

H-F Jr. Vikings finish off successful year, look for new faces

BY DAVID P. FUNK
dpfunk@hfchronicle.com

Winning has become commonplace for the Homewood-Flossmoor Junior Vikings, the area's youth football and cheer program. In the last calendar year, teams were especially successful.

Now the organization is looking for more local kids to join the mix. There are no tryouts for the Junior Vikings. Some kids have no background in the sport, but no one is turned away. The basics are taught every season.

Spring football registration ends March 15 and fall sign-ups will extend into July.

The Junior Vikings are part of the United Youth Football League. The group saw almost 200 members play and cheer to successful seasons in 2021. Every level of Junior Vikings football qualified for the playoffs.

- The 11U football team won the Northern Illinois UYFL AFC Division state championship.

- The 13U group won the NIUYFL NFC state title.

- The 6U team was runner-up in the state championship, the Bantam Bowl.

- The 9U and 12U cheer groups each finished third at nationals.

- 10 football players played with the Illinois Bucs All Stars, which finished second at 13U nationals at Plant City, Florida.

"We just don't like to lose. I, for one, have been there and don't like that feeling," said Erika Bush-Johnson, a sixth grader at James Hart School. "Just being in the Junior Vikings makes you want to push for what you want."

Bush-Johnson was voted the captain of the 12U cheerleading team by her teammates. Her mom, Jessica Branch, became the coach when her daughter was a 7-year-old.

"I had no idea what I was getting myself into until I got into it," Branch said. "You don't realize how much goes into actually coaching," from sporting rules and regulations to folding different personalities together.



Members of the 13U NFC championship team and the coaches.

Provided photo

Recruiting kids was becoming a struggle before the pandemic. President Chris Loving said the Vikings fielded only two football teams in 2019. This past year, the program fielded six teams.

Competitions are important. The main focus of cheer is being on the sidelines during football games, but the team does compete in state, regional and national events.

"We want to win," coach Branch said. "We're not here to play. We want to win. I want the girls to have fun, and I want them to learn technique, obviously."

The 12U cheer team finished fifth in the regional competition. The team qualified for nationals in Florida winning third place, beating two of the teams they were behind at the regional event.

Cheerleader Bush-Johnson said in the month between events, cheerleaders switched positions and the routine was changed. The adjustments paid off.

Kyle Bryant is a 14-year-old defensive

tackle, center and kicker for the Junior Vikings. He's an eighth grader at Parker Junior High School. Bryant has played for eight years.

"I was just the captain, the role model," he said. "I know football. I'm physically good at football and mentally good at football. I study the plays. Everyone knows whenever a coach asks a question, I can answer it."

Bryant was one of the Junior Vikings who played with the Illinois Bucs All Stars. He said the team's success wasn't an accident. Many on the team played together for the last several seasons. The new players jelled quickly.

The organization's leadership — like President Chris Loving, football director Sam Wilkerson and cheer director Ericka Whorton — are dedicated to the kids.

Wilkerson and Loving said almost all of the kids in the program live in Homewood or Flossmoor but players and cheerleaders are welcomed from Chica-

go, throughout the South Suburbs and Northwest Indiana.

"We want to give kids an avenue to play the sport the correct way," Loving said. "We want to make sure we develop a holistic view of the kids, making sure they're truly student athletes. That's important. We also want to compete at a high level, not just in the Chicagoland area but in the state of Illinois and hopefully go on to nationals."

One of the goals for the Junior Vikings going forward is to become more diverse and attract kids with different backgrounds.

"We want all people from all walks of life," Branch said. "One of the reasons I love Homewood is the diversity here, and I want that to be represented in this cheer program."

For more information or to register your child to play football or cheer, visit hfjrvikings.org, find them on social media or call Loving at 773-988-2679 or Wilkerson at 312-731-9644.

A Hidden Gem in Homewood!!

SALEM LUTHERAN CHURCH

Join us every Sunday!

Indoor or parking lot services, 8:30 a.m. and 11 a.m.
Adult Bible Study and Sunday School for all ages, 9:45 a.m.
(We are 1/2 block west of Riegel Road)

18324 Ashland Ave. in Homewood | 708-798-1820 | www.salemhomewood.org



Looking to Buy or
Sell in the HF Area?

contact Vicki &
Ryan Stevenson

708-251-1500

#1 REALTOR IN HF

