

Building communities — a yard at a time

Teams bring fans together under the Friday night lights

Merle Wilberding



A few years ago, *Friday Night Lights* was a best-selling book and a successful movie. The story was about the culture of high school football in Odessa, Texas, and how it infected the players, their families and their community. Its success embodied a culture that is pervading life

throughout the United States. As I saw this fall, that culture also exists in our communities, but in a far more measured scale, a scale that keeps football a part of life, not life itself.

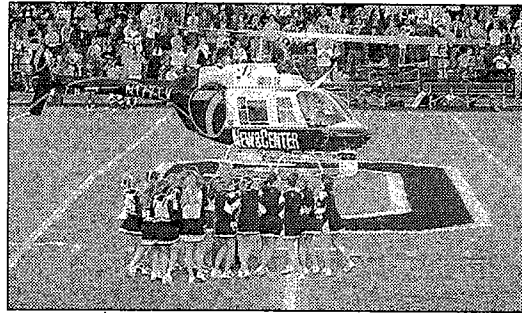
This fall, I watched a dozen or so area high school football games under the Friday night lights. What I saw was not just the teams battling to win a game for their school, a yard at a time. I saw fans and families building their respective communities, a yard at a time, as they connected their yards to the schools with banners, ribbons and Friday night backyard barbecues.

At each game, I saw a certain spirit rising from deep traditions of the past, bringing families and communities together again. Anyone who has been to a Valley View game will long remember the community spirit that erupts from the Valley View grandstand.

In varying degrees, I saw that same spirit everywhere. In Versailles, the Tigers and their fans marched with pride and patriotism to midfield as a local Boy Scout troop presented the colors for the national anthem. It seemed like the whole town was outfitted in orange, especially the homes whose front porches overlooked the field. Yet even those spirited fans quickly yielded and helped remove traffic barriers so that an injured Oakwood player could be driven to the hospital.

On another evening, as I was walking through the parking lot near the Carlisle stadium, I couldn't help but notice the many fans tailgating. The smell of hamburgers on the grill was in the air and pride was in their hearts. At Northridge, the spirit of the Polar Bears warmed up a very cool evening, effectively reducing the adjacent Interstate 75 traffic to a locker room din. At Bellbrook, even a cold, drizzling rain throughout the game did not dampen the spirit of the teams, the cheerleaders, or even the homecoming queen.

The Friday night lights shine especially bright — more like spotlights — when the game is the *Dayton Daily News'* Game of the Week. At Oakwood, the street between the school and the football field was shut down, and the party atmosphere kicked off as soon as the newspaper's RV arrived,



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MIKE HARTSOCK and Chopper 7 arrive at Oakwood's Mack Hummon Field for the 'Dayton Daily News' Game of the Week on Sept. 30. The Spartans won, 38-21.

complete with disc jockey, stereo speakers, and lots of giveaways. Before the game's start, Mike Hartsock and the Chopper 7 helicopter swooped down on midfield to hand out game balls. The Oakwood band carried the party into half-time, complete with grass skirts and surfboards as they played Beach Boy favorites like *Little Deuce Coupe* and *Surfin' Safari*.

This game ended, as all games end, with a winner and a loser. Both sides converged at midfield to give mutual congratulations for a game well played, albeit the winning team always seemed to have a bit of a swagger, while the losing team had a more muted rhythm. The teams left the field, and the band played on.

The lessons for the night become the lessons for life. Perform to the best of your ability; enjoy success with a measure of respect for the other side; and accept a loss with a determination to do better next time.

The culture of our communities' Friday night lights says a lot about our core values. These values weave families into their communities' history. They do this by erecting yard signs, by grilling hamburgers, by being there after the cheering stops, and by actively participating in all the other things that go with the program. The high school players become the heroes of the younger children, the alumni connect to the current players at homecoming, and fans of all ages get caught up in the community spirit. These experiences become the traditions.

So, even as the season winds up, all of the teams have a right to celebrate, and that includes their families and fans. They have used the Friday night lights to build their communities, a yard at a time.

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