

Geneva goes on road trip on Day 1

The Bears have Bourbonnais.

The Illini have Camp Rantoul.

The Geneva football program's preseason getaway is not quite as elaborate, but the Vikings have their own preseason ritual that has become an ingrained season-starter.

On Wednesday, as Illinois high school football teams opened practice, the Vikings took their first road trip.

It wasn't a long one – just a few miles into the country down Keslinger Road – but the act of heading to Broadview Academy High School, just outside LaFox, signaled the arrival of the season as clearly as the shrillest of whistles.

"You definitely know what you're getting yourself into," said Geneva linebacker Pat Schiller. "You get on the bus ... and you're just like 'Doubles are starting, football is starting.' "

Geneva's four-year-old tradition is done for the same reason higher-level teams train away from home – to hold players' attention spans hostage. The idea occurred to Vikings coach Rob Wicinski as he drove past the rural stretch a few years back.

"When the corn's out, you can't see the field," Wicinski said. "But when the beans are out, you can see the goal posts."

The first year, the entire program trained at Broadview. Now it's just the varsity – something Wicinski said makes his older guys feel special.

The Vikings only train there for the first three days before heavy-duty equipment is needed as teams move to full contact. Wicinski wishes the retreat could be an overnight affair, but reality dictates the Vikings bus back to Geneva at the end of their long day of practice.

Make that practices. Geneva had three of them Wednesday, making each minute of rest inside Broadview's dated fieldhouse precious.

Team bonding might sound hokey, but it's also important, and the Vikings get plenty of it at Broadview.

"There's no way our friends can get ahold of us really out here," said quarterback Shaun Ratay, who called the Vikings' adopted facilities "a little bit old-school."

Before their final workout Wednesday, players sprawled on the cool fieldhouse floor, mustering strength and courage for what would be a grueling nightcap.

Some swapped snacks. Many talked football. Earlier, a duck-duck goose game broke out.

"Everybody's doing something," Ratay said. "There's a whole lot of everything going on."

"Most of the time kids just sleep. Last year people started bringing air mattresses and stuff, building forts, just goofing around."

Said Schiller: "When you're here, it's just football. You've got nothing else to do, and you talk about past memories of when you've been here."

Geneva has had three straight strong seasons after 10 losing ones. Crediting the out-of-town training for the resurgence would be a stretch.

But quality programs are full of traditions. This one appears to be a winner.

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