

Jake Furr

Division I News

DI N07

## He's in the game: Lexington's Mike Clapper to have voice featured in NBA 2K23 video game

LEXINGTON — Mike Clapper couldn't tell you the difference between a PlayStation and Xbox.

Easy to say, he isn't much of a gamer.

But he might have to go out and buy himself a PlayStation or spend more time with his nephews in front of the TV and game console.

Last week, Clapper signed a deal to do voice work for the NBA 2K videogame franchise, a Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc. product.

In an effort to bring a personalized touch to the next installment of the game, developers wanted to include the home arena public address announcers for each team. The part-time PA announcer for the Washington Wizards and full-time announcer for the Washington Mystics, the WNBA team located in Washington D.C., Clapper got the call and the offer.

"This was all unsolicited, and the last thing I wanted to do was add anything else to my plate," Clapper said after showing his schedule for the end of February and the month of March that included trips to D.C., Lexington tournament games and the News Journal All-Star Classic. "Not to mention, our first granddaughter is scheduled to be born this week, so we have some traveling to do to meet her as well.

"But, after looking at it and talking to my wife, it is a lucrative deal and something totally different than what I am used to. I am used to being in the arenas and announcing, but this is getting back in the studio and back to my roots. It will be something different and fun."

For the last 10 years, Clapper has split his time between D.C. and his home in Bellville. In 2019, he was courtside for every home game, both regular season and playoffs, for the Mystics WNBA championship run led by Elena Delle Donne. He has his own personalized championship ring to prove it.

As if that wasn't a lasting enough legacy, Clapper will now be immortalized in a video game. Whenever a user plays a game at Capital One Arena, whether it be the Wizards or Mystics, they will hear the smooth voice of Mike Clapper doing the PA announcing.

"The game developers wanted to bring more authenticity to the game," Clapper said. "They wanted to bring in the announcers from every NBA and WNBA team and arena so they can be a part of the game. If you are playing with the Washington Wizards or Washington Mystics at Capital One Arena, the game developers wanted Mike Clapper to be the voice. They will also use me to supplement when other announcers move on."

Users could hear his voice at different arenas as well, depending on the situation.

Working through the Screen Actor's Guild, Clapper is contracted for 24 hours of recording and will be compensated for his flying time as he travels back and forth to Los Angeles, California, to do the voice work.

Working in four-hour sessions, Clapper will record tracks for every possible event that can happen during a game for every player in the NBA, WNBA and even NBA and WNBA legends who can appear in

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DIN 07

the game. Clapper can run through 400-plus events during a typical two-hour Wizards game. He will be tasked with recording tracks for an entire NBA season for every game and every player on every team.

He has to have the work completed by May so the developers can get the game released in its usual August slot, before the NBA season starts in October.

"We are recording tracks for anything that can happen during any game at anytime for all of these players," Clapper said. "That is all I really know about it. It will be interesting to see how all of that shakes out."

Take-Two Interactive Software Inc. recorded a third-quarter revenue increase of 5% or \$903.3 million. Its Net Bookings outlook for 2022 rose from \$3.37 billion to \$3.42 billion. Last year, it was used in video games such as WWE 2K22, NBA 2K22, PGA Tour 2K21, WWE 2K Battlegrounds, Ultimate Brawlers Pass, 2K Ball N' Brawl Bundle and WWE 2K20. It is also used in Civilization and Mafia games, as well.

Clapper had humble beginnings in the radio industry before landing in public address announcing. He went to Bowling Green as a business major and, after a year, he realized he wasn't a numbers guy. Much to his parents' chagrin, he pursued radio, TV and film. The rest is history.

He worked at the college radio station at BGSU before landing a job at a Toledo station before moving up to Lansing, Michigan, where he had the opportunity of a lifetime calling the famous 1979 NCAA championship game between Magic Johnson and Larry Bird for a local radio station.

But, the radio gigs weren't exactly paying the bills.

"I got into doing public address announcing because the radio pay really sucks," Clapper said with a laugh. "After I retired from RR Donnelley after 32 years and doing PA, I started doing the Wizards games back in 2010 and picked up the Mystics when they changed ownership.

"I have been announcing at Lexington since 1997, 25 years, and this is just fun stuff. Basketball is by far the most PA announcers job in the world because of the content action and immediate response. It is great brain food. Football PA announcing is a social event compared to basketball."

