



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: Tuesday, April 7, 2026.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. Contact [Gage Harter](#) with any questions.

### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Orange County, Virginia  
Program Title: Elementary School Flag Football Tournament  
Program Category: Education & Parks and Recreation

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Stephanie Straub  
Title: Deputy County Administrator  
Signature:

**2026 VACo Achievement Award Submission  
Category: Education & Parks and Recreation  
Nomination: Elementary School Flag Football Tournament**

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## **Executive Summary**

Answering community interest in expanding athletic programs, Orange County Parks & Recreation (OCPR) leveraged strong existing partnerships, and built new networks, to offer an innovative and meaningful flag football tournament for our



*Figure 1: Participants enjoyed the full thrills of playing on the “big” field.*

local elementary schools. The program was designed for fourth and fifth grade students and envisioned as a week of practices culminating in an interschool tournament on the high school playing field. The inaugural program attracted an overwhelming response.

The tournament packed the stands at Porterfield with parents and spectators, building community pride while providing an opportunity for young athletes to enjoy their moment in the spotlight. More than just a simple competition, the event provided an age-appropriate introduction to the sport of football, launched a new capstone program for OCPR involvement in youth sports, fostered a new sense of school pride for young athletes, and set the stage for future increased involvement in scholastic sport.

## **Challenges Faced**

The driving forces behind the tournament were twofold. First, existing partnerships with Orange County High School athletics staff had built a strong foundation for program development. Coach Colston Bayless, the Orange County High School Head Football

Coach, was particularly interested in increasing future student involvement in varsity athletics participation, especially football. Although there are some quality contact youth football programs in the area, many parents have concerns about their kids participating in contact programs, citing injury concerns. Flag football has emerged as a solution to this problem. In fact, the sport has experienced dynamic growth, even among adults and professional athletes. Especially important from our department's perspective, this version of football is a fantastic alternative for young players interested in learning how to play in a less aggressive environment. An absence of organized flag football programs in our area left a service gap waiting to be filled.

The second driving element was growing public interest in our department expanding its athletics-focused programs. While OCPR has long been a strong partner of the volunteer organizations that operate our youth baseball, softball, and soccer programs, the department's



*Figure 2: The coed program drew wide interest from participants, volunteer coaches, and spectators. High School athletes helped at the event.*

role has been focused on facilitating field availability and maintenance rather than direct operation. The aforementioned flag football service gap presented an opportunity for Parks & Recreation to address this public desire while offering something completely new to the community and assisting our school partners to help young people discover an interest in football and other scholastic athletic opportunities. Often called “feeder programs,” Parks & Recreation Departments are well suited to sparking interest in sports that can be further developed by school programs when the student athlete reaches the middle and high school level.

With clarity and unity, OCPR seized an opportunity to work with school personnel and offer a unique new coed youth activity.

### Program Implementation: Partnership and Innovation

Since OCPR is a rural department with limited staffing, providing the new flag football program required building a strong network of new volunteers. Thankfully, the foundation for such a team had already been established by prior partner programs with the schools. The initial plan called for a team of fourth and fifth grade students representing each of Orange County's four public elementary schools. Given that participants would need a fundamental understanding of the game and rules prior to the tournament, each school was scheduled to hold practices in the week leading up to the culminating event. However, practices require coaches. Coach Bayless was a strong advocate, helping recruit coaches at each school and paving the way for the program to become a reality.

Meanwhile, Parks & Recreation took the lead on promoting the tournament and registering participants. Strong interest led to an unexpected, but necessary and welcome pivot during this process. It was expected that each school would field one



Figure 3: Parks & Rec. made a full show of the event, to the delight of parents and participants leveraging Communications support to develop event programs and promote the activity.

combined team of fourth and fifth grade students. However, strong interest quickly made

it clear that teams of this nature would be too large, limiting playing time for participants. Recognizing this concern, organizers divided the program into separate fourth and fifth grade divisions. Thanks to great community enthusiasm (and the strong partnerships in place), it seemed that everybody wanted to help. As a result, the required adjustments to make this possible, such as additional fields and coaches, were implemented with minimal issues. This tournament restructuring ensured that all participants enjoyed a level playing field (in every sense of the phrase) and more playing time to enjoy the game.

The tournament structure itself guaranteed each team at least six games. Players thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to play on Porterfield Park, the same location where high school athletes compete. Enhancing the experience, Coach Bayless recruited some of his varsity players to help with tournament operations, including refereeing. Sharing the playing field with older student athletes was truly special for the elementary-aged participants. Reinforced by stands filled with parents, grandparents, and spectators sporting elementary school team colors, the atmosphere of school spirit, community pride, and healthy competition made a lasting impact on everyone involved.

