooms, and possibly the rest of the school. The risk of vandalism, thefts, and other crimes is greatly increased, especially if some areas are poorly supervised.

Presence of alcohol and drugs. Some people associate athletic events with alcohol and drug use, so levels of consumption by spectators may be high before, during, and after games. The use of such substances, combined with the anonymity of a crowded situation and strong emotions, may elevate dangers.

Gang presence. In communities where gangs are active, gang members may see athletic events as places where they can easily catch up with and confront rival members with a lower risk of being caught because of large crowds. Gang incidents typically escalate more rapidly than nongang conflicts and also pose a greater risk for the use of weapons.

Step 2: Provide adequate staffing

Having adequate personnel supervising your sporting events will go a long way to ensuring the safety of athletes and spectators. But what exactly does "adequate" mean?

The answer is unique to each sporting event—and the potential safety issues facing your schools. How large a crowd is expected? How large are the facilities and grounds, including parking lots? Have there been violent incidents at similar events at the campus? Are there school rumors or police knowledge about conflicts among students, gangs, or community members that could spill over into an athletic event?

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Where large crowds are expected, a school district should bring in professionals—school police officers, school resource officers, or community law enforcement officials. School security personnel should be deployed where the biggest crowds are expected to gather, because they are likely to know the young people who attend the event. If more manpower is needed, consider using local gang unit officers, detectives assigned to juvenile cases, and community policing officers who are most familiar with the community's youth.

School administrators and other school staff members also can be enlisted to assist with security. After all, no one knows better than the school staff those students and former students who have exhibited behavioral problems in school and at school-sponsored events. As a final resort, school districts may want to enlist support staff or parents, but they must be trained and given more limited and specific tasks and direction.

All of this costs money, of course. But hiring off-duty police officers or paying school security personnel overtime should not be seen as cutting into gate receipts and the profitability of an athletic event. It's far better to view such expenditures as an investment. Failing to reasonably spend on the front end can, if an incident occurs, leave many schools paying more later, both in liability and in damage to their school's image in the community.

In deploying your security team, make sure all key locations are under supervision. Ticket gates, entrances and exits, parking lots, and common areas such as restrooms, concession stands, the playing grounds, and the stands should all be covered. Police should be in uniform, and security staff should wear clearly identifiable clothing. At events with particularly large crowds or where potential problems are anticipated, you might consider making use of plain-clothes police officers.

Security personnel should be assigned to monitor the selling of tickets and the admissions gates. Follow some commonsense rules. Stop ticket sales after a designated time, such as at the beginning of the second half of the game. Have police or security personnel escort staff members who take money from ticket sales to a designated location where they can count and prepare bank deposits and then transport the money to the bank.

All staff members working an event should be equipped with two-way radios so they can communicate with one another. Key administrators and security personnel also should be issued cell phones. You should consider assigning staff members to videotape the game and, if necessary, record areas where spectator misconduct is reported—particularly at events where school rivalries are strong or where past incidents have occurred.

Finally, don't overlook the power of the public address system at the sports facility. Announcers should make announcements at the beginning of the game and at other times, if necessary, to remind spectators of the importance of sportsmanlike behavior.

Step 3: Be ready for emergencies

On occasion, an emergency may arise that defies the best planning and overwhelms the best-trained security team. For those instances, you need to be ready to act with little or no warning. And that means another round of planning.

The first step is to develop written guidelines detailing the steps to take in such emergencies as a bomb threat, shooting, or other situation that requires the evacuation of the sports facility. These guidelines should clearly describe evacuation procedures and outline procedures for communicating with parents, students, school staff, and the media.

You also need a plan for the hours and days after an emergency—to deal with worried parents who cannot find their children immediately after an evacuation, with reporters wanting information, and with spectators who may require medical attention or counseling after a particularly serious incident.

Once developed, these guidelines are no good if they gather dust on a bookshelf or are forgotten in a filing cabinet. They need to be tested in tabletop exercises to ensure they will do the job should an emergency arise, and all personnel assigned to supervise athletic events should be trained until they can carry out their tasks without hesitation. Before any event, these guidelines should be reviewed with personnel from the visiting school.

It's important to coordinate with your community's emergency medical system. Schools expecting large crowds at athletic events often have an ambulance parked at the sports facility until the game is over and spectators have gone home. School administrators also should coordinate with local law enforcement agencies so on-duty police officers or sheriff's deputies are aware of the increased traffic and safety concerns surrounding the sports facility. Even if off-duty officers are hired to work the game, don't assume that law enforcement is aware of your game schedule. It's up to you to make sure there are no surprises.

Some school systems already have learned these lessons the hard way. Between 2003 and 2005, the number of violent incidents rose from nine to 31, with a corresponding increase in injuries. At least seven people died. All of this has prompted many school systems to beef up their security measures, with some games staffed by as many as 30 officers.

So now is the time to act—before events overtake you. With a reasonable investment of resources and time, you can ensure a safe environment for school athletic events and keep your students, parents, and community members safe. ■

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