

HIGH SCHOOLS

PLAYING TO WIN

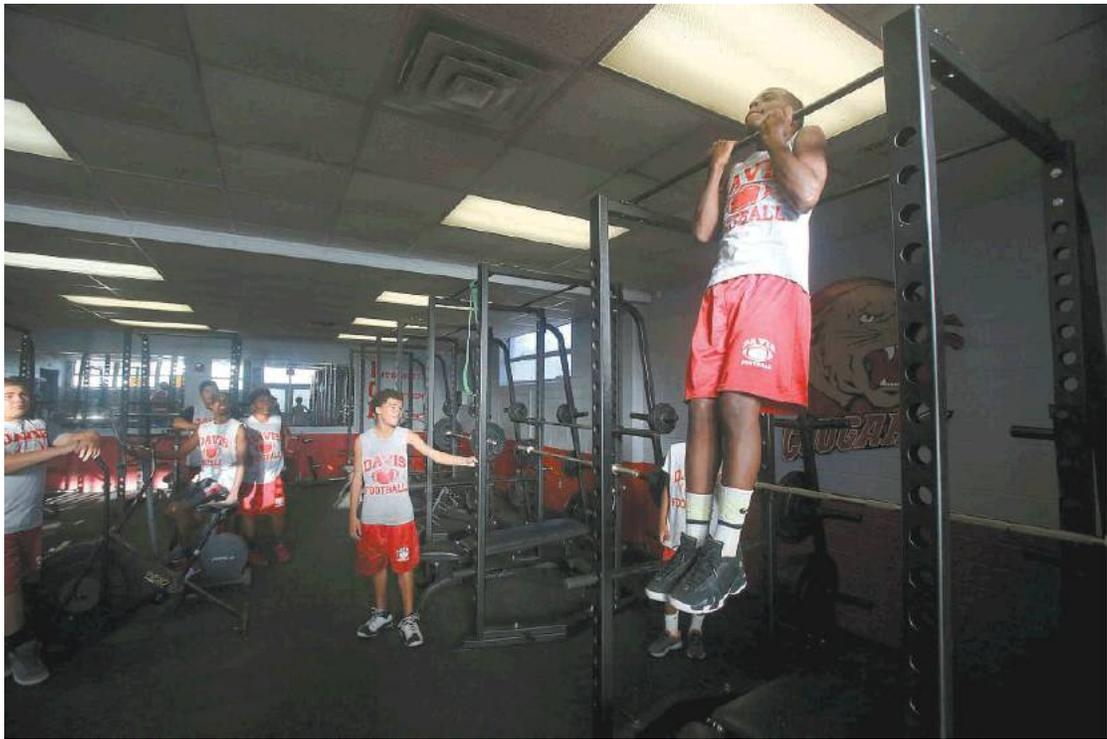
SAISD implements plan to beef up athletics