Creative application of partnerships, effective use of existing resources, and igniting school pride at the elementary level were the primary innovative elements of the Flag Football Tournament. By working with school personnel in athletics and grounds, and allowing each to play to their strengths, Parks & Recreation was able to create an activity with an impact far beyond its investment.

This program demonstrated that when goals intersect and organizers find unity of purpose, great things can develop for the community. The simple desire to give the kids a new activity and an opportunity to play on the high school field removed many obstacles.

The energy was contagious; staff and volunteers seemed to answer the call whenever needed. Small details like championship rings and allowing each team to run through the high school's inflatable tunnel made the event special for participants, parents, and organizers alike.

The sport itself represented an innovative offering for our area. Outside of some activities held within the schools (such as PE classes), there had been no prior organized flag football program in Orange County, certainly not at the scale of the tournament. While chosen primarily to support interest in scholastic football opportunities, flag football had the further advantage of being something of a novelty. Redundancy would have come into play with other sports, as many youth organizations already offered established programs for those. Such duplicate efforts would have likely led to decreased interest and participation. Furthermore, any parent concerns related to contact football were alleviated by offering flag football.

In short, strong partnerships, and creative effort, allowed access to a diverse and talented support base and allowed both OCPR and school staff to play to their strengths and craft a meaningful event for our young athletes.

### **Cost, Financing, and Staffing**

It is notable that the tournament was not budgeted at all, since it was planned and organized mid-fiscal year. However, this did not become an obstacle for organizers. All necessary expenses, including team jerseys, trophies, medals, and championship rings were covered by the low \$30 participant registration fee, with the remaining surplus supporting the Orange County High School Football Team.

Unlike contact football, flag football does not require extensive equipment, either for players or fields. As a result, there were no other costs outside of staff time. Parks & Recreation already had the flags, and players provided their own mouth guards and cleats (soccer cleats were permitted for convenience). Field and facility preparation, outreach and communication, and more were all rolled into existing staff time or supported by volunteer effort.

Upon reflection, one of the most impressive elements of this program was the amount of impact made with minimal, even negligible expense. Its success clearly demonstrates that creativity, partnership, and applying the right skills in the right way have a much greater impact than funding alone.

### **Results, Impact, and a Model for other Localities**

Registration numbers for this program greatly exceeded expectations. Eighty-five participants registered in less than a month, which led to the reorganization of the tournament to facilitate separate fourth and fifth grade divisions. As a result, the new flag football tournament became OCPR's most popular activity of the season, even exceeding the consistently packed gymnastics program. Spectator turnout further demonstrated the value of the event. Based on the capacity of the stands, it was estimated that around 300 parents, grandparents, and other flag football enthusiasts came out to support the young athletes. The counts become even more impressive when one considers the event was developed mid-year, and nothing like it had been held before.

However, those who plan youth activities know that the true value of a program is not purely measured in participant numbers, even when those are impressive. The best metric is the joy it brings to the participants or community (in this case, both) and the lasting impact it makes. In that regard, the tournament set a new standard. “Everyone was happy,” said Recreation Programmer Jacob DeLoriea. “Even if they lost, you could just see their smiles from playing on the ‘big’ field,” he added. The sentiment was echoed by volunteer coaches online. One Facebook comment read, “These kids really brought it all Saturday!! I know us coaches couldn’t be prouder of them doing this with no experience and within one week of practice! We ready to run it back next year!” All participants received medals, and the winners received championship rings. The trophies went to the winning schools, to reside there until the following year’s contest (which we just held at the end of March). In their respective trophy cases, they served as a tangible reminder which helped foster interest throughout the school year. Our 2026 event proved it; participant numbers grew even further!

Finally, the low-cost implementation of the program allowed for a staggering return on investment for the community. Thanks to partnerships, volunteerism, and effective use of existing resources, OCPR was able to deliver a brand-new athletic program in an unserved niche. The event served to address school interest in promoting scholastic athletics, while simultaneously establishing the Parks & Recreation Department as a provider, not just supporter, of youth sports programs. In short, it was a touchdown.

Organizers believe this program would be readily applicable for other localities anxious to establish or expand their youth sports programs. Since most counties have both a parks & recreation department and a public school system, the framework is likely

already in place. The low cost and novelty of the program make it ideal for building stronger connections between a school system and locality's departments. Building school spirit at the elementary level, and encouraging young athletes, is something everyone can get behind. Once clarity and unity are established, the sky is the limit. Minor adjustments may be necessary depending on the number of schools, classes, etc. Our staff are ready and willing to discuss the effort at length with those interested in replicating its success.



*Figure 4: Each of our four public elementary schools fielded two teams at the event!*



*Figure 5: Flag football reinforces many of the same fundamentals as contact (or tackle) football.*



*Figure 6: Championship rings and traveling trophies helped create lasting interest which helped the 2026 event grow even larger!*