

Courtesy Cars

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) – When Steve Alford or Dan McCarney drive to a speaking engagement, show a recruit around town or just go to the store, they can hop in a car given to them simply because of who they are – coaches in big-time athletic programs.

Like other schools across the country, Iowa, Iowa State and Northern Iowa put many of their coaches and athletic department administrators in cars donated by dealers.

It's a nice perk. Not even university vice presidents and deans have such an arrangement. But athletic officials say there's also a practical side to their courtesy car programs.

"It's a cost saving for us because we're not buying the cars," said Les Steenlage, an assistant athletic director who runs the program at Iowa. "It's meeting the needs of our people and providing a vehicle that fits the purpose of the job.

"A marketing person spends a lot of time on the road. They shouldn't have to put that on their own vehicle."

Iowa gets cars from 59 dealers across the state. There are 72 to 75 cars in the program at any one time, Steenlage said.

Currently, at least one car is assigned to every Iowa sport except field hockey and cross country. The football staff has 12 cars, men's basketball six and women's basketball five.

Iowa State has 35 cars from 29 dealers and not every head coach gets one, though most football and basketball assistants do. Northern Iowa works with 17 dealers who provide 27 cars. Each head coach at UNI is offered a car, though some have turned them down and allowed assistants to get them instead, assistant athletic director Steve Gearhart said.

"The courtesy car program for us is huge and is greatly appreciated," Gearhart said. "If we had to buy those cars it would be cost prohibitive, or if we had to rent from a company. It's a huge savings for us."

Steenlage said he wasn't aware of any program that actually buys cars for coaches, though some may provide a stipend to cover expenses if a vehicle isn't available for a particular coach.

"We've tried to stay away from that at Iowa," Steenlage said. "Once you're doing that, it actually costs the department."

At Iowa State and Northern Iowa, the only administrator on the academic side who gets a car is the president. Iowa President David Skorton receives a \$600 a month vehicle allowance, but he has donated that to a need-based scholarship for a student, university spokesman Steve Parrot said.

As the Iowa schools indicate, the number of cars donated varies from place to place. Nebraska gives about 100 free cars, including some for spouses. Spouses at the Iowa schools are allowed to drive the courtesy cars but not get their own.

Dealers who donate cars to the Iowa schools retain ownership of the vehicles. The coaches and administrators who drive them must pay for the insurance and maintenance and must keep track of personal miles for tax purposes.

A dealer can ask for the car back at any time to sell it and then will provide a replacement. Coaches who have to drive a lot might swap several cars in a year. Others need only one.

"Typically, they're not brand new cars," said Gary Thomas, president of the Iowa Automobile Dealers Association. "They might be the current model year, but they're likely to have 15,000 to 25,000 miles on them when they're given to a coach.

"If a car has 20,000 miles, a dealer might say when it has 30,000 on it, give it to me and we'll get you another one."

Some high-profile coaches and administrators do get new cars because appearances can be important in recruiting.

"Those young people do look," Steenlage said. "They look at what the head coach might be driving. It shouldn't matter, but it does."

Courtesy cars tend to be mid-sized to full-sized vehicles. Some staffers, such as trainers, are given vans because they're more suitable to the job. Others prefer a compact car.

McCarney, the football coach at Iowa State, drives an SUV. So does Alford, the basketball coach at Iowa. Iowa football coach Kirk Ferentz and athletic director Bob Bowers also have SUVs.

"Our vehicles aren't extravagant," Gearhart said. "I can unequivocally tell you that none of our coaches is driving a Lexus. But I'm not here to say they're junkers. They're very nice. There's not a vehicle in our fleet that I wouldn't hesitate to use."

Dealers in the Iowa program, which began in 1967, do not receive free tickets but are given a higher priority if they want to buy tickets, Steenlage said. They also get priority parking.

Iowa State's dealers receive four free season tickets that can be used for football or basketball or split between the two. At Northern Iowa, the car dealers get four free season tickets to any sport for which the university charges admission.

Thomas said his association recently surveyed members on the courtesy car programs and "90 percent said there's not a lot in it for us. They do it because they're good corporate

citizens and to help the universities."

Tom Kroeschell, athletic department spokesman at Iowa State, said having the cars available free of charge more than offsets the lost revenue from giving away tickets.

"I think if you look around the country, it affirms that observation," Kroeschell said. "I don't know of many athletic programs anywhere in Division I that don't have a car program."