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Turn on the lights?

Darien playoff football game moved to Norwalk as talks on lighting resume

By Melvin Mason on December 5, 2013 In Latest News, News, Sports - 0 Comments

About author



Melvin Mason

The Darien High School football team took the field Tuesday night as the home team against Daniel Hand High School.

However, the Blue Wave squad did not take a single snap of its first round CIAC Class L contest within the town borders. That's because the home field at Darien High does not have permanent lighting. The lack of lights forced the game to be played at Jack Casagrande Field at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk.

Discussion about adding permanent lights to the DHS field has gone on for nearly a decade. Supporters say it will give high school students student-athletes more time to play, but some neighbors near the field remain against lighting, believing it will disrupt their quality of life with more noise and other distractions.

While relocating the game may have bothered some, the night in Norwalk ended on a high note as Darien kicked a late field goal to beat Daniel Hand High School of Madison 31-29. Darien's semifinal opponent will be Middletown High School at 2 p.m. Saturday at Pomperaug High School in Southbury.

The Darien Board of Education in 2008 withdrew a \$550,000 appropriation request it had with the Representative Town Meeting. The appropriation was equivalent to a gift being offered to the town to finance a lights project. That same year, the Planning & Zoning Commission voted not to hear a lights proposal because the project did not fit in with town's plan of conservation and development.

Darien High head football coach Rob Trifone said last Friday that was disappointed that his team, which clinched the top seed in Class L after a dramatic 28-24 win over rival New Canaan on Thanksgiving, could not enjoy a home game after all their hard work. Darien High officials talked with McMahon officials last week about being able to use the McMahon field in case the Blue Wave earned a home playoff game. The Blue Wave players boarded buses and traveled to McMahon Sunday afternoon to practice at Casagrande Field. Darien's football team had to play a home game at McMahon last year once play resumed following the cleanup from Superstorm Sandy, Trifone said.

"I think it's an injustice to those high school athletes," Trifone said last Friday, noting that the New Canaan team Darien defeated enjoyed a home game at the Rams' Dunning Stadium, a field equipped with lights.

Darien is the only school among the four Fairfield County Interscholastic Athletic Conference members to make the playoffs that does not have permanent lighting at its field. Two FCIC schools that did not make the playoffs, Harding High School in Bridgeport and Trinity Catholic High School in

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Stamford, also don't have lights at their home fields. Staples High School in Westport added lighting to its field last year.

"This situation not only deprives our players and fans of a tremendous community experience but also affects many other community organizations that would benefit as well as other sports that use the stadium field including field hockey and lacrosse," Trifone added in a statement. "It's my hope that this helps demonstrate the need for lights and how much we could all benefit from their installation."

The Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference, the state's governing athletics organization, has scheduled first round playoff games for Tuesday evenings after the regular season for about 15 years, said Joel Cookson, CIAC director of media and sports information. The games are held in the evening to allow people to attend the games during the week, he said.

"While we would like every school to be able to play home games at their school, there are certain standards that need to be adhered to in order to be sure all teams and fans have an equal quality experience in their playoff games," Cookson said in an email. "We used to allow the renting of temporary lights but last year that was changed to require permanent lighting. The reason for that is that the quality of temporary lights is not as good and the towers are not as tall. So punts would go over the lights and parts of the fields would be unlit."

Cookson said many teams have moved their games to fields with lights and some have added lighting, which, he said, "enhances their experience throughout the year, not just in the playoffs."

Mo Minicus, head coach of the Darien High field hockey that recently won a state championship, considers it "a shame" that the football team and other fall sports teams cannot play nighttime home games due to the lack of lighting. The school also can't host state tournament games as a neutral site.

Minicus' team had to move a home playoff game against Westhill set for Saturday afternoon Oct. 26 to Friday afternoon Oct. 25, because the Blue Wave football team was scheduled to play on Saturday afternoon and she did not want her top-seeded team to give up its home field advantage.

"How great would it be to have a 2 p.m. football game and a 6 p.m. field hockey game?" said Minicus, whose son Colin plays on the football team.

First Selectman Jayme Stevenson said she is "very supportive of lights when our community is ready to support what I believe could be a wonderful community amenity." Stevenson added Monday that she plans to ask the Planning & Zoning Commission to have a discussion on home lighting next year.

John Sini Jr., a new member of the Planning & Zoning Commission who previously served with the Darien Junior Football League, said it's time for the commission to have such a talk.

"Given the significant growth in our town's youth population and the dramatic increase in youth sports participation rates in recent years, Darien is long overdue for its town officials to conduct a comprehensive discussion over many of the issues related to the community's recreational facilities," Sini said in an email on Tuesday.

Board of Education Chairman Betsy Hagerty-Ross said lighting is not on her board's list of goals and objectives for the new year. She does not expect a change unless the town's plan of conservation and development is changed. "That's the impediment," said Hagerty-Ross, who voted to support the permanent lights at the field in 2008.

Former Planning & Zoning Commission Chairman Fred Conze said the issue of lights has to go through the planning and zoning process.

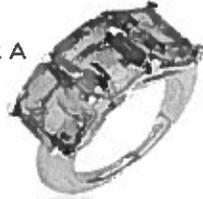
"When the high school was originally designed, they never expected to have the intensity of use," Conze said. "When you go over there on a Saturday, there are no parking spaces. The use of the facility has intensified."

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Conze said those supporting lights need to be aware of the "significant impacts on the neighbors around the school" that lights can have. Most Fairfield County high schools are not surrounded by residential neighborhoods, he said. Conze said the Board of Education should do a master plan of the school, which could incorporate lights and new turf fields that the Darien Athletic Foundation wants to add to the campus.

"Just putting up lights is not proper planning," Conze said. "Just because we have a good football team is not a reason to put up lights."

Peter Graham, president of the Darien Athletic Foundation, said his group "shares the opinion of many in town who believe that lights would be beneficial to our community." The group will take the guidance of Darien leaders as they determine how they want to examine and move forward on the lights issue.

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Tags: [betsy hagerty-ross](#), [Brien McMahon High School](#), [CIAC](#), [Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference](#), [Daniel Hand High School](#), [darien](#), [Darien Blue Wave](#), [Darien Field hockey](#), [Darien football coach Rob Trifone](#), [darien high school](#), [Darien lacrosse](#), [Darien soccer](#), [FCIAC](#), [First Selectman Jayme Stevenson](#), [high school football](#), [lights](#), [Mo Minicus](#), [neighbors](#), [New Canaan High School](#), [New Canaan Rams](#), [stamford](#), [Staples High School](#), [Trinity Catholic High School](#), [westport](#)

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