

High school football players honour teammates killed in crash with win

Grande Prairie team chasing title amid grief

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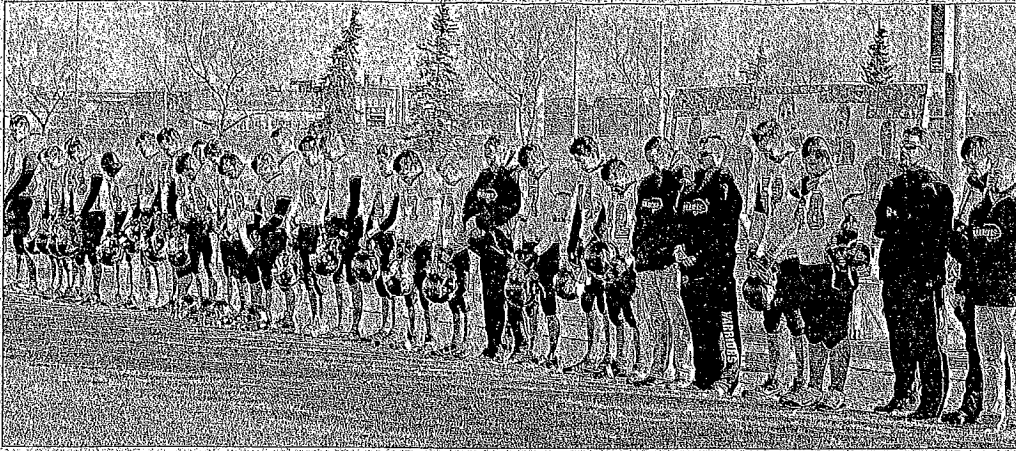
With heads bowed low and black helmets in hand, a wall of teen football players stood in silence to remember the teammates they had to play without on Saturday.

Behind their bench, a billboard with photos of their absent teammates briefly protected the players from the bitter wind.

"A constant reminder was to just look over the sidelines, and see all five of our brothers just there with us — it helps a lot," said Marcus Cooper, 17, a running back for the Grande Prairie Composite High School Warriors.

Cooper scored one of the touchdowns that brought his team to a 40-0 landslide victory over the Sexsmith Sabres, a week after a crash killed four of his teammates and left a fifth in hospital. It was a playoff game, and the first the team played since the tragedy.

Vincent Stover, 16, Walter Borden-Wilkins, 15, Matthew Deller, 16, and Tanner Hildebrand, 15, were killed after their car was struck by a pickup truck in the south end of Grande Prairie on Oct. 22.



Members of the Grande Prairie Composite High School Warriors have a moment of silence before their game Saturday in honour of four teammates killed in the Oct. 22 crash, and for survivor Zach Judd, who is still in hospital.

Zachary Judd, 15, survived the crash but remains in a coma in an Edmonton hospital.

The 21-year-old driver of the pickup truck faces impaired-driving charges.

On game day, each player wrote the numbers of their fallen teammates on their orange socks in thick, black marker. Orange and black are the Warriors colours.

With the win against the Sexsmith Sabres, the Warriors will now move on to the championship game for the Mighty Peace Football League.

"They wanted that ring, so we have to bring it home," Cooper said.

After spending the week at the side of his brother and

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teammate, Louis Judd, 16, flew into Grande Prairie on Thursday so he could play with the Warriors.

"It felt amazing. It meant so much to me and my family, and I'm happy I got a chance to play," Judd said to reporters after the game.

"The whole game — I couldn't get him off my mind. To be honest, I was scared I was going to break down in the middle of the field. It was a lot to take in."

The memory of the fallen Warriors weighed heavily on

Rick Gilson, the team's coach and principal of Grande Prairie Composite High School.

"They are inspirationally courageous," he said. "I know myself, during the moment of silence, I started to lose it. I was kind of going, 'Man, I hope they're not.'"

Last week, Gilson learned about the crash that killed his players when his son woke him to show a text message he received. Gilson then went with RCMP officers to deliver the news to families of the victims.

Rick MacWilliam, Postmedia News

Those families attended Saturday's game along with a roaring crowd of orange and black.

Lori LaRose, the aunt of Matthew Deller, remembered him as a funny teen with a passion for football and food. A week later, the death of Deller and his teammates still remains "unbelievable."

"We just wished that it wasn't real, but it is," LaRose said, an orange memorial ribbon pinned to her sweater.

The community of Grande Prairie has rallied around the boys, with many local businesses featuring donation boxes for the victim's families. A silent auction and barbecue was held on the Warrior's

practice field during the game. The money raised will go to a trust fund for the families.

It will be up to the parents of the boys to decide how the money will be used, said Lee Wrigley, team co-ordinator for the St. Joseph's Celtics.

The Celtics, from Grande Prairie's Catholic high school, would've been rivals under different circumstances. On Saturday, they helped raise money for their sister school, part of efforts by the entire football community in the town.

"It is so heartwarming to see the community come together like this," Wrigley said.

A local hotel presented the team with a \$25,000 cheque during halftime at Saturday's game.

Support for the Warriors has come from as far away as California. A few weeks before the crash, the team travelled to San Diego to play against the Santana High School Sultans.

"I think it really hit them as a team," said principal Tim Schwuchow. "They were pretty traumatized."

One boy on the Sultans team took the news particularly hard. After the game against the Grande Prairie students, he had exchanged belts with one of the Warriors who was killed.

Now, Santana High School plans to send the Warriors a video students made of their game.

The Warriors will play in the championship game next weekend.