

# LOCAL SPORTS Journal

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NOVEMBER  
2017

## BATTLES FOR **LOCAL SUPREMACY**

**Big Reds hold off the Sailors**  
**Montague stuns MCC**

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30-game  
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# LOCAL SPORTS Journal

- 4 Big School Showdown**  
The Muskegon Big Reds had their hands full with a great Mona Shores squad in the showdown of the season, but rallied late to beat the Sailors.
- 6 Small School Showdown**  
Muskegon Catholic has been dominant in football for years, but Montague came along and shocked the Crusaders in their first gridiron collision.
- 8 Snapping the Streak**  
The Shelby football team has been struggling for a few years now, but there were smiles all around when the Tigers snapped a 30-game losing streak.
- 10 Kent City 9-0: First Time Ever!**  
The Kent City football team came to life in the last two seasons, and capped off its resurgence with its very first perfect season.
- 12 An Annual Mark of Excellence**  
The Oakridge football team has now made the state playoffs for 13 straight seasons, which is a point of great pride in the Harger household.
- 14 More than Keeping the Seat Warm**  
Spring Lake volleyball coach Sarah Bulthuis retired in 2013, then came back this year and is having big success.

*On the cover: Muskegon's La'darius Jefferson races past Mona Shores defender Sincere Dent. Photo/Michael Banka*

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# M BIG SCHOOL SHOWDOWN

All season long, everyone was talking about "the game" - Muskegon vs. Mona Shores, a showdown between the area's two best high school football teams, on Oct. 13.

Muskegon came in 7-0 and ranked No. 1 in the state in Division 3. Mona Shores was 7-0 and ranked No. 2 in Division 2.

It was billed as a battle for supremacy in football-crazy Muskegon County, with the likely championship of the O-K Black Conference on the line.

Something had to give when the two great teams clashed, and local fans were excited.

Mona Shores Coach Matt Koziak seemed pretty pumped. After twice tasting success against the Big Reds, the Sailor coach was eager to have another shot at mighty Muskegon, the most successful high school football team in the history of the state.

"This is the first time that both teams will be undefeated going in," said Koziak, whose team beat the Big Reds in 2014 and 2015. "I told the kids, you deserve all of this, for all of the effort you've put in. They are going to have a packed house, they're going to play a great team, and it's going to be a great game.

"There has been no issue getting the kids jacked up for this one."



**"The thing that worried me was what's going to happen when we're faced with adversity and fall behind. The kids answered that."**  
- Shane Fairfield

But Muskegon Coach Shane Fairfield wasn't buying all the hype, at least in public.

"To me, it's just another football game on the schedule," Fairfield told

LocalSportsJournal.com a few days before the showdown. "It's Week 8. The series is something like 35-6, so I don't know if you can call that a rivalry. In my opinion, us and Lowell are more of a rivalry."

When the matter was finally settled in the cold rain of a fall Friday night, the Big Reds emerged with a come-from-behind 35-24 victory over the Sailors, in a thrilling contest that drew an estimated 11,500 fans to Sailor Stadium.

Later in the week, Fairfield acknowledged that he purposefully refused to buy into the pre-game hype. He said he got more excited about the matchup a few years ago, and the Big Reds ended up losing to the upstart Sailors.

"I guess it comes from experience," Fairfield said. "There were times in the past when I've made this game bigger than it has to be, when I tried to make it more cross-town rivalry



## Big Reds rally late, beat back a challenge from talented Sailors

and rah-rah, and I think the kids sensed that and it backfired. So now we just try to keep things as normal and businesslike as possible, and it worked."

The clear star of the game was Muskegon's standout senior quarterback, La'darius Jefferson, a dual-threat signal caller who was waiting for another chance to shine.

The Big Reds had been winning a lot of games by very large margins, so Jefferson had been coming out early, and rarely had to push himself to guide his team to victory.