Clapper made a name for himself at Lexington basketball games making the atmosphere one-of-a-kind with his voice and choice of music. He could be at a Wizards or Mystics game or in a studio recording tracks for a multi-million dollar video game franchise and he would still rather be in the gym calling a Minutemen or Lady Lex game.

"This is the best seat in the house no matter what," Clapper said from his seat at the scorer's table at Lexington High School. "But this is pretty cool. It will take me back to my old radio days cutting commercials at the station. So it will be neat."

Clapper's contract runs through the production of NBA 2K23-NBA 2K27, so for four years he will be leaving quite a legacy as he records the initial tracks for the 2K23 game and will make enhancements, which will include new players and updated actions for the next four years.

His voice will forever be on the video game, and that is quite a legacy to leave in the world.

Now, he will just have to find someone with a PlayStation or Xbox to play the game so he can hear it for himself.

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DI N07

## **A league of his own: Lexington's Scott Hamilton breaks career wins record**

LEXINGTON — Toward the end of the season, Lexington senior Jack Depperschmidt was walking out of practice alongside his coach.

He looked over at Scott Hamilton and asked, "How many more, coach?"

Hamilton was perplexed

"How many more what?" he asked his senior.

"Wins," Depperschmidt replied. "How many more do you need? I want to get you that record."

With a 60-28 sectional championship win over Clear Fork on Friday night, that number is zero. The victory netted Hamilton his 159th career win, passing legendary coach John Barr — who coached from 1961-72 and amassed 158 wins — to become the all-time wins leader in the historic program.

But the questions irked Hamilton a bit.

"He said, 'I am going to slap you,'" Depperschmidt said with a laugh. "It is great for him and we are so happy for him. Coach always says it is all about us as players and how we are a team and just need to play for each other. He doesn't want us playing for him, but this win was all for him."

Hamilton felt bad because he thought his players were putting extra pressure on themselves to get him a wins record that really didn't mean a whole lot to him, personally. The only thing he wanted to do as a coach was prepare his team to the best of his ability and help his players achieve their maximum potential. He didn't want his guys worrying about getting X number of wins or trying to figure out a way to win a game for their coach.

So, the next day at practice, he addressed his team and told them the last thing on their minds should be winning a game for him. Instead, they should win games for themselves and only themselves. Nothing else matters.

Well, the Minutemen did that Friday night and, in the process, helped their coach make program history.

"Wow," Hamilton said after the game. "You know what that means? It means I've had a very good staff, I've had some very good players and I am old. I have been around for a long time. I would make a huge list of the number of kids I have had that are quality individuals. It isn't always the ones on the stat sheet. It is the ones at the end of the bench who show up to practice with a willingness to help us prepare."

Hamilton started coaching at Lexington in 1999 in various sports and became the freshman boys basketball coach shortly after. He worked his way up the ladder until 2012 when the opportunity to become the 21st coach in program history came about. He jumped at the opportunity and, 10 years later, he is still at it.

"It is very special to me," Hamilton said. "When I started coaching at Lexington back in 1999, I never dreamed of being the head coach. Ten years ago, as the JV coach, things kind of fell in my lap and I was

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DI N 07

asked to put my name in, and I did. I had Coach (Jay) Guth on the staff at that time and had his full support. We, as a staff, are a team, and it is a great feeling and something I will never take lightly.

"The biggest part is just having the opportunity for two or three hours every day to work with these kids. My greatest moments are in the practices with the guys and talking with them and getting to teach them a little bit, and it isn't always just about basketball. It is about growing as people."

In Hamilton's first season as a varsity head coach, he piloted the Minutemen to a 16-8 record and a sectional championship, which started a streak of six straight sectional titles. In 2015-16, he won his first district championship and an Ohio Cardinal Conference crown while winning a career-high 24 games. He followed that up with a district runner-up trophy the ensuing season before one of the most impressive runs in recent program history.

In 2017-18, he coached Cade Stover and the gang to a regional championship and state final four berth, going 23-6 that year. In all, Hamilton has won seven sectional championships, two district titles and three OCC crowns in 10 years.

"It is a big deal for coach," Depperschmidt said. "I have been with him for three years and he spends so much time out of his day to make sure we are in a position to win. It really means a lot to us as players. It is a big deal and we are proud of him."

Junior Baden Forup, who scored 17 points and pulled down 12 rebounds in the sectional championship win Friday, agreed with Depperschmidt.

