

## Across the state, prep football facilities have long served as community gathering points on autumn weekends. Here are some stories of how they became 'The Place To Be'

If you build it, will they come? Spectators and sportswriters at every level often romanticize the sports stadium. In Chicago, hope springs eternal for Cubs fans, as they reunite within the cozy confines of Wrigley Field. Red Wings faithful treasure winter nights at "The Joe." University of Michigan fans and school officials, numbering 110,000-plus, celebrate being part of "the largest crowd attending a college football game in America," at every home date at Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor. Passionate battles have been waged to save various sports cathedrals like Tiger Stadium and Chicago Stadium over the years.

At the high school level in Michigan, similar feelings permeate the air on Friday nights. From aluminum bleachers located on the edge of town to brick-and-mortar architectural marvels in the city, the facilities come in all shapes and sizes.

These athletic facilities are part of the pageantry that makes the prep game as thrilling as any professional or college athletic event. Memories are cast in these surroundings.

Reinforced concrete stadiums from as early as the 1920s, and Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects from the 1930s and 1940s survive and thrive in Michigan. For many fans, these classic designs offer features not found in modern multi-use facilities. Talk to a Muskegon High School aficionado about the band's postgame march through the "tunnel" following a home game at Hackley Stadium, or a Fordson follower about the old stadium in Dearborn. Quickly, you understand how the gridiron experience can differ. But what created the need for such memorials to athletic achievement?

Throughout the 1920s the popularity of the gridiron game grew exponentially. The rapid rise in interest was reflected throughout popular culture. Football was featured in literature, in movies, and in song. Along with the popularity came large masses of football fans, quickly taxing the existing athletic facilities

At the prep level in Michigan, the first city to act on the need for a larger facility was Bay City. Attendance at the 1924 season-ending game between Bay City Central and Flint Central – the outcome of which determined the Saginaw Valley championship and the mythical state title – overwhelmed Bay City's athletic field. Attendance was expected to reach 1,500 fans; instead an estimated crowd of 10,000 arrived.

"The crowd that turned out for that game is well remembered," reported the *Bay City Times Tribune* one year later, "as is the trouble that was experienced in seating them. Thousands of people were discouraged over conditions – there was but one small bleacher for

seating purposes and finally the crowd overflowed onto the field, making play difficult."

As a result, a number of businessmen from the city took it upon themselves to plan construction of an athletic stadium to handle the growing crowds. Ten months later, they proudly unveiled the result of their efforts: a \$45,000 structure featuring two stands of solid concrete with 16 rows of seats for 7,100 fans. At the time, the capacity ranked third in the state, behind the facilities of the University of Michigan and Michigan State University

The facility was unveiled to the public on Saturday, Sept. 26, 1925, for a gridiron contest between Bay City Central and Detroit Western. A crowd of 3,000 gathered for the season opener, won by Central, 14-0.

Elaborate dedication ceremonies were planned for the Saginaw Arthur Hill contest late in the season, but heavy rains forced cancellation of the event.

The ceremony was rescheduled for Thanksgiving Day against Pontiac Central, allowing many of the local businessmen who had helped with the planning, financing and creation of the stadium to attend the event. Stands were decorated in the school colors of purple and white, and a large speaker system was erected on the site to allow fans to listen to the speeches of the guests of honor.

Over 75 years later, the results of that fund raising drive are still on display. Rechristened Elmer Engel Stadium on Sept. 23, 1973, in honor of the school's longtime football mentor, over a million dollars have flowed into repair, renovation, and restoration of the facility. The results are indeed impressive.

In Jackson, high school officials opened a new high school and athletic complex in the fall of 1927. Built at a cost of \$100,000, Withington Stadium opened for gridiron use on Sept. 24 as Jackson faced Hastings.



**New prep stadiums such as Dearborn Fordson's (left) were constructed at a rapid rate in the 1920s, as football's popularity grew.**

**Hackley Field in Muskegon (opposite) was the site of this 1927 gridiron tilt, and has been home to the Muskegon Big Reds ever since. Bay City's facility (right), renamed Engel Stadium in 1973, was the largest prep stadium in the state when it opened in 1925.**

Named in honor of the Withington family, descendants of Jackson's Civil War hero, William Herbert Withington and donors of the property upon which the facility is built, the facility utilizes a classic horseshoe design. Featuring locker rooms for players, a ticket window, and an arched main entrance, the stadium was said to have a seating capacity of 10,000.

Two weeks later in the dedication contest played on Oct. 8, Jackson downed Detroit Central, 43-7, before a crowd of 6,500 who had gathered for a pregame ceremony.

After numerous renovations spanning 75 years, Withington still plays host to classic contests. Lights were added in 1931, and after years of debate, AstroTurf was installed in 1980 as part of a \$2.5 million renovation. The refurbished facility was christened in early September with a game between Jackson Parkside and Portage Northern, and rededicated before 2,000 spectators in November of 1980. Since that time, the site has hosted numerous MHSAA playoff games.

The 1920s represent a period of gridiron dominance for Muskegon High School. During the seven-year span 1920-26, Muskegon won or shared the mythical state championship four times. The success of the Big Reds, and the resulting demand for tickets brought to light the need for a new facility. It became apparent that the old wooden stands at Hackley Field needed attention.