But his skills were very much needed against the determined Sailors, and he more than rose to the occasion, rushing 32 times for 290 yards and four touchdowns.

"It was a performance he had been waiting for," Fairfield said. "We knew we were going to get into some games where we were not going to have to use him as much - games where we just handed the ball off and took the option stuff away from him so he wouldn't take a beating. La'darius has been very selfless and mature about it.



*An estimated 11,500 fans, including this fired up bunch of Big Red boosters, packed the Mona Shores stadium. Photo/Michael Banka*

"We knew a game like Friday was going to come when we were going to need him, and he did it against a team that was ranked second in the state."

The Sailors struck first midway through the second quarter, when Mona Shores quarterback Tristan Robbins faked a handoff and darted 15 yards untouched to the end zone. The Big Reds answered quickly, tying the game with a 15-yard run up the middle by Jefferson just two minutes later.

The score was 7-7 at halftime, and both teams' strategies changed in the second half when a steady rain started to soak the field.

"There was no sense in trying to throw the ball in this stuff, so we said 'let's just go wear them down,' and our offensive line did a good job of moving the line of scrimmage and getting first downs when we needed them," Fairfield said.



*Images from the Big Red-Sailor showdown at Mona Shores. Photos by Michael Banka*

The Sailors looked to be in command through three quarters. Robbins connected with Keyshawn Summerville on a perfectly thrown 28-yard fade pass early in the quarter to put Mona Shores up 14-7. Summerville had a huge game with nine catches for 106 yards.

Jefferson tied the score again on a 16-yard scamper with 8:50 left in the third quarter, but the Sailors grabbed a 17-14 lead on a 32-yard field goal by Austin Flowers with 4:45 to play in the third.

Jefferson gave Muskegon its first lead, 21-17, on his longest touch-down run, 38 yards, with 8:02 left in the fourth. The Big Reds then went up 28-17 on a



**"We can't feel sorry for ourselves. We're going to clean up some stuff and we're going to the playoffs and we'll see if we can make a run."  
- Matt Koziak**

14-yard score by wing back CJ Jefferson, who finished with 111 yards rushing on just 10 carries.

Muskegon totaled 544 yards overall, with 388 in the second half.

Even with time dwindling down and the game seemingly over with 1:57 left, the Sailors weren't done. They closed the gap to 28-24 with a razzle-dazzle option pass from Summerville to receiver James Gilbert for a 42-yard score.

The Sailors then appeared to recover an onside kick, but the referees ruled they touched the ball before it traveled the

required 10 yards, and gave it back to the Big Reds.

"I know for certain it went 10 yards," Koziak said moments after the game. "(The referees) said someone touched it early, but I saw someone jump on it at about 10½ yards. We'll look at it on the tape and see for sure."

Jefferson added the finishing touches to his dominating effort when he broke a pair of tackles and scored on a 26-yard rumble for the game's final score.

For Fairfield, the game answered a question that he had been posing since the beginning of the season - how his talented team would respond when it was facing defeat.

The Big Reds had outscored their opponents by a whopping 400-21 margin in the season's first seven weeks, and Mona Shores was the first opponent to really push them.

"The kids answered that," Fairfield said. "They stayed calm, didn't fall apart, didn't point fingers. Once we got it going, we got it going."

With a win over Jenison in Week 9, which clinched the O-K Black championship, the Big Reds turned their attention to the playoffs and beat Holland in the first round.

They've been to a state finals in Division 2 or 3 in four of the past five years, and lost all four games, including last November's last-second loss to Orchard Lake St. Mary's.

"Yes I want to win a state championship to get the naysayers off our backs, but the other thing is, the reason state means so much, is it would teach our young kids, if you stay true to people, care about others, keep getting kicked and keep getting back up, you will be successful," Fairfield said.

"It would finalize the message of my whole career - you just don't quit."



# Small School Showdown



The coach said it was about having fun, with his unbeaten football team challenging a dominant state power in the final game of the regular season.

