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Hillgrove Hopes to Build Stands Atop 'the Hill'

"Some people think, 'Oh, it's just a football issue,'" Principal Robert Shaw said of the school's lack of visitor seating. "It's not just a football issue; it's an issue that really affects the whole school."

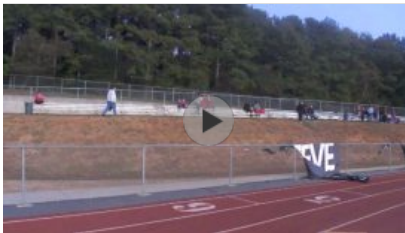
By [Michael Stone](#) | [Email the author](#) | October 25, 2011

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[Hillgrove](#) is the only public high school in Cobb County to not have permanent visitor stands beside its football field.

When supporters of away teams travel to the Powder Springs school, they do their best to get situated on "the hill"—the area opposite the home stands. (The hill is shown in the attached video.)

"People bring their own chairs, or we will put temporary stands up there," said school clerk Natalie Feller, co-treasurer of the Hillgrove Foundation. "It's not the most comfortable place, so we'd really like to be good hosts."

The foundation is working to raise the \$200,000 needed to complete the visitor stands. The amount it has so far—\$23,000—has come from fundraisers, a senior class gift, and donations.

"We've had people donate \$100 here, \$50 there," Principal Robert Shaw said. "We're grateful for any gift regardless of the amount, but we just want to make sure people know who we are, what we're trying to accomplish, and why it's important."

"Some people think, 'Oh, it's just a football issue.' It's not just a football issue; it's an issue that really affects the whole school."

Football, Shaw described, is a "moneymaker" for all of the school's athletic programs. "Most of your sports don't make any money. Basketball, baseball—sometimes they break even."

An example he gave is the Lady Hawks basketball team traveling for the playoffs last year. With the football team's successes came extra funding that the basketball team could use.

"Because we had extra football money," he said, "we were able to put them on a Coach bus instead of making them take a school bus to South

Georgia.”

Shaw also noted that the softball team [is set to travel to Columbus](#) on Thursday for the 5A softball tournament.

“The money we make from the football gate really goes to support every other sport,” he said. “So when people decide not to come to a Hillgrove football game because there’s just no place to sit, that does impact what we can do for all of our other sports.”

There’s also an issue of safety, Shaw said. Last year, Hillgrove, freshly bumped up to class 5A, hosted crosstown rival [McEachern](#) for the first-ever game between the two.

The school planned ahead for the game, and everyone was safe, Shaw explained.

“But still, when you’ve got 10,000 people in a stadium that sits (3,000)—and maybe half of them are teenagers—you just want to make sure you have a safe environment.”

The School District’s Role

Hillgrove, which first opened its doors in 2006, is one of several new schools to be built in the county over the last decade.

When construction is planned, proposed facilities must have an academic purpose, said Cobb schools spokesman Doug Goodwin. The way schools build athletic facilities—like field houses and visitor stands—“varies from school to school,” he added.

“Most of them have been lucky enough to acquire some corporate sponsorship from local business partners, and that has helped them fund those away stands,” he said, also noting loans taken out by booster clubs.

Cobb EMC donated money toward Hillgrove’s current football facilities, hence the name Cobb Energy/Hillgrove Stadium.

Shaw said the district does provide money for purposes like extra security at games, ambulances and stipends for coaches. “But by and large, that’s it.”

Included in the current education SPLOST was artificial turf for all high school football fields. The total cost was \$16 million, [according to the Marietta Daily Journal](#).

Goodwin said that football fields also serve academic purposes, like physical education classes and music programs.

The question was raised over whether extra SPLOST money could be used by Hillgrove for visitor stands. But those wouldn’t be for academic purposes, Goodwin said, and the SPLOST projects were already locked in when voters approved the project list in September 2008.

“The artificial turf was something that was voted on by the public,” he said, “and so that’s not a negotiable item.”

Possible Affect in the Playoffs

The Hillgrove football team—with its 8-0 record following [Friday’s hard-fought battle against Pebblebrook](#)—is showing itself as a contender for marching far into the playoffs. The only round that a lack of visitor stands might affect is the fourth out of five—the semi-finals.

The top-seeded team serves as the host in all rounds except for the finals, played at the Georgia Dome. For the first three rounds, there are no seating requirements other than equally dividing what is available between home and away fans, said Steve Figueroa, a spokesman for the Georgia High School Association.

In Hillgrove’s case, if enough temporary seating wasn’t brought in to equal the home stands, the current seats would need to be divided up, he said.

“If you’ve only got (stands) on one side, you’ve got to offer them half the seats,” he said.

For the semis, the host team in class 5A must have at least 6,000 seats, Figueroa said, referencing the GHSA’s [constitution and bylaws](#).

Shaw said: “I don’t even think we’re above (3,000) to be honest with you.”

Figueroa said that, if the Hawks didn’t want to hand host status to the lower-seeded school, they’d need to seek out a stadium that meets the seating requirements. “They can rent the Georgia Dome if they want to,” he joked.

Shaw said Hillgrove would likely seek a Cobb high school that’s stadium wasn’t being used in the playoffs.

Cases like Hillgrove’s, where a school doesn’t have visitor stands, aren’t unheard of, Figueroa said.

“It’s certainly not the first time I’ve seen it,” he said. “Many schools have concrete on one side, and then a few little bleachers on the other side.”

The Hillgrove Foundation

The Hillgrove Foundation was started last year for those wanting to give money that would go to whatever projects are needed most, Shaw said.

It’s unlike the school’s booster clubs—which solely fund their respective sports—and aims to help academics, athletics and the arts, he added.

“But right now, for many reasons, we have to get this stadium completed,” the principal said, noting that soccer, lacrosse, band and clubs for younger children also use the facility.

Last year, while the organization was “getting off ground,” it was under the umbrella of the [Cobb Schools Foundation](#), Shaw said. But within the last few months, it broke free and is in the process of being registered as a 501c3 nonprofit.

Shaw said that in its first year, the foundation had a lot of drive but didn’t know much about nonprofit work. But now, two parents who have careers in fundraising have offered their help.

"We're working on putting together a focused plan that will really make fundraising for (the visitor stands) the real emphasis for the foundation for this next year, if not longer," he said.

Shaw said the visitor stands are more of a short-range plan, while in the long run, the school is looking to expand the home stands and improve other existing facilities around the football field. Those come with a price tag of between \$200,000 and \$300,000, he explained.

The principal said he wants the school to make the purchases outright and not through loans taken out by booster clubs.

"We want to do it in a fiscally responsible way," he said. "We don't want to put it on the parents, (and) we don't want to create debt that we have to pay off. We want to do it in a way that is responsible and doesn't put more of a burden on our community."

For information on how to donate to the Hillgrove Foundation, call the school at 678-331-3961.

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