

Welcome Home: Holyoke High School alumni full of school spirit and Homecoming memories

Written by Darci Tomky

*To Holyoke High we pledge our loyalty.
So fight fair and square now team to win another victory.
Fight, Dragons, fight to win.
Always wear that smile.
And if the break seems hard to take,
Just fight the more to make the score to wi-i-in. Hey!*

There's just something about standing up and clapping along to the Holyoke High School Song during those chilly autumn football games.

There's something about hearing the bass drums, trumpets and tubas march down the street proudly playing the tune to that familiar song.

And for Holyoke High School alumni, to "pledge our loyalty" to the green and gold has a deep meaning that extends beyond the bounds of a crowded football field.

The idea of Homecoming is all about "coming home," so HHS alumni who are now teachers, coaches and staff at Holyoke schools took some time to reflect on Homecoming festivities of years past.

"Homecoming is fun because you can feel it in the air and you can remember your own," said Jane Zink, cheer sponsor.

"Homecoming is still Homecoming," said Pat Vasa, boys' golf coach. "It's still the same. I still get excited about it."

Of course, it wouldn't be Homecoming without an abundance of green and gold. For years now, high school parents have made unique locker decorations for their student athletes. Classes also used to have competitions to decorate their hallways in the high school.

Also filling the hallways were all those crazy Homecoming dress-up day costumes. Alumni remember everything from pajama day, twin day and nerd day to hippie day, gender-bender day

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and green/gold day.

And HHS alumni can all imagine what the outfits looked like when it was the seniors' turn to dress up the freshmen. (We won't go into all the Homecoming hazing that took place at HHS...)

Holyoke volleyball traditions include exchanging gifts with secret sisters during Homecoming. In the past, it was the cheerleaders who had secret brothers on the football team.

One highlight of Homecoming Week is Olympic Day, a tradition over three decades old. "It was the day you looked forward to," said Zink.

The Class of 1979 claims Olympic Day first began their senior year, according to Vasa; Kimberlee Bennett, district assessment coordinator and athletic/activities director; and Marcia Dalton, music teacher.

The fun day was originally on Friday and lasted the whole day. "You were exhausted by the end of the day," remembered alumni.

Classes accumulated points throughout the day, and of course, the goal was to always beat the faculty.

With a barbecue at noon, Olympic Day events included things like Dragonball, class pyramids, obstacle courses, softball, pushing a school bus and tug-o-war.

Sandra Rahe, math teacher and coach, laughed at the memories of jello wrestling as well as the traditional "Homecoming Dance" which involved boys dressed as girls, girls dressed like boys and a wheelbarrow.

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Powder puff football was a memorable event for Bennett and Dalton in the '70s. HHS girls got to play a game of flag football while the boys coached them from the sidelines.

Vasa remembered competing in class bonfires during high school. Students collected cardboard boxes for their fire during the week, and of course some of the more competitive kids stole boxes from other classes so their fire could be the biggest.

Between dress-up days and Homecoming Olympics, excitement grew each day until the final Homecoming festivities—parades, pep rallies, football games and dances.

Mary Austin, Title I teacher, said back in the '60s Homecoming was a day-long event held on a Saturday with a parade in the morning, the football game in the afternoon and a dance that evening. While they did have a bonfire Friday night at the south end of the football field, they did not get out of class during Homecoming Week for any activities.

Now the norm is to feature the parade Friday afternoon, athletic events (both volleyball and football) Friday night with the dance following on Saturday night.

There's nothing that brings an HHS class together like decorating a Homecoming float. For days classmates gathered in the evenings to give their float those special touches that would win them first-place honors.

It always seemed to involve lots of chicken wire and tissue, and the Class of '79 is convinced their floats were much more elaborate than they are today.

The annual parade always followed a theme. While some focused on defeating an opponent, a trend in the '80s and '90s was to use a popular song title like Danger Zone, Get Down Tonight and Crazy Train.