He called it a great warm-up for the main event - the state playoffs, which started one week later.

But it turned out to be a bit more than that.

Montague's stunningly efficient 34-10 victory over Muskegon Catholic, a team seeking its fifth consecutive state title while riding an amazing 27-game winning streak, turned out to be the signature victory the Wildcats had been seeking for the past three years.

The Wildcats have certainly been good in recent seasons, but have come up short in several big games as their younger players continued to develop.

Against Muskegon Catholic, a battle between the two best small-school teams in Muskegon County, the Wildcats looked like their maturing process was complete. They fell behind early, but the Montague players responded with a calm maturity that bodes well for a playoff run.

"They don't need an over amount of reinforcement when we instruct and prepare," said veteran Montague Coach Pat Collins, regarding his team's development. "They hear it once and they are



**"They had the momentum early on, but we settled down and came back like we should and we ended up having a great game."**

**- Sebastian Archer**

locked in. They're able to do what they need to do. In adversity they are able to control their emotions and get the job done."

Of course the Montague football program has had plenty of big wins

over the years.

The Wildcats have qualified for the state playoffs 15 of the past 16 years, and have won their share of West Michigan Conference titles and playoff games along the way.

They were state semifinalists in 2005, 2006 and 2007 and Division 6 state champions in 2008 and 2009.

But the Montague program hit an ugly bump in 2014, posting a dismal 2-7 record and missing the state playoffs for the first time in 13 years,

The situation quickly improved, which surprised nobody who is familiar with Collins and his coaching staff. But there have still been frustrating moments since then.

Montague rebounded with a perfect 9-0 regular season in 2015, and had visions of playing for a state championship, before losing a heartbreaker, 31-28, to Grand Rapids NorthPointe Christian in the final minute of its second playoff game.

Last year the Wildcats were very good again, posting a 7-3



## Wildcats end Crusaders' amazing 27-game win streak

record and again making the playoffs. But they were upset by North Muskegon 14-6 in the regular season, lost 31-28 to Oakridge in a showdown for a share of the conference title, then were upset by an upstart Kent City team 20-19 in the first round of the playoffs.

"It was pretty typical of the last five years," Collins said earlier this year, looking back on the Kent City loss. "We were winning a lot of games, but not the big ones."

The 2017 season arrived with high hopes, because many of the young players who had cut their teeth on varsity for two years were finally seniors, ready to cash in. The Wildcats also had several explosive skill position

players, including quarterback Sebastian Archer, running back Bryce Stark and wideout Kenyan Johnston.

Montague rolled through the first eight weeks, posting a perfect record, regaining the West Michigan Conference championship; and outscoring opponents 434-65. Their only close call came in Week 4, when they pulled out a thrilling 46-44 victory over neighborhood rival Whitehall in a game for the ages.



*The Montague squad hoisted the colors as they took the field at Muskegon Catholic's historic Kehren Stadium. Photo/Tim Reilly*

Then came mighty Muskegon Catholic in Week 9. The Crusaders came into the game 7-0 (they didn't have a Week 1 opponent this year), with four straight state titles under their belts. They had not lost a game since Oct. 16, 2015.

Almost unbelievably, the two area powers had never met on the football field before. The game was scheduled in the offseason, because the Crusaders, who many potential opponents avoid, were having trouble filling their schedule.

A victory in the local showdown was not crucial for either team. Both had already clinched conference championships and playoff berths. The game was actually a gamble of sorts for both squads, because the loser ran the risk of falling down the playoff seeding chart and perhaps losing a home postseason game.

But Collins was more than excited to tee it up against the Crusaders, just for the fun and the challenge.

"That's a good question - I don't know," Collins said, when



***Montague and MCC battled for the first time ever, in front of a big crowd. Photos/Tim Reilly***

asked why the teams had never met before. "It's all about playing quality opponents and preparing for the playoffs. Plus I just think we want to live, and create some great memories for these kids, with a game like this. That's what it's all about."

