



Morristown takes the field on Sunday. Morristown defeated Chatham, 38-7. CHRIS PEDOTA/NORTHJERSEY.COM

Who needs Friday Night Lights?

Saturday football still a tradition at some New Jersey schools

Jane Havsy

Morristown Daily Record
USA TODAY NETWORK – NEW JERSEY

Are bagels and juice the breakfast of champions? The Woodbury football team hopes to find out.

While most New Jersey football teams strap on the pads and buckle chinstraps on Friday night, Woodbury is one of the few teams to host home games on Saturdays. And at Woodbury, kickoff comes early – usually 10:30 a.m.

It's a tradition that dates back as long

as head coach Anthony Reagan can remember. He is a Woodbury graduate, and his staff includes alumni dating back to the 1980s. All played in daylight, a different atmosphere Reagan

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said has become “a rite of passage ... part of the Woodbury family.”

Friday night without lights

The idea of football equaling “Friday Night Lights” has become a national myth, inspiring a book, movie, and television series based on Odessa (Texas) Permian’s 1990 season. But not every high school varsity football team kicks off on Fridays.

Though it’s a growing trend in New Jersey, there are schools where day games are still the standard.

Though no coach contacted by the USA TODAY NETWORK New Jersey had statistical evidence, they all believe playing in daylight can be a home-field advantage, shaking opponents out of their night-owl comfort zone.

Players on Saturday squads are already accustomed to the early-morning alarm clock, when Friday-night teams are normally “licking their wounds and watching film,” like Colts Neck coach Matt Ahearn used to do when he was defensive coordinator at Red Bank Catholic.

The Woodbury coaching staff sets up continental breakfast for the players at 8 a.m. – bagels, fruit and orange juice. The team meal is at 9:30 at Bergenfield, which usually kicks off at 1 p.m. Colts Neck and Marlboro both moved their kickoff times up to noon last fall, “just a little thing to throw off the timing of everybody else,” Ahearn said.

“I’m a very energetic person. I find myself trying to help them in that cause to the best of my ability,” Reagan said. “Not that I’m Knute Rockne, but you kind of have to be enthused when you’re playing that early in the morning.”

Despite the potential struggle to get high school student-athletes out of bed early on a Saturday, no team has a Friday night curfew. In fact, watching other teams play on Fridays is encouraged, both as an opportunity to scout and for bonding.

Woodbury hosts a team dinner be-



Quinn Kelly of Chatham tackles Lance Davis of Morristown. Neither Morristown nor Chatham have lights on their high school fields.

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fore the players go to a game together, but Reagan hopes they’re in bed by 10 p.m. – and in the locker room around 8 a.m. the next morning to “get into that football mode” before the walk-through and last-minute preparation. Lovey’s Pizza & Grill in Morris Plains caters Morristown’s Unity Dinners for the whole football program and cheerleaders on the nights before games, each geared toward a particular theme.

“If (football) is important to them, they have to hydrate and eat the right foods,” Ahearn said. “Rest is one component of being ready to play in the game. If it’s important to them, they’re going to do it.”

If the early morning wake-up call presents trouble for players, going on the road on Friday the week after a Saturday home game is a challenge for even the most seasoned coach, particularly if the opponent presents unusual wrinkles. As the former defensive coordinator at Red Bank Catholic – which plays on Friday nights – Ahearn likes to “keep it simple”

when Colts Neck has to shift schedules.

“On Friday, it does feel a little bit rushed at times,” said Rob Violante, who is in his ninth season at Bergenfield. “There’s a sense of urgency. Certain things you wouldn’t do on a Wednesday, you move up to Tuesday. A lot of things you wouldn’t get to until later in the week when you’re playing a home game get moved up.”

Staying in the dark?

Attendance on Saturdays certainly isn’t the same as on Friday night unless there’s a rival in town.

At Woodbury, “the older die-hards in blue and gold” and the band greet the teams for warmups. Violante praised Bergenfield’s “enormous band” for its contributions to a spirited game-day environment.

Part of Colts Neck’s tradition is to recognize a player “who had a good week in practice and did well in school that week” with the task of carrying the cou-

gar flag while leading the team onto the field.

Nearly every coach interviewed would like to have both artificial turf and lights, regardless of school tradition. The lure of Friday Night Lights is powerful, and not just for the players.

“There’s definitely a different type of excitement on a Friday night,” Morristown head coach John Power said. “When you have a team that’s ready to go, a bunch of kids who want to compete together, whether it’s Friday night or Saturday afternoon, it’s time to go.”

Neither Morris Knolls nor Morris Hills have lights, though each school usually rents them for a week during the fall. The annual rivalry game at Morris Knolls on Sept. 13 was played under the lights. But when the turf at both schools was renovated about five years ago, underground electrical conduits were laid out.

Morris Hills Regional District school business administrator Joann Gilman Auricchio said the four towns – Denville, Wharton, Rockaway Borough and Rockaway Township – were asked to contribute toward lights “because that will add a lot to the project, both in value and cost.” But there was no interest at the time. With the conduits in place, it is possible to add lights in the future without tearing up the turf.

A municipal lighting ordinance in Chatham has been far more controversial, inspiring litigation which dragged on from 2008 to April 2013. Cougar Field, which straddles Chatham, Chatham Township and Madison, was renovated in 2017 – but still only has the single week of temporary lights at the behest of nearby residents. Morristown, too, has homes just across the street from its turf stadium field.

“Everything about the stadium screams lights. That’s the only thing that’s missing,” Reagan said. “I love our program, but I’m also someone who likes to see things get modified for the betterment of the program. We can still keep our tradition, and join what is the state’s tradition, and pretty much the country’s: Friday Night Lights.”

Staff writer Jane Havsy: 973-428-6682; jhavsy@gannettnj.com;
www.dailyrecord.com/writerjane/