

LONG ROAD TRIP

Hartford Pop Warner Team Heads For Playoffs In Florida

By **VANESSA DE LA TORRE**

vdelatorre@courant.com

HARTFORD — The Hartford Hurricanes posed for team photos in the bitter cold Friday morning, all smiles and runny noses and anticipation of warmer days.

After a perfect 13-0 record this season, and against the odds, the 25 pee wee football players then boarded a bus for their trip to the Pop Warner National Championships in Orlando, Fla.

For most of them, one coach said, it was the first time they had ever left New England.

The 11- and 12-year-olds will face the Holy Cross Knights of Texas at 1 p.m. Sunday, a quarterfinal matchup of Division I teams that is scheduled to be televised on ESPN3.

If the Hurricanes beat the Knights and win a semifinal on Wednesday, they'll play Dec. 8 in the Pop Warner Super Bowl at the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex in the Walt Disney World Resort.

FOOTBALL, A3

"We're more excited than the kids," said grandfather Bill Smith of Hartford, among the dozens of players' relatives who went to Friday's send-off at Keney Park. "This is a wonderful group of young men. ... They worked hard, through all adversity, to get here. We're so proud of them."

Just four years ago, when Hartford Hurricanes Youth Football and Cheerleading was a new organization, its teams lost every game that season, said Mary Welker, a Hurricanes board member.

Now the group's teams from six Pop Warner divisions — tiny-mite to junior midget — are good enough to make the playoffs. They compete in the Southern Connecticut Pop Warner league, which is also sending a junior pee wee squad from New Haven and two Division II teams from West Haven to Florida.

But just days ago, Hartford parents and supporters were unsure whether the Hurricanes could afford to play in the national

championship. After beating the Vikings of Worcester in the New England regional finals last weekend, the pee wee team needed about \$35,000 to finance the trip.

"We were frantically raising money all week," said Welker, of Wethersfield, her eyes wet with tears. "With the Hartford Hurricanes, we try to say, 'If you work hard and do the right thing, good things will happen.' ... We have been up 20 hours a day, calling everyone we could think of. ... And thank God, people have stepped up and helped."

There was a fundraiser Tuesday at T.G.I. Fridays on the Berlin Turnpike, where one of the team's coaches works as a cook. Rep. Douglas McCrory, D-Hartford, a coach and father of 11-year-old wide receiver Cairo, organized an event at the Red Rock Tavern in Hartford on Wednesday night.

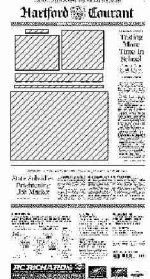
The Capitol Region Education Council sponsored some students, McCrory said, and local businesses gave what they could.

The city chipped in \$20,000.

City council President Shawn Wooden said that the Hurricanes had trouble finding a practice field earlier in the season until the city helped locate an area of Keney Park in the North End.

"To culminate in a championship," Wooden said Friday in the Keney parking lot, "it's a really special and inspirational story for the city of Hartford."

Winston Kennedy, a minister from Hartford, led



the group in prayer before the Hurricanes boarded the chartered bus at 8:30 a.m. One player, head bowed, had the team's "HH" logo shaved into his head. Because of the cost, many of the players' relatives are unable to join them in Florida.


"I pray, God, for a safe journey down and a safe journey back," Kennedy said. "I pray for victory, God."

Earlier, the boys said they felt confident about their chances. What about the bus ride that McCrory estimated would take 27 hours, with stops?

"If you sleep, you're going to get mustard on your face in the morning," said 12-year-old running back Marquis Wilson, worried about pranks. (Homework should also be on their minds: The kids are required to finish assignments while away from school.)

Yahnee Brandon smiled with other moms but said she was nervous. Her 11-year-old son Malik, a Jumoke Academy sixth-grader who plays defense, has never been on a long-distance trip.

"An inner-city kid going to Florida? I'm 33; I ain't been to Florida," Brandon said. "I'm proud of him."

 Visit courant.com/popwarner for more pictures.



MICHAEL MCANDREWS | MMCANDREWS@COURANT.COM

SHONRECCA FOY gives a hug to her son Tyler Allan before the Hartford Hurricanes football team leaves Friday for Florida to play in the national Pop Warner football championship.



MICHAEL MCANDREWS | MMCANDREWS@COURANT.COM

THE UNDEFEATED Hartford Hurricanes gather for a team picture Friday before boarding a bus for Orlando, Fla., to play in the national Pop Warner football championship. The Hartford team beat Worcester in the New England finals last weekend.