

Idaho Statesman

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

‘Something bigger than themselves.’ Idaho football team will honor Gold Star family.

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Dustin Ard grew up a half a mile away from Rocky Mountain High School and has family members attending the school. So when Dan McKnight heard the Green Beret died while serving his second tour of duty in Afghanistan on Aug. 29, he knew the Grizzlies had to honor their former neighbor.

A month later, No. 1-ranked Rocky Mountain (4-0) will host a Veterans Appreciation Night dedicated to Ard as the Grizzlies take on Centennial (2-2) at 7 p.m. Friday.

The event goes beyond the typical flag waving and camouflage-themed uniforms. Instead, the game will serve as a donation drive for the Blue Star Mothers of America, a nonprofit supporting mothers with sons or daughters in active service.

Fans can bring travel-sized toiletries and single-serving or individually wrapped snacks for the group to build care packages for soldiers overseas. Cash will also be accepted to purchase those items.

And before kickoff, Lt. Governor Janice McGeachin will present a wreath of white daisies to a representative of Ard’s family, Idaho’s newest Gold Star family. Ard brought white daisies to his 3-year-old daughter Reagan when he returned from missions.

In addition to his daughter, Ard leaves behind pregnant wife Mary, who is expecting a son.

“It hits very close to home, and so we wanted to do something that was more than just waving a flag, playing a patriotic song and then forgetting about it tomorrow,” said McKnight, the freshman offensive coordinator at



Rocky Mountain.

The Grizzlies will deck out every corner of the stadium for the game with 100 flags representing all branches of the U.S. military. Players will rush onto the fields with those flags, present the Blue Star Mothers with blue flowers and wear special grey uniforms with red, white and blue shoulders.

A fire truck will also hang an oversized American flag behind one end zone, and patriotic-themed T-shirts are on sale for \$12.

Pregame festivities start at 6:45 p.m.

“The school, once it was brought to them, they’ve jumped on board,” McKnight said. “Every organization in the school wants to be a part of it — the cheerleaders, the band, the soccer team, the boosters. ... When you are in a school of 2,500 kids, getting that kind of involvement is fairly unique.

“Seeing them come together for a cause that’s bigger than themselves is quite special, especially growing up in

this kind of affluent area that we live in. Military service is not common in this district.”

McKnight served in the Marines, the Army, and the Idaho National Guard for 13 years. He has since founded BringOurTroopsHome.US to encourage Congress to withdraw troops from the Middle East, pointing out that nearly none of Rocky Mountain’s students were born when the U.S. first went to war in Afghanistan.

Ard was the 15th U.S. service member killed in Afghanistan this year. The U.S. still has 14,000 troops stationed in the country as part of its longest-running war.

But McKnight said Friday night is about honoring Idaho’s soldiers and their families, not a political stance.

“I think it’s a chance for us to pause and remember this is real life,” Rocky Mountain head coach Chris Culig said. “We get a pretty awesome opportunity to play a game. But there are a lot of people that are dealing with a lot of things and dealing with real life.”