

By KEVIN DRULEY kdruley@kcchronicle.com

## 'The best time of the year'

An unidentified man bellowed something from his car early Wednesday morning that sounded like a war cry through Batavia.

Driving down Main Street with a clear view of the first football practice of the season, he slowed down for a moment to share, "LET'S GO DOGS!"

The gesture went scarcely noticed, but those words will become familiar background noise soon enough. Kickoff for the 2009 season comes in 15 more days, and you don't have to tell the fans.

"We really can't hear from down where we were, but I know there were a ton of [fans] passing by," junior lineman Brian Wilson said.

Handfuls of spectators greeted teams in other towns, navigating minefields of water jugs adorned with worn-out names to find a spot on the sidelines or bleachers.

On Saturday, they'll welcome popping pads and the onset of full-contact workouts, but who says drilling against imaginary offenses and defenses can't be invigorating, too?

"[Tuesday] night felt like Christmas Eve. I was so excited to get back to football," Kaneland lineman Eric Dratnol said. "It's the best time of the year."

Football season barely stops for many involved with the sport. Teams met routinely for six weeks this summer, congregating for camps, weight training and 7-on-7 showcases designed to accelerate the development of skill players on both sides of the ball.

Even an IHSA-mandated hiatus spanning the end of camps and the beginning of practice brought little relief. Motivated for that elusive run past the first round of the playoffs, St. Charles North seniors organized conditioning and weight workouts in the mornings the past two weeks.

"With all the stuff we do in the summer now, it's not like it was in the old days when it really was starting off at zero," North Stars coach Mark Gould said.

Enough teams find themselves beginning close enough to that dubious position. Defending IHSA Class 7A state runner-up Geneva returns only senior quarterback Brandon Beitzel as a starter to an offense that centered around record-setting running back Michael Ratay. Four returning defensive starters join Beitzel.

Ratay understudies Jay Graffagna and Michael Santacaterina, both seniors, project to share the carries, but they've already mastered their predecessor's modest persona with the media.

"I love my mom," Graffagna smiled, echoing some famous first words, "and I'm happy to be here."

Former Vikings assistant Mike Fields takes over at St. Charles East, inheriting a program that graduated its share of key contributors, including running back Wes Allen and linebacker Pat Friel.

Batavia brings back just one offensive starter of its own while a duo of third-year defensive regulars – Mike Greco and Ian Powers – aim to revive a unit that allowed 117 points in its final two games last year.

"This level's fun because you take what the community gives you and you try to mold it," Bulldogs coach Mike Gaspari said. "It's just an awesome job. I'm happy to get to do this."

Other perks of the position can be slightly less sightly. By all accounts cooler than the opening day of practice last year, Wednesday's weather and conditioning-happy workouts still prompted an upchucking or two.

No big deal in St. Charles.

"They lose their lunch and they jump right back in the drill," Fields said. "I think that's a good sign."

Geneva left one more thing behind to start the program's sixth training camp at Broadview Academy in LaFox: its best season since 1978. Just before sending players off to lunch between sessions, Vikings coach Rob Wicinski called them to the same hill they conquered in August 2008.

The Vikings scaled the hill 14 times that day, one for every game they hoped to win. Things went according to plan until

Week 14 brought a 33-14 loss to East St. Louis in the state title game.

Wicinski unveiled a new wrinkle Wednesday, adding one more hill climb to the drill.

"We need this," Santacaterina said. "If we didn't, we wouldn't be here."

- Sports editor Jay Schwab contributed to this report.

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