

# Football season kicks off with first practice

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When St. Charles East senior Jake Grossman woke up at 6:30 a.m. Wednesday, he knew it was football season again.

"The smell of the air, you get your pads out – it's definitely a good time," the Saints' lineman said.

The Saints began practice at 7 a.m., and the rest of the area teams followed with their own two-a-days to kick off the first official day of football practice.

On Saturday, the IHSA allows teams to begin hitting with full pads, and on Aug. 26, the season finally begins.

As Kaneland coach Joe Thorgesen said, "It's good to be back."

Here's a look at some of the local teams on the inaugural day of practice.

## **Batavia**

Batavia's hard work in the off-season, almost 130 sophomore and varsity players did not miss a summer workout session, led to a smooth opening day of practice.

"We started out (Wednesday) morning very well organized, practice very well choreographed," Batavia coach Mike Gaspari said. "Very impressive group of kids. We're off to a great start."

"We've had countdowns going all summer, first day (of practice), first game," senior wide receiver Jack Scalcucci said. "All the seniors are so pumped and the juniors are ready to go. It's going to be a great year."

Overall the Bulldogs had a great athletics year last year. With many of the team's players participating in other sports, including Scalcucci who was on Batavia's sectional basketball team, the confidence has carried over to the fall.

"Anytime you get kids competing at that high a level, even in other sports, there's a tremendous carry over," Gaspari said. "I'm a big believer in that. It's always better to be competing than sitting in a weight room."

"Guys who play other sports carry confidence with them from other seasons," Scalcucci said. "With more confidence, you play better. You have more trust in your abilities. It's just momentum. I feel like I just want to keep going, keep the ball rolling this season."

The countdown to opening night stands at 15 days.

## **Geneva**

The effects of last year's run to the state semifinals were evident on Day 1 of football practice for Geneva on Wednesday.

The program boasts 170 kids overall, up more than 50 from last year, as a result of the attention that last year's team garnered.

"It's generated excitement in the program," Geneva coach Rob Wicinski said. "It's been a big change for the staff to see

the numbers. Our organization has to be a lot better."

"There is a lot of momentum still going," senior tailback Nick Herrera said. "It's like the season never ended. People have been in (the weight room) since the day (last season) ended. It's just been like football year-round for everybody."

The learning curve is steepest for junior quarterback Shaun Ratay. He backed up three-year starter Alex Pokorny last year, but saw only one play on the field. Ratay is up for the challenge of replacing one of the school's all-time greats.

"Alex was a great guy to learn behind," the 6-foot-6 Ratay said. "I learned so much from him. I think it really helped being there, just watching. There is a lot less pressure than I thought there would be."

"(Pokorny) really mentored Shaun a lot and took him under his wing," Wicinski said. "Shaun has carried it over. He's really stepped up and had a really nice summer. His consistency is improving all the time."

### **St. Charles East**

The Saints, sporting their black helmets while conditioning and running through drills, enter their second season under coach Ted Monken, who looks forward to his sophomore year.

"It's so much better to have a year under my belt," Monken said. "Going through all the routines and making appropriate plans, things don't come up and surprise you."

This year, Monken has more athletes on the roster to work with and he was satisfied with how they performed after having one practice under their belts.

"So far, so good," Monken said. "I think we have a good nucleus. We'll see how we can put it all together for the first game. We just want to focus on ourselves – how can we get better from day to day, how can we improve, how can we make sure we're better tomorrow that we were yesterday. From here until Aug. 26, we're just working our tails off."

Grossman is one of the returning starters on the team, which finished 4-5 overall last season.

"I'm hoping we can improve on our record," Grossman said. "I definitely think we can, and have a lot of fun."

And, of course, the Saints want to defeat their crosstown rivals. Last season, North defeated East, 21-13, in its homecoming game.

"Beating North is pretty much on top of the list," Grossman said.

### **St. Charles North**

Every class of athlete in North's football program has been there since they were freshmen.

North Stars coach Mark Gould said that factor made the first day of practice a smooth one.

"Every year seems to go a little smoother than the year before," said Gould, who is beginning his fifth season as coach. "We think because a lot of kids have gone through the program, they've been in the program since they were freshmen."

"The majority of kids also come during the summer and get a lot of work done. We're almost to the point to where it's, 'Let's put the shoulder pads on and let's go out and play.'"

The North Stars have already developed a successful program. Last season, they finished 8-2 overall last season and made the playoffs for the third time.

"That's our whole motto, building tradition," said defensive back Colin Green. "So we're stepping it up. We have a newer school, but our team's pretty good here."

So what do the North Stars focus on during three days of helmets-only practice?

"Basically, it's timing and getting guys to the right spot," Gould said. "Are you blocking the right people, is the timing right? The timing between our quarterback and our backs is very important. Are people going into motion at the right time? Defensively: Are people lining up correctly and are they on run and pass going to the correct spot?"

This year, North will look to build upon its football tradition. And, of course, the North Stars want to defeat East.

## **Kaneland**

"It's been a long winter," Thorgesen told his Knights during end-of-practice conditioning.

Last season, Kaneland (6-4 overall) qualified for the playoffs for the 10th consecutive year, but for the second straight season, the Knights fell to Rochelle in the playoffs.

The silver helmet-clad Knights wrapped up the first practice of the season with a series of sprints, from 20- to 50-yards.

While running, Thorgesen motivated the team by explaining that last year's playoff loss came because Rochelle's starters outlasted the Knights. Kaneland gave up two touchdowns in the final three minutes of the game en route to a 27-7 loss.

"Young kids like you," Thorgesen said, "if you bust your butts for two weeks, you'll be in great shape."

Kaneland began its run for its 11th consecutive playoff in the summer like most teams. But the Knights were eager to get down to serious business.

"With the way the summer is set up, you really have a lot of contact with your team," Thorgesen said. "You get tired of just doing summer camp and seven-on-seven, so it's always exciting to get the season started.

"We'll have a controlled scrimmage on Saturday and gets some things on tape and kind of go from there. But we're just out trying to get our football legs under us and polish up what we've learned this summer."