By Adam Zuvanich STAFF WRITER

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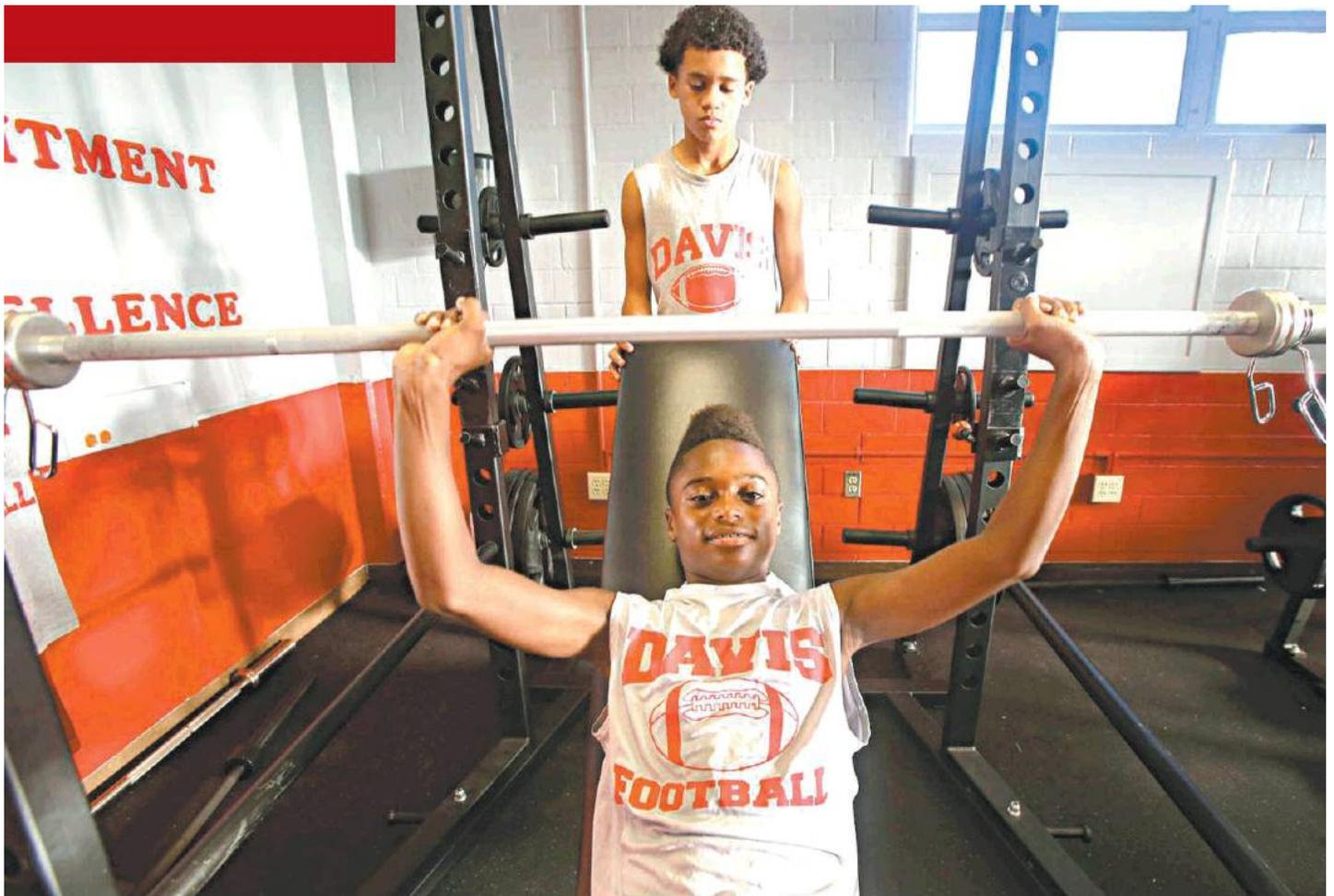


[Cart Cast: David Hinojosa and Adam Zuvanich preview Week 8 in E-N Area high school football.](#)



John Davenport / San Antonio Express-News

Charles Clark, 13, works out with teammates at Davis Middle School, which didn't have a weight room until a recent push to improve facilities.



John Davenport / San Antonio Express-News

Deron Mackey, 13, lifts as Gabriel Landrum, 12, spots at Davis Middle School. More than half of SAISD's middle schools lacked weight rooms at the start of last year.

Sam Houston did not lose a district football game in either of the last two seasons. Once it reached the playoffs, though, the Hurricanes could not close to winning.

Their teams that went a combined 16-0 in District 28-5A, which included mostly other San Antonio ISD schools, were no match for Boerne Champi Tivy in Class 5A Division II bidistrict matchups. The Hurricanes lost those games by a combined margin of 77 points, allowing more than 50 in each

"We run up against a team that it just seems like they're bigger. They're stronger than us," said first-year Sam Houston coach Melton Schultz, who served as defensive coordinator. "We've always had some really good athletes here and there, but when we get up there (in the playoffs), we can't the line of scrimmage. That sets the tone. They open up holes and stuff, and we can't stop anybody. They keep coming at us."

