

The LaSalle-Peru High School Howard Fellows Stadium -

75-Plus Years of Football-Playing History

Early History of the Site

Football first started at LPHS in 1909 and up until the mid-1930s, games were played on Matthiesen Field, a space just southwest of the school building where the running track now exists. As early as 1900, however, less-regulated football was still contested, sometimes with faculty members helping to fill roster shortages. During the mid-1930s time of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal incentives in the midst of the Great Depression, the school board was eager to act on a new outdoor venue. Through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), funds became available for the construction of new stadiums, and the LPHS project became one of some 3,300 new facilities built nationwide. Through the generosity of the Western Clock Company, otherwise known as Westclox, land southwest of the original playing field was donated to the school. This company, located in Peru, IL, opened in 1884 and was a major employer in the north central part of the state, boasting a workforce of over 4,000 in 1956, but closed in 1980. The plot was largely an unused, unsightly ravine containing tangled brush and discarded debris, but architects envisioned the advantage of utilizing the natural bowl-like setting. At the time of completion, in the late 1930s, this venue was considered to be one of WPA's prize projects.

LWN Phoenix Connection to the Stadium

Head Coach George Czart actually has a link to the storied LPHS stadium. In the very early 1980s, Coach Czart was a junior college student-football athlete at Joliet JC. Illinois Valley Community College, from out in LaSalle County, Illinois belonged to the same football conference as JJC. In addition, IVCC, during the times it had a football program before dropping it in the late 1990s, played their home games at the high school field. Coach played on a special JJC squad that handed IVCC only its 2nd loss in a 19-game span, in the last game of the 1980 season in Joliet. The very next week, however, in the opening round of the playoffs at the LPHS stadium, IVCC knocked out the Joliet Wolves to end Coach George's season. Now, less than a handful of junior colleges in Illinois still compete in NJCAA football, unlike some other states, such as California and Texas, in particular.

Original Stadium Construction

The donated property value was \$62,000 with project costs estimated at \$313,000 and all but 15% was to be funded by the federal government. Work began in late November of 1935 and due to the scarcity of work in those severe economic times, the average laborer was allowed only 40 hours per month, at a wage of \$1 an hour. Project employment topped out at about 380 men. Understandably, progress was slow and tedious with setbacks like cave-ins resulting from ravine side-cutting and bottom-widening to the point that a power shovel was approved by the WPA. Ultimately, stadium amenities included: concrete footings, heated locker room with showers, seating in excess of 4,000 (over 95% of which exists on the east side), heated aluminum press box with telephone, electric clock, and illuminated scoreboard. The stadium opened for its 1st game on 10/1/1937 with LP hosting Joliet HS in a Big Seven Conference

match-up. Other members of the Big 7 football league at the time included: East and West Aurora, Freeport, Elgin, and Rockford.

Howard Fellows and LPHS

Howard “Foxy” Fellows began his coaching career at the school in 1913 and became athletic director in 1928, a position he held until retirement in 1959. In addition, Fellows was also instrumental to the initiation of the Illinois Valley Community College intercollegiate athletic program in 1928. In 1913, the “Red and Green” athletic program at LP consisted of: football, basketball, track, swimming and tennis. The school joined the previously-mentioned Big Seven Conference in 1935, adopting for the first time its name “Cavaliers,” which it uses to this day. This designation is in honor of Frenchmen Chevalier de LaSalle who was a Great Lakes explorer from the 1600s. When Rockford HS split for the 1940-41 school year, the conference became the Big 8. In 1963, shortly after Fellows’ departure, LPHS joined the North Central Illinois Conference (NCIC) where it resided until recently becoming part of the 2-division Northern Illinois Big 12 Conference for the 2010-2011 season. The football stadium took on the Howard Fellows name in 1976 after a re-dedication ceremony following flood repairs to the site. Excessive rains during 1974 had produced debris that clogged a drain running beneath the field, causing the former ravine to hold water and create a small lake leading to extreme damage to the facility.

Mid-1990s renovation

In the summer of 1994, stadium problems of bleacher deterioration, leaning walls, crumbling concrete, safety issues, and handicap-accessibility all warranted major repairs. The cost of a new stadium was projected as equal to the cost of renovation, so the latter choice was made and integrity of the historic stadium would remain. In March of 1995, demolition began and LPHS made arrangements to play its home games at Richard Nesti Stadium of the Red Devils from Hall HS in nearby Spring Valley. IVCC, still playing football at the time before dropping the sport soon after, moved its home schedule to Ottawa-Marquette HS, after considering St. Bede Academy, also. The original project estimate of \$1.3 million ballooned to \$2.2 million as additional repairs, particularly to the west wall and field lights, became necessary. Concrete cost alone totaled \$1 million for restoration, pre-casts, and new pourings that were required. The project was funded by the combination of the building fund, life/safety money, and booster contributions. “Wall of Honor” tiles were made available for recognition of donations to the cause. The 2 main interruptions to completion progress involved late discovery of a missing vertical support column and delivery of mis-measured bleacher components. On August 25, 1996 a 3-hour re-dedication ceremony occurred in advance of an anticipated Week 3 opening home game. On September 13th, the 1st game was held as LPHS ran their record to 3-0 at the refurbished stadium with a 26-12 victory over the Galesburg Silver Streaks. The gridiron currently remains the natural turf playing surface used since inception.

Stadium Photos

See “L-PHS STADIUM THEN” AND “L-PHS STADIUM NOW” tabs for former and current views of the west side stands.

