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Huntley fast on the rise

The signs posted on the outskirts of town welcome visitors in a quaint, chamber-of-commerce friendly fashion.

The miniature wooden billboards include an image of the village's iconic town square gazebo, the centerpiece of what was once its business epicenter. Printed across the bottom of the signs is a phrase village officials plaster on promotional material and websites, pointing back to Huntley's small-town roots.

The Friendly Village With Country Charm.

But drive down Interstate 47, past the Huntley Dairy Mart. Travel up and down Main Street and out to Huntley's palatial high school, built in the midst of the subdivisions that have sprouted up out of rural nothingness, and the change is evident.

Huntley is in the midst of mushrooming into something much bigger, unafraid to stack itself up against all comers. Only 13 years ago, Huntley's population hovered around 5,700. It's now a sprawling community of nearly 25,000 residents in a village priding itself on its ever-changing landscape.

There's the \$233 million Centegra Hospital that will bring 1,100 permanent jobs. There's the I-90 full-service interchange that will usher traffic onto and off of the nearby congested toll road. Huntley's Talamore subdivision, plotted to include 2,000 homes, recently was ranked as Chicagoland's top-selling subdivision, continuing an era of change that now defines the community. Del Webb, a retirement community with nearly 8,000 residents, also has been among the village's most popular additions in what's become a diversified place to live.

"I remember a time not that long ago when you could go outside and literally listen to Huntley grow," said Margo Griffin, Huntley's business retention and expansion coordinator. "You could listen to the hammers and the saws and the backhoes and such. It was kind of crazy."

At the center of it all is the village's beloved Huntley High School Red Raiders, who have shed an identity as a sleepy also-ran and become a player among Illinois' biggest high school programs. The latest to blossom is girls basketball team, which will make its inaugural trip to the IHSA state tournament today against Rolling Meadows.

It is the latest achievement for a community that Griffin now promotes to potential businesses as forward-thinking community with top-notch schools, sprawling green space and friendly population base. It's a formula, she says, that continues to make Huntley a popular destination for newcomers.

"Do I see continued growth? Definitely," Griffin said. "Do I see the Village of Huntley being a leader in growth? Definitely."

The push for greatness carries over to the playing field.

Next season, Huntley's football team is scheduled to become the area's first squad to play on field turf, which will kick off a bigger athletic facility improvement plan that puts the school on the same footing as others its size around the state. For football coach John Hart, the project represents a vision that helped lure him to Huntley from one of Indiana's most storied programs.

During his final interview with the district, Hart was asked why – out of all the places to live in the world – he would choose Huntley. Before Hart could answer, District 158 superintendent John Burkey piped in.

"I can tell you why," Burkey said. "He's got the same vision we do. We want to blaze the trail academically, in the arts and athletically.

"We're not going to follow the suburbs, we're not going to follow somebody else's blueprints. We're going to make our own."

Hart knew he was home. But these days, calling Huntley home means something much different than it once did.

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Jim Overstreet has called Huntley home for 35 years.

If Overstreet's name doesn't ring a bell, his voice certainly will. Venture into a Red Raiders' sporting event and Overstreet's familiar, "Hey, Hey, Huntley" rings out.

Overstreet has been a bleachers mainstay for almost the entire time he's lived in the village. He's seen the good and the bad and has remained loyal all the way through. But he also has seen Huntley change in front of his eyes. When he first arrived, he could count the 40 students that made up his kids' graduating classes. Now, he won't even venture a guess as to how big the school has become, all part of the boomtown expansion Huntley has undergone over the past 3 1/2 decades.

"It used to be that whenever homecoming came up, you didn't have any trouble getting as many farm wagons as you needed," Overstreet said. "Now, it's hard to find a farm wagon."

Despite Huntley's population explosion, village officials still point to the town's country charm as a major selling point. To long-time residents, Huntley still is the supportive community it always has been, celebrating victories on and off the field together and consoling one another through the tough times.

The push to be the best extends from the high school's Harmony Road campus to the office Village Manager Dave Johnson works out of. Like many of Huntley's players, Johnson hears the questions. What's Huntley? Where's Huntley? But now, Johnson, who moved his family to Huntley in 1998, has watched the move quickly away from village Huntley the rural anonymity it once was known for.

Huntley's growth, Johnson said, is a testament to the well-planned approach village officials have taken in recent years. The progress stems from a solid foundation of doing things right and a community that has accepted change as Huntley has moved away from its former small-town self and into a more diversified place to live and work.

That's part of what made Huntley the right fit for Hart, who arrived in Huntley before last season after leading powerhouse Indianapolis Warren Central. The Warriors have a championship tradition, winning an Indiana state record four straight 5A titles before winning its most recent state crown under Hart in 2010. Hart left the school over a dispute with the school's principal over support for his program.