The Wildcats answered the challenge with an exclamation point, and opened up a lot of eyes across the state in the process.

Archer, the Montague quarterback, was stripped of the ball by MCC defensive end Jacob Martinez deep in Wildcat territory on the opening drive, allowing the Crusaders to score on a six-yard run by Dawson Steigman and take an early lead.

But Montague answered with its big offensive line and its run game. Stark scored on a short touchdown run at 7:19 of the first quarter, and again just a minute into the second quarter, to give the Wildcats a 14-7 lead.

MCC trimmed its deficit to 14-10 on a 33-yard field goal by Caleb Muskovin nearly six minutes later, but Montague stole the momentum back just before halftime.

On a fourth-and-three, a hard count by Archer drew the Crusader defense offside to give Montague a fresh set of downs at the 50-yard-line with under a minute left.

Two plays later, Archer found senior Blake Jones wide open over the middle for a 19-yard touchdown, which proved to be a back-breaker for MCC.

Archer made it 27-10 with 6:24 to play in the third when he appeared to be stopped short of the goal line, but rolled over the top of a Crusader defender and into the end zone for the score.

Two minutes later, he connected with Jones on a perfectly-placed pump-and-go 50-yard touchdown pass to officially put the game out of reach.

"This feels great because it's a big win for us, especially with the playoffs coming up," Archer said moments after the game. "Both teams came out with a lot of motivation. They had the momentum early on, but we settled down and came back like we should and we ended up having a great game."



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Shelby had four great years of football, followed by four painful seasons and 30 consecutive losses. But the Tigers hung tough and finally...

# Snapped the Streak

By Steve Gunn  
LocalSportsJournal.com

Some coaches win a lot of games. Others lose a lot.

Lorenzo Rodriguez has done a lot of both in his 12 years as head varsity football coach at Shelby High School.

Before he became head coach in 2006, Shelby had one of West Michigan's worst high school football programs for decades.

Then Rodriguez and his staff turned things around, winning at least a share of three championships in the tough West Michigan Conference, and twice taking Shelby all the way to the state semifinals.

Between 2010 and 2013, the Tigers posted a 35-10 record, and the future seemed extremely bright.

But then the situation quickly soured again, at least in the win-loss columns. The

20, when Shelby closed out the 2017 season with a 21-19 victory over Hesperia.

It was the team's first win since Sept. 26, 2014, and broke a painfully-long 30-game losing streak.

It wasn't a huge upset. Hesperia also came into the contest with an 0-8 record. It was hardly a dominant victory. The Tigers needed a big defensive stop late in the game to preserve the win.

But it was still a win for a team that desperately needed one, so for Rodriguez and his crew, it felt like a Super Bowl championship.

"It was elation out there," Rodriguez told LocalSportsJournal.com following the victory. "We were out there with the kids, jumping for joy, and we all looked like five-year-olds at a birthday party."

## An incredible turnaround

Between 1990 and 2005, Shelby posted a 46-107 record. The Tigers had only qualified for the state playoffs twice in program history.

Few Shelby fans were excited when they heard that Rodriguez, a four-year assistant coach who worked as a middle school custodian at the time, was becoming head coach in 2006.

"I remember one assistant coach of mine, who was working in a lumber yard at the time, telling me he heard people saying, 'Oh great, we have a custodian and a lumberjack for coaches,'" Rodriguez told LSJ in 2014. "I never let that bother me. I never wavered from my goal and mission. We just kept plugging away. I was willing to do whatever it took to turn the program around."

That he did. After going 4-5, 5-4 and 5-4 in his first three seasons at the helm, the Tigers turned on the jets.

