



SPORTSMANSHIP APPRECIATION WEEK

OCT 18-24TH

Football Teams Showcase Sportsmanship in Unexpected Matchups

As a member of the North Jersey Interscholastic Conference, Wood-Ridge is used to playing football opponents from within a tight circle around its Bergen County home.

The weekend of Sept. 24-25 was going to be no different for the Blue Devils, who were set to oppose nearby St. Mary's (Rutherford) in a conference matchup.

Instead, Wood-Ridge was forced to search for a new opponent just days prior, after learning that St. Mary's was low on player numbers and would not be able to compete that week.

"We found out on a Tuesday that St. Mary's would be cancelling the game due to a lack of numbers," said Wood-Ridge athletic director Marc Sinclair. "After speaking with the coaching staff, we decided that a game would be beneficial. We confirmed the game with New Egypt that night."

That's New Egypt, from inland Ocean County, and more than 70 miles away from home, following a bus ride on a Friday on New Jersey roads to boot.

"We hit traffic, so it took us about 1 hour and 45 minutes to arrive," Sinclair said. "It was certainly a unique situation as our kids are not used to traveling through corn fields and sod farms."

Aside from seeing a different part of the state, Wood-Ridge also experienced something else on its unexpected journey: well-appreciated hospitality from New Egypt.

They were great hosts," Sinclair said.

"All our teams and community members pitch in to make all of our home games special in any sport," New Egypt athletic director Ken Mason said. "As an example, on tennis Senior Day, we shared pizza with Moorestown after the match. It is a right thing to do and we like our student-athletes to respect our opponents win or lose."

That commitment reflects the overall intent of the initial NJSIAA Sportsmanship Week, sponsored by JAG-One Physical Therapy, from Oct. 18-24. While good sportsmanship should be a priority every day, the week is designed for all schools, teams and athletes celebrate and spotlight the ideals and principles of sportsmanship and mutual respect between all participants in sports.

The matchup between Wood-Ridge and New Egypt, which the hosts won, 27-0, was not the only football game this fall scheduled between uncommon opponents because of last minute cancellations.

Other examples include the last-minute St. Joseph (Montvale) at Phillipsburg game on Sept. 4, the Hudson Catholic at Watchung Hills contest on Sept. 5, the Willingboro at New Providence game on Sept. 18, and Middlesex at Harrison matchup on Oct. 8.

And in each instance, teams were not only appreciative for the chance to play, but additionally grateful for the mutual respect shown from the moment of arrival right through the post-game handshakes.

For example, Willingboro was searching after losing a date against Penns Grove a couple of days before kickoff. As a strong Group 2 team, linking up someone at that late juncture figured to be hard. But New Providence, another Group 2 that's 75 miles away, agreed to play.

Willingboro gladly made the trip from Burlington County to Union County for the opportunity. Not only did it win, 26-7, it also experienced first-class treatment from its hosts.

"New Providence allowed us access into their school for the football team and our cheerleaders," Willingboro athletic director Leon Owen said. "Their staff was extremely open and treated us like we were the home team. The training staff and event staff continually asked if we needed anything throughout the game and filled our water jugs during halftime. At the conclusion of the game, the coaches for New Providence respectfully praised the work our coaching staff has done with our group of young men. The New Providence coaching staff displayed the utmost professionalism and class."

Owen saw other examples of how the game reflected the values of sportsmanship.

"Given the nature of power points and trying to schedule games that will ultimately help your program, New Providence could have waited for another opponent to play against," Owen said. "But their coaching staff and athletic director took on a challenging game to better their student-athletes and football program. The contest was one that would normally never occur during a regular season, due to the schools being so far apart in distance. One example of both programs' level of respect were multiple minor injuries that stopped the game, and each opposing bench helped the player that was injured. They provided water and assisted the training staff in any capacity needed. I believe the fans enjoyed this matchup and everyone respected the game and their opponent."



Photo credit: Guy Kipp/TAP