



All-Star Football Game Brings Out Best in Players, Fans

By Bill Gosse

Posted July 26, 2008

More than 100 players and coaches gathered to play some football before heading to college or back to high school to coach another season at the 32nd Wisconsin Football Coaches Association All-Star Game on July 19 at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh's Titan Stadium.

After announcing my retirement as an official after last season's state championship game, I knew when the time came I'd get the itch to officiate again. In the spirit of unretiring, I had the honor of officiating with my old crew one more time at the all-star game.

I never had officiated or attended this game before, so I wasn't quite sure what to expect. I had heard bits and pieces from my brother-in-law, who played in the contest many years ago.

With only a week to practice a new offense or defense and to get to know everybody, including arch-rivals, challenges could be anticipated. Having played in the past in full-contact alumni games in my hometown, perhaps a similar defense-oriented, low-scoring affair would evolve.

As we approached the stadium well in advance of kick-off, fans had already begun to assemble and tailgate – a typical big-game Friday night atmosphere.

We were escorted to our dressing area under the stadium. Located in a room behind one of the squads, we walked among players getting ready to go out for pre-game warm-ups. I could tell several players from different schools had bonded with ceremonial Mohawk haircuts. The tradition of loading one's helmet with logos from other teams was evident throughout the locker room. My excitement began to build.

Even though this game meant “nothing” you could tell each and every one of these players was pumped to represent their community, their school and their family in a positive way. They were proud to be there and recognized it as a privilege. This was their last opportunity to play football as a high school athlete. Some never will play organized football again.

As we worked our way to the field, people were streaming into the stands. Anticipation for a great game was in the air.

The U.S. Army provided the final pre-game excitement when three parachutists zigzagged across the sky – one of them toting our grand old flag.

Are you ready for some football? I sure was.

Surprisingly, the game turned out to be a very close, well-fought game, with only a few grumblings over “missed calls,” and one overly-aggressive out-of-bounds play.

Players helped each other up after hard hits and broken-up passes. Big runs and long pass plays dotted throughout. Coaches instructed with calm tones and encouraging pitches. There even was time to smile and ask officials how summer vacations were going. Foul language was lost.

What a refreshing atmosphere.

The only thing absent was the win-at-all-costs mentality from fans and coaches, and I don't think anyone missed it.