"It means a lot," Forup said. "I love coach Hamilton, and he works hard for us. He deserves it. It proves he is a great coach and, rightfully, one of the best in history."

When Hamilton returns to the sidelines next season, he will tie Barr as the longest-tenured coach in program history. He is just one of five coaches in Lexington history to record 100-plus wins, joining Barr, Don Sutter, Gregg Collins and Steve Gray.

"It has been a long journey and a lot of fun," Hamilton said. "It has been a lot of quality relationships that I cherish and will for a long time."

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DI N 07

## True Greatness: Ohio's all-time girls soccer assist queen Taylor Huff has No. 13 jersey retired at Madison

MADISON TOWNSHIP — When Taylor Huff was 12 years old, she showed up to a club soccer practice wearing Alex Morgan's No. 13 Team USA jersey.

She went through the practice pretending to be Morgan, one of the most decorated women's soccer players in the country. She juggled the ball with ease, made silky-smooth moves through, around and over defenders and delivered a perfect pass.

Just like Alex Morgan.

Years later, still sporting the No. 13, Huff made quite a name for herself in the high school soccer world. She made 13 her own.

"I was watching a video this morning of me when I was about 12 and I was playing for a club team out of Cleveland and we would always have to juggle in practice, so I was watching that video and I was wearing an Alex Morgan No. 13 jersey," Huff said. "I was tiny and juggling and I was just watching that video and realizing that is where 13 came from. Alex Morgan really inspired me.

"I shaped it into my own number and always felt like 13 represented a strong work ethic. Then, throughout my career, it became a special number for so many reasons, like when we won the state championship it was on Nov. 13. Little things like that are really neat to make 13 my own."

That she did. Huff achieved so much in her No. 13 jersey that for as long as there is a Madison girls soccer program, no one will ever wear the No. 13 jersey again.

During halftime of the Ohio Cardinal Conference boys basketball game between the Rams and Wooster Generals, the most decorated athlete in Richland County history returned home and received the highest honor any high school athlete could ever receive.

Huff had her jersey number retired, joining Sunny Litteral (No. 19 in softball) and Ryan Pore (No. 9 in boys soccer) as just the third Madison athlete to be so honored.

"It is so incredible and such an honor that no one else will ever wear No. 13," Huff said. "I wore it to the best of my capabilities, and it is humbling that the community stands behind me and hearing them cheer for me really made me happy to know I have all of these people to support me.

"It is special to have my jersey retired because I know I did my best every time on the field, and that sits well with me. It is a cool, neat experience."

In her No. 13 jersey, Huff compiled a very long list of accomplishments. In each of her four years of high school soccer from 2017-2020, Huff received All-America honors, All-Region honors, first-team All-Ohio, Division II District Player of the Year, first-team all-district, Ohio Cardinal Conference Offensive Player of the Year, first-team All-OCC and Mansfield News Journal Player of the Year honors.

As a freshman in 2017, she helped her team reach the state final four for the first time in program history. In 2019, she led the Rams to the state championship game where they finished as runners-up. That season, she earned Division II Player of the Year honors.

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DI N 07

Then came the most special year in Madison history. Huff led the Rams to their first state championship in program history while earning her second Division II Player of the Year award. She also earned Ohio Ms. Soccer, Ohio Gatorade Player of the Year, United Soccer Coaches National Player of the Year and United Soccer Coaches Scholar National Player of the Year. She led the Rams to a 21-0-3 record.

She scored 133 career goals and handed out a state-record 93 assists in four years and ended her high school career as a 4.0 student and class valedictorian.

Retiring her number was a no-brainer.

On Friday night, she was presented her retired jersey in a special case at center court in front of a packed house of Rams faithful. Each and every Rams fan stood and applauded Huff for her four years of effort and what she brought to the school.

"Playing at Madison has definitely given me a sense of community," Huff said. "The thing I want to do is give back to this community to show my appreciation for all of the support. This place is true and special to me and I want to make them proud."

She definitely made the entire community proud even after she left Madison and headed to the University of Tennessee. There, she was named the Southeastern Conference Freshman of the Year after scoring 10 goals and handing out five assists while leading the Vols to a 20-3 record, regular-season and SEC tournament championships and two wins in the National Championship tournament.

But when Huff left for Tennessee, the question remained — would she get to sport the same digits? As luck would have it, she would. The player who wore No. 13 the year before transferred out of the program the year Huff was coming in. In the spring, the number became available. By the fall, Huff snatched up the jersey number and wore it during one of the best freshman seasons in Vols history.

