



## Kids thrilled to 'play ball'

By Kat Hasenauer Cornetta | Sunday, November 4, 2012 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | General

As Irving Middle School's football team took the field at Dorchester's Frederick Middle School on a crisp, fall Thursday afternoon, Frammy Llaveria had one last order for his team.

"Put your mouth guards in!" the eighth-grade quarterback yelled. "Guys, you have to put your mouth guards in!"

Just a year or two ago, Llaveria did not know he would like leading his peers, and had never had the opportunity to play organized football. But thanks to an alliance between the Play Ball Foundation and the Boston City Schools, Llaveria not only gets the chance to learn football skills before high school, but learn life and leadership skills that will apply beyond the field.

"Playing football has taught me that I like to be a leader," Llaveria said. "I like taking care of my teammates, showing them what they need to do. If I don't do it, they'll get hurt, and I don't want that because there are no better players than the guys we have on the field."

That type of maturity is just one quality Play Ball hopes their sponsored middle school sports engenders in city middle schoolers. For years, the city's seventh and eighth graders were limited to playing basketball or track.

The Play Ball Foundation, founded in 2005 by Michael Harney, teamed with the city to provide funding for four additional sports: football, girls volleyball, baseball and double dutch. The football program started four years ago with four teams, and has grown tenfold since.

"I like to say, 'We fund it, they run it,'" Play Ball board member Pat Arcand said. "The district's athletic department takes care of the logistics, and we pay for everything."

"Everything" runs from the police detail and EMTs watching over games to long-sleeve shirts for the student-athletes to wear under jerseys as the weather turns chillier. During Thursday's game at the Frederick, Arcand ran around making sure the police officer and EMTs had been receiving payments and asked the coaches if they had any equipment needs.

Football and baseball are two of the most popular offerings. Lionel Flores coaches both sports at Frederick, and says that the turnout for both keeps breaking records.

"Last spring, I had 45-60 kids come out for baseball, and I had to hold three tryouts," Flores said. "Fifty came out for football this year, and we had to organize two tryouts."

The football turnout was even more impressive given that last season (the inaugural year) Frederick was winless. At the outset of this season, Frederick's three coaches charged their team with a mission.

"We told them before the season that if they could win a game, they could make history for their school," coach Jason Coburn said. "No matter what they do after this, no matter if this school is long gone, they would know that they could be the first group to win a football game."

With a win last week, Frederick achieved that goal. Its game against Irving determined which team would earn a spot in Play Ball's semifinal games this Friday. Irving and Frederick played evenly through much of the first half.

Around the 10-minute mark of the second quarter, though, Frederick quarterback Dimmon Marshall connected with tight end Narayan Jones, who made a Rob Gronkowski-style leap for the touchdown.

The Frederick sideline erupted, including Monica Jones, Narayan's mother. She loves the effect the Play Ball football program has had on her son.

"There have been major changes in him since he started," Monica Jones said. "He has so much more discipline, much more respect. He understands he has to do well academically in order to play, so now he is putting in the time in."

"And now he loves wearing shirts and ties, because the coaches make them wear that on game days."

The Marshall-to-Jones connection ended up being the game's only score, as Frederick's defense frustrated Llaveria and Irving throughout the second half to hold on for the 6-0 win.

"It feels great to make history for your school," Frederick defensive end Edwin Gonzalez said.

As Frederick celebrated, dejected Irving players made their way to the bus. Llaveria stopped and called to his teammates to huddle up.

"We played well today and all season. They just had a bit more . . . um . . . skill today," Llaveria said as his teammates laughed at the pause. "But we're brothers, and I'm proud of you all."

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