

Big time sports — small college flavor



photos by BILL HANSEN

The cheers from the fans don't seem to bother a brown cow who grazes peacefully beside the end zone at Olivet College's Griswold Stadium.

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

Away from the recruiting violations, steroid scandals and overzealous alumni calling for the coach's neck, there is a place. A place where epinephrine is forsaken for the serenity of fallen leaves crunching underfoot and the stinging, sweet smell of leaf fires.

A place, if one were to go to the big guy in the sky and ask for a ticket on the 80-yard line of rural life, they would probably end up here.

Full up a seat, Olivet is about to play Adrian in a Michigan Intercollegiate Athletic Association football game at Griswold Field.

The game is one of several NCAA Division III football match-ups on this day. For Olivet, a private school with 750 students, this is a chance to finish with the first winning record since 1974.

All that quickly grows less important as the day unfolds before a small, but enthusiastic audience. Time has left this brand of collegiate athletics untouched.

No scholarships, TV contracts or season ticket revenue on this level — just tradition and intimacy.

"Follow me," said Olivet assistant coach Bob Kublak after introducing himself to a pair of visitors. "If anyone asks, I'll tell them you're recruits."

Kublak leads the pair into the Kirk Center where breakfast of steak and spaghetti is being served to the Olivet players three hours before kick-off.

KUBIAK JOINS other coaches at the roundtable in the cafeteria. The coaches are all wearing white sweaters except for one — Dominic Livedoti who is the head football coach at Olivet. The mustached gentleman might be mistaken for Mike Ditka. He begins to leave when he notices some unfamiliar faces.

Livedoti introduces himself and sits down. Without much prompting, he begins discussing Olivet and the allure of small-time college football. Imagine Bo Schenbeckler or George Perles chewing the fat with a

pair of strangers — let alone a journalist — the morning of a game.

With no scholarships and bigger schools swooping in on prep talent, Livedoti's job is more like a 40er sifting for gold in a stream. He gets by with what's left over.

"I look for a kid with a big heart," Livedoti said. "Maybe one from a big family with eight other kids because I know they probably had to fight for everything."

"WHAT I'M SELLING here is the environment, the one-on-one interaction you have at a place like this. Here, you might be in a classroom with 15 other students instead being in an auditorium where the instructor is a video."

Such an atmosphere brought Livedoti back to Olivet College, where he starred as a receiver for the Comets. He held the team's single game receiving record and career pass receptions with 83.

He left West Bloomfield High School to coach at Olivet, whose football program was in disarray. So far, so good. The Comets battled for the MIAA title despite three early-season losses and brought respectability back to Olivet's football team.

With him are West Bloomfield High players, such as running back Dan Shrewsberry, corner back Chris Alexander and linebacker Tom Lamb. Another member of his backfield, Todd Pasick, plays with one arm.

A person walks into the cafeteria with a potential recruit. Livedoti excuses himself and leaves. He instantly warms up to the teenager with a retainer and a pin-decorated varsity jacket.

"What do you play son?," asked Livedoti, putting his arm around him as they exit. "Running back and linebacker, huh. Well I have a running back with one arm and he's as tough as nails . . ."

A WALK THROUGH the oak tree-lined campus before reveals little pre-game revelry, just quiet tradition.

Olivet College was founded in 1844 by Congregationalists from Ohio and New England. The school opened its doors immediately to women and minorities.

The school has been a charter member of the MIAA since 1888. The league also includes Albion, Alma, Calvin, Adrian, Hope and Kalamazoo. Olivet has the smallest enrollment of the bunch.

The town of Olivet itself seems oblivious to the importance of today's game. The downtown occupies two blocks. There is a pizzeria, a pharmacy, a snack shop and a grocery store. City hall and the police department share one storefront-sized building.

We look for a pregame party inside the town's tavern, The Coach Light Inn. The only fanfare in the darkened bar is the whirling noise of the ceiling variety.

An older man in a battered baseball cap eats a hamburger while another in flannel shirt drinks a Pabst Blue Ribbon and watches TV. The waitresses talk loudly about how she lost weight after she quit drinking beer.

AS THE NOVEMBER sun casts an orange tint through the leaf-bare branches, the serenity of the walk down Main Street to Griswold Field is only interrupted by a few passing cars and a stray dog.

Outside the gates, there are no ticket scalpers. Heck, there's not even any tickets. Instead a pair of students work the entrance. One collects \$4 from each adult; the other sells programs.

The Olivet team of 89 players walks down Main Street from campus in two rows holding hands. The marching band, with 19 members, arrives to play the school fight song and the National Anthem.

During the first half, Olivet scores the first touchdown. The home stand is filled with people filled with red and white — the school's colors. Across the field, a small jury box of people cheer for Adrian. A brown cow grazes behind the scoreboard.

Quarterback Pete Marzoni, who is a Livonia Stevenson graduate, connects with Larry Anaschets for a 19-yard touchdown pass. The air lets out of the Olivet crowd like a vacuum cleaner bag.

AT THE HALF, Adrian players sit with their should pads and jerseys off on the grass behind the restrooms. The Olivet band performs and then is followed by an Irish setter who catches Frisbees.

Three more cows and a calf convene behind the scoreboard as the second half commences.

Olivet pulls to within three points on Shrewsberry's 1-yard plunge with 2:07 left. The Comets try an on-side kick but the Bulldogs recover.

The band plays "Tequila" to perk up the home crowd as the clock winds down.

After the final whistle, fans and family filter onto the field. Shrewsberry gets a hug from his mother as he walks off.

Livedoti stays around to talk as the afternoon sun begins to fade into another fall night. An alumna congratulates him on the team's season, which concluded at 4-5 and 3-2 in the MIAA.

"Why don't you come back to the house and I'll get you a cap," Livedoti said to the Olivet grad as they walk off the field together.

By then, even the cows could go home.



The game between Adrian and Olivet was a thriller with Olivet pulling to within three points with 2:07 left.



Olivet head football coach Dominic Livedoti stands along the sidelines in a stance that might lead someone to mistake him for Chicago Bears coach Mike Ditka.



Partisan Olivet fans give their team a rousing cheer as the Comets pull within three points of rival Adrian Bulldogs.

"I look for a kid with a big heart. Maybe one from a big family with eight other kids because I know they probably had to fight for everything."

— Dominic Livedoti

Forget the tier after tier of fans, Olivet's Griswold Stadium is like one at a high school — plenty of seats for the hometown fans and a few bleachers for the loyal opposition.

