



# PLAY IT SMART

*Turning Athletics Teams Into Learning Teams*



## \$10.7 Million Federal Education Grant Aims to Improve Academic Achievement for Student-Athletes

*Play It Smart program builds critical bridge between the playing field and classroom*

On August 9, 2004, The National Football Foundation and College Hall of Fame (NFF) and U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige announced a \$10.7 million grant to expand the NFF's highly successful Play It Smart program for at-risk student-athletes.

Play It Smart trains "academic" coaches and places them in schools to work with high school athletics teams for the entire school year, taking the lessons learned on the field and applying them in the classroom and the community. By capitalizing on the positive peer pressure of the group, Play It Smart academic coaches work closely with their head coaches to change the norms of the team, creating a "healthy" gang environment where academic achievement and community involvement become the standard.

The Department of Education (ED) grant specifically adds 60 new schools to the program, and allows the program to expand to girls and boys engaged in extracurricular activities other than football at 20 existing Play It Smart schools. With the addition of the ED money, the program will reach over 14,000 different students in 94 cities and 35 states in 2005.

"This is exactly the kind of program that we want out there with good theory and research behind it. There is no other program like it at the high school level," said Michael L. Sachs, Ph.D., a past-president of the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology and a professor at Temple University.

"The ED grant will provide the critical mass of data so schools across the country can see that the



U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige (center) joins Art Shell (r.) of the NFL, Ron Johnson (l.) of the NFF, and three members of the Play It Smart program (back) in announcing the grant.

program is cost effective and find the necessary resources to support it. The potential is fantastic."

The grant is part of the Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Education program,

which supports innovative projects in elementary and secondary education. "We are pleased the Department of Education has made a commitment to broaden the reach of Play it Smart," said Art Shell, NFL senior vice president of football operations and development. "Educated and motivated players consistently rise to the top, and this program provides a strong foundation for the next generation of athletes and citizens."

"The Department of Education grant provides credibility to a program that we have seen make a remarkable impact over the past six years," said NFF Vice

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### The Department of Education's grant will enhance the Play It Smart program in the following ways:

- Add 30 new schools beginning in the 2004-2005 academic year
- Fund an additional 30 schools starting in 2005
- Expand the program in 20 current schools to include students participating in extracurricular activities other than football
- Expand and refine the mentor-training program for academic coaches

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## Former Principal Brings Unique Perspective to Play It Smart

Throughout my 33 rewarding years of service, the last ten of which were spent as a high school principal, the student-athlete received as much of my attention as an educator's and a principal's work schedule would permit. I attended as many games as possible and felt a sense of pride knowing that many of our students were passionate and willing to voluntarily expend their time and energy to achieve their extracurricular goals.

I was constantly troubled, however, when so many of our talented student-athletes did not receive the attention from college and university recruiters warranted by their academic and athletic exploits. Furthermore, the handful of students who were aggressively pursued by educational institutions often found the application and eligibility process too difficult to navigate. They were neither motivated, nor prepared, to tackle this process, and subsequently were content to limit their success to their high school achievements.

Following my retirement in 1995, a dear friend asked me to assist with the academic supervision of a standout athlete at my former school. I agreed, finding it to be a very different academic world from which I was accustomed. I was lost in a world of NCAA jargon, including notions of core courses, 48H and the NCAA Clearinghouse.

During this process, I was introduced to the Play It Smart academic-mentoring program. Unlike any program I experienced as an educator, Play It Smart reinforces academic progress, community

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## The Value of Sports

Does sport build character or does it promote character disorders? Although some people associated with athletics would argue for the former, the correct answer to the question is neither. Sport creates numerous and powerful opportunities to learn about yourself and to acquire important skills, but individuals are not likely to benefit from

these experiences unless they are in the right kind of learning environment and are surrounded by the right kinds of people.

At the National Football Foundation Center for Youth Development through Sport at Springfield College, we have been examining the factors

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**PLAY IT SMART**

*An informational newsletter delivered to high school principals to share with their educators, coaches, and school administrators. Please Circulate.*

(Grant.....Continued from page 1)

Chairman Ron Johnson." It's been our experience that student-athletes who are given appropriate opportunities and motivation to succeed will become leaders in their schools and communities."

Fundamental to the success of Play It Smart is The National Football Foundation Center for Youth Development Through Sport at Springfield College in Massachusetts (NFF Center). The NFF Center is responsible for creating the conceptual model for the program as well as developing the training for the academic coaches.

Under the grant, the professional staff at the NFF Center will conduct qualitative and quantitative research to further refine the program's model. Additionally, the grant enables the team at the NFF Center to enhance the training of the project's academic coaches by adding

a three-day mid-winter session to the current weeklong summer conference. "It's a common misconception that individuals learn life skills by simply participating in sport," said Dr. Albert Petitpas, the director of the NFF Center. "Our experience shows that if you engage young people in an activity that they love, surround them with caring adult mentors, create the right kind of learning environment, and provide them with opportunities to use their transferable skills in the classroom and community, some truly wonderful things can happen."