Dalton remembers walking to city park in elementary school to watch the parade as it traveled

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down Interocean Avenue. Students sat on the curb, munching on caramel apples they could buy from FHA (Future Homemakers of America) members for something like 25 cents. "That was always a very special treat," said Dalton.

Two thousand eleven! Two thousand eleven! Two-two-two thousand eleven!

Class cheers and battle cries are an unforgettable part of Homecoming festivities. They can be heard after the parade at the Homecoming pep rally on the Courthouse lawn.

"I really think we have pretty good school spirit, but nothing like it was back in my day," said Dalton. "We had a lot of school spirit back then!"

Over 30 years ago, Dalton, Bennett and Vasa were all shouting, "We're divine. We're just fine. We're the class of '79!"

Back then classes were awarded special spirit sticks for having the most school spirit.

Zink noted her class did a series of snaps before their class yell while those in the '90s used variations of the cheers HHS does today.

Alumni said it wasn't unusual for the cheerleaders to hold pep rallies every week, but they made the Homecoming pep rally extra special.

On occasion, the football boys could be seen dressed up as cheerleaders, performing a hilarious routine for their classmates. "I think our boys need to start doing that again!" said Dalton.

The Homecoming pep rally was also a good opportunity for team captains to talk and get

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everyone fired up for that night's game. "It was a good way for students to step up and take leadership," said Vasa.

Amidst Tunnel Time, pep band songs and green and gold face paint, take a moment to savor the school spirit at this Friday's football game. Ever notice how it seems like the whole town of Holyoke is there to shout, "Go Big Green!"

"It's the one week the whole community comes together and inspires the team to do their best," said Vasa.

And of course, it wouldn't be Homecoming if HHS didn't welcome home its alumni. "I look forward to all the people coming home," said Bennett.

"Homecoming was a highlight of the year, especially since it provided an opportunity to see recently graduated friends who returned for the Homecoming festivities," added Austin.

Sometimes there were cookies for alumni after the football game, and they were even invited to attend the Homecoming dance.

In addition to the exciting Homecoming football game, there was plenty to keep alumni entertained.

Cheerleaders and dance team members would coordinate fun routines and cheers to get the spectators involved with plenty of school spirit. Rahe recalled how the cheerleaders in the '90s would stand on painted spoons they got from Highline.

When thinking about Homecoming, don't forget the band. "Being in the marching band was a really big thing back in the day," said Dalton. They met in the mornings for several weeks to rehearse their show, complete with a special routine by the flag team.

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Austin said the Homecoming parade was the first appearance of the year for the HHS marching band which numbered about 90 members. At that time in the '60s, the uniforms were gray and black, complete with feather-plumed hats and white, buckskin shoes.

“Several moms spent countless hours the first couple weeks of school fitting uniforms, pinning up pants and trying to find coats large enough to fit the senior boys,” said Austin.

Her band always played Tenderly as they formed a big “H” on the football field for the coronation of the Homecoming king and queen. The candidates did not have to be athletes since they were representing the entire school.

Some years there was a bonfire following the football games while other years a sock hop dance was held at the end of the Friday-night festivities.

Regardless of when it was, the Homecoming dance was a great conclusion to the week-long event.

Alumni from the '70s remembered the dance was held at the elementary school gym until the new gym at the high school was built in 1977. The sophomore class was in charge of planning the dance, and they often invited a live band to provide the music.

Mum corsages were popular for students in the '60s and '70s. Now, HHS kids get mums for their moms to wear during Homecoming.

Whether HHS students are competing in Olympic Day, marching in the band or tackling their opponent on the football field, Homecoming traditions have lived on for decades at Holyoke High School. Alumni working in the school district or residing in Holyoke get a first-hand look at the passing down of those traditions and the beginning of new ones.

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“I really love still being associated with good old HHS,” said Dalton. “I have wonderful memories, and I’m so happy I am a part of the school system and that I get to enjoy it still today.”

Be sure to get out this week and support the Holyoke Dragons. And the next time you hear that familiar melody of the school song, don’t hesitate in standing up, clapping along (or even singing along, for those brave enough!) and take time to remember your own Homecoming memories.

GO BIG GREEN!