



Rising from the Ashes: Huntley Project High School

Having its school burn down was not enough to stop this football team from winning a state championship

Early in the morning of September 18, 2008, a fire set by arsonists destroyed much of Huntley Project High School. The library, the gym, three offices and nine classrooms went up in flames.

Jay Santy is the head football coach at Huntley Project High School in Worden, about 20 miles east of Billings, Montana. Santy also serves as activities director and teaches biology.

In this exclusive interview, Coach Santy describes how this small community banded together after the fire to keep the school running and inspire the athletes to keep their school pride strong.

BFS: *Tell us about the fire.*

JS: We were in our third week of football, and our record was 2-0. Early Wednesday morning some arsonists broke in and started the fire; the firemen

figured it started at 1:30 in the morning. I got to the school at about 2:30 in the morning and the school was ablaze, with firefighters working hard to try to save the school. When it was all said and done, the school was pretty much destroyed.

BFS: *How much damage was done, dollarwise?*

JS: About \$8 million.



On September 18, 2008, an arson fire at Huntley Project Schools resulted in eight million dollars in damage.

BFS: *Are all the buildings in the school connected?*

JS: We have just one high school, grades 9 through 12. Our middle school and elementary school are on the same campus, but they are separated by a large parking lot.

BFS: *How long was the school closed?*

JS: We gave the kids a couple of days off just so we could assess the situation, but we didn't have anywhere to go. Immediately our administrators began bringing in trailers from Billings, which is a city about 20 miles from here. We

got several trailers up and running by the weekend, and so the kids had a couple of days off from school.

BFS: *Did you have to postpone your football game that week?*

JS: No. Luckily the firefighters got into the locker rooms and saved a lot of the football players' equipment and uniforms. We had some smoke damage, but the uniforms didn't get burned. Several local businesses helped by cleaning the materials to try to get us ready to play on Friday. By Thursday we had some helmets and shoulder pads, and by Friday we had everything ready to go for the game.



Although the school was ruined, by using portables and even school buses, classes and athletic programs were able to continue.



BFS SUCCESS STORY

BFS: *After the fire, did you consider canceling the season?*

JS: No, that was not an option. We knew we had a very good football team, and there is no way these kids were going to let us cancel the season. It meant too much to them. We got a lot of help from different organizations in the community getting us equipped to play, and we still had our football field – and all you really need is a football field.

BFS: *Were the student body and*

community supportive to the team after the fire?

JS: We had a packed football field, and there were even people from Billings who came out to watch – it was like a playoff atmosphere, and it was only the third week of the season. Our kids played an inspired game and beat a good football team that was also undefeated.

BFS: *Were you able to work out at all during the season?*

JS: Yes. Our weight training facil-

ity is connected to our junior high, not our high school, so we were lucky in that respect.

BFS: *Did you have any special team motto during the season?*

JS: We had some T-shirts with sayings like “A little fire will never keep a Red Devil down” and “We will rise from the ashes.” We also had BFS clinician John Rowbotham come up here and put on a day-and-a-half Be an 11 clinic. When he started talking about



With great fan support, the Red Devils’s football team persevered to win the State Championships.

goals, our football team got together right away and said they were going to win the state championship. That was in mid-August, and they were not going to let this fire affect them – in fact, it may have even motivated them more to succeed.

BFS: *So how did the season play out?*

JS: We ended up going 12-0 and winning the state championship in Class B. This is only the second time in school history that we were able to do that.

BFS: *Would you say the football team helped keep the school spirit intact?*

JS: Absolutely. The community really rallied around our sport teams, not only football but also other sports such as volleyball and cross-country.

BFS: *Where did the volleyball team practice?*

JS: Our volleyball team didn't have a gym, so they had to practice at other schools and played all the rest of their

matches on the road. They ended up taking third in state.

BFS: *Are you still using trailers?*

JS: Yes. We have about a dozen trailers set up for the high school, and we laid a foundation of sidewalks connecting all of them. Our old school building is kind of just "there," but that will soon be torn down so we can start the process of building a new high school.

BFS: *How long will it take to get the school back up to its original state?*

JS: There's an architectural firm working on it now. We will probably have a new school in the fall of 2010.

BFS: *What type of training does your football team do in terms of strength and conditioning?*

JS: We do sprints, box jumps and agility work twice a week; and three times a week we have weight training classes. My assistant Mark Wandel runs the Bigger Faster Stronger program,

and he inspires the kids and makes them work hard. They are always setting records. We have a record board set up, and our kids are always trying to break those records. And of the 50 kids on our football team, about 90 percent are lifting now.

BFS: *Does breaking records help your athletes stay focused and work hard?*

JS: Sure it does, because it creates competition. And besides competing against the school records, the kids compete against themselves. Athletics is all about learning how to compete.

BFS: *How does your team look for next year?*

JS: We have a great junior class, and we are going to have six or seven starters on both sides of the ball coming back next year. And they haven't slowed down at all. They are in the weightroom pushing themselves, and they want to win another state championships. **BFS**



The Red Devils's volleyball team also enjoyed an inspirational season in taking third in the state championships.

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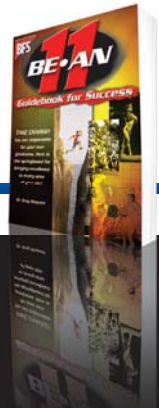
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