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High school trainer
saves parents,
school big bucks

By William
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It may look like
just water bottles,
towels, tape and ice
bags.



Surrounded by her rehabilitation equipment, Rio Rico High athletic trainer Maritza Rodriguez says parents would be surprised how much money is saved with the services her program provides.

But when the surface is scratched, parents end up saving a substantial amount of money because of the services provided by Rio Rico High's sports medicine program.

Parents saved \$56,280 in evaluations and \$53,873 in treatments in the 2005-2006 school year alone, according to school trainer Maritza Rodriguez's latest tallied numbers.

And Rodriguez-who treats 25-30 kids a day-should know. Along with her state and national certifications, she has been given the medical codes to bill insurance companies if she were to open her own physical therapy practice.

"I want to make sure parents understand what the sports medicine program here offers them, as well as their sons and daughters," she said. "I want to have them see the benefits of it. I want them to understand the specialty behind it."

As a member of the National Athletic Trainers' Association, Rodriguez brings her knowledge of anatomy, physiology, prevention techniques and health-care management to the table every day.

With the help of six dedicated student-assistants, she is able to evaluate and then assess injuries, and can also provide rehab and treatments such as electric stimulations and ultrasounds, as well as whirlpool treatment and therapeutic messages.

That kind of work would be financially taxing for parents, if it weren't for the school's sports medicine program.

An evaluation from a civilian doctor can cost \$30 a pop, an ice bag at a hospital \$25, a joint brace \$60 and crutches \$100, Rodriguez said.

For an athlete at Rio Rico High School in need of such things, it's free.

Preventing injuries, though, is just as-if not more-important.

Just from a financial standpoint, Rodriguez said someone could expect to spend anywhere from \$100 to \$200-at a minimum-if they called on the services of an orthopedic surgeon. Additionally, an MRI can cost about \$3,000, while surgery for a torn ACL, for example, can cost upwards of \$30,000.

That's why the Hawks' staff prides itself on reducing the number of outsourced referrals and treatments over the years.

For example, from 2001 to 2006, Rodriguez said physician referrals have gone down from 129 to 52, and hospitalizations and surgeries have gone down from 34 to just five.

In a given year, more than 400 student-athletes have the potential to take advantage of the program's services.

One of those athletes is Lucas Meza, a senior who has been involved in basketball, football and track for his four years at Rio Rico High. He has experienced many ankle and knee injuries along the way, said his mother, Ana.

"We've really utilized her expertise," Ana said of Rodriguez. "(Lucas) was never hospitalized, but we owe a lot of that to her because she administered treatments to him when he needed it and taught him how to stay in shape.

"We have insurance," she added, "but the cost would have still been so much that I'm not sure we could have done it all without her. The program really saved us a lot of time and money ... and we really felt confident with her. She's always looking out for the athlete."

While Lucas Meza hasn't had any serious injuries in his school career, Ian Titcomb, also a senior, hasn't been so lucky.

During the past track season, a more detailed look at what appeared to be a routine ankle sprain uncovered a bone tumor "that could have been easily missed if it wasn't for (Rodriguez)," said Titcomb's mother, Michelle. "We owe her a lot. She prevented a very long-term injury. And, because of her, we are all more knowledgeable about prevention and caring for injuries."

It's that type of praise that keeps Rodriguez at the high school level, instead of opening her own practice or going to the collegiate or professional levels.

"The high school level is where it all starts," she said. "These kids really, truly need to have a very sound foundation so they can move on to the college level and not have any significant injuries that may keep them from getting a Division I scholarship."

Incidents, she said, occur more frequently at the high school level because the youngsters' bones are still maturing and the students have a lack of knowledge when it comes to training and nutrition.

"So, we're constantly educating," Rodriguez said.

In fact, before each respective season, Rodriguez addresses the athletes with pointers on how to take care of themselves.

Another benefit, she said, is that in this lawsuit-happy generation, the school system's coffers don't have to be dipped into when it comes to liability.

"I think an athletic trainer takes a huge liability off of the school system because they're licensed through the State of Arizona and through the National Athletic Trainers' Association ... and we carry our own liability insurance," she said. "It's a win-win situation for everybody."