

# Pride of Ohio: St. Henry

By [Kyle Rowland](#) - 26 April 2013

[35 Comments](#)

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*"Pride of Ohio" is an homage to the small to medium-sized Ohio cities that have helped to shape Ohio State athletics.*

Two thousand four hundred twenty-eight. That number can apply to multiple things in St. Henry – the population and the number of townspeople filling the Wally Post Athletic Complex on a Friday night. The number one is also significant, as in the number of police officers and stoplights.

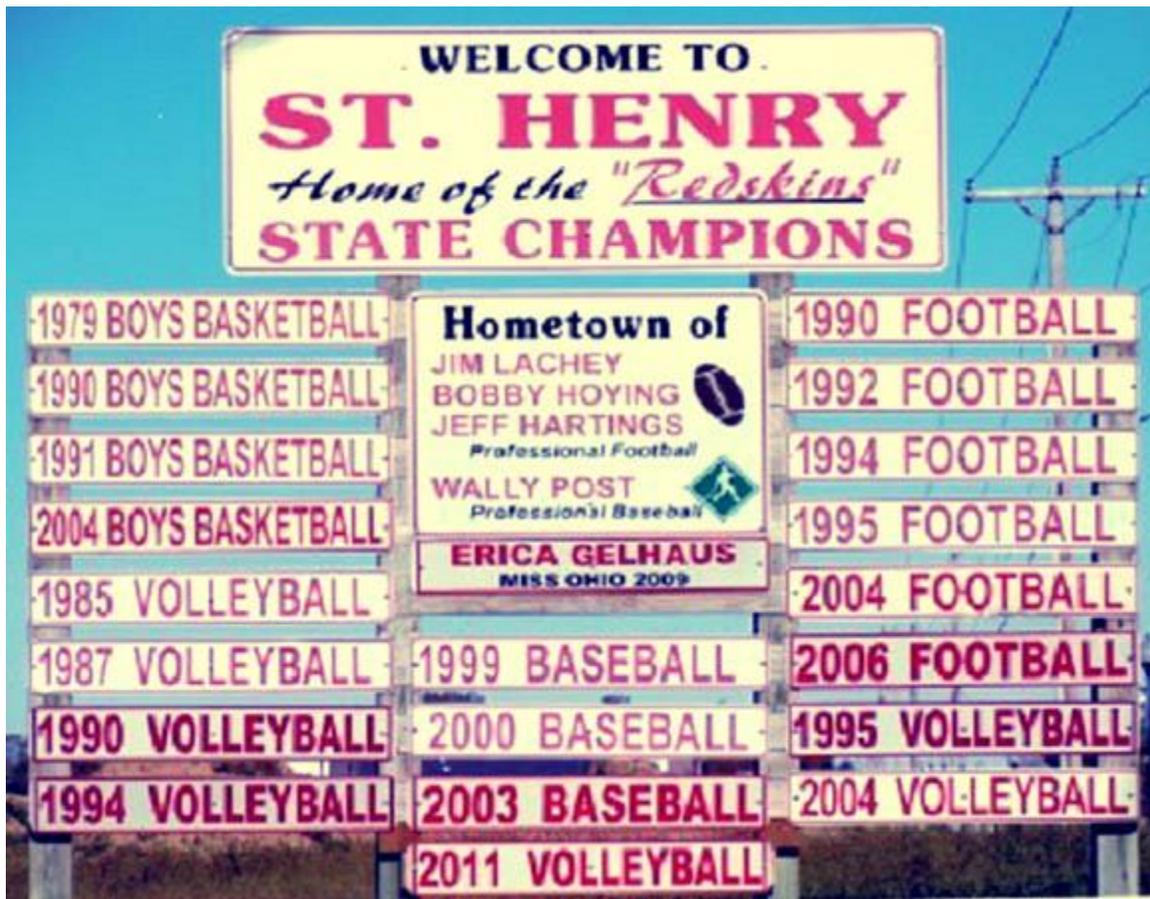
The tiny outpost in the far reaches of western Ohio sits less than 10 miles from the Indiana border. The close proximity to the Hoosier State does not mean basketball is the choice game, though the Redskin hoopsters are plenty successful. Still, St. Henry is Midwestern football to the core.

"Football in this state is embedded in the culture," said Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith. "Communities have rallied around that in a great way. They can take pride in the accomplishments of their local football team. For our state, we've been blessed primarily because we have some unbelievable high school coaches. That's a huge part of it, and we've always had great athletes in Ohio."

When football isn't being played, fields are plowed, hay is baled and silos are filled. When the heartland is discussed, a picture of St. Henry could be distributed for the visual effects. Hard-working families inhabit the town, kids raised on working-class values.

Once the calendar flips to August, there's an unmistakable buzz in the air. Whistles can be heard and the clatter of helmets creates an echo that signals a rite of autumn.

"It's a big discussion. I know if you go up town in early August people are talking about what the football team will be like and who the quarterback will be," said St. Henry athletic director Dennis Wendel. "Once the season starts, that's the big topic around town."



