"It's gorgeous": VCSU's $1M football stadium renovation gets first big test

By: Eric Peterson, INFORUM

VALLEY CITY, N.D. – Valley City State President Steve Shirley couldn’t hide his smile Thursday night as the Vikings played for the first time on their new football field.

“It’s gorgeous,” Shirley said. “It takes your breath away.”

VCSU played Morningside College, ranked No. 5 in NAIA, to christen the newly installed artificial surface that was completed within the last couple weeks. The Mustangs spoiled the festivities as they powered to a 35-17 victory before 1,018 fans. The game was the season opener for both teams.

“I think you can kind of sense the buzz in the air and the atmosphere and it means a lot to this region and the community,” Shirley said.

The playing field was officially dedicated as “Shelly Ellig Field” moments before Thursday’s game.

The facility is now known as Shelly Ellig Field at Lokken Stadium.

“It was a great atmosphere to play in,” Vikings quarterback Tommy Zinke said. “We had a lot of fans show up tonight. It’s pretty sweet to come out and open the field up. ... This is 20 times, a million times better. ... It’s great stuff to play on.”

Ellig founded Stop-N-Go convenience stores, which donated $350,000 to the stadium project. Ellig passed away in October 2010. Stop-N-Go president Sheila Carney joined Shirley and other VCSU officials for a ribbon-cutting ceremony that preceded kickoff.

“It just shows that we’re not going anywhere and we are committed to our football program,” said VCSU athletic director Jack Denholm. “We’re committed to making Valley City State University the best it can be in football.”
Morningside scored the first touchdown on the new playing surface, a 16-yard touchdown pass from quarterback Jordan Jacupke to Joel McCabe that came with 3 minutes, 55 seconds remaining in the first quarter. That gave Morningside at 7-0 lead.

The Vikings’ first points on the new surface came on a 27-yard field goal off the foot of freshman kicker Thomas Cortez. That trimmed the Mustangs lead to 7-3 with 10 seconds to play in the first quarter.

Vikings wide receiver LeTheo Proctor brought the home fans to their feet near the end of the first half. The senior made a spectacular catch in the end zone with a leaping grab over the top of a Morningside defender with 13 seconds to play in the second quarter. The scoring pass, from Zinke, covered 37 yards and cut the Mustangs lead to 21-10 heading into halftime.

The Mustangs scored the first two touchdowns of the second half to pull away. Morningside rushed for 310 yards on 44 attempts. Freshman back Dillon Robinson rushed for 137 yards on 13 carries. Junior Fred Jones added 125 yards on 20 attempts.

“Defensively, we wore down, we wore out,” Valley City head coach Dennis McCulloch said. “In the end, we’ve got to find a way to makes some plays, but we kind of wore out defensively and allowed too many big plays.”

The entire stadium renovation cost around $1 million. The artificial turf accounted for more than $800,000 of the overall price, Denholm said. The upgrade also included a new scoreboard, which wasn’t totally completed for Thursday’s game. Denholm said the school would like to add a new video board by next season.

McCulloch said the artificial surface is the same type of turf being used in the Metrodome and Superdome. He feels the new field is important for the health of football and the athletic department as the Vikings mull their conference affiliation future.

VCSU is a member of the Dakota Athletic Conference, which shrank to four teams this school year. While the DAC will hand out league awards this season, the four members will be considered NAIA independents when it comes to the postseason in what will be the final DAC season.

“We can’t stay stagnant,” McCulloch said. “Valley City State needs to show its thriving.”

VCSU’s enrollment is more than 1.300 students this school year, the highest it’s been in 40 years, according to Shirley.

Shirley said a strong athletic program is one of the keys to keeping the university’s enrollment healthy.

“I think this is a real statement that we are not going away,” Shirley said. “Athletics is a critically important part of this university and will continue to be so.”

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