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Contact

Melissa Weber, Director of Communications
Phone: 320-589-6414, weberm@morris.umn.edu

Jenna Ray, Editor/Writer
Phone: 320-589-6068, jrray@morris.umn.edu

Big Cat Stadium takes shape

Summary: When big cats meet in the wild they can be either exceedingly cordial or fiercely competitive. Fans can expect a little of both when they fill the stands of Big Cat Stadium, the new UMM/Morris Area High School shared-use football facility, this fall.

(August 28, 2006)-When big cats meet in the wild they can be either exceedingly cordial or fiercely competitive. Fans can expect a little of both when they fill the stands of Big Cat Stadium, the new University of Minnesota, Morris/Morris Area High School shared-use football facility, this fall.

It is expected that Big Cat Stadium will be competition-ready by Friday, Sept. 1, when the MAHS Tigers play Minnewaska Area High School at 7 p.m. and Saturday, Sept. 2, when the UMM Cougars play Lawrence University, also at 7 p.m. A final decision regarding the location of these games will be decided later this week. Watch and listen for updates by the Morris Sun Tribune and KMRS/KKOK radio.

The stadium's name, recently approved by the Morris Area School Board, with a nod of approval from administrators at UMM, is an obvious reference to both schools' team names and mascots, the MAHS Tigers and the UMM Cougars. But the name also represents more than that, said UMM Athletic Director Mark Fohl, who came up with the idea.

"When considering a name, we wanted to incorporate both schools and represent the cooperation between us," said Fohl. The opportunity for high school athletes to play on this state-of-the-art facility is especially rewarding, added Fohl.

Lowell Rasmussen, associate vice chancellor for physical plant at UMM, and Dave Aronson, UMM project coordinator, agreed.

"This is another example of cooperation between the high school, the campus, the community and the legislature, to benefit all of us," said Rasmussen. "The result is one state-of-the-art facility instead of two mediocre ones."

"There is a lot of potential in this type of facility," added Aronson, "for example, the opportunity to host future high school playoff games."

Since the field will be used for football by ninth grade and junior varsity teams, MAHS, UMM, practice and more, a cooperative spirit is essential in the areas of scheduling and maintenance. Fohl, along with MAHS Athletic Director Mary Holmberg, have worked together to define a usable schedule. While UMM will maintain the infrastructure of the field, whomever uses the stadium will take on the responsibility of cleaning it before the next competition.

"We are very excited for players, coaches, fans and our community to reap the benefits of this new stadium," said Scott Monson, Morris Area School District superintendent. "This is a great opportunity for all of us, and the cooperation between the school district and the University - along with support from many individuals - made it possible."

A few facts:

From moving the first layer of dirt on May 15, 2006, to getting the field competition ready by September 1, 2006, the project has been comparatively fast-paced. Here are some of the facts:

- Turf vs. grass: The field is scheduled to be used six days a week. Due to the amount of play that the field will receive, turf holds up better than grass to continuous wear and tear. A drainage system, topped by three feet of sand, eight inches of crushed granite and, finally, one million pounds of sand and rubber pebbles are added to make the upper layer of the field's surface. The turf is made of plastic fibers the rubber pellets from recycled tires. The pellets, along with the sand make the field a safer, more natural surface on which to play.

- Hydraulically collapsible goal posts are the most sophisticated in the state. The posts can be hydraulically lowered to the ground and the width between the uprights can be hydraulically adjusted between 18 feet, 6 inches for college and 23 feet, 4 inches for high school competition.

- Football competition under the lights for UMM will be possible for the first time since the 1960s when UMM athletes played on Miller Field, located behind the campus' Science facility.

What to expect on game day:

- State High School League rules apply at the stadium at all times. No alcohol or tobacco use or outside containers (packed coolers, beverages, food, for example) will be allowed in the stadium at any time.

- A quality public address speaker system, Internet capability and a remote camera, located on the south wall of the Physical Education building, to comply with Upper Midwest Athletic Conference (UMAC) rules for taking end-zone photos, are state-of-the-art amenities that the new stadium offers. Public restrooms and concessions will also be located in the brick building behind the bleachers, but fans should know that these may not be usable for the first few games. Concessions will still be offered, but in a temporary location. Portable restroom facilities will be used until the bathrooms are complete.

- Athletes wearing clean cleats will be welcome on the playing field fans will be welcome in the stands. Only authorized personnel are allowed on the field's playing surface. A turf-covered playing surface requires this strict policy so that nothing organic touches the field. Surprisingly, items such as gum will adhere to the turf's fibers and weeds will grow in the turf. The field requires minimum maintenance using a grooming and cleaning apparatus three to five times a year. There will be a chain-link fence around the perimeter of the site. Fans can get a turf experience from a sample at the stadium's entrance.

- Fans who attend football games toward the beginning of the Fall 2006 season will notice that athletes appear to be running through a field of wet grass, as the rubber pellets "splash" upward from the field's surface. This will subside as the field is played on more.

For a complete list of home games to be played at Big Cat Stadium, visit: www.morris.umn.edu/athletics or www.morris.k12.mn.us/.

Photo: Big Cat Stadium by Mike Cihak, Media Services

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