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## A home game, at a new home

*Charlotte High School's \$7 million football facility replaces the one ruined by Hurricane Charley in '04*

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PUNTA GORDA -- Hundreds of students dressed in blue and gold, hyper as only packs of teenagers on a Friday night can be, bustled into the new Tarpon Stadium, passing by their darkened former field.

It was just over three years ago, on Aug. 13, 2004, that Hurricane Charley littered the retired field with what seemed like the contents of the 81-year-old Charlotte High School.

That night, athletic officials examined the decades-old stadium,

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including its felled light towers and toppled press box, and wept.

Friday night, as Charlotte High hosted the first home game at its rebuilt \$7 million stadium, there were no tears and little time for them anyway.

"It's probably been one of the most laborious weeks I've had in a long time," said Charlotte High Athletic Director Brian Nolan as he coordinated the event with a walkie-talkie.

Nolan stood outside the stadium's new control booth, where the intensity of preparations matched that of a space shuttle launch.

Nolan took a few seconds to watch the rows of bleachers fill with hundreds of Charlotte High students, parents and alumni.

"This is one of my proudest moments," he said.

Since Hurricane Charley, Charlotte High has played only 12 homes games, all on the makeshift old field, which was partially flooded by Friday's rains.

Beside the former field's drainage issues, the old booth for coaches and announcers consisted of a rickety system of scaffolding and plywood, said Wayne Sallade, Charlotte County's director of emergency management and game announcer for the Tarpons for 29 years.

Off-field coaches would monitor their teams above Sallade, supported by only a layer of plywood.

"Sometimes, we didn't know if they were going to join us," he said. "We could hear every footstep and every expletive."

In addition to a more sturdy JUMP booth, the new stadium features a new field of Celebration Bermuda grass that drained perfectly.

"That turf on that field is every bit as nice as the Tampa Bay Bucs' field," said district construction manager Gene Spurr, who helped oversee the stadium's construction.

Friday marked the first home game for the Fighting Tarpons since since Nov. 3, 2006, and students have been anticipating the game since the start of school in August.

"People have been waiting for this game like crazy," said sophomore Zack Hardwick, 15. "A home game is a home game."

Perhaps one of the most nervous fans was Punta Gorda resident

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Wayne Goff, a fourth-generation Charlotte County resident and 1957 Charlotte High graduate.

Fifty-one years ago -- on Oct. 5 -- Goff, captain of the football team, handled the first kickoff at the inaugural game for the former Tarpon Stadium as Donna, the homecoming queen who would become his wife of 47 years, looked on.

Before the game Friday, Goff was asked to mark the occasion with a ceremonial kickoff -- a 37-yard kick that went end-over-end.

Goff, 69, characterized it as a "fair" attempt.

"I've had some better ones in practice," he said.

"Believe it or not, after 51 years, I still had butterflies in my stomach."

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