



Lights, Camera, Action



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The New Orleans Saints Super Bowl XLIV victory over the Indianapolis Colts last season became the most watched television program of all time in the United States.

On October 22, 2010, for those who can't attend, the St. Thomas Aquinas at Gardner-Edgerton football game may eclipse that mark. OK, maybe not nationally, but it sure might locally. The reason? That particular game was pinpointed this past summer for an ESPNU broadcast. That's right, the Blazers and

Saints are not just going primetime, they are going national.

"This will be the single biggest event this town has ever seen," said Gardner-Edgerton principal Tim Brady. "I've seen Gardner grow from 3,000 people to 18,000 people, so I know this will be very special for the community."

So, if all 18,000 residents, as well as the many thousands of St. Thomas Aquinas fans, can't entirely fit into Gardner-Edgerton's football stadium, then rest assured, all other plans will be canceled, and their televisions will be tuned in to ESPNU for the contest Friday night.

"The one thing about this being a home game, we really think that Friday nights are really celebrated here in a unique way, particularly in Kansas, and we're excited that the rest of the state, as well as other states, get a chance to see that football is a big deal here," Gardner-Edgerton head coach Marvin Diener said of the national broadcast. "For the community, that's really fun too, and our support has been second to none, the game is against a rival, so it sets up to be a really fun time."

'This is really cool'

High school football teams don't get to play on television every week, let alone national television, so once the deal was sealed with ESPNU, both head coaches knew this was going to be huge, not just for their schools, but for their programs as well.

"This is really cool. In a kid's term, it really is," Diener said. "We are very excited to be able to showcase what our program has done. We've got some really outstanding, gifted players that I think will be very interesting for that kind of spectrum to look at. But more than that, we are very excited about our supporting cast of players too and giving them the opportunity of being in that same light."

Part of the reason this game was selected by ESPNU was because of 1) the recent success of each school, and 2) the budding rivalry between these two programs.

Going back to 2007, Gardner-Edgerton and St. Thomas Aquinas have faced off five times. The Saints hold a 3-2 advantage over that time; however, the Blazers have taken the last two with the final one coming in the state semi finals last season.

"I really think it's an honor to say that you are playing on ESPN, and it's just a great situation," said Aquinas head coach Mike Thomas. "Our program is pretty darn good, and it's going in the right direction, and now with this, it just gives us a little bit more exposure. What a great thing for the kids to say, 'I've played on ESPN.'"

History lesson

When Marvin Diener took over the Blazers football program five years ago, the team was coming off of a 2-7 season. Since then, they went 5-4 and were co-conference champions of the Frontier League in 2006, improved to 7-4 the following year and Class 5A regional champions, soared to 10-2 and sectional champions in 2008, and last year went 12-1 and ended as sub-state champions.

This year, the team has jumped out to a 7-0 start behind the arm and legs of Nebraska recruit Bubba Starling. It's the school's first year in the vaunted Eastern Kansas League. The Blazers have made themselves quite comfortable in their new surroundings.

Aquinas has had its share of success as well. In 2007, the Saints went 8-4 and finished one game away from playing in the state championship. The following year, Aquinas did break through and make it to the state championship game only to fall short to Hutchinson 38-0. In 2009, Mike Thomas took over the program after longtime coach Kevin Kopecky stepped down due to health reasons. The only two losses in Thomas' first year came to, you guessed it, Gardner Edgerton with the final loss coming in the state semi finals 49-7. This year, Aquinas is off to a 5-2 start with losses to Webb City and Blue Valley as the only blemishes.

Given that this is going to be each teams' eighth game of the season, and a district game on top of that, keeping the players focused week-by-week wasn't going to be an easy chore with a nationally televised rivalry game looming in the distance. Both coaches have had to temper excitement a bit.

"It's been really kind of unusual for the kids," Thomas said. "When they first heard about it, they were just saying things like, 'This is really cool.' I think they've just kind of taken it in stride, but the week of the game they will be more aware of it and maybe a little uptight. They've had people come out and take pictures of the kids and have them fill out forms, so it's been a little bit of a distraction but not much. They've been handling it very well."

Aquinas senior free safety Kyle Kane knows that it can be difficult to focus on games from week-to-week, but staying focused each week with a nationally televised game on the horizon hasn't been too much of a distraction for him and his teammates.

"I've been wondering how we've stayed focused without looking ahead," Kane said. "It's been coaching, and they keep us focused each and every week, and the players know it's not fun losing around here."

'It's just another game'

This game means everything to Blazers offensive lineman Lucas Powell, and he knows it's the biggest game he and the rest of his teammates have ever played.

"When we first heard about the game, I was super excited, and couldn't wait to get out there and play," he said of this moment. "I want to play my best and show everyone else around us how great of a school we are. I've been counting down the days until we play this game."

While excitement has been riding high and continues to build as the game approaches, Aquinas quarterback Richard Davila was a little more reserved about his opportunity in the limelight.

"I like it for two reasons," he said of the game. "It gives a chance for other people to see what we showcase, and it gives us the opportunity when we grow up to say OK, we've done that, but other than that, there is nothing we should look forward to because it's just another game on a Friday night under the lights, and we are playing a very, very good team, and that's all we have to look forward to."

His teammate Kyle Kane “quarterbacks” the defense. He knows that there will be a different atmosphere, a different feel, a different intensity during the week of this game, but as for preparing for their opponent, it will be business as usual.

“I hope we take it very seriously, but I don’t think we’re going to change much,” he said. “We’ll go over the game plan, and we’ll do exactly what we do every week, and really hope for the best.”

The player that may have the most eyes on him Friday night will be Blazers quarterback and Nebraska recruit Bubba Starling. He will be playing in front of the largest crowd in Gardner-Edgerton history and knows it’s going to be somewhat of a circus atmosphere.

“It’s going to be loud. It’s going to be crazy,” he said. “I think we’ve had three or four of our games on TV so far this year, so I know this is going to be really sweet.”

A tremendous opportunity

Amid the hype and hoopla around the two football teams, there is still a school and a community that must gear up for such a large event. That hype and hoopla is felt all the way up to the Mayor of Gardner.

“This is a tremendous opportunity for our community to have this kind of recognition,” Gardner Mayor Dave Drovetta said. “This was all due to the hard work of the kids at the high school, and it has really brought our community together.”

It’s gotten so big that the Governor of Kansas, Mark Parkinson, will be on hand for the coin toss. Gardner resident Todd Drusell has been attending Blazer games for years and is proud of what this event will do for his town.

“It’s huge,” he said. “The big-town schools will finally find out what the small-town schools are about.”

Excitement has rapidly spread through the halls of Gardner-Edgerton High School. Students, faculty and administration all know what this game means, for not just their community, but for their school as well. Junior Logan Meyer knows the importance of such a high-profile game.

“This has definitely raised school spirit,” Meyer noted. “It’s so big, they are going to bring in extra bleachers. I think the whole town will be there.”

Or at least will be watching.