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Brookline-Jamaica Plain Pop Warner team eyes Florida trip

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 01, 2011

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BROOKLINE-JAMAICA PLAIN POP WARNER

Brookline-Jamaica Plain Patriots Junior Midget players, ages 11 to 13, and coaches celebrated their regional championship win.

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For just the second time in the local Pop Warner program's history, the Brookline-Jamaica Plain Patriots Junior Midget team will travel to Florida this weekend to compete for a national title.

"They're very excited," Ian Cotterell, chief operating officer and longtime coach for Brookline-JP Patriots Pop Warner, said by phone Monday.

The team had reached the regional championship game "three times in a row before, and we couldn't beat Connecticut," he said. "Getting over that hump was really, really big for us."

The Brookline-JP program, which fields six age-group teams, dedicated its season to the late Myra H. Kraft, philanthropist and wife of New England Patriots owner

Robert Kraft, who died from cancer in July.

The Krafts are lifelong Brookline residents, and one of their four sons, Jonathan, coached the Brookline-JP Pats for five years before his son, 15-year-old Harry, graduated from the program two years ago.

The Junior Midget squad, with players 11 to 13 years old, clinched their trip to Florida with a win against New Haven last Friday. The weeklong national championship tournament will begin Saturday at the ESPN Wide World of Sports complex near Orlando.

“My mom attended very many of the Brookline-JP games,” said Jonathan Kraft, who is team president of the three-time Super Bowl champion Patriots in Foxborough. “She was always beaming, seeing all of the children from different backgrounds out on the field and having a good time.

“It’s really cool that this group of young men will have a chance to go to Florida to compete for the national title. Hopefully this year’s team can take it to the house,” he said in an telephone interview this week.

Kraft called the youth football program “a phenomenal demonstration of community volunteers.”

“It’s a sport unlike any other,” said Kraft, who sits on the national board that oversees Pop Warner. “I got to meet and coach kids in that program who I still have a connection with to this day. There’s something about the bond you build that’s so special. You just fall in love with it. It’s so fun to watch. It’s a lot of work and a big commitment for the kids.”

The Brookline-JP program’s home turf is Harry Downes Field in Brookline. The program serves children from a number of communities and a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Teams can compete regionally and nationally; the Pop Warner program has 45 other teams in Eastern Massachusetts.

The Brookline-JP team finished the regular season at 7-0, and continued its undefeated streak through the postseason for an overall 12-0 record. The team’s defense did not surrender a single point all season, including in its 18-0 victory over New Haven, according to Cotterell.

“There was one time the offense fumbled and it was returned against us for a touchdown, but that was it,” he said.

The Brookline-JP Pats organization formed in the mid-1990s and struggled until recent years, when Cotterell helped turn the program around. He joined the Brookline-JP program in 1998 after his son’s coach quit.

Cotterell, a native of Boston's Mission Hill section, was nominated in January alongside 27 other coaches nationwide - including last season's Super Bowl champ - for a new annual NFL award honoring coaches at all levels of the sport for "integrity, achievement, and leadership."

"This was another history-making weekend for the Brookline-Jamaica Plain football program," said Thomasina Cole, the organization's interim president, in a statement. "These children have worked hard since August and they are all outstanding examples of our mission: 'Do your best and treat others the way you want to be treated.' "

The program has won a regional championship once before. In 2008, players traveled to Florida to compete for the national championship, but the team was eliminated after losing its first game.

The team faces another hurdle this week: it is working to raise \$60,000 in just a few days to cover players' and chaperones' travel and lodging costs to play in the Pop Warner Super Bowl.


Donations to the Pop Warner Travel Fund can be sent to Peoples Federal Savings Bank, 264 Washington St., Brookline, MA 02445.

This year's team has raised about \$17,000 since capturing the regional title Friday.

Regardless of whether the remaining funds needed to cover the trip to Florida are raised before the competition begins this weekend, Cotterell said, "We'll find a way to go. We'll do whatever it takes."

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