



# Friday Night Lights

Madison's Surf Club may be Connecticut's most magical field of gridiron dreams

By DUO DICKINSON

Following a hard-fought 14-13 Hand victory over Cheshire Oct. 8, the Tigers' Leif Colberg (left) and Rams' Michael Skibicki paid their respects.

PHOTO: SUSAN FALZONE

What makes a memory? An event married to a place. Every autumn for 40 years a field of memories has been vibrantly glowing (literally) on the Connecticut shoreline.

Madison is known for its tiny, terrific downtown, an extraordinary public beach — the Surf Club — and an enviable public school system.

But what is also known to just about everyone in the New Haven area with school-aged athletes is Daniel Hand High School's outsized tradition of athletic excellence. It boasts of 45 state championships and 70 conference championships. Hand was recently recognized by *Sports Illustrated* as the best athletic program in Connecticut.

Of course, there are many great athletic programs in Connecticut. This story focuses on just five events each year: Hand's home football games at Strong Field at the Surf Club combine a site, a town and a team to create an experience that is both electric and classic — the very stuff of memories.

Football started late at Hand. Six-man football was phased out after World War II and although a club football was started in the 1960s, it took until 1971 to actually field a varsity eleven under the extraordinary devotion and care of its first coach, Larry Ciotti. By merely its third season of varsity competition, the Hand football team went undefeated. Hand has had five other undefeated teams since then and has gone to a total of 16 state championship games, winning nine.

Unlike, say, Pennsylvania or Texas, high school football in Connecticut is not exactly a matter of life and death. But by Nutmeg State standards, Madison is a perennial force to be reckoned with.

That, however, is only half of the story. Back in 1970, when Larry Ciotti was musing about football in Madison, almost no high-school teams played night games. Gridiron tilts took place almost uniformly on Saturdays at 11 a.m. or 1 p.m.

But through a serendipitous connection between a generous local patron, Harold Strong, and a town willing to site its football field apart from its high school, Larry Ciotti helped to forge perhaps the most celebrated high-school sporting venue in New England: Strong Field at the Surf Club.

When Strong came to Ciotti and asked if he could help create a field for Hand's brand-new football team, the latter leapt

at the offer and a grass field was installed just north of the beach. The coach then gently suggested that it might be a good idea to build stands for fans. Strong agreed, and that emboldened Ciotti to suggest further that it would be a wonderful experience for Hand to play at night, under the lights. True to his generous spirit, Strong wrote the check, and the tradition of Friday night lights at the Surf Club was born exactly 40 seasons ago.

Ciotti recalls, "The first home night game was the middle of September 1971 — Mt. Everett High School of Great Barrington, Mass. — and we won." If the tradition of football played at this exquisite setting was a losing or even mediocre one, the games played there would be just another event at a great town beach. But those 40 years have spawned successive generations of young Madison men dedicating themselves with such ardor that among them they have won more than 300 games over that span — half of them on the shores of Long Island Sound.

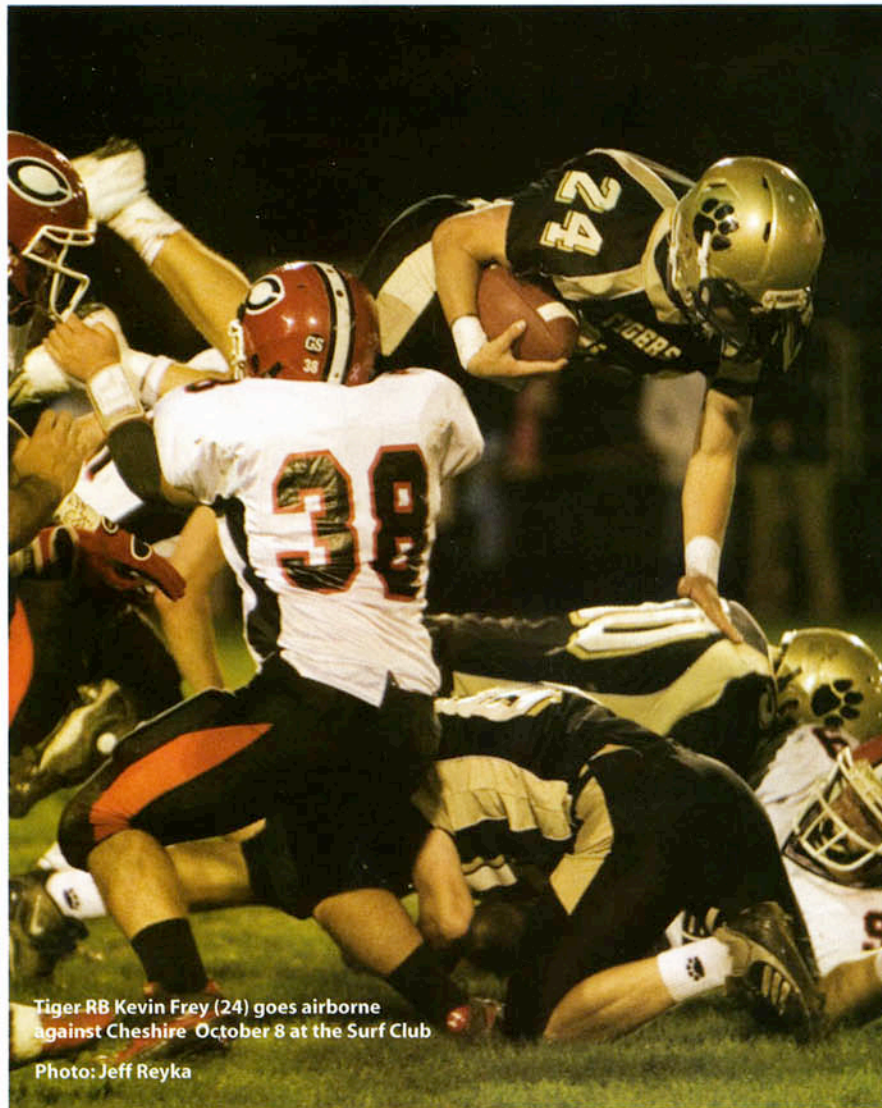
Numbers are one thing, but the competition has been historically at the highest level, often involving competition against schools twice the size of Hand, which has about 1,200 students.

