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Lake Fong/Post-Gazette Photos

Summit Academy coach Steve Sheerer talks with his team during halftime Saturday in Herman.

## THE SUMMIT EXPERIENCE

WELCOME TO SA, FOR A TRULY UNIQUE HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL EXPERIENCE WHERE PLAYERS ROLL INTO GAMES FROM NEARBY WOODS WHILE SATURDAY AFTERNOON CHURCH BELLS TOLL.

By Mike White  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

While stadiums with multilevel press boxes and spiffy artificial turf are all over the WPIAL map these days, a school on the outer edges of the league's football universe provides a unique game-day atmosphere.

Welcome to Summit Academy, where, among other things, players literally come out of the woods for games.

Summit Academy is a reform school for adjudicated youth in grades 9-12, located in the countryside of Herman in Butler County. It was at one time a Catholic seminary called

St. Fedelis. On a fall Saturday afternoon, make the left turn off Bonnie Brook Road to get to the school's field and you'll have a one-of-a-kind high school football experience.

Summit's field doesn't have lights, so football games are played Saturday afternoons in a picturesque setting that is serene,

yet loud. You'll see things that can be humorous, interesting and enjoyable.

"We're just trying to give these kids – both the players and the students – something to be a part of that they might remember, because a lot of them have never been part of anything," said Adam Kinsel, 62, the pep club leader who also works at the school.

At games, eight students bang drums during every break in play. Kinsel often dances to the beat of the drums, and students stand the entire game, clad in light blue dress shirts, khakis, sneakers and red-and-blue ties, all part of their school uniform.

"This is my first time here," Valley coach Troy Hill said with a smile after last Saturday's game at Summit Academy. "I've never seen anything quite like it."

You don't see things like this at Upper St. Clair, Pine-Richland or Aliquippa. This is the Summit of WPIAL football experiences:

- One of the end zones isn't far from a lake, while woods surround much of the field.
- The locker rooms are up a hill and across the street from the field. So, Summit Academy goes into the woods for final pregame chats and then charges onto the field from the woods.

- At halftime, the team ventures back into the woods and discusses strategy while sitting on the ground. Heck, a player could roll into the lake if he's not careful.

- The refreshment stand is in a baseball dugout next to the football grid.

- Church bells from nearby St. Mary of the Assumption play songs during pregame warmups.

- There is no press box. Instead, there is scaffolding on both sides of the field where coaches stand for games.



Summit Academy Knights take on Valley Saturday in Herman, Pa.

## Welcome to the Summit Academy experience

And then there are the students and the pep club. Nearly an hour before last Saturday's game, 32 students and eight drummers marched two-by-two from the school across the street and down to the field.

This pep club is popular at Summit. Over the years, it has been asked to perform at some small-college basketball games in Western Pennsylvania and the Roundball Classic. Many years, Summit will take pep club members to a football game at the Naval Academy, just to show them what student spirit is all about.

About a half-hour before game time, it is a sight to see the rest of the Summit Academy students march, two-by-two, from the school down a hill and onto six rows of bleachers. During the game, they chant and move to the beat of the drums.

Summit has 250 students from six different states. Counting the pep band, about 150 attended last Saturday's game against Valley. Some students are not permitted to attend for either disciplinary or academic reasons and some might be visiting with parents.

"All of the drummers are self taught. They teach each other," said John McCloud, executive director of Summit Academy who also helps coach football.



Summit Academy students cheer for their team against Valley Saturday.

"I'd say it's a pretty unique atmosphere we have."

Some of the student chants are creative. A short one is, "We fired up – can't take it no more."

One of the longer ones goes, "Stop ... drop ... Summit Knights just won't stop ... Ohhhh ...Ohhhh ... that's the way SA roll."

The student section is not far from the visiting team sideline.

"What's funny is, I found myself every once in a while turning around and taking a peek at those kids," Hill said, chuckling. "You'll see our players on the sideline turning around and watching sometimes. You can't help it."

Students at Summit Academy have been sent there by courts. They have committed all kinds of

juvenile and adult offenses, but no serious offenses such as murder or robbery. Many of the students have drug offenses.

Summit Academy opened in 1996 and has been playing WPIAL football since '98. The school also is in the WPIAL in basketball and baseball.

Summit Academy has never made the WPIAL playoffs in football, but it came close the past few years. Steve Sherer is Summit Academy's coach and he rarely has more than a couple of players on the team from one year to the next. Students are sent to Summit for usually a minimum of five months and many of Sherer's players haven't played organized football for years. This year's team has more than 50 players.

Sherer, 58, was a star running back on Duquesne University's 1973 team that won the national club football championship. He also is an administrator at Summit.

"We try to make it very difficult for a kid to slip through the cracks if he comes to us," Sherer said. "We want to make sure that we get him hooked into something. If it's not football or athletics, then he can be in the pep squad or some other program here."

Summit Academy is 0-5 this season, but only two years ago it was 5-4 and missed the playoffs by a game.

"We think the football program and the atmosphere here give these kids a sense of pride," McCloud said. "The scoreboard doesn't always mean a lot to us. What means a whole lot is that the kids work as hard as they can, we work together and treat the other team with all the respect in the world.

"If I didn't think we were making a change in some of these kids, I wouldn't have been in this business for 32 years."

Hill said he has had a few players run afoul of the law over the years and then sent to Summit.

"They do a great job with kids here," Hill said. "Some of the kids from Valley who have been here, when they come back, they're straightened out. They're different."

Football can help put a kid on the right path. Sherer tells the story of a former kicker at Summit who calls him every month.

"He was a handful until we got him on the football field and that helped him," Sherer said. "Now he's living in Washington, D.C., working construction and making something of his life.

"I can tell you there are definitely times I go home from this place frustrated. But when I look back on my career, I think everyone is put on this planet to do something. I think we have a unique opportunity here to impact some kids' lives every day. And I think that's a necessary and worthwhile need in our society."