"You always set limits and goals for yourself, and I believe I achieved what I set out to do," Huff said. "I got to go above and beyond, and it was just nice to see the work I put in pay off because I really did work hard putting in a lot of time and effort into my game. It was incredible to have the season we had and an honor to play and start for Tennessee."

Despite playing at a national level while in high school with her club team, Huff admitted college soccer was a bit of an adjustment.

Before each game, Huff and her teammates would receive a scouting report. The day before the game, she and her teammates would be grilled on what was in the scouting report, being asked questions about this player and that player. Huff cherished the opportunity to learn about different teams and players and the aspects that make a team click.

Madison legend Taylor Huff had her No. 13 jersey retired by Madison High School on Friday night at halftime of the Madison vs Wooster boys basketball game.

"It is totally different than what I expected," Huff said. "Internationals, which is the club team I play for, set me up for college, but you can never experience college soccer until you are actually there. The amount of time spent watching film and studying scouting reports was more than I expected and the competition level was something I hadn't experienced before."

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DI N 07

But, she excelled and made the Madison community proud.

After her jersey retirement ceremony, Huff went out into the commons at Madison Middle School and a flock of young girls followed her. They all posed one after another for a photo with Huff and her newly retired jersey.

"I trained a bunch of them, so to get to see them again and see their parents coming out to support me and be here for this special day is amazing," Huff said. "Knowing they trust me with their kids and having their kids look up to me is a very warm feeling. What keeps me working my hardest is knowing those younger kids do look up to me so I can set a good example."

Just as Morgan was to Huff, Huff is now looked up to by a new generation of soccer players in Richland County. Many will play club soccer year-round and play on their school's soccer team.

And when it comes time to pick a jersey number, you can bet each one will want to be No. 13.

Just like Taylor Huff.

Curt Conrad

Division I News

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MANSFIELD — Kenny Dillingham wasn't sure why Keontez Bradley was still available — not that Arizona State's new head coach was complaining.

Bradley, Mansfield Senior's standout defensive back, signed a national letter of intent Wednesday to play for the Sun Devils. He was surrounded by friends and family, including his father and Senior High football coach Chioke Bradley, when putting pen to paper during a ceremony in the high school auditorium.

Arizona State entered the Bradley sweepstakes late. Keontez and his father took an official visit to ASU's Tempe, Ariz., campus over the weekend, just days ahead of Wednesday's early signing period.

"They were floored that the Power Five schools in the Midwest weren't recruiting him because when you watch his tape, he does a lot of things well in the back of the defense," Chioke Bradley said. "He makes a lot of plays. He's got ball skills and he tackles pretty well. He played corner and safety and he has verified track times.

"When you put all of those things together, Arizona State couldn't believe how he just fell into their lap. They get a 6-foot-2, 175-pound fast guy who has ball skills and is physical at the back end of the defense."

Keontez Bradley came into his own this fall as the Tygers reached the third round of the Division III, Region 10 playoffs. He had 53 tackles, two interceptions and a team-high 10 passes defended while splitting time between cornerback and safety.

He verbally committed to Kent State, but when head coach Sean Lewis stepped down earlier this month to become the offensive coordinator for Deion Sanders at Colorado, Bradley re-opened his recruitment.

That opened the door for Dillingham, who was hired to replace Herm Edwards in late-November, and new ASU cornerbacks coach Bryan Carrington, a rising star among college football recruiters. Carrington helped assemble the 2023 recruiting class for College Football Playoff-qualifier TCU as the Horned Frogs recruiting coordinator.

"Arizona State was late, but I've been in contact with Bryan Carrington. He was always texting me to see how things were going," Bradley said. "When (Lewis) left at Kent State, I opened my recruitment up. That's when (Carrington) really started to push the envelope to sign me."



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Bradley played sparingly for Senior High as a sophomore, making 14 tackles and breaking up three passes. He had 29 tackles and four interceptions as a junior, setting the table for his breakout senior season.

As good as he was during the regular season, Bradley was at his best in the playoffs this year.

He returned an interception for a touchdown in an opening-round win over Ontario and had eight tackles in a regional quarterfinal victory over run-heavy Defiance. He was on his way to another big night against Holy Name in the regional semifinals before an illegal blindside block late in the first half ended his evening. He had five tackles and an 86-yard touchdown reception on a shovel pass in the first half.

