



Watchung Hills and North Hunterdon demonstrate remarkable teamwork to play football game

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There will be thousands of football games contested throughout the state this year, but the Friday, Sept. 8 meeting between North Hunterdon and Watchung Hills will certainly go down as one of the most unique.

A host of logistical problems were brought on by severe weather that afternoon, and could have easily postponed the game to another day. To make it worse, more thunderstorms were in the forecast for Saturday and Sunday, and to further complicate things, both teams were scheduled to play their next games the following Thursday, due to the Rosh Hashanah holiday.

Bad weather in those situations usually wins out. But thanks to some outstanding on-the-fly collaboration between the administrations and teams at both schools, as well as from the game officials, the contest was played that night, albeit 24 miles from where it was originally scheduled, on just a couple of hours notice.

Here's what happened:

The game was originally scheduled as North Hunterdon at Watchung Hills, a Big Central Conference matchup to be played that afternoon at 3:30. The Friday afternoon kickoff was necessitated because Watchung Hills is in the process of having new lights installed, so the game had to be completed during daylight hours.

A major problem was looming that day, and it turned out to be unavoidable: The weather. The forecast was calling for severe thunderstorms in the afternoon and early evening. The weather hadn't yet turned when North Hunterdon set off on its trip on Route 78 from Annandale to Warren, but the skies began to threaten after Lions' bus caravan arrived at Watchung Hills, less than two hours before kickoff.

The storms - which were localized at first before becoming widespread over much of Central and North Jersey - first arrived about 40 minutes before game time, with the accompanying lightning continuously re-setting the 30 minute clock that determines when play can commence.

Both schools and the game officials realized that with no lights, the game couldn't start after 5 p.m., which meant no additional lightning could be seen after 4:30. And on that afternoon, it wasn't close to happening.

What made the situation even worse was that weather forecast for Saturday afternoon was identical (and turned out to be just as bad). The same with Sunday. And because of the Thursday games scheduled for Sept. 14, the whole situation was made even more difficult.

The coaching staffs from both schools had the same idea, if it could possibly be pulled off: What if everyone hopped on buses and cars and went to North Hunterdon, to play the game under the lights at their field, once the weather cleared?

Could it actually be done? Was it totally far-fetched? After giving it some thought, all of the stakeholders came to the same conclusion: "Let's do it."

The logistical challenge would be incredibly daunting. But thanks to remarkable work and cooperation from people at both schools, right down to Watchung Hills borrowing one of the North Hunterdon busses to transport players, the game was played to completion that night in Annandale.

“The student-athletes just want to play football,” Watchung Hills coach Rich Seubert said. “Once we knew we weren’t going to be able to play at our place, both athletic directors and both school administrations all came together and we made it happen pretty quick.”

Watchung Hills won the game, 49-6, but everyone had a night to remember. And for all of the adults involved, there was satisfaction in knowing that it was all successfully done for the sake of the student-athletes.

Here’s how it was pulled off:

It all began with the coaches and athletic directors at both schools paying close attention to the weather apps on their phones throughout the day.

“As soon as that first thunder delay happened around 2:50, it kind of started to get a little dicey,” said North Hunterdon AD Alexa Freguetti, who was credited with doing the most work to pull off the switch. “As we started to delay further and further, we understood that daylight was going to be a problem, so we kind of knew that 5:00 was going to be the cutoff. When that happened, it was all hands on deck to make an alternate plan.”

“Honestly, what ended up happening was that our coach, C.J. Robinson, came up to me, kind of half-heartedly and half-joking at first, and asked ‘What do you think if we just move this whole thing to North?’” she said. “I kind of looked at him and thought ‘This isn’t a bad idea.’”

She then brought that suggestion over Derek England, the athletic director at Watchung Hills, and found out that he and his football coaches were thinking the exact same thing.

“Once we had our first delay, we started talking about it,” England said. “The coaches talked to their teams, we talked to our administrations, and then it became a bunch of people working together. It became a real team effort, involving a lot of people, including the officials.”



A group of North Hunterdon students found out about the switch and made it to the school to support their team.

Photo courtesy of North Hunterdon Athletics



A makeshift group of North Hunterdon band members were able to shift their schedules to play at the game.

Photo courtesy of North Hunterdon Athletics

That brought in Mark Bitar, who assigns officiating crews for the Big Central. If games were going to be postponed that evening, he'd have to make sure each game had coverage for its new date and time, which isn't easy.

"I knew there was going to be an issue on Friday morning," Bitar said. "And at 3:30 p.m, I knew it was going to be very bad."

Bitar was especially aware of the problems developing at Watchung Hills, since it was the area's lone afternoon game.

"I got the first message at 4 p.m.," he said. "I had received a cancellation of two games already and heard from three officials who could not get out of their houses due to flooding. I then started playing musical chairs to see who could go where."

He made it all work, so that a crew could be present at North Hunterdon.

Hosting a football game requires a lot of planning, and lot of staffing. Freguletti was able to get it all done in matter of two hours, with a lot of help along the way.

"If one person says, 'No,' then you're done, and you have to pull the plug on it," she said. "People absolutely came out the woodwork to help."

Her first call went to Bitar.

"This was the wildest weekend of scheduling I have ever been a part of," he said, noting that one game was even postponed three times. "But the officials showed that they care about the game, and wanted to make sure they were a part of the solution of a tough weekend weather-wise."

"We called Mark, and we got a couple of the officials to agree to make the trek over to North, and Mark was able to fill out the rest of their roster," Freguletti said. "From there, it was kind of on us to see how many people and members of the community could help out."

The next step was transportation. The North Hunterdon band and cheerleaders traveled to the game in separate buses, but they agreed to go back to Annandale together. That allowed the Watchung Hills players, who all got the necessary parental waivers, to use the extra North Hunterdon bus.

"From every level, from the band to the cheerleaders to the football team, everybody worked together to make that happen," Freguletti said. "Watchung hopped on our extra bus and were able to make it over to North."

"While all that was going on, we were calling our coaches and teachers to get them on board to help us out," she said. "We had our head volleyball coach, our head boys basketball coach, and our freshman football coach running the chain gang, we had one of our assistant soccer coaches, our head girls golf coach and our director of student activities up in the box running the clock, we had our vice principal announcing for us, and we even



The North Hunterdon boosters were able to scramble and open the concession stand.

Photo courtesy of North Hunterdon Athletics

had our booster club vice president come out and open the snack shack. We got the ambulance here, all of our police officers came to help us out... it really was an incredible community-based effort. It was really something to watch our community come together to make this a reality for our kids.”

The people who answered the call were glad to help out.

Kyle Rehrig, the North Hunterdon boys basketball coach, actually missed the first two calls from Freguetti because he was at a doctor appointment. He didn’t find out until 6:00, and was able to make it to school in about twenty minutes.

“It’s all about what we needed to do to get the game in for the kids,” he said. “It was a great effort,”

Lana Brennan is the booster club member who got the snack stand up and running.

“One of my friends texted to say the game had been moved,” she said. “I knew that it was sort of my area, so I reached out to Alexa and said to tell me where to be, when to be and we’ll make it happen. We keep a good stock of our non-perishables. We said we’ll do what we can, but no hot dogs. We had popcorn, nachos, all the drinks and all the candy, and all the kids seemed to be happy. If there was going to be a game, we wanted to help make it happen for all of the kids.”

The game itself:

Coaches take things day-to-day, but they also don’t want to mess with their overall routine. That’s why both teams really wanted to play that day, especially with the unusually short week ahead.

Suebert was initially concerned about the weather forecast, especially since his team was already 2-0 and didn’t need any jolts to its momentum. And as someone who was a standout lineman for New York Giants from 2001 through 2010, he also experienced his share of short weeks on the schedule, and knows that they aren’t ideal for anyone, whether they be in high school or the NFL.

“It was two good coaching staffs and two good athletic directors coming together for the kids to play,” he said. “With a short week ahead, you just want to play the game. You have a schedule to keep. It’s tough to turn around on a short week. I’ve done it, and it’s not fun. Your body isn’t ready. I’m sure kids can overcome soreness quicker than we can as adults, but you also just want to be mentally right.”

The weather still hadn’t totally cleared when the teams arrived at North Hunterdon. But there was actually a rainbow once the storms moved out for good, with kickoff coming a little after 8.

Once it began, it was contested like any other, with Watchung Hills returning home (in their parents’ cars) with the win.



A group of coaches from other sports teams at North Hunterdon answered a last-minute call to work the chains.

Photo courtesy of North Hunterdon Athletics

The only difference was that every one could feel good about the mutual cooperation between the schools that allowed it all to happen.

“We were supported on so many levels, I felt we were going to make it work,” England said. “There were things we still needed to square away, but we worked together. Athletic Directors in general work to help each other out, because we understand what we go through and want to help each other.”

“It spoke volumes to what our North Hunterdon community is all about and how much we value athletics here, creating these opportunities for athletes to compete,” Freguletti said.

“We had two very motivated head coaches that wanted to get the game in, and every single person worked together to make it happen,” she said. “That’s what athletics is all about, people coming together to make these things a reality. The two coaches got together, got on the same page, were willing to get together to make it happen, and that’s a big deal. You have to have everyone pulling in the same direction, and that’s what we did.”