The other six football-playing high schools in SAISD have experienced similar problems.

The district won a combined three playoff games during the previous 10 seasons — Bracken-ridge in 2012, Sam Houston in 2010 and Lanier in 2009. The last SAISD team to win two games in the same postseason was Highlands in 1984.

Todd Howey, who became SAISD's athletic director midway through the 2014-15 school year, said that poor track record is mostly a product of inadequate training facilities on the district's high school and middle school campuses. He has upgraded the weight rooms at most of those schools, a few of which were none, and tried to beef up SAISD's athletic programs from an organizational standpoint as well.

Howey has worked with SAISD administrators to lessen the teaching load for the high schools' head football coaches, who also serve as campus athletic coordinators for boys sports, and the girls athletic coordinators. SAISD coaches said that has given them the opportunity to focus more on monitoring and building their athletic programs while better aligning them with their feeder-school programs.

Howey, formerly the athletic director for Canyon ISD and Midland ISD in West Texas, said those practices have long been the norm within other schools in the San Antonio area and around the state.

"We were kind of behind the curve, but we're starting to catch up now," said Tracy Robinson, the eighth-grade football coach and boys athletic coordinator at Davis Middle School, a Sam Houston feeder. "Thanks to Mr. Howey, we're getting the ball rolling on these things."

Heavy lifting

Howey said he quickly noticed while watching SAISD teams compete against those from other school districts that they appeared physically weaker cases, he said, it was because SAISD athletes had not had a comparable amount of weight training.

Howey said more than half of SAISD's middle schools did not have weight rooms when he started in January 2015, and most had limited or damaged training equipment. He has since created or expanded those facilities by reallocating existing space on the campuses and bolstering them with new equipment. He covered most of the cost by shifting money in his athletic budget from the high schools to middle schools. Team fundraisers also helped for some of the improvements.

The most significant upgrades have been made at Davis and Tafolla, a Lanier feeder, with Howey saying neither had a weight room before. Longtime Brackenridge football coach Willie Hall said the two middle schools that feed his program, Page and Poe, also had limited equipment in small spaces rarely used.

"Our kids come to us frail. They haven't lifted weights. They don't even know what a weight bar looks like," Hall said. "Now that they've got a weight facility, it's going to make a major difference. Schools on the other side of the town, they've had that opportunity."

Robinson said he already has noticed more muscle tone and definition in the athletes at Davis, which had its new weight room completed toward the end of the school year. He said it includes eight squat racks that can be used for multiple exercises, plyometric boxes and a curl bar.

Along with better preparing SAISD athletes to compete at the high school level, longtime Lanier football coach Don Gatian said the middle school programs also will help them train more effectively in high school. Exposing the younger athletes to weights and the proper techniques for using them will not be a new concept once they reach ninth grade.

"Having knowledge of what to do helps a lot, too," Gatian said. "Normally we spend three or four weeks just teaching technique. Some kids, they're ready further, but we're not ready as a group yet."

When SAISD athletes are ready to play for their high schools, they will have improved training facilities on many of those campuses as well. Howey upgraded some of their existing weight rooms while adding auxiliary facilities utilized by other sports, including girls teams.

The most extensive improvement has been made at Brackenridge, where rooms previously used by the ROTC program have been converted into training office space utilized primarily by the football team. A wall was taken out to turn two small classrooms into a large weight room, which is adjacent to as well as offices for offensive coordinator Steve Holick and defensive coordinator Jeff Smith.

The Eagles' former weight room is now one of the auxiliary facilities used by the school's other athletes. There also is weight-training equipment in a woodshop.

"It's a nice upgrade to what we used to have," Brackenridge running back Fred Jones said. "It's just good for us if we go in there every day and work."

Edison had two existing weight rooms, one used by boys and one by girls, and both have been upgraded. The girls have three new squat racks that can be used for multiple sports.

Girls athletic coordinator Denise Cardenas, the girls soccer head coach and former volleyball head coach at Edison, said the seemingly minor changes made a significant difference in the mindset of her athletes.