Their big breakthrough came in 2010, when they posted a 7-2 regular season record



*Coach Lorenzo Rodriguez, pictured above addressing his team, has experienced extreme highs and painful lows in his 12 seasons at Shelby.*

and made the state playoffs for the first time in years. They lost their first-round playoff game to Morley-Stanwood.

There was more success in 2011, when the Tigers went 8-2, tied for the West Michigan Conference championship and again went to the playoffs, where they lost in the first round to league rival Oakridge.

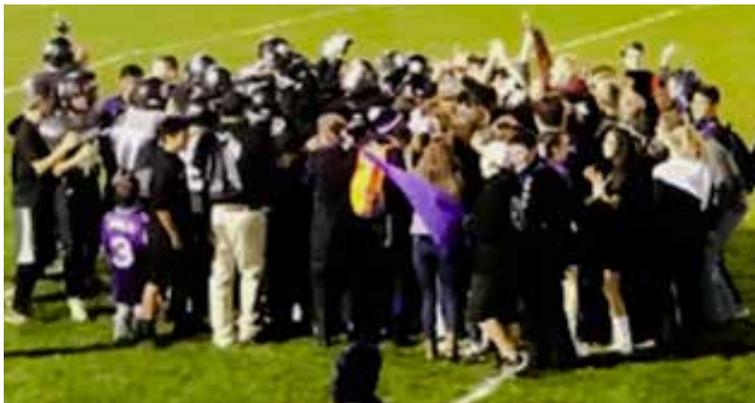
In 2012 they tied for the conference title again, and won three playoff games and a regional title before falling to Ithaca 31-14 in the Division 6 state semifinals.

In 2013 Shelby went 11-2, won another regional title, then lost in the state semifinals 49-3 to Clinton.

The playoff accomplishment in 2013 may not have been as satisfying as the regular season, when the Tigers finally won an outright championship in the powerful West Michigan Conference with a 7-0 league mark.

And they did it in dramatic fashion. The Tigers trailed league favorite and No. 1 state-ranked Oakridge with just 25 seconds remaining when they ran the "hook and ladder" trick play.

The Tigers were at their own 44-yard-line. Quarterback Andy Fortier nailed a short pass to wide receiver Dylan Unger, who pitched the ball to fellow receiver Devin Mussel. Mussel raced up the sideline for the touchdown, giving Shelby a 22-19 victory.



*Fans mob the team on the field after the Tigers beat Hesperia, breaking their 30-game losing streak.*

Tigers have posted a 3-33 record over the past four seasons, including 0-9 marks in both 2015 and 2016.

The 2016 season was particularly tough, because the Tigers had to forfeit two games, and only play half of another, due to injuries and a lack of healthy players.

But through all the disappointment, Rodriguez has remained himself - professional, optimistic and determined.

That's why a lot of people were happy for Rodriguez and the Tigers on the night of Oct.

A few wins later the Tigers had sole possession of the league trophy.

"The quality of this league just makes it more special when you win it," Rodriguez said the following summer.

Despite losing in the state semifinals for the second straight year in 2013, Rodriguez was understandably excited about the future.

"It's a job unfinished in my book," he said. "We feel we shouldn't have lost (in the state semifinals) and we were beaten soundly each time. We don't feel sorry for ourselves. We just know we have to prepare better for the future."

### ***The bottom drops out***

Rodriguez' optimism didn't pan out in 2014.

The Tigers lost their first three games, then won their next two (46-30 over Montague and 57-0 over Hart) and seemed to be back on track. But then they lost their final four games and finished a disappointing 2-7.

Things got even worse in 2015, when Shelby went 0-9.

But the most bitter season of all was 2016, when the Tigers went 0-9 again, and had to forfeit two games, to Oakridge and Hesperia, because injuries left them with too few players to compete.

They also lost to Montague 53-3 in a game that ended by mutual agreement at halftime, when the Tigers were down to nine healthy players.

