

Landers, Pannozzo leave with plenty to smile about

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It will be another historic milestone in the wonderful saga of Tiger Hollow when the Ridgefield High School football team opens its 2008 season against Warren Harding Friday night. And when the new lights at the stadium are officially dedicated during a special pregame ceremony, the two biggest smiles in the place will probably be on the faces of Vin Pannozzo and **Dave Landers**.

The local duo were there in the beginning, two of the first committee members on board when the plan to build Tiger Hollow was discussed back in 1998, and the last of the original members still around.

But as a new board took over beginning Wednesday night, Pannozzo and **Landers** decided it was a good time to finally step down after nearly 10 years of dedicated service to help make Tiger Hollow the outstanding athletic facility it has become.

In fact, the idea to build Tiger Hollow was actually hatched during a conversation the two of them had one night in **Landers'** living room.

"**Dave** and I both came through Ridgefield High School and had children come through the school," Pannozzo said. "I graduated in '69 and **Dave** graduated in '74 from what I still like to call the finew' high school. At the time, the football field was in poor condition. It was playable, but it was pretty run down, and the track was so bad it couldn't hold any meets.

"Ridgefield was going through major renovations at the time," he added. "They had what was called the Education Bundle and were renovating all existing school buildings and even erecting a new school. In excess of \$100 million was being spent for that so we knew there was little they could do to take care of athletic fields.

"I was over **Dave's** house one night and we said, figee, what can we do as a community to make it better,' and that was really the stimulus. Then we got other people who had kids playing sports involved."

"You have to watch out for those meetings in your living rooms," **Landers** laughed. "They can lead to some complex initiatives.

"But for Vin and I, it's been a wonderful experience. We started on this journey in 1998 and it's been 10 years since we came up with the concept to rehabilitate the stadium."

Landers and Pannozzo both envisioned a facility Ridgefield would be proud to call its own and one that would be the envy of visiting teams from other communities.

So they and others began the task of raising the money to build it.

"We had to raise two and a half million dollars at that time to create a state-of-the-art facility," Pannozzo said. "We raised one and a half million and in December of 2000 we were in a position

where we either had to go ahead with the project or drop it. We made the commitment to go ahead and that's when a benefactor, the Bossidy Family, stepped up."

With the funds available, most of the facility was built by the community itself.

"People donated their time to help build it," PannoZZo said. "Especially on weekends. People gave anything they could and everything they could. We had no experience, but we learned as we went along."

"I even laid down some bricks," laughed Gary Tiger, the Ridgefield High wrestling coach who works in sales during the day and would later manage the facility. "We all slopped some paint. Whatever was needed we did it. We also had a lot of local builders and masons donate their time."

"It was a real community effort," PannoZZo agreed. "There were really a lot of people who put in a lot of years and a lot of effort, all board members who never asked for anything in return. They just wanted to have something people could enjoy."

And on Sept. 29, 2001, Tiger Hollow was open for business as the football team made its home debut.

"Of course, they won," PannoZZo said with a smile. "The completion from the teardown to the opening was only 128 days."

But the name Tiger Hollow wasn't even part of the original plan.

"It was always known as the RHS football field or RHS sports facility," said **Landers**, who was captain of the 1973 RHS football team, a quarter of a century before his son would also be a captain. "But on the day we leveled it out, I remember a few of us were standing on top of the hill on an early spring morning overlooking it and someone commented what a beautiful hollow this is.

"That's when Paul Rohrmann, who used to be the president of the Pop Warner Association, said I think it should be renamed Tiger Hollow. We all thought what a wonderful name and it just stuck."

The field was also rededicated in memory of Steven Lancaster, a former RHS student and football, basketball and baseball captain in the early 1970s who lost his life to cancer.

"My class dedicated the field in Steve's name," **Landers** said. "But our board felt over the years his name was not being well represented with the condition of the field. I know the Lancaster family and we wanted to give them a field they would be proud to have their son's name on.

"We also dedicated the new eight-lane Olympic track to Rick Medve, the former track coach," said **Landers**, who was also captain of the track team under Medve. "I tracked him down in Maine and he came down here for the dedication."

Tiger Hollow has seen even more improvements in the seven years since its opening.

"We built a support building to house all the school athletic equipment and all the maintenance equipment," PannoZZo said. "We also added a strength and conditioning center to the facility. Even though the high school has a very nice one, we saw the need to have one right there at the field."

"We spent \$500,000 this summer alone, not only for the new lights but the irrigation system on the fields on the side," **Landers** added. "It really rivals any athletic facility in the state. It's better than what some Division III colleges have. It's one of the nicest high school facilities in the state and actually one of the nicest in New England.

And sports fans aren't the only ones who get to enjoy Tiger Hollow.

"It's a multi-function facility that really caters to so many things," **Landers** said. "Not just athletics, but the community, too, like when they have fireworks."

While the board still oversees the facility, the stadium management is now under the direction of the high school athletic director, while the Parks and Recreation department maintains the playing surface.

"Bob Schneider has done a super job all these years," PannoZZo said of the Parks and Recreation field maintenance director.

Yes, what was once known as just the RHS football field, has certainly come a long way. And to think, it all started from a simple conversation Vin PannoZZo and **Dave Landers** had one night 10 years ago.

Now they are both walking away, confident and comfortable they're leaving what they started in capable hands.

"It's a special group of people on the new board," PannoZZo said. "We set up a 10-year plan for improvements that we're now three years into and the new board is ready to run with it and maintain it as a premier facility."

Landers agreed. "We've gone through three operating boards and the current board has the same commitment and passion we had in the 1990s," he said. "If you look at the board, it's really a mirror of the board we had when we started."

But while **Dave Landers** and Vin PannoZZo are stepping down, they will forever be a part of Tiger Hollow.

Besides, they won't ever be too far away.

"I'll still be around to help out," PannoZZo promised. "I'm sure I'll come watch games and have a hamburger."