"That's what the Arizona State coaching staff talked about during his visit. Keontez is an asset because he can do so many things," Chioke Bradley said. "You've got guys who can only play corner, guys who can only play nickel and guys who can only play safety.

"Keontez can do all three. With his size and speed and natural ability, he is in high demand."

Still, there is plenty to work on before Bradley arrives in the desert.

"I need to get into the weight room and get stronger," said Bradley, who plans to pursue a degree in the aviation field. "They like my speed, but I need to continue to work on my craft. Being a defensive back in the Pac-12, everything is going to be faster and more physical and more detailed.

"I'm long and fast and rangy, so the intangibles are there. They told me I'm very versatile, so once they develop my body the way they feel like it should be developed, then I'll be good."

Before last weekend, Bradley had never been to the Desert Southwest. It didn't take him long to fall in love with the place he will call home for the next four years.

"There are mountains everywhere. It's just beautiful," Bradley said. "They definitely showed everything they have to offer. I'm looking forward to getting out there and going to work."

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LUCAS — Lucas athletic director Taylor Iceman is more concerned about the future of Bob Wine Field than he is about what happened there last weekend.

The Cubs' football field was vandalized early Saturday morning and a 21-year-old Lucas man was taken into custody later in the day in connection with the incident.

Cameron Michael Scott was arrested and charged with vandalism, according to a report provided by the Richland County Sheriff's Office. Scott is being held in the Richland County jail.

According to authorities, surveillance footage provided by the school allegedly shows Scott and another man in a side-by-side vehicle entering Bob Wine Field at approximately 2:45 a.m. Saturday and making multiple circular ruts, or donuts, on the playing surface. The cost to repair the damage is estimated at \$20,000.

The Lucas football team was to host Hillsdale on Saturday night. The game was instead played at Clear Fork High School.

"When it first happened, we put a bunch of sand in the ruts and rolled it to try to get it ready to play that night, but that obviously didn't happen," Iceman said. "(The turf company) was here Monday and they are going to plant some ryegrass in there. We don't play at home again until Week 5 and they think they can get some grass to grow. With the sand, they think we will be all right."

Not surprisingly, the Lucas community rallied around its successful football program in wake of the incident. Iceman said he had more help than he needed by the time the news began to leak out.

"I had people calling right away and offering to get sand and trucks to haul it," Iceman said. "Within an hour of us finding out, we had it filled with sand and rolled out and we were able to make a decision if we were going to be able to play or not."

"That was all Lucas people stepping up and doing what had to be done."

Once it was determined the field was unplayable, the rest of north central Ohio rode to the rescue. Clear Fork and Hillsdale officials offered to do anything they could to play Saturday's game.

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"It's a lot of work to move a game at the last minute like that, don't get me wrong, but I had so much help," Iceman said. "You would have thought it was a regularly-scheduled game to be played at Clear Fork.

"We had ticket-takers show up. We had our chain crew down there. Our (public address) announcer was there and they even hooked up our sound system. That's a big deal for our fans.

"Everyone at Hillsdale was very cooperative as well. They could have said that we had to go to their place, but they were willing to do whatever it took to get the game played."

Football coach Scott Spitler was impressed with the resilience his Cubs showed throughout a trying week. Players and coaches already were coping with the deaths of two people associated with the program earlier in the week.

Shortly after finding out the football field had been vandalized, Spitler learned his daughter, Morgan, would undergo an emergency appendectomy. Morgan Spitler, a softball player at Edinboro (Pa.) University, came through the surgery without incident.

"You go through these tests, not to find your weaknesses but to see what your strengths are. We had to dig deep," Spitler said after Lucas held on for a 14-13 win over Hillsdale. "It's been a heck of a week, but I couldn't be more proud of our kids because they stayed focused and got it done when they needed to."

Lucas isn't scheduled to play at Bob Wine Field again until Sept. 16. Iceman hopes the field will be playable for its final three regular season home dates.

"We'll put some lipstick on the pig and try to get through the season," Iceman said. "I don't know if we'll have to tear out a section of the field and re-sod it after the season. We're just trying to get through right now."

Regardless of what happens, Iceman was humbled by the outpouring of support from Lucas and beyond.

"That is the part of the story we want to emphasize," Iceman said. "The good outweighed the bad."

