



stops by the school cafeteria at 3 p.m. before the game to make himself a walking taco.

This is a big night: the first game in decades that the Warriors will play under lights at their home field. The school purchased stadium lights this year for the football and baseball fields. Desjarlait controls them with an app on his phone. He is thrilled that his players finally get to experience Friday Night Lights on their home field.

Red Lake opens against New York Mills, a Class 1A power that advanced to the state semifinals last season. The temperature is near 90 degrees, and Desjarlait worries about his players having to play both offense and defense.

The Warriors dress 18 players, including three middle-schoolers and a senior playing in his first football game. New York Mills brings 35.

Desjarlait huddles his players before they make the walk down a gravel road to the field. He is wearing a white T-shirt with a photo of Nolan Jr.'s smiling face in the middle. The shirt has No. 12 on the back.

"Who's nervous?" he asks.

Nobody raises a hand.

"Good," he says, "I'm glad you're not nervous. This is a clean slate."

New York Mills scores a touchdown on its first play, a 50-yard run. Red Lake fumbles the kick-off, New York Mills recovers and scores another touchdown. The score is 53-0 at halftime.

The Warriors keep battling and score a touchdown in the final minute. Their sideline erupts in cheers. The final score is 70-6 but the mood does not reflect it. The Warriors find simple joy in playing football. A touchdown or a diving tackle sends a euphoric jolt across their sideline. Teammates constantly encourage one another.

With New York Mills stretching its lead on another touchdown late in the first half, the team's biggest body and boldest personality stops as he walks back to the sideline and gazes at the horizon.

"That's beautiful," Brown says.

The sun is setting over the top of the school in a magnificent orange glow. Brown motions to get the attention of a game official standing nearby.

"That's beautiful," he repeats, pointing to the sky.

The official looks and nods his head.

Brown takes a few more seconds to savor it, then turns around and gets set for yet another kick-off.

In the postgame huddle, a player shouts, "We've got a good chance at a win this season!" Teammates yell and high-five as they head back to the locker room.

"That's the thing about Red

Lake football," says Beaulieu, the captain. "No matter how bad we get beat, there's always hope we'll get a win the next week."

Perseverance has become a hallmark of Red Lake, something opponents respect. Conference coaches voted Desjarlait as Coach of the Year after his team went 0-8 a few seasons ago.

New York Mills coach Matt Radniecki tells his players to think about the commitment to teammates that Red Lake players exhibit.

"It's not easy to jump on the field when you haven't had success," Radniecki says, "but they had fun doing it."

Two weeks later, the Warriors remain optimistic as they prepare for a road game at Bagley. Hunting season on the reservation started this week and two players bagged deer. Players toss footballs in the parking lot outside the locker room as they wait for the team bus.

Nineteen players make this trip, including the most seniors they've had in years: eight. Three young boys on a playground run to wave at the bus as it embarks on the 40-minute drive down Hwy. 1.

The bus is mostly quiet, except for a faint sound of '90s music playing over the stereo system, but the locker room pregame buzzes with excitement. After coaches go over final strategy reminders, Beaulieu huddles teammates for a pep talk.

"Nobody expects us to win!" he shouts, reminding them that it's been a long time since the Warriors did just that.

Their competitive spirit is visible, but the Warriors are over-matched and outnumbered again. Bagley returns the opening kick-off for a touchdown, then scores repeatedly. The Warriors keep competing hard as Bagley inserts backups. Final score: 54-20.

In the postgame huddle, Desjarlait and his assistants encourage players to keep their heads up, keep battling. Each player gets a turn to say something, and each message is positive.

"No matter what the score is, they come here to have fun," Desjarlait says as players walk to the locker room. "I'm just here to help them. It's life. We're always here for them regardless."

The team makes a pit stop at a convenience store to grab snacks for the ride home. Laughter fills the bus. Desjarlait sits in the front seat, staring out the front window into the darkness, always mindful that the next obstacle lurks.

That obstacle appears a few days later.

Homecoming festivities start with good news. Brown is named homecoming king and just in case anyone needs a reminder, he wears his crown as he leaves the locker room in uniform before the game.



#### CROWNING MOMENTS

Justin Brown was declared homecoming king in class as Cade Beaulieu applauded. On Senior Night, coach Desjarlait handed out roses to seniors like Brayden Beaulieu, beaming with pride. "I'm teaching them how to be a young man in a football helmet," he says. Cade, who hopes to play basketball in college, and his classmates had fun at a homecoming dance.