"I'm not one to ever quit," Rodriguez said. "It took every bit of me to throw in the towel at halftime. But we were down to 10 and then nine healthy players. (Montague coach) Pat Collins called a time out and made it even on the field, which he did not have to do. That just goes to show you what classy people we have in this league."

Roster size was a huge problem going into the 2016 season. The Tigers only started with 18 players, and that number was quickly decimated when concussions and other injuries started to add up.

But even with all the wounded players, it tore at Rodriguez and the Tigers to forfeit games.

"We're competitors," he said. "We work hard all the time. We work too hard to let those opportunities slip through our hands, opportunities those kids will never get back. But at the same time, as a coach, you have to think about the safety of those kids."

Rodriguez said other factors besides injuries have contributed to Shelby's struggles.

"It's been a combination of a lot of things," Rodriguez said. "We hear that the concussion thing deters some kids from playing, we've had several kids move away, and we've lost several kids to soccer. The



***Happy Days: Rodriguez and players after winning regional title in 2013.***

time commitment is another thing."

The coach admits that the overall talent and skill level is not the same as it was a few years ago, when the Tigers were winning big.

That goes back to having a small roster, he said.

"We definitely don't have the variety to choose from that we had in the past," Rodriguez said. "And we've lost a lot of size. Physically we haven't matched up well with anybody in the last couple of years.

"But the kids have worked very hard, and they believe in what we're doing. They understand they're being taught the right things. Sometimes it's just a matter of execution, and mistakes that cost us."



***QB Kristian Oberlin in action earlier this season. Photo/Stephanie Clark***

### ***Another victory at last!***

When asked if all the losing over the past few years has ever made him think about quitting, the coach is quick with an answer:

"Not at all," said Rodriguez, whose son, 14-year-old Lorenzo Jr., will soon be joining

the varsity after playing JV this fall. "There have been times when I have wondered what we have to do to get this thing rolling again, but by no means would I ever walk away. I'm going to continue to fight. I won't let up."

Even after the bitter disappointment of two straight winless seasons, Rodriguez entered the 2017 season with a positive outlook.

"My goal never changes, whether we were 0-9 two years in a row or not," Rodriguez said. "My goal is to win every football game."

There were no wins for the first eight weeks of 2017, when the Tigers were outscored 365-58. Fans were bracing for another winless year, before Hesperia came to town for the season finale.

The visiting Panthers scored first, then Shelby responded with a 44-yard touchdown run by Latrell Sobers. Kristian Oberlin punched in a two-point conversion to give the Tigers an 8-7 lead in the second quarter.

Shelby took a 14-13 lead into halftime after Christian Cooper connected with Oberlin for a 21-yard touchdown pass.

Oberlin punched in the final Tiger touchdown on a 41-yard run to extend the lead to 21-13 in the fourth quarter. Hesperia cut it to 21-19, then the Panthers drove to the Shelby 34-yard line.

But the Shelby defense stopped Hesperia on a fourth-down play, and the Tigers got the ball back and ran out the clock.

The long, painful losing streak was finally over.

"It was a gang tackle, it was awesome," said Rodriguez, when asked who made the fourth-down tackle. "We put the game in the hands of our defense and they came through.

"The kids were just elated. They battled and battled all the way to the end. They could have given up and said they were going to be zero-for-life, but they continued to fight until they finally got one."

# KENT CITY 9-0: First time ever!

Bill Crane played football at Cedar Springs High School and Hope College, and spent seven years as a teacher and assistant coach at Kelloggsville High School.

So he was more than ready when the opportunity came to become the head varsity coach at Kent City High School in 2011.

The Eagles finished 3-6 that season, which wasn't a huge surprise, since Kent City had not had a winning football team in years. Crane was just starting his head coaching stint, and there was plenty of time to turn things around.

Then fate threw a curveball at his career.

The Kent City High School principal resigned in the fall of 2011, and Crane was named interim principal. The following spring he was promoted to principal of both the high school and middle school, and it quickly became



obvious something had to go.