## Football officials, area conference avert boycott with agreement (8-8-22)

Opening night of high school football on Aug. 19 is no longer in danger after the Cleveland Football Officials Association and area conferences came to an agreement on a five-year plan that will address the official association's concerns over low compensation.

The CFOA and area conferences came to an agreement, following a July 28 meeting at Beachwood High School and multiple negotiations and uniformed agreements, that will standardize pay and pay increases over the next five years.

The agreement means that all first-week games will go on as scheduled. Last month, the CFOA expressed its intentions to boycott Week 1 games unless their demands for better pay were met.

"We'll be playing ball and everybody will be cheering their teams on as scheduled on Aug. 19," said Dr. Don Lewis, commissioner of the Chagrin Valley Conference who helped spearhead the July 28 meeting with Beachwood athletic director Ryan Peters to get both parties working on a long-term deal. "The two sides came together, cooler heads negotiated and prevailed. ... Let's play ball!"

The five-year plan that both sides agreed upon calls for area leagues that hire CFOA officials to pay officials \$80 per game for the 2022 season, \$90 in the 2023-24 seasons and \$100 in the 2025-26 seasons.

Junior varsity and freshman football officials will receive \$60 per game in 2022, \$70 in 2023-24 and \$80 in 2025-26, while junior high officials will get \$50 per game the next two years, \$55 in 2024-25 and \$60 in 2026.

Compensation structure for seasons beyond 2026 will be reviewed and evaluated by both parties based on national and Ohio averages for officials and the educational financial climate at the time.

Conferences who attended the July 28 meeting and verbally agreed to the payment schedule are the:

- Chagrin Valley Conference
- Cleveland Senate
- Great Lakes Conference
- Greater Cleveland Conference

- Lake Erie League
- Crown Conference
- Lorain County League (LC8)
- Mahoning Valley Athletic Conference
- Southwestern Conference
- Suburban League
- Western Reserve Conference

Two conferences – the Northeast 8 Conference and the Northeast Athletic Conference – informed XXXXXX that while they had representatives or member schools at the July 28 meeting, they are not part of the group of conferences that agreed to the officials' pay increase plan.

Each of those conferences had a representative attend the July 28 meeting ranging from conference commissioners, assigners, athletic directors and principals.

"The Cleveland Football Officials Association, working jointly with area conferences commissioners, athletic directors and principals and other school administrators, are pleased to announce a resolution to the Cleveland area football referee fee issue. As a result of these positive discussions and agreements, football officials' fees for middle school, freshman, junior varsity and the varsity level have been modified to a level satisfactory to all parties for a period of five years. Therefore, there will be no football officials boycotting area football games this season and beyond, as a five-year fee agreement has been proposed and accepted. We look forward to continuing to work together for the betterment of our student athletes, coaches and our communities. We appreciate everyone's support."

Ryan Peters, vice president of the Chagrin Valley Conference, praised all parties for coming together both on July 28 at the meeting Beachwood hosted, as well as on the discussion and proposal in general.

Also part of the July 28 meeting were OHSAA director of officiating and sports management Beau Rugg, Northeast District Athletic Board assigner Pat Montana and St. Ignatius athletic director Rory Fitzpatrick, who helped represent independent schools not affiliated with a conference.

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## Football officials, area conference avert boycott with agreement (8-8-22)

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"We're very happy the way things worked out," Peters said. "It took a lot of time and effort between myself, Don and both Rocky Neale and Brian Crummie from the officials association. We worked closely with many conference commissioners and conference leaders to make this happen. We talked through how we could come together with officiating fees and how we could help grow the officiating world and better help officials before, during and after contests and better protect them from unruly fans."

The number of licensed officials has been plummeting not only in Ohio, but across the nation, in football and other sports. Part of the reason, said CFOA secretary Tony Bondra last month, is lower pay than other states and verbal abuse officials take during games.

The new agreement addresses the payment issue, which both the conferences and officials association hope will entice more people to enter the realm of officiating.

"The plan we agreed upon is a great plan," Lewis said. "Both parties agree — this really and truly makes sense."

Crummie, the president of the CFOA, lauded Lewis and Peters for initiating and leading the negotiation process. He also named Paul Powers of Aurora, Kevin Leigh of Padua, Eric Frombach of Avon, Chris Medaglia of Valley Forge and Doug Snyder of Chardon as key members of the negotiation process.

