



John Gahner/The Hawk Eye

Karen Lyon, left, and Sandy Smith, both of Burlington, walk the track at Bracewell Stadium after work Thursday. "We try and walk a couple of miles every day, if possible," Smith said. While open to the public, the stadium sitting in a ravine is best known as site of Burlington High School football games and other athletic events. Bracewell Stadium in 1929 was site of the first night high school football game west of the Mississippi River.

Historic stadium welcomes another season

By Larry Lockhart

The Hawk Eye

The past is being remembered fondly in this, Iowa's sesquicentennial year.

Burlington has its fair share of history, and one distinctive bit of it returns to the spotlight tonight when high school night football returns to Bracewell Stadium for the 68th season. Burlington High School is scheduled to play its home opener at 8 p.m. today against Davenport Central. The sophomore game will get under way at 5:30.

How long has Bracewell been the site of BHS football?

The first night game was Sept. 27, 1929, a 13-6 win over Chicago Bowen before a crowd of 4,000 in the reclaimed ravine. It was the first high school night football game west of the Mississippi River, and only the second in the nation.

Leroy Pease of Burlington was in the crowd that night. A 100-pound high

school freshman who had just moved to Burlington from Peoria, he had aspirations of playing on the lighted field one day.

A retired BHS teacher, athletic director, principal and school board member, he did go on to play two years of varsity football for the Grayhounds, and two more years in Bracewell for Burlington Junior College.

"I remember Amos Dana," Pease said of the inaugural game. "He put on quite a show, offensively and defensively. Almost everybody played two ways in those days. You didn't have to wear a helmet then, and he played without one."

That was about a month before the stock market crash that plunged the United States into the Great Depression. Bracewell has survived not only the depression, but a world war, several smaller wars, the threat of nuclear war and changes in the way Americans live, work and play that most of us are far too

young to imagine.

Though it missed holding the nation's first night prep football game by eight days, Bracewell may have been the first high school stadium to have lights. The late Carl Johannessen, a long-time BHS coach who was an assistant coach on the Grayhound football team in 1929, told The Hawk Eye several years ago that the school's annual spring athletics festival was held under the lights at Bracewell in May 1929.

All the football players will wear helmets tonight, and many other things have changed since 1929. One thing probably hasn't changed much: the excitement.

"Words can't explain it," said junior defensive back DeWayne Osborn, whose first varsity start tonight also will be his first varsity game at Bracewell.

"I'm going to be pumped up," said junior defensive back Matt Springsteen, also a first-time starter tonight for his

Bracewell varsity debut.

Osborn and Springsteen both have played games at Bracewell before as members of the freshman and sophomore teams.

"That isn't the same, though," Osborn said. "There will be a lot more people, more intensity of play."

"It will be a whole new game," Springsteen agreed, "different from when you're a freshman or sophomore."

Both players admitted to being nervous about their varsity debut in Bracewell, but excited as well. Though each has only about a 10-year history of watching games in the storied stadium, since they were in elementary school, it's been a dream to walk down the ramp into the bowl with the band playing and the roar of a few thousand people rather than a few hundred.

There's a new manufactured acce-

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board by Clark Fieldhouse now, but at one time Bracewell had the first lighted, automatic scoreboard in the state.

The creation of school system engineer Earl Wiegand, now deceased, the 1944 model was activated by dials from old telephones that rang up numbers on the scoreboard. Wiegand told the Hawk Eye several years ago that the dial units were built in his basement, then the scoreboard was assembled in the seating plant using salvage materials.

The stadium wasn't named for longtime school superintendent Ray H. Bracewell until Sept. 10, 1954. Bracewell was BHS principal from 1920-37 before becoming superintendent. Described as an innovator who was quietly generous, Bracewell died of cancer shortly after the stadium was named for him. Legend has it he took out a personal loan to help finance the stadium when it was built.

The largest crowd ever at Bracewell Stadium was more than 7,000 for a 1951 game against Fairfield, according to former BHS athletic director Jack Wagner. Both teams entered the season finale unbeaten and were ranked second and third in the state. Burlington senior, 25-0, and was the mythical

FROM THE FRONT PAGE



Jonathan Brimmon/The Hawk Eye
Burlington school district employee Leon Yeager blows leaves and trash from the stands Thursday at Bracewell Stadium. Workers were preparing for Burlington High School's opening football game tonight against Davenport Central.

state champion in that pre-playoff season.

Bracewell has permanent seating for 3,249 fans — 2,625 on the west and 624 on the east.

Temporary bleachers can be moved in to add seating and may have spawned one of the biggest misconceptions about the stadium.

Johannsen, a longtime BHS track coach, explained several years ago that the stadium's track never passed through the end of Clark Fieldhouse.

Built in 1938-39 and named for school board member Charles Clark, the fieldhouse had portable bleachers at its south end for many years. Those

were moved through large doors and placed behind the north end zone for football games.

Though track meets were never run through the fieldhouse, its construction did alter the track and the football field. The track was originally 440 yards around, the standard distance in the pre-metric era of

track and field. That was shortened by about 50 feet when the fieldhouse was built, and the football field was shifted farther south.

Bracewell Stadium also has been the site of the short-lived Burlington Steamboat Bowl for NAIA colleges, with Iowa Wesleyan of Mount Pleasant appearing in the initial game in 1989, and Burlington Junior College games when the predecessor of Southeastern Community College fielded a team many years ago.

Prior to the stadium's construction, games were played at the old fairgrounds, where Wal-Mart is now located on the northwest corner of Agency Road and Roosevelt Avenue.

Land purchases at the Bracewell Stadium site began in 1919. The ravine once housed the Gilbert Hedge Lumber Company, which donated some of the land to the school district. A 22-inch layer of sawdust reportedly is now buried some 19 feet beneath the playing surface.

A fund drive to raise \$5,000 for the stadium was begun in 1920, and games were played there in 1920 and 1921. An average of about 500 people watched games those first two seasons — without benefit of bleachers.

A large concrete drainage tunnel contains the creek which once flowed through the ravine. The stadium and fieldhouse are constructed over that culvert.

Most of the construction for the stadium as it appears today took place in 1925 and 1926. Rock was blasted from the southeast corner and moved to the north end. The running track was built, along with the west-side bleachers.

A dense growth of mulberry and locust trees sprang up almost overnight, giving the stadium the character it retains to this day.

Bracewell, Johansen and others supervised boys' gym classes during the 1930s as students raked in 12 inches of topsoil over the clay field surface. The high school was only a couple of blocks away then in what is now known as the Apollo Building, current home of the alternative high school.

The center of the field then was raised 25 about 30 inches above the sidewalks, giving it a crown for drainage, and real grass was grown on the field for the first time.

The scoreboard was added for the 1944 season, and the east-side bleachers in 1949. The press box was constructed in 1970.

Bracewell himself admitted that the stadium complex was more intricate and expensive to build than most high school facilities. But the result is a place with charm, character and history far beyond a surface built down from a cornfield.