



## The View from Right Field

by Rick Ohler

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**Homecoming on Terra Firma**

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**M**y ongoing Wednesday morning residencies (10-11 a.m. or so) at *The Advertiser* headquarters have begun to attract some visitors to the front room round table. I enjoy sharing the Main Street office of the world's best hometown newspaper with current readers and maybe some who will become readers. It ain't easy being a newspaper these days—print or online, but I figure that if folks get the idea that the local newspaper that we put out is really *their* newspaper, maybe they'll realize its intrinsic (RIP Snake) value. After all, a small town thrives on cohesiveness., I'm not talking about the kind of false cohesiveness that bounces around cyberspace on social media before it comes down to earth, making us technically more connected but actually more lonely. I'm talking about the kind of cohesiveness and commonality of purpose that exists among its citizens right here on *terra firma*. And where better to build cohesiveness than in the pages of a weekly publication dedicated wholly to community?

I'm finding that each of my guests visits me with a unique story and point of view. Some come with questions for me to answer. Occasionally, I can put them on the track to find the answer. A couple of guests have needed some help getting started with their own writing, and they can count on me to, if nothing else, give them a manageable assignment to bring in during a future Wednesday. I find that wanting to write and actually writing are very different things, so a short writing task provides an undaunting way to start. Many are appreciative of the work that we ("we" meaning the dozen professionals on the staff that publishes the paper, of which I am the smallest part) do. As is only fitting, however, there are bound to be complaints and since I'm in the front of the building on Wednesday mornings, I get them.

Two Wednesdays ago, the grandparents of an East Aurora High School athlete came in with a complaint that they disguised nicely as a suggestion. "How come there's so much stuff in the paper about football and not the other sports? Especially when the

football team is losing most of its games? There are a lot of kids playing sports like field hockey that never get any coverage.”

It wasn’t immediately clear if they understood that I was the guilty party who writes “so much stuff” about football, but I didn’t hesitate to own up to it. “That would be me, writing about football every week, spinning it our way whether we win (which hasn’t happened at a home game for a couple of years) or lose by several touchdowns” (which has happened all too often).” I explained as best I could that we didn’t have the staff to cover all the sports—there are 12 fall varsity sports—and that we encouraged coaches, players, parents, booster clubs, journalism students at the high school—anyone, really—to send us scores and highlights, but that they rarely did. Photographer Marty Wangelin does a yeoman’s job of getting to home games for as many sports as he can, but he can’t be all over the town all of the time. I offered to email the coaches and the athletic directors to ask them to keep in touch, which I did, without much response. But then I tried to justify to the grandparents why I write “so much stuff” about football, which brings me, at long last, to the point of this week’s musing from Right Field.

I love attending all high school athletic competitions, regardless of the sport. Of course, baseball is No. 1—everybody knows that—but all the rest are tied for second place. There’s a genuineness to competition at the high school level that is missing as soon as college scholarships or professional contracts get involved. As the late, great WBEN sportscaster Stan Barron said at an EA Boys and Girls Club Awards Banquet in 1983, “I’d rather see a high school game in person than watch a pro game on TV any day.”

And high school football games, unlike any other sport, become not only spectacles, but community events and gathering places, akin to a Fourth of July parade. Football, for all its shortcomings and detractors, is the one sport that lends itself to a celebration of much more than two teams going at it.

Take last Friday’s Homecoming game, for instance, that pitted our Blue Devils against Lewiston-Porter. It game was disaapointing, with our guys never getting their footing even though they played their hearts out. They did, however, provide the setting for a community gathering that went well beyond the four quarters of a football game.

Before the game, the EA-Holland Football Boosters hosted a tailgate party with frivolity and food trucks. As the game approached, up the walkway from the gymnasium came the student jazz band, playing merrily like pied pipers. By game time the new grandstands were completely full of students, parents, EAHS alumni, grandparents and townsfolk. The snack shack dished out Sahlen’s hot dogs. It was a festive atmosphere.

Then, from the north end zone came the color guard from the East Aurora American Legion, 12 strong in this their 10<sup>th</sup> year of presenting the colors of the U.S.A. and the

branches of the Armed Forces. Marching to midfield, they were introduced by the longtime stentorian voice of the Blue Devils, Pat “Doc” Keem. On hand this week were Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq war-era veterans Charlie Schack and Gary Wald of the U.S. Navy, Norm and Jim Suttell and Don Haney from the Air Force, and Bill Wright, Gary Kingston, Alex Forhecz, Bill Lewis, Keith Bender, Lt. Col. Elizabeth Raleigh, and Post Cmdr. Tom Ricci from the U.S. Army. They marched in the Missing Man Formation in honor of recently fallen comrade Navy veteran Bruce Capell. As the color guard stood at attention on the 50-yard line, high school student Nicole Egloff belted out a stirring rendition of the national anthem. Without warning or prompting, the student body joined in the singing, a first in my 15 years covering Blue Devils football.

At halftime, three separate events took place in a jam-packed 20 minutes. Varsity football 12<sup>th</sup> graders Finn O’Brien, Brandon Dunn, Austin Sitarek, Joe Kenefick, Toby Abramo, Lucas Grad and Sebastian Stencil-DeGweck joined parents at midfield as announcer Keem read words of thanks that the players had composed. Then the 2018 honorees of East Aurora High School Athletic Hall of Fame, Len Macaluso, class of 1926; Bill Stradtman, class of 1953; Mark Hulme, class of 1979; and Michelle Stiles, class of 1981, were saluted by the fans in the grandstand and the SRO crowd along the sidelines. Also at halftime, the Homecoming king, Blue Devil lineman Lucas Grad and queen Lucy Creighton and their court were honored. Can you imagine these celebrations taking place anywhere but halftime at a football game?

Sure, it would have been nice to win the game, but the fans stayed to the end, cheering ferociously (and cohesively) as one body along with our acrobatic and spirited cheerleaders and warming each other with their sheer mass on the chilly October night.

As long as they’ll have me, I’ll keep covering the football games and celebrating the sense of community cohesiveness that they engender. And I promise that I’ll get to more of the other 22 high schools sports as often as I can.