Crummie said the CFOA's intentions were two-fold, to increase the compensation for officials and to do so in a manner that would be amicable for the schools involved and their budgets going forward. This is the first time in 18 years the association asked for a raise, Crummie said.

"We wanted to work together to get this done, and we did that," he said. "Once we got everybody together and sat down to talk, we were good. We had never done that before."

Said Peters, "Teachers get raises, administrators get raises. People get bumps in pay. Why should officials not get something similar, as 18-plus years is a long time to not get a raise."

The incremental jumps from \$80-\$100 over the next five years also allow school districts, who have already approved budgets for the next few years, to allocate monies for the increased officiating fees. It allows district treasurers and superintendents to better prepare their five-year forecasts with these fees locked into place.

Lewis said the area conferences have already been contacted by other sports' officials inquiring about raises as well.

"We were only able to get through football on July 28," Peters said, noting the time crunch with the regular season starting Aug. 19. "We started with football but had every intention to tackle other sports. We essentially ran out of time to discuss other sports in our meeting.

"We are going back to this group to discuss other sports in the next 30 days. We have a meeting scheduled at the end of the month to address all other sports that have officials. We anticipate giving bumps to those sports starting in 2024 if everyone agrees.

With the potentially terse situation resolved, both parties turned their attention to the gridiron.

"It all worked and I'm happy about that," Crummie said. "It's time to go play some football."

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## High school girls flag football expecting rapid growth (5-4-22)

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The girls flag football tournament and championship night May 2 at FirstEnergy Stadium is a launching pad for what is yet to come for the NEO Flag Football Association.

That was the resounding mindset as nine high school girls flag football teams from the NEO Flag Football League came together at the home of the Cleveland Browns, supported and advanced by Browns Youth Football.

"This is one of the coolest things I've ever been around," said quarterback Jacoby Brissett, an offseason acquisition by the Browns.

Meanwhile, Browns fullback Johnny Stanton IV was on the sideline shaking hands with players, posing for photos and marveling at the spectacle that had overtaken the field where he and his Browns teammates will play this coming season.

Stanton noticed the lit-up scoreboards, the field specially lined to meet the specifications of NEO Flag regulations, and the throng of players and fans who came downtown for their season-ending tournament and championship game.

High school girls flag football in Northeast Ohio is here to stay.

"I hope it reaches the sky," Stanton said. "It's such a great experience for them. To see an NFL team get involved with it, especially the Browns, is really cool to see."

NEO Flag Football has been on the rise for years, with youth leagues rapidly growing. The addition of a high school girls league last year was greeted with excitement to the point that the league more than doubled in size this season. The Browns then got on board by sponsoring the league, buying jerseys for all the teams and picking up any and all costs, including officials and field rental.

The culmination was tournament night under the lights at FirstEnergy Stadium.

"It's unbelievable," said Bob Berwald, president of NEO Flag. "We talked about doing this for a year and a half. To have it come full circle and be here is great for the girls."

When players arrived for the game, they were announced team by team and ran out of the tunnel onto the field just like the Browns do on Sundays.

The scoreboards were lit and boasting NEO Flag and championship tournament night.

The field was custom painted as per their leagues specifications.

Music played on the loudspeakers throughout the night.

Browns players Brissett, Stanton and Isaac Rochell were there to watch them play, pose for photos and chat with the girls.

"As soon as we walked in, my jaw dropped," said Kirtland senior Macy McIntosh. "Me and Malia (Becker) were over there fan-girling."

Said Erika Zschuppe, another Kirtland senior, "I think it was really cool. Not many of our girls have met the Browns players. Maybe they've been to some games, but it was really cool to see them and interact with them."

The tournament — as expected — came down to Kirtland playing Lake Catholic for the league title. For the second year in a row, Kirtland won — this time by a 19-6 count.

There were also some memorable feel-good moments, such as Mentor senior Breanna Berwald, who tore her ACL in the opening week, coming on field for one play and throwing a pass to her sister. Additionally, Berkshire's Danielle Taraba, who has Down syndrome, scored a few touchdowns, much to the delight of her, her teammates and the crowd.

When the tournament ended, Stanton — who had been on hand for more than four hours — handed out medals to Kirtland and Lake Catholic players, and then presented the championship trophy to the Hornets.

"You look back at it, and, 'Wow,'" Berwald said. "It was a great night. Pretty awesome. The Browns were first-class with everything they did."

That's the intent, said Jenner Tekancic, vice president of community relations for the Browns.