A broad public-private coalition of individuals, foundations and corporations has rallied behind Play It Smart. The NFL and the NFL Players Association specifically are two of the major backers, having committed over \$5 million to ensure



Providing leadership opportunities outside of sports is a key component of the program. These activities allow students to test their life skills in different settings while raising their self-esteem.

that at least one high school in each of the 32 NFL franchise cities has the advantage of an academic coach.

Other organizations that have provided significant support include The

Peyback Foundation, IDT Corp., The Prudential Foundation, PSE&G, The New Brunswick (NJ) Board of Education, The Miami Dolphins Foundation, The Jonathan Ogden Foundation, the City of New Haven, FleetBoston Financial, The Tostitos Fiesta Bowl, the Washington Redskins Charitable Foundation, Hampshire Management and the School District of Philadelphia.

Note: The grant specifically provides \$10,655,312 over five years. In year one, the grant provides \$1,498,848 while outside sources will contribute approximately \$2.25 million to cover the additional schools in the program. Grant funding in year two increases to \$2,561,460, holds steady in years three and four, and tapers in year five to \$1,514,747. During the course of the grant, the NFF will continue to raise money from individuals, corporations and foundations.

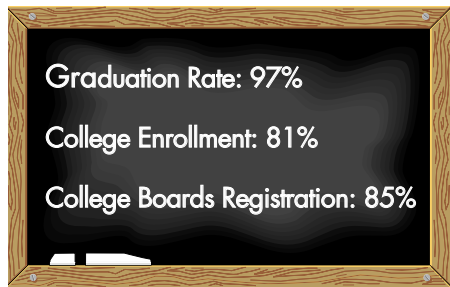
## Results Help Differentiate the Play It Smart Program

Educational accountability and closing the achievement gap for students in under-resourced communities are two of the cornerstones of the *No Child Left Behind* initiative. These two ideas played a central role during the creation of the Play It Smart program in 1998. The National Football Foundation & College Hall of Fame's (NFF) Executive Board felt strongly that the program's success would need empirical data to validate its effectiveness with its supporters and to serve as a feedback mechanism for improvement. They knew that many youth development programs had a positive impact, but very few conducted a rigorous research agenda tied directly to the program.

The board authorized a two-year pilot program to assess the concept's effectiveness in four high schools from economically disadvantaged schools in the Northeast. They collected outcome data on participants' grades, SAT/ACT scores, graduation rates and college matriculation rates. The original results showed the program's dramatic impact, and the NFF has sought to expand and improve the program ever since.

Play It Smart continues to collect outcome data on indicators of academic performance and future planning. The 2003 results showed that 97% of Play It Smart seniors graduated from high school on schedule, 85% took the ACT/SAT and 81% went on to higher education. Each of these percentages exceeds the corresponding rates for

peers at the same schools that indicated 87% of seniors graduated from high school and 58% went on to higher education. Equally promising is the finding that participants who had the



benefit of an established Play It Smart program for their entire high school career showed a 100% graduation and college matriculation rate.

To further refine the program and its ability to understand the outcome data, The National Football Foundation joined forces with Springfield College in 2001 to

The NFF Center will host a Summit on Positive Youth Development Through Sport from March 18-21, 2005. Experts in the field of youth development will discuss how kids can get the most out of their sport experience. For more information, please contact the Center at 866-532-2289 or visit [www.youthsports Summit.org](http://www.youthsports Summit.org).

create The NFF Center for Youth Development through Sport (NFF Center). The NFF Center was charged to develop a more systematic

approach for examining exactly what components of the program accounted for the positive changes seen in participants. The hope was to identify strategies that could be disseminated to anyone who wanted to use sport and after-school activities to develop positive characteristics in youth. Beyond collecting and analyzing the outcome data, The NFF Center's role includes assisting with the training of Play It Smart's academic coaches, developing educational materials and workbooks, and organizing leadership conferences and other special events for Play It Smart.

The Department of Education's grant, announced on August 9, will allow for a more extensive study of Play It Smart's empirical results with several new research components directly built into the grant. A mid-year training session for the project's academic coaches, added per the grant, will help evaluate seasonal trends and enable immediate adjustments. The winter training sessions will also reinforce the relationship building skills and various program techniques that help the academic coaches ensure success for students in the program.

In subsequent editions of this newsletter, staff members from the NFF Center will share important research findings that may be of assistance to educators who are developing support programs within their schools. Topics to be discussed in future issues include characteristics of effective mentors, the identification

and use of transferable skills, and structuring community service activities to benefit participants.

