**World War Memorial Stadium: The pride lives on**

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On Thanksgiving Eve, Newburyport will celebrate the rededication of the restored World War Memorial Stadium, and it will dedicate the new playing field to former football coach Jim Stehlin. In the coming days, The Daily News will present a series of columns and news stories on this historic event. This is the first in the series. “The atmosphere is here. The community likes and supports sports through attendance, in the budget and everything else. But the thing that symbolizes everything is the stadium — it’s probably the nicest in high school football.” — Legendary Newburyport High School football coach and Athletic Director Jim Stehlin, comments in The Daily News article announcing his retirement, November 1985. There’s just something about this landmark that would never let me give up the fight. World War Memorial Stadium, situated behind Newburyport High School on farmland once known as Mount Rural, long has been recognized as one of the grandest high school stadiums in Massachusetts, if not in all of New England. It was built in the late 1930s as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and took three years to complete with a seating capacity of 5,000 and at a cost of $150,000. And there was nothing like it anywhere around. The first game in the new stadium was played on Sept. 16, 1939, with more than 4,500 fans on hand. Unfortunately for the Clippers and their fans, they lost to rival Salem by a score of 14­0. Luckily, the first night game, against St. James of Haverhill, was more successful: The Clippers triumphed under the lights by a score of 26­7. The intent of WPA public infrastructure projects (Haverhill Stadium was also built through this program) was to put thousands of men to work during the Great Depression. But here in Newburyport, it also fostered something equally if not more important: a sense of community pride.

In the days before Title 9, there were only a handful of competitive sports played at the high school level; these competitions were occasions for the entire community to come out and root for their home team. It was not unusual, particularly during the 1960s, to have 8,000 to 10,000 fans crammed into the stadium on a fall Saturday afternoon. As well, Newburyport High School was the first, and for years the only, area high school to hold its graduation ceremonies outside in the stadium, a tradition that continues to this day. Annual Yankee Homecoming concerts were also held in the stadium and drew the likes of performers such as the Mamas and the Papas and internationally acclaimed Up With People. And in later years, field hockey, lacrosse and soccer would host games here as well. The draw of playing in the stadium, particularly in the evenings under the lights, was an unforgettable event for any athlete fortunate enough to experience it. Eventually, the elements would take their toll on the stadium’s concrete infrastructure. In 1999, the south visitors’ stands were deemed unsafe and closed to the public. I was part of a small but dedicated and determined group of parents, alumni, coaches and community members to come together in 2002 to begin the quest to renovate and restore this historic stadium. The efforts of RESTORE would start, then stall, and then start again with gusto in recent years. All told it would take almost 14 years to achieve its end result: a renovated stadium and a new, state­of­the­art turf field. While the names and faces changed over the years, RESTORE persevered with significant and critical help from many, including project champions Mayor Donna Holaday, the Newburyport City Council, the Community Preservation Committee, City Planner Geordie Vining, Parks Director Lise Reid and Port Pride. The Unsung Hero award to this project, however, is unquestionably the Institution for Savings, who collectively donated $600,000 toward the project’s completion, and then proceeded to gift the field­naming rights to legendary football coach and Athletic Director Jim Stehlin. The project is nearly across the proverbial goal line. Though there are parts of the renovation still to be completed — including a brand­new Veterans Plaza where once there stood visitors stands — a renovated World War Memorial Stadium and the new James T. Stehlin Field will be officially dedicated on Nov. 25 in a gala celebration open to the community. The following day, the Newburyport Clippers will take on the Amesbury Indians in one of the longest running Turkey Day football rivalries — but this year they will play for the very first time on a synthetic turf field. It will be yet another milestone moment in a historic, majestic stadium that has, and always will be, the pride of Newburyport. So just exactly what is it that kept me in the fight? Was it the historical significance or the fact that it is one of the first monuments in Massachusetts to honor World War veterans? Maybe it was my memories of watching my brothers run out of that tunnel while my dad watched proudly from the end zone, pipe in mouth … then watching my own sons and daughter competing on that same grass. Maybe it was recalling my 1977 graduation in the stadium … and then nearly 30 years later, as then mayor, presenting my eldest son with his diploma on that same field. Or maybe, just maybe it is because that’s what we do here in Newburyport. We preserve and honor the past, and pave the way for those who will determine our future. As my old friend Paul Tsongas said, it is “the obligation of our survival.” We pay it forward. We leave our community and our world better than when we found it, for those to come after us. To all those who had a hand over the years in keeping this dream alive: to the veterans for whom this amazing facility stands … to my dad and my mom who taught me the importance of tradition, roots and perseverance … but most importantly, to the generations of athletes and students whose memories are kept alive by this restoration as well as the generations of athletes and students to come: This one’s for you