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HIGH SCHOOLS

Detroit school set to get 'Friday Night Lights' football revival on Titan Field



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Hundreds of high school football teams will open another season this week across Michigan, but the lights could shine brightest Friday at McNichols and Livernois on the University of Detroit Mercy's Titan Field.

The field has been home to a rich tradition of football, including the Detroit Lions' first Thanksgiving Day football game in 1934 and the final season of UDM's football team, which defeated Virginia Military Institute 28-7 in November 1964.

Nearly 60 years later, the storied heritage will be resurrected when the Loyola High School Bulldogs take on the Country Day Yellowjackets at their new home field. The private Catholic Detroit high school has been playing their games for years on Saturday afternoons on suburban football fields.

At practice earlier this week on a pockmarked field behind Loyola High School, running back Braylon McDonald said it's amazing that the team finally has a city field — Titan Field, no less — to call home.

"It will help us get the 'Friday night lights' experience," said McDonald. "It's what everybody around the world does. High school football is meant to be played on Friday nights."

Starting quarterback Daniel Kent, 16, added that he and the rest of the team can hardly wait, especially since they are part of a revival of an important football tradition in Detroit.

"It feels amazing," said Kent, a senior from Detroit. "We're bringing football back to the city. It's a statement."

A new tradition begins

The genesis of the football revival at the University of Detroit Mercy began in 2015 when alumni were lobbying the school to bring back football, said Athletic Director Robert Vowels.

Four years later, the university installed permanent lighting on Titan Field as part of its \$100 million fundraising effort that was completed in 2019.

Until then, lights had not been part of UDM's outdoor athletic facilities since 1971. The university had not hosted an outdoor varsity athletic event at night since 1964, when the university football team played its last game.

Titan Field was used for training and offseason workouts for UDM's varsity men's and women's soccer and men's and women's lacrosse programs.

After nearly 30 donors funded the \$600,000 lighting project, the lights shone over the night games played by the soccer teams for the first time in September 2019.

The discussion about playing football remained on the table, but it took a different turn.

Vowels said another UDM football team is not financially feasible, so discussions began with local high schools. UDM's board chair, Michael McNamara, brokered conversations with the president and other officials at Loyola High School, an all-male school run by the Jesuits and Archdiocese of Detroit.

Loyola's football team only has a grassy patch outside its school property that is only suitable for practice. The Bulldogs had been playing at football field venues such as Bishop Foley Catholic High School in Madison Heights.

"They needed a permanent home," Vowels said.

Donations pave the way

Around that time, a Grosse Pointe Woods family was thinking of a way to honor their father, William Listman, a former UDM running back and longtime Detroit lawyer who died in 2020.

His children, Robert and William Listman, and Jennifer Barthel remembered his loyalty to the university and made a donation to help UDM buy portable field goal posts for the field. The family will be honored for their donation in September.

"We couldn't be more happy about football returning to the University of Detroit," said William Listman, a lawyer in Mount Clemens.

Monday was the first day of the new school year at Loyola High School.

"It's been the talk of the school day: The first football game is Friday," said Dennis Morey, athletic director of Loyola High School. "Our community is really, really excited."

Mike Williams, a senior on the football team, said everyone at the school will be coming out to cheer on the team.

"Friday night lights? It will be amazing," said Williams. "We get to live up to all the hype and get to see everybody out there. You can show everybody what you got, put your team on notice for the entire state."

The \$15,000 goal posts arrived Thursday and are ready for Friday night's game.

"The opportunity to have competitive football on campus in 50 years will be an exciting venture for Detroit Mercy and Loyola High School," Vowels said. "Titan Field already has its place in Detroit history. ... I am excited to see a new tradition begin with another Jesuit institution this year."

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