Defense builds identity, brotherhood, tradition

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The Darkside unfurls a new flag to be flown on the field this year.

When the Titan defense takes the field on Friday night, the crowd won't just see a defense – they will see a defense with an identity. Known as the Darkside, the defense lineup has become more than just a unit on the field; it's a culture, a mindset, and a tradition that continues to grow.

The idea dates back to 2018-2019, when defensive coordinator Tyler Nutsch was searching for a way to unify and brand his defense. Inspired by his college experience at Peru State, where both offense and defense carried their own nicknames, Nutsch and his players landed on the name Darkside, and it stuck.

"Great defenses over time have had these nicknames," Nutsch said. "The Bears had the Monsters of Midway, the Vikings had the Purple People Eaters, and obviously Nebraska are the Blackshirts. Having a nickname is special, and those defenses played with incredible effort and violence."

For the Titans, playing defense is about flipping a mental switch.

"Defense is all reactionary: We don't know when they're going to snap the ball; we don't know what formation they're going to be in; we don't know what play they're going to run," Nutsch said. "So we have to react, and when we react, we have to do it in a nasty, violent, aggressive way, and a lot of our guys play both ways now. So when they are on offense, it's a lot more calculated. They have to know exactly what the play is, exactly what their steps are, what front they're getting, or what coverage they're getting. We want them to go to the Darkside."

Players have embraced that mindset.

“It’s the bond that we have,” senior outside linebacker Cole Lempp said. “We are all close to each other, and we meet outside of football. However, on the field we can become disconnected and we all trust each other in order to get the job done.”

Senior safety Grant Beckenhauer agreed that the team’s bond was strong.

“What separates us from last year is our mindset and our togetherness. We have a lot of good energy this year, and some guys have stepped up and are ready to make an impact,” Beckenhauer said.

Part of what makes the Darkside unique are the traditions surrounding it. The players take pride in waving the Darkside flag after big plays, often carrying it to the student section to hype the celebration.

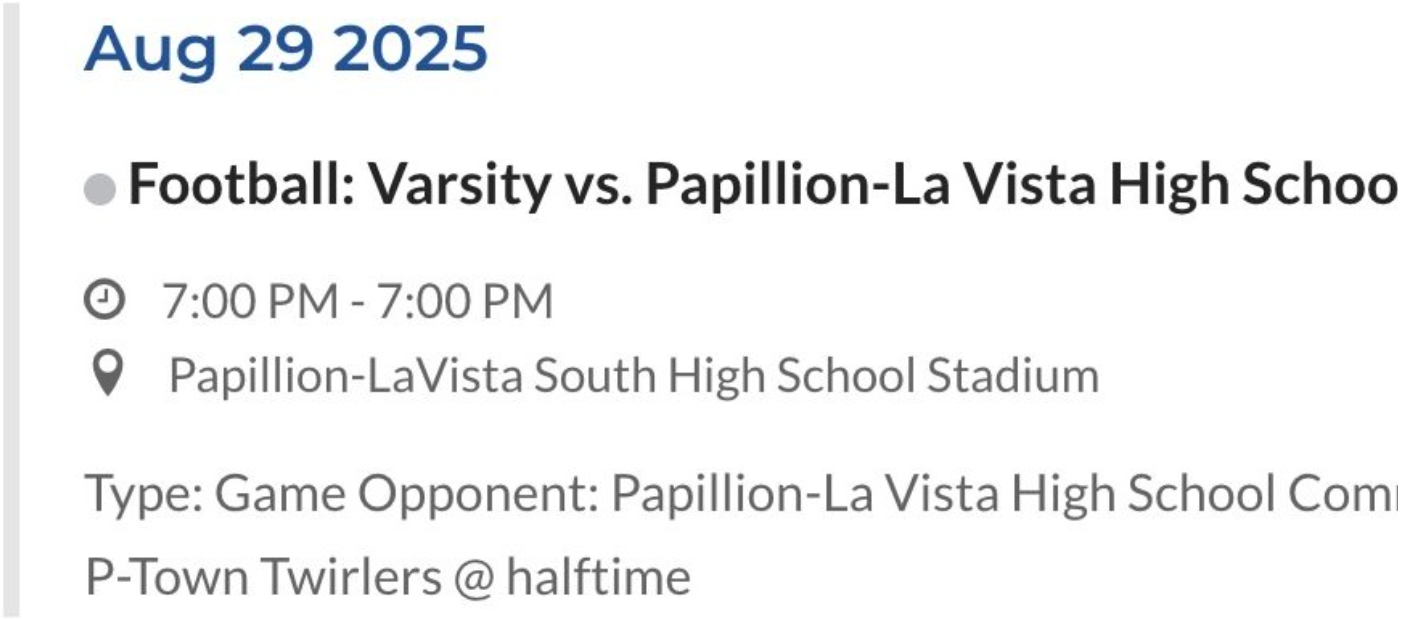
“When our defense takes the field, I want it to be loud and crazy and do everything we can,” Nutsch said. “If we can get a procedure penalty from the offense and get them to 1st & 15, statistically, the chances that we get a stop go way up.”

Senior Grant Beckenhauer at practice before the Titan-Monarch game. (Trey Lovings)

As the 2025 season launches this Friday against the cross-town rival Monarchs, the Darkside is looking to prove it can be one of the state’s best defenses. The goal, according to junior defensive lineman Gage Burki is simple: “I want to see our mentality of how we need to go out and dominate people and that no one can beat this, and if our offense scores 17 points, we are going to win. That’s the mentality we need to have.”

Senior Cole Lempp in a drill against junior DB Bristol Gibson

Lempp echoed Burki’s confidence. “I am hoping we have the best defense in Class A, if not the state,” he said.

For Nutsch, it all comes back to the player who embodies the identity: “All these guys, they get on the field, and they flip that switch.”

Beckenhauer said fans should expect to see big things. “Our mindset is going to be different this year,” he said, “and we are going to be fun to watch. So come show out to the games and support us.”