Crane's coaching career appeared to be over, before it ever really got off the ground.

"It was difficult," said Crane, 37. "I had a lot of conversations with my wife about the right decision. But I really felt like I had to do what I had to do as principal, and I had to give something up. Football was part of my life for so long. It was not an easy decision, for sure."

Forward to the spring of 2016, when Kent City suddenly had an opening for a head varsity football coach again.

Crane was surprised when his bosses approached him about returning to the coaching position, even while remaining principal. He accepted the challenge, with an eye on changing and improving the football program.

"These kids had been successful in other sports, like basketball, wrestling, baseball and track," he said. "I was just trying to figure out, how do we get them in the right place to have the same success in football?"

Crane and his assistants obviously figured it out

Last season, in his first year back, the Kent City football team shocked the school and community by posting a 7-2 regular season record, gaining a tie for the CSAA Conference Silver Division championship, and qualifying for the state playoffs for the first time in 15 years.

The season started off in pretty typical fashion, with a 28-8 loss to Ravenna. But then the Eagles started rolling, winning seven of their last eight regular season games.

Then came the Division 6 playoffs, when Kent City stunned perennial power Montague 20-19 in the pre-district round to gain the first playoff victory in school



**Bill Crane**

history.

The Eagles trailed 19-14 with just over seven minutes remaining. But Montague was forced to punt late in the game, and Kent City blocked the kick and recovered the ball at the Wildcats' one-yard line. One play later, Colton Atwood plunged into the end zone to give the Eagles the stunning victory.

The season ended the next week with a loss to Ravenna, the same team that beat the Eagles in the season opener. But the seeds of success were planted at Kent City.

"Last year was amazing," Crane said. "I felt that every week the team just kept working hard and getting better and better and better.



***Kent City running back Gio Weeks, who rushed for more than 1,200 yards this season.***

The seniors bought into the fact that if they were going to turn this thing around, they were going to have to work their butts off, and they did that.

"They went from being 1-8 their junior year to 8-3 as seniors. That was just a real credit to those kids."

Things got even more exciting for the Eagles this season. They opened the campaign with an eye-opening 41-20 victory over Ravenna at Grand Valley State University's Lubbers Stadium, then just kept winning

They posted a perfect 5-0 conference record to win the outright championship in the CSAA Silver. Then on Oct. 20 they went on the road and defeated Tri-County 47-19 to complete the first 9-0 regular season in school history.

## EAGLES 2017

**Kent City 41, Ravenna 20**  
**Kent City 49, Comstock 29**  
**Kent City 34, Holton 6**  
**Kent City 63, White Cloud 12**  
**Kent City 49, Lakeview 23**  
**Kent City 28, M-Stanwood 0**  
**Kent City 54, Hesperia 19**  
**Kent City 35, Maple Valley 0**  
**Kent City 47, Tri-County 19**

"We had talked a little bit about, if we could get by Ravenna, we might have a shot to run the table, but it was a little bit of a surprise," Crane said.

"This has been great for our community. All the excitement taking place right now is great for the school. It's helped in a lot of different areas. It's something the student body is very proud of.

We had a really good following this year, even for away games. Our sideline was just packed at Tri-County."

The Eagles beat conference rival Morley-Stanwood in their first playoff game, and there was no doubt they planned to keep winning, starting with a playoff rematch against Montague the following week.

Each spring the team's incoming seniors have a leadership academy and identify their goals. The current seniors had some lofty ambitions heading into 2017, and had checked most of them off their list by the end of the regular season.

"They had four goals, and there are three I will tell you," Crane said. "Beat Ravenna at Grand Valley, win the conference outright, and have an undefeated regular season. In a couple of weeks I'll tell you what the fourth goal was."

*Great Lakes*

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# Oakridge makes the postseason for the 13th straight year

By Nate Thompson  
LocalSportsJournal.com

What