### Play It Smart By The Numbers

Play It Smart reaches 11,000 students nationwide

- 128 schools in 84 cities and 34 states currently have the program
- 88% of Play It Smart students come from minority backgrounds
- The \$25,000 cost per school covers academic coach compensation, educational materials, SAT/ACT registration, parent programs, college visits and more
- Graduation rates are 11% greater than school averages, while college matriculation rates are 40% greater than school averages
- Teams with fewer than 40 kids see their participation rates increase an average of 35%
- In 2003-2004, 88 Play It Smart programs completed more than 25,000 hours of community service combined

**The National Football Foundation Center for Youth Development Through Sport at Springfield College can be reached at 1-866-532-2289. Please visit [www.footballfoundation.com/Center/center.php](http://www.footballfoundation.com/Center/center.php) for more information.**

necessary to provide young athletes with an optimal environment and the activities necessary to facilitate positive growth and the acquisition of skills that can be transferred from the playing field to the classroom and future careers. These factors have become the building blocks for our framework of youth development through sport and form the guiding principles of the NFF's Play It Smart program. In a nutshell, we believe that positive growth is most likely to occur when young people:

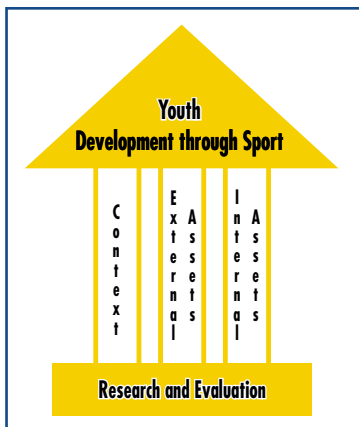
... are in an appropriate "context" for growth, i.e., participating in activities that are voluntary, challenging and require a lot of commitment and effort over time.

... are surrounded by positive "external" assets, including caring adult mentors in the form of academic coaches, teachers, coaches and school leaders.

... develop "internal" assets, such as interpersonal, decision-making and problem-solving skills, and have opportunities to test out their skills in non-sport settings.

... benefit from "research and evaluation" that identifies best practices and guides program improvements.

Although we know that all the elements of the framework are important for youth development, we are also quite aware that research shows that "canned programs" have a poor track record of success in public schools, particularly those in urban centers. As a result, Play It Smart academic coaches and coordinators work closely with school personnel to identify local resources, both in and out of school, and tailor the program elements to partner with or take advantage of these support mechanisms.



Play It Smart's academic coaches, working together with coaches, teachers, guidance counselors and other school personnel, attempt to take advantage of student-athletes' commitment and passion for their sport by motivating them to strive for academic and personal excellence. Unfortunately, many high school students feel disconnected and show little interest or energy for schoolwork. Yet these same individuals are willing to put in countless hours perfecting their sport skills or mastering video games. Play It Smart strives to harness the commitment that students have to their extracurricular activities and connect it to academics and future planning. This approach is supported by a line of research that has identified sport as an ideal environment for fostering a sense of initiative. Sports work as this ideal because they are voluntary activities that are intrinsically rewarding, have clear rules and boundaries, and require considerable commitment and effort over an extended period of time.

While sport may provide a fertile environment for youth development, we also know that adolescents have a strong need to belong. We imagine that those of you who have struggled to counteract the lure of gangs or peer-pressure can attest to the fact

that many young people want to belong to a group that will provide them with peer acceptance and a sense of identity. Therefore, because research has shown that the vast majority of young people still value sport over all other school activities, Play It Smart strives to help each participant find a special place within a valued group. Each student-athlete is encouraged to find a way to contribute to his or her team's success, whether academically, athletically or through community service.

Another consideration in creating a positive context for youth development is to ensure that students are engaged in an activity that is not only desirable, but one that also has clear rules, goals and policies that are enforced without ambiguity. When this is the case, young people learn to conform to rules and boundaries, to manage their emotions, to handle wins and losses and to persevere in the face of adversity. Each

*"Sports work as this ideal because they are voluntary activities that are intrinsically rewarding, have clear rules and boundaries, and require considerable commitment and effort . . . ."*

of these experiences is an important life skill that can also facilitate success on and off the playing field.

The purpose of this article was to introduce readers to a framework for youth development and to examine program components that may facilitate the acquisition of a sense of initiative. In subsequent editions of this newsletter, we will examine the other components of the framework as well as other suggestions for enhancing academic and personal development through sport and extracurricular activities.

**Dr. Albert Petitpas, Ed.D, a leading sports psychologist, is the director of The National Football Foundation Center for Youth Development through Sport at Springfield College in Massachusetts.**

service, college planning, and SAT/ACT prep as just a few of its core values. Play It Smart answered many of my questions regarding why colleges and universities were not recruiting our athletes. Students and coaches on the high school level did not have the total knowledge needed to make it happen.