"Having this new equipment really changed the attitude of the kids and just the atmosphere," Cardenas said. "It's really exciting for them."

Increased coordination

While SAISD athletes now have better resources to bulk up their bodies, their coaches have more time to build and expand their programs. Emilio Schultz, Edison school district's deputy superintendent for administration, said most of the high school athletic coordinators have fewer teaching responsibilities per request.

Cardenas, Gatian and Hall said they no longer teach any classes outside of their athletic periods, while Schultz teaches one. At one point during the year, Gatian said he had four history classes and a conference period while serving as football coach and campus athletic coordinator.

Each coach said the extra time during the school day has allowed them to devote more attention to administrative responsibilities such as completing and monitoring their athletes' grades. They have also used that time to study game film and devise game plans, with Gatian and Hall saying they are stretched as thin as they once were.

"Before, I may be in here Saturday and Sunday running off grades. Now I can run them while I'm here at school," Gatian said. "I'm able to get it done."

The SAISD coaches also are spending more time at their feeder schools, where Howey said their roles are a combination of recruiting, coordinating and instructing. Cardenas said she visits Twain and Whittier middle schools multiple times per week to help coach their volleyball teams and ensure the terminology they use matches that of Edison's program.

The football coaches are doing much the same at their middle schools, which now are using most of the basic offensive and defensive schemes as corresponding high schools.

"We need to get them accustomed to what we're doing," Schultz said. "They need to have a feel of it, so when they're freshmen it's not all brand new."

Edison football coach Albert Torres said familiarizing himself with his future players, and having those future players get to know him, is equally important. He said meeting the middle school athletes and telling them about the high school program has helped retention between the two levels.

Last year was the first time Torres had a chance to make weekly visits to his feeder schools and drum up interest in his program. He said about 45 playing football this year, up from about 30 in previous years, which is the most he has had in 10 years as head coach.

"It's made a big difference in number of kids we had this year," Torres said.

Howey said another benefit of giving coaches more time to coach, and fewer classes to teach and hours to work, also makes their positions more ; they need to be replaced. He said SAISD is competitive with other school districts in terms of pay, but until the last two school years, their overall j were a detraction.

"When you're teaching three or four classes as a football coach," Howey said, "that's not an attractive job."

Game plan

There have been other athletic initiatives at the middle school level that ultimately are designed to improve SAISD's high school teams. The middle their own athletic periods for the first time, and electronic scoreboards have been added to some of their fields.

Howey also created the Academy Sports League among the school district's seven academies for students in kindergarten through eighth grade, v more on academics. This year, for the first time, Howey said the academies' seventh-and eighth-graders can compete against each other in boys a basketball, boys and girls soccer, track, cross country and volleyball.

A new batting tunnel at the SAISD Sports Complex also has been constructed under the watch of Howey, a former baseball player and coach, and improvements in mind for the high schools. He said he wants to upgrade the practice fields on each campus, possibly replacing the natural grass v turf.

Howey said his vision is an extension of a philosophy relayed to him by SAISD superintendent Pedro Martinez, who said that while many of the scl students grow up in poverty, its campuses should not be a reflection of that.

Another objective is keeping SAISD students involved in school activities as a means to help them graduate and continue their education. Howey ; a leadership council consisting of athletes from each high school, and said statistics show athletes tend to be better students and have higher grac than those who do not play sports.

"Athletics for me was important in my life. I had some great coaches that helped inspire me," Castro said. "I know the importance of it for students engaged. It's a big deal."

So is winning, which is the primary reason for upgrading SAISD's training facilities and the structure of its programs. Hall said he is eager to see th Howey's initiatives and expects them to produce an improvement in performance within the next three or four years.

Howey expects an uptick as well. If there is not, there also will not be any excuses.

"I told the coaches what we've done in the past will never be good enough again," Howey said. "Our goal is to start winning playoff games. We've successful in football winning playoff games, and our goal is to change that." adam.zuvanich@express-news.net Twitter: @AZuvanich