When high schools game the system, other teams left with little chance to win

This is the second of a three-part series.

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As he looked across the football field a year ago, Palm Beach Lakes High coach Alonzo Jefferson saw a distressing sight: Kids who should have been his students were playing for his rival.


That lopsided matchup has become a common outcome in Palm Beach County's era of school choice. The system results in fabulously successful all-star teams and also-rans struggling to keep up.


"It's hard to build that sense that we're going to accomplish anything," Forest Hill football coach Chris Kokell said, "when everybody abandons you every year."

For players with top-tier Division I college dreams, school loyalty has become a thing of the past.

"If you think crass materialism is a good thing, then you probably don't mind (high school free agency)," said Patricia Greenfield, a UCLA psychology professor who has studied ethnic interactions on high school teams. "It really distorts the sport."

To many, the drive to join top teams is worthwhile for players who get top instruction and grab the attention of college recruiters. But for players left behind, the result is less attention, from the community as well as college recruiters.

Palm Beach Lakes, a once-proud football program that is struggling, already must cope with the stigma of low marks on standardized tests such as the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. That makes Lakes a school whose students can transfer under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The receiving school? Dwyer, a football powerhouse fueled in part by students who would otherwise attend Lakes.
As stars transfer, Lakes has struggled on the field, winning twice in its past 18 games. When teams can't compete, attendance suffers. Over eight home games since the 2010 season, Lakes' revenues from gate receipts are about a third of Dwyer's, and Forest Hill's revenues are about a fourth.

With $13,500 in 2010 gate receipts, Forest Hill officials say they barely raised enough to pay for game security, travel and referees. Leftover money, if they have any, may go to replace worn helmets.

Dwyer, including its two home playoff games, raised $67,000 last year. The extra money pays for uniforms and equipment, team meals, other sports and student activities, Athletic Director Tom Pagley said.

He downplayed the effect of success. "We might get new uniforms every two years, as opposed to three years," Pagley said, "but it's not like we're opening up a dome anytime soon."

Black parents in a school that is 76 percent black have lost confidence in Lakes, Jefferson said. Twenty years ago, Lakes was 47 percent black.

At Dwyer, Jefferson said, black parents believe white people will "take care" of black students and "save" them. Dwyer is 49 percent white.

"I go to Lake Lytal (Park) and you ask people where they want to go to school," Jefferson said. "They live right here, across the street from (Lakes), and they tell you, 'Oh, I want to go to Dwyer,' or 'My mama said I'm going here,' or 'My daddy said I'm going to Gardens.'"

"If you look at those rosters, at all the kids who live in my district, you'd be amazed. How do they get that? Those loopholes."

Former Lakes Principal Nathan Collins explained that the expansion of school options created a perfect storm with the rise of prominent athletics programs at other schools. "For whatever reason, people really thought we were the worst place in the world," Collins said.

Although Palm Beach Lakes made the playoffs two years ago, the team is in a rough stretch. Some local football observers say Lakes could be far better if its in-zone students stayed and played for the Rams.

In 2010, seven players on Dwyer's roster were zoned for Lakes. Four of those players either are now playing for or will play for Division I college football programs.

Lakes finished 2-8 last season despite playing six other teams with losing records, and is winless this season. Dwyer reached the Class 4A state semifinals last year and is ranked among the best teams in the state.

The fear of rival coaches' prying eyes forced Jefferson to cancel a spring exhibition game, close practices and consider eliminating a pre season game. Jefferson said his paranoia is justified because a few unaffiliated individuals were "hanging around" games and practices and talking to players and parents.

"When you're getting the cream of the crop, everybody ain't gonna eat," Jefferson said. "Don't get greedy. Let everybody get a taste of the food. Let us all eat a little bit. There's enough here to feed off of."
At Forest Hill, which has had 37- and 43-game losing streaks over the last decade, second-year coach Kokell said his players suffer verbal abuse from classmates. Even after a close loss this season, Kokell said, "they hear all day, we suck. We're not from Dwyer. It's the hardest battle to fight."

Forest Hill girls basketball coach Lonnie Moody said the best players transfer after middle school. To compete, he said, "we have to work harder as coaches to develop the kids we have."

Former NFL running back Ottis Anderson grew up in West Palm Beach and graduated from Forest Hill in 1975. He never heard from other high schools and had no options to play elsewhere, he said.

Despite playing for a low-profile Forest Hill team in the early 1970s, he received a scholarship from the University of Miami and went on to a pro career that included a Super Bowl Most Valuable Player award with the New York Giants.

If he were playing high school ball in today's era of free agency, Anderson said, he would welcome offers to jump to a top-ranked high school. "You'd be crazy not to go to those schools," he said.

While top teams, and their schools, thrive under free agency, it may not offer students the best lesson.

"It falls on the parents," said Florida Atlantic University professor Jim Riordan, who directs the school's sports management program. "They're essentially using their child. You get a bunch of athletes together and go out and beat other communities and it's a win. People need wins. It starts this whole process. People start looking the other way. It really creates a false community pride. When you start using kids like that, it becomes false."

*Staff writer Matt Porter contributed to this story.*