*"The program's design helps teenagers develop the skills necessary to become successful student-athletes and productive members of society . . . ."*

When I was offered the job of academic coach, I accepted with the full knowledge that the principal, coaches, school staff and, most importantly, student-athletes would all prosper in a positive way by having Play It Smart. I found my new role to be a valuable one, if anything because I developed a great appreciation for the many responsibilities juggled by my high school coaches, especially my current head coach, Ted Ginn. The program's design helps teenagers develop the skills necessary to become successful student-athletes and productive members of society by preparing them for college and life beyond the high school classroom and playing field.

At my school, the principal and the head coach now have a tool to monitor academic progress and see the results of improved self-esteem, discipline, attitude changes and students who understand what it means to be responsible for their own actions. Play It Smart participants voluntarily attend community service events, study halls, test preparations and other events addressed to provide structure in their lives. Play It Smart provides this structure where students are accountable for their time, providing them life lessons that they can carry with them for years to come. Using a student-athletes' passion for sports, the program creates a learning environment, which channels that passion towards personal growth and goal-setting that a whole team can rally around.

**Elbert Cobbs, Jr. was a principal in the Cleveland Municipal School District for 10 years. He currently serves as the Play It Smart academic coach at Glenville High School in Cleveland.**



Play It Smart strives to harness the desire for athletes to learn on the playing field and apply it in classroom and community settings.

# A Brief History of Play It Smart

Founded in 1998 by The National Football Foundation & College Hall of Fame, Play It Smart launched as a pilot program at four schools: Hillhouse High School in New Haven, Jefferson and South Shore High Schools in Brooklyn, and Orange High School in Orange, New Jersey. The NFF selected the schools based on the support of the program from the administration and the school's athletic staff. Academic Coaches were recruited from the athletic counseling program at Springfield College in Massachusetts and were in place

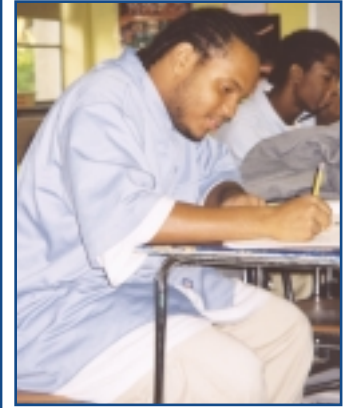
at the beginning of the 1998-99 school year.

These pioneers broke new ground by winning over the principals, guidance counselors, athletics directors, head coaches and, most importantly, the students on their teams. These first academic coaches had no idea what to expect, but they committed to spend 20 to 25 hours a week with the student-athletes from the opening day of the school year to final exams. Students responded positively, quickly coalescing around the program's study tables, test-taking strategies,

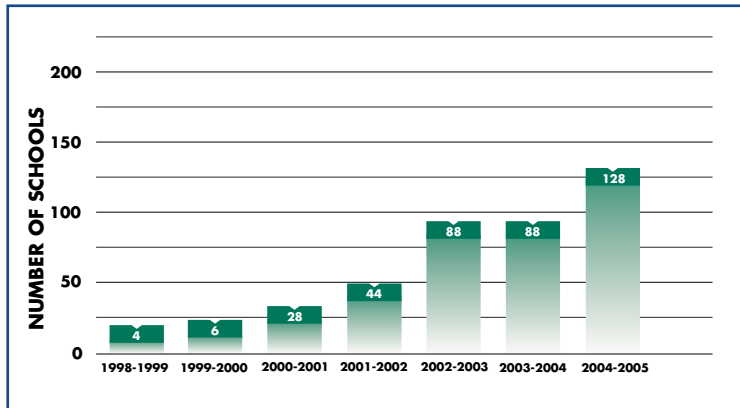
community service outings and team building experiences.

The following year, the program expanded into Vermont and Springfield, Mass. After that school year, the NFF approached the National Football League (NFL) and the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) for potential support. The response was favorable, and the resulting grant enabled the program to undergo a significant expansion. Twenty-two schools joined in 2001-2002, 16 more came on board a year later, and student-athletes from teams other than football gravitated toward the program. Private organizations and individuals supported numerous schools in their local communities, and continue to do so today. By the 2003-2004 academic year, the program reached over 6,000 students and 88 schools in 30 states.

This year, with the combined backing of the U.S. Department of Education and the NFL and NFLPA, Play It Smart reaches 128 schools in 84 cities across the country. Next year, more than 160 schools with over 14,000 participants will define the Play It



Consistent attendance at voluntarily study tables has been a key to the success of Play It Smart.



Smart landscape, including 20 schools whose academic coaches will formally work with groups of student-athletes engaged in extracurricular activities other than football.

**For more information on the Play It Smart program and how to get involved, please visit [www.playitsmart.org](http://www.playitsmart.org) or call The National Football Foundation at 1-800-486-1865.**



## PLAY IT SMART

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