Wendel has had a front-row seat to Redskin athletics for much of his life. He was raised in town and watched the likes of Jeff Hartings and Bobby Hoying matriculate from St. Henry to powerhouse college programs to the NFL.

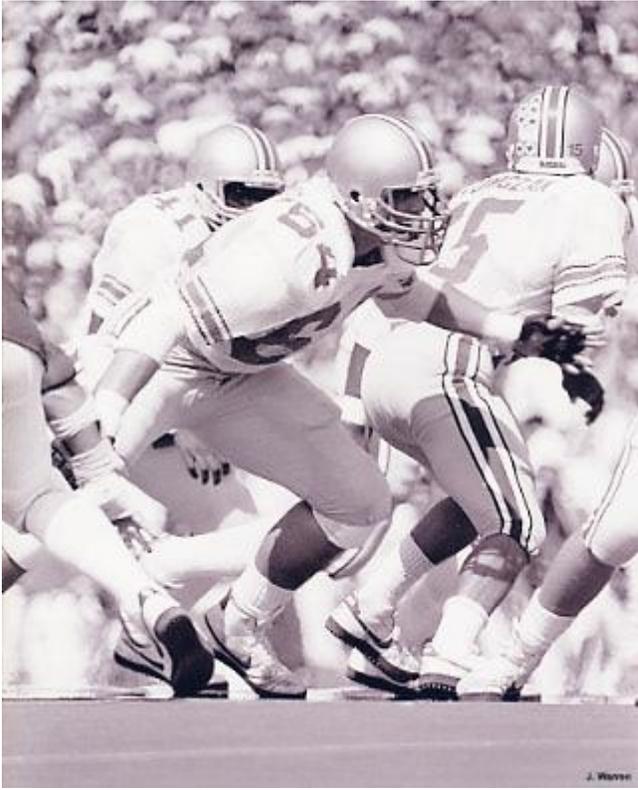
Wendel himself rose to stardom as a starting defensive end on St. Henry's 1995 state championship team. He was also part of the 1994 state title, both of which are recognized as you drive into town and happen upon a road sign that honors St. Henry's 20 state championships, which include the sports of football, boys basketball, baseball and volleyball. The sign rises up amidst fields on either side like an oasis.

"Friday nights under the lights is a pretty big deal in St. Henry," Wendel said. "Going to the game on Friday is a dream for a young kid. To play in that atmosphere is great. There are a lot of people there, especially that first game. The air starts to cool off and people are pretty excited. There's just nothing like it."

It's such a big deal that St. Henry sells between 600 and 650 season tickets each year. And the renewal rate is almost 100 percent. When you've won six state titles since 1990 and count a handful of NFL players among your alumni, football is serious business, regardless of the size of the town – which is 1.65 square miles.

Not only do the townspeople flock to Redskin football games on Friday night, the entire police department is also present – all one of them. But don't worry, Wendel said there's never been an incident that he can recall. Football is literally the only show in town during the fall.

"We're unusual. We live in a little bit of a bubble," he said. "It's more than an hour to Lima and Dayton, and there are no major interstates. On Friday nights (football is) the entertainment. People go to football games. It brings a big sense of pride to the community. There are very few things that could bring a community like ours more together than a successful football team. If you're having a good year, you really feel the support."



J. Warren Lachey went on to star for the Washington Redskins

If former St. Henry star Jim Lachey manhandling a hapless defender counts, then there has been roughhousing at football games. Before he was an All-American at Ohio State and a Pro Bowler and Super Bowl champion with the Washington Redskins, Lachey started to pen his legacy at St. Henry.

Jeff Hartings had the same career arc. Star at St. Henry, All-American at Penn State, Pro Bowler and Super Bowl champion in Pittsburgh. Former Ohio State quarterbacks Bobby Hoying and Todd Boeckman also call St. Henry home, as does Bobby's younger brother, Tom.

"You know when those guys are back in town," Wendel said. "You can see a lot of smiles on people's faces when Jim Lachey and Bobby Hoying walk by. Those two are unbelievable representatives of our community – really good people, even more so than their athletic talent."

Boeckman, like Wendell before him, grew up watching St. Henry teams on Friday nights and envisioning the day when he would finally lead the Redskins. He followed in the footsteps of his boyhood idol, Bobby Hoying. Boeckman is responsible for one of those state titles, though it was on the baseball diamond, where he starred as a hard-throwing pitcher.

As gaga as the town is over St. Henry football, it's equally as supportive when former players move on to college. The entire town once again watches its own on Saturday, tuning in to whatever game features an ex-Redskin.

"People will go to games just because there are St. Henry grads," said Wendel, who played at Bowling Green under Urban Meyer. "I was amazed after games when I'd go out to greet my parents and there would always be St. Henry people there because they knew I played and wanted to come up and watch a game."

When it comes to the Big Ten, though, the party lines are clearly drawn.

"It's definitely an Ohio State community, bar none," Wendel said. "A lot of the college graduates here attended Ohio State. But when Jeff Hartings was playing at Penn State, you saw a lot of Penn State clothes."

Whether it's Scarlet and Gray or Blue and White, one thing is constant – a St. Henry connection. And no town turns its back on its own.