"It starts at the top with our ownership, all the way down through the entire organization to the coaches, players and staff," she said. "We want to expand flag football. That there is actually an all-girls league and we're hosting the

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## High school girls flag football expecting rapid growth (5-4-22)

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playoffs and championship game at FirstEnergy Stadium, we couldn't be more proud."

If the seeds of success were planted last year when the girls league started, the events of May 2 at FirstEnergy Stadium will cultivate even more growth.

The growth will be rapid. In fact, Berwald said he is already received a large amount of inquiries on how to be part of the league in the future. Other areas around Ohio are also interested in starting their own leagues, with the partnership between NEO Flag and Browns Youth Football as the blueprint.

"With the attention the league is getting, this is here to stay," Berwald said. "It's not going anywhere. I get emails daily, with different schools wanting to be part of it. They all want to see it grow. It's going to."

NEO Flag, the Browns — everyone — is aiming high. Berwald made that clear while addressing the championship game teams before the medal ceremony.

"It's going to continue to build into something special," he said. "One day you'll be able to tell your daughters you were part of starting all of this."

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## Coaches weigh in on NIL possibilities on prep level (4-5-22)

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High school student-athletes in Ohio are on the verge of earning money via endorsement agreements.

The Ohio High School Athletic Association announced a measure that, if passed by member school voting in May, would allow high school student-athletes to make money via a Name, Image and Likeness proposal much like NCAA student-athletes.

The announcement was made April 5 as part of 14 referendum items up for vote during next month's May 1-16 voting cycle.

Said the OHSAA in its announcement regarding the upcoming voting on NIL, "This proposed addition would now allow student-athletes to sign endorsement agreements so long as their teams, schools and/or the OHSAA are not being represented within those endorsements and provided there are no endorsements with companies that do not support the mission of education-based athletics (casinos, gambling, alcohol, drugs, tobacco)."

If passed, the legislation would take effect immediately, meaning high school student-athletes could begin making money on their Name, Image and Likeness starting May 16.

Most of the area coaches contacted for comment regarding their thoughts on high schoolers making money on their NIL were OK with the measure, although each had questions on how it would be monitored and the effect it might have.

"There's a big difference between what the OHSAA is doing with this and the NCAA," Chardon football coach Mitch Hewitt said. "The OHSAA isn't making a ton of money off their athletes like college football is. I'm not selling my team's jerseys at book stores at \$65 a pop with the money going to the school like college football is doing. I respect individual capitalism. It'll be interesting to see how it works out."

Kirtland football coach Tiger LaVerde, whose program has won six state championships and four state runner-up trophies in the past 10 years, said he is OK with kids making money of their NIL, too.

"I don't see a problem with it," he said. "I just don't think it's going to happen much. I don't see businesses throwing a

bunch of money at 15- and 16-year old kids. If they want to do that and think it'll help their business, I don't have a problem with it. I just don't think it's going to happen much."

Hewitt agreed, adding in a chuckle that he and his wife own King Kone — a very popular ice cream store in Chardon, which another opening in Perry this summer.

"What am I going to do, pay some kid \$10,000 to tag King Kone (on social media)?" he said with a laugh. "I don't see a bunch of people coming to give our kid a truck because he's the fullback for the Chardon football team."

But money will be out there, and it could be available if some sort of system isn't in place, according to Richmond Heights boys basketball coach Quentin Rogers, whose team just won the Division IV state title.

Rogers said he, just like Hewitt and LaVerde, is good with endorsement deals for kids. But he said it could create a disparity between the haves and the have-nots.

"If some school has the alumni in powerful places that can pull off deals and get kids some change in their pocket, whew," Rogers said. "I'm not naive; that could happen. We'll have to see how big of a problem that could be. First, we've got to see how many kids are even going to be NIL worthy. That's going to be a small percentage throughout the state. I don't think it's going to be overwhelming.

"We'll see how it plays out. I'm sure the OHSAA and government bodies will go over the data and go from there."

Rogers said it's important for kids to remember the important things.

"Get your education for free (via a college scholarship)," he said. "How's a kid going to handle himself if he's getting \$50,000 a year in high school? How's he going to handle his work in the classroom? You don't want anyone getting a big head or losing sight of the end game, your education."

Mentor's Bob Berwald is certainly no stranger to high-end athletes.

As Mentor's girls track and field coach, he coached Paige Floriea, who went on to win state titles in four events last



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