"We walked out to the bleachers at the football field" recalled former Muskegon head coach C. Leo Redmond years later,

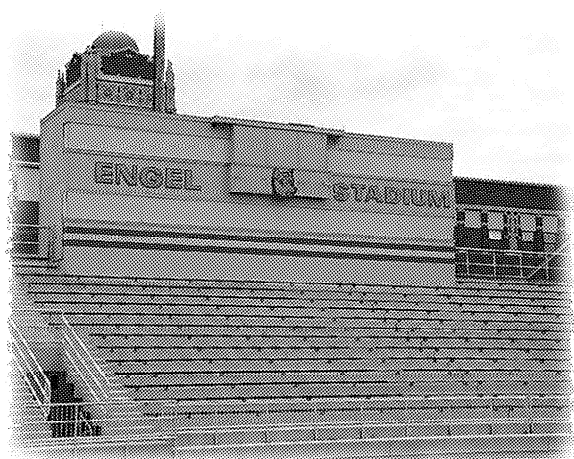
"the director of finances for athletics pulled out his pocket knife and pushed the blade completely into one of the wooden beams supporting the bleachers. 'Dry rot,' he said. They would fall down if they had to support another season."

A plan to replace the bleachers was publicly announced following the 1926 season at the football team's annual banquet in December. Students from the classes of 1927, 1928, 1929 and 1930 were asked to undertake the job of selling the bonds to the public.

"Principal John Craig talked to us Thursday night after practice," remembered Gont Miller, captain of the 1929 Big Reds. He said, 'We're going to ask you to get out and sell some bonds.' People really supported Big Red football. We sold all the bonds, and they built the stadium. It was quite an experience for a kid."

Work started on June 15, 1927, and was completed in time for the first game against Muskegon Heights on Saturday, Sept. 17, an 89-0 win that began a 10-0 season and another mythical state title. According to the files of Osborn Engineering, the concrete structure was completed in 24 days, July 20 to August 12.

On Nov. 17, 1928, Muskegon shared in the opening of another grand structure, this one in Dearborn. Located on the north side of Fordson High School, the concrete structure seated 5,000 and was designed to mimic the high school's English 16th Century Renaissance architecture. It featured electric heat and lighting in the press box and outside telephone service. The arcade at street level, which included steam-heated locker rooms for both teams and space for concession sales, could be closed with iron gates at each arch. Sadly, the stadium was removed in the



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1970s due to its deteriorating condition.

Keyworth Stadium in Hamtramck was the first WPA project – a massive employment relief program launched in the spring of 1935 as part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal – completed in the Detroit area. Named after Dr. Maurice Keyworth, longtime Superintendent of Schools in the Hamtramck district, construction began in May 1935, and was completed in time for the football season. FDR himself attended the gala dedication ceremony on Oct. 15, 1936. Since that time, the facility has hosted a number of events, including a performance by the legendary comedy team of Abbott and Costello on August 17, 1942. The show was staged for area residents who purchased at least \$1 in bonds to support the World War II effort. A renovation of the facility, including the installation of a new synthetic field was completed in 1999.

Wisner Stadium in Pontiac and Memorial Stadium in Port Huron, built in 1948 to honor the 161 members of the Port Huron community who gave their lives in World War II, are two outstanding examples of the intimacy provided by football-only facilities. Flint's Atwood Stadium, built in the 1930s, and Houseman Field in Grand Rapids are treasured examples of multi-purpose facilities utilized by numerous schools in their respective communities. All these facilities have hosted huge crowds for classic confrontations over the years, including many MHSAA postseason gridiron battles that have led teams to today's venue, the Pontiac Silverdome.

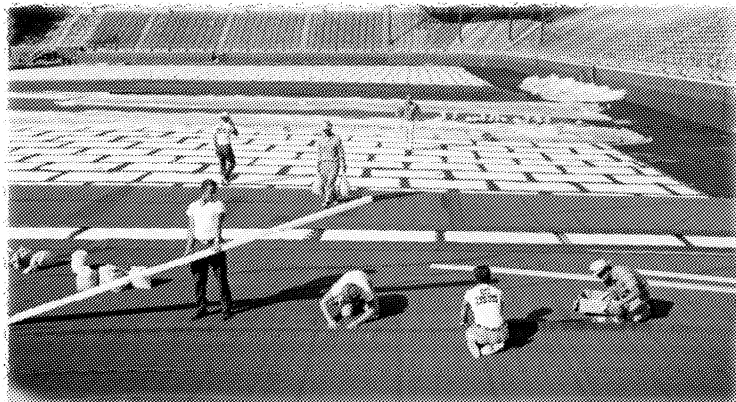
— Ron Pesch



photo courtesy of Port Huron High School

**Port Huron's Memorial Stadium (above) opened Sept. 17, 1948 with the Port Huron - East Detroit football clash, and it still serves as home to Port Huron and Port Huron Northern today.**

**At right, workers at Flint's Atwood Stadium begin to lay AstroTurf on the stadium floor in 1968, just four years after the Houston Astrodome was the first to employ such a surface. Atwood became just the third outdoor stadium in the country to install AstroTurf.**



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