Clearly, the iconography of playing at night under the lights was not lost on those who originally "art-directed" the fashion statement with which the Hand Tigers confront their opponents. Black uniforms topped by gleaming gold helmets create a stoically fierce nocturnal presence.

But football is just the seed corn of what these autumn eves have evolved into. Hand's 200-strong marching band underscores the intensity of the experience with classic complementary musical moments like the menacing "Emperor's Theme" from *Star Wars*, usually played when the home team is in the middle of a long march down the field. But the classically recurring theme is "On Wisconsin" — loudly proclaimed with every Hand score — and given the team's history, that's a hit tune for the band. A full complement of cheerleaders and color guard make the games full-blown events.

Attendance can be upwards of 5,000 at a "big game" (Clinton's Morgan High School in early years, now Guilford on Thanksgiving). But many Connecticut high school teams can put fannies in the seats and stage a spectacle for the faithful. But what makes playing on Strong Field





Tiger RB Kevin Frey (24) goes airborne against Cheshire October 8 at the Surf Club  
Photo: Jeff Reyka

at the Surf Club a unique experience for so many?

Erich Hamel, a captain of the 1994 team who received an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy and played football for the Middies, speaks for thousands of young men who have played on that field.

"I'm really not sure what it was, but under those lights, on the field and before that crowd, we felt and believed it was okay and acceptable to strive for perfection — to try to be the best," Hamel recalls. "In an uncertain time, the field represented a world where we could all work as one and wildly dream that we, like those before us we so admired, could achieve what was once unthinkable — that we could be winners. That's the field to me."



In 1989 Steve Filippone took over the reins from legendary Larry Ciotti. Filippone had been an assistant under Ciotti as well

as a teacher at the high school. Filippone and Ciotti are the only coaches Hand Football has ever had — another reflection of the program's powerful underpinning tradition.

The last 20 years have seen much of the rest of the state join most of the country and now a majority of Connecticut high school football games are played on Friday nights. Beyond the obvious glittering excitement under the lights, adults who work on Saturday or have other children with Saturday youth-sports commitment can now attend the games.

Having been a part of this tradition for 30 years, Filippone naturally has strong feelings about the place where his team plays.

"The natural beauty is overwhelming," he says. "Look down toward the field and the contrast is unmistakable. There young men in full battle gear prepare to defend

this patch of green from all intruders. It is loud and violent. It has been nourished by 40 years of blood, sweat and not a few tears. These tears have been shed by hundreds of boys on their way to manhood. It is for us a sacred place."

This writer has personally experienced the veracity of Filippone's statement. As an assistant coach of the 1985 Branford High School football team, the bustling excitement of a large crowd in full-moon fervor helped facilitate a thorough beat-down of my Hornets by the Tigers. And as the father of a Hand football player over the last four years, I have felt the same rush of emotion and fierce devotion that radiates through the thousands who gather on these autumn eves.

Despite the site's obvious natural beauty, the facilities are beginning to show their age. The stands have no wheelchair accessibility. The circa 1975 fieldhouse has restrooms that are similarly unfriendly to wheelchairs and without substantial renovation is at the end of its viable lifecycle. The sad truth is that when you walk in the front portal (a gap in a chain link fence) you immediately see doors opening to reveal brightly lit toilet bowls.

The chronically ragged salt water-stunted grass and the need for renovation of the facilities has now prompted yet another Larry Ciotti intervention. Even though he has not coached at Hand for almost 20 years, he recruited me and scores of others to assist him to rebuild the site as the Strong Center — erecting new fieldhouses and stands, a large paved plaza and an expanded field area. The project will extend the tradition of football to soccer, lacrosse, field hockey and create outdoor performing-arts opportunities that can take the *Friday Night Lights* experience to every household in Madison and the shoreline, not just those with athletic high-schoolers.

But places alone do not generate wild enthusiasm — if that were true, New Haven Coliseum would still be standing. At the core of all the sights and sounds and socializing is the incredibly intense emotional devotion that young athletes find in shared sacrifice.

The Strong Field experience happens just south of the 12<sup>th</sup> tee of the Madison Country Club. Madison is a comfortable town populated largely by affluent families, not a hellhole from which young men seek escape via athletic endeavor. At

Hand the practices are both lengthy and intense — not the norm for most high school teams in Connecticut, but the key to this program's winning tradition. Where does the extreme dedication of players and coaches come from?

In Madison, most kids really don't want for much. If they desire something desperately enough, they can usually buy it — or get Mom or Dad to. But winning in football or any sport is something money can't buy. Larry Ciotti says the kids who play football at Hand know that what really matters to them "cannot be purchased with Mom's or Dad's checkbook." Young boys who think they might want to play football see the sport's most compelling realities on those magic nights at the Surf Club where sunset, brass and percussion and small-town America weave a seductive portrait of possibility.

As with all other athletes, the price paid every fall Friday night by 60 or 70 young men at Hand High School has created an event of undeniable beauty and compelling consequence — and these athletes have a gridiron home that is the equal of their own commitment. ❖