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WEEKEND BREAK



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Photos by Ron Baldwin

Astoria High School football players practice their paces in one of the first practices of the new season led by head coach Howard Rub.

A NEW YEAR ON THE HORIZON

By RON BALDWIN

Back to school — Just that phrase can trigger an emotional torrent in kids, parents, grandparents, teachers, maintenance and service staff — nearly every person connected to the school system in any way. With all the changes in our schools in America in the last half-century, one thing remains constant: the anxiety, thrill and dread that becomes evident in a sizable portion of the population upon exposure to those words.

Around the first of August or even sooner the print ads start. Meanwhile television, radio and online ad campaigns have already been in action for weeks revving up demand for new designs and trends. The online onslaught has been in gear all year, it's just that now the focus becomes back to school.

Back-to-school shopping behavior seems to be split along gender lines. The girls are happy to go out with mom and shop for the latest trends and are happy to wear them to school on the first day. Still, disagreements can persist.

"Just decide already."

After the age of about 7, boys will never be caught shopping with mom without being hog-tied.

"These shorts and T-shirt I've been wearing all summer will do fine until the snow flies."

One can clearly see why some moms celebrate on the first day of school. Most moms work, so child care concerns and costs go down. Grandmas have their summers filled with energetic grandkids, and, for them, now is the time to crank up the camper and hit the road.

Gearing up on the field

In late August, we begin to see the sports teams on the athletic fields. The students who participate in fall sports have already gone through some training exercises by the time school starts. Many have done some physical training on their own. Parents and students have filled out a seemingly unending number of forms. The teams are ready to go onto the field and accept the rah-rah-rah of their peers, defend the goal and the honor of the mascot that inhabits their shirts and hats.

"Fight, fight, fight for victory."

They call it school spirit. For some, it comes naturally. For others, it can be elusive, like all spirits.

Learning on the bus

Even though there is a growing number of students of all grades that depend on parent drop-off, rural and city school districts alike still depend on a fleet of buses to transport students safely to school.

A cadre of classified employees is needed to maintain, clean and drive those yellow behemoths. But it appears there is a dearth of school bus drivers in the Northwest. If you travel, you may have seen the banners on the buses along the road: "School bus drivers wanted."

It seems like every district is begging for drivers. One explanation for this phenomenon is the economy. When employment is high and wages are rising, current and potential employees are tempted to go to higher wage jobs and the driving jobs go wanting.

It's primarily moving kids to school,



Jesse Strauch, Astoria High School's new marching band director, calls out the formations for his students in their first practice of the year with no instruments.



Jon Fay, an Astoria School District employee, mows the field at the Astoria High School track with Saddle Mountain in the distance. Local school workers are busy prepping the grounds and classroom before school starts Tuesday.

but the bus is also where students learn. Part of our social-interaction behavior is learned on those early morning and midafternoon rides. On the first days of school the pecking order is established but the whims of fortune sometimes change, and new friendships can develop throughout the year.

Smells of school

One thing I remember about my first days of school are the smells. For the lack of a better term, I'll call them smell prints. Scientists say that smells can trigger emotions and memories quicker and

more certainly than other senses.

Waiting for the morning school bus on the side of the road near Northwest rivers has a smell print all its own. It's the flowery, grassy, dewy, sunny, foggy smell that every school bus rider knows but can never name. At school, with all the buses together, that smell is mingled with diesel smoke, creating a new smell print. Enter the school doors and the cleaning product odors hit the nose for an entirely new smell print. Somewhere between 10 and 10:30 a.m. the cafeteria begins to churn up new smells that make students' stomachs growl. Then on to lunch and after,

the smells of blackberry, cedar, alder and fir drifts in and out of the window until school is out. This routine continues until the rains resume, everyone has a cold and no one can smell anything.

Sultry September days

Teachers now develop that "here we go again" mindset as administrators develop new policies for the year and maintenance personnel scurry around fixing, fussing and cleaning. The last-minute touches are being applied to seasonal construction projects. Students are saying goodbye to summer friends, the last excursions to the beach are coming to an end. The populace is getting ready to settle down into a routine. The only thing is, that never really happens until about the end of November.

The fact that school begins in our best weather kind of works against students when it comes to staying alert in the warm afternoons of our balmy Septembers. The first days of my sophomore year were a good example. Our civics teacher Hollis "Bullet" Beasley was a great mind and scholar, but his voice was dull and boring. Coalesce that with the fact that civics was scheduled directly after lunch on 75-degree days with no air conditioning and the direct result is the entire class falls asleep, even the nerds. The Bullet, as the boys called him behind his back, was prepared to make an example. And I was his target. The scenario went something like this:

TB: "Mr. Baldwin?"

Me: "Mhuh"

TB: "Mr. Baldwin, will you please give us a definition of the economic concept "laissez faire?"

Me: "Um, er, I didn't read the ..."

TB, interrupting: "No Mr. Baldwin, it does not mean that you are lazy, and I am fair, even though it is most certainly so."

Whole class, now wide awake: "ahahahahahaha."

Ron Baldwin is a musician, photographer and writer living in Chinook, Washington.