That's when Huntley reached out to him, hoping to land a coach dedicated to producing winning teams. If he was going to come here, Hart told school officials, he wouldn't change the way he approached his job, wanting to compete against on a regular basis against the biggest and best.

"I've never been a guy who has set goals with limitations," Hart said.

Huntley finished 6-4 in Hart's first season, finishing 5-1 in FVC Valley play. The Raiders lost a 10-9 heartbreaker to Fenwick in their playoff opener, laying a foundation for the bigger things Hart expects in the future. But as Huntley moves forward, Hart senses an overwhelming amount of support not only for his team, but also for the rest of the school's athletic programs.

Next year, students will be able to enroll in a weightlifting class, which Hart says he believes will make athletic conditioning easier across the board. With the improvements being made to the school's athletic facilities, Hart says coaches are getting a green light from administrators to move the Red Raiders into the state's elite.

"This is a school district that's never going to be satisfied even with being the best," Hart said. "I think they're always going to have that vision of, hey, what's next?"

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That vision is one Huntley girls basketball coach Steve Raethz has built a championship-caliber team around.

After Raethz graduated from St. Norbert College, Huntley gave him an opportunity to take over a varsity program rather than working his way through the coaching ranks. Like with Hart, school officials painted a picture of unlimited potential to Raethz, who was taking over a program that never had posted a winning record.

The early stages were rocky. The Raiders finished 2-23 in his first season before setting a new record for wins the next year in a 13-14 campaign. By Year 3, Huntley went 19-11 before capturing the school's first regional title in 2003. Since 2007, Huntley has won five regional titles in seven years, including this season's historic run to the 4A state semifinals.

"It's kind of one of those things where you take a couple steps forward, a step back and then another couple steps forward," Raethz said. "But the kids have really bought into what we're trying to do and it's nice to see the torch passed from year to year as far as expectations go."

Huntley has embraced the Red Raiders' success ever since, rallying around the school's athletic teams the same way other smaller communities tend to. Johnson draws comparisons to "Hoosiers," the story of a small Indiana town that follows its boys basketball team all the way to the 1952 state championship.

Johnson remembers back to the 2000-01 season when Huntley's boys basketball team advanced to a supersectional for the first time, representing the first time the Red Raiders reached the state's Sweet 16. He recalls the steady stream of cars that made their way to DeKalb, much like they did this week when Raethz's team won its supersectional title in Carpentersville in front of a red-and-white clad audience that included several village officials, including Mayor Charles Sass.

"You see the whole Huntley side is packed with fans and it shows what [winning] means not only to the team, but to the whole community," Johnson said. "It makes everybody forget about their troubles for a little bit and focus on the positive."

For fans like Overstreet, the Red Raiders' latest bout of success is a sign Huntley continues to move in an upward direction. Despite the facelift the community has undergone since he's lived here, Overstreet says he believes a winning team can serve as the common bond between a population that not only grows in number, but in diversity.

Over the years, Overstreet's "Hey, Hey, Huntley" has made him a fan favorite, linking him to all of the school's teams. Overstreet cherishes the good times – the 2000 boys basketball run and the school's 2009 baseball postseason run when the Raiders finished 30-7. But he also has seen teams through tough times, describing himself as a grandfather figure for all of Huntley's athletes who never could be disappointed, regardless of how things ended.

But mention Huntley's latest championship team – one that includes only one senior – and Overstreet sees a special group that has a freshman as a star player and that has overcome one obstacle after another, taking the village on a ride it won't soon forget.

Like the town's residents, Raethz's players embrace the underdog nature of the trip downstate. In a state tournament bracket filled with high-profile talent from bigger-name schools, the Raiders remain a virtual unknown among the general sporting population.

"No one ever knows where we are from," senior captain Haley Ream said. "But I love Huntley. It's this small, little town even though the school's getting bigger. I don't even know half the kids anymore. But I still love it. It's out in the middle of nowhere."

Johnson looks at this team and sees a mirror image of the community it represents. He sees the Red Raiders dedication and work ethic and the way they have played through adversity to survive against bigger competition. He looks at a village that has survived, even in the midst of harsh economic downturn.

With both, Johnson sees the potential for greatness, not only now, but in the future. He's excited about the days ahead when growth and new infrastructure will move Huntley out of the shadows of its once small-town identity and onto a bigger stage where people will not wonder what Huntley – country charm and all – is all about.

"The sky is the limit," Johnson said. "For the next decade plus, people aren't going to be asking, 'Where's Huntley?' for much longer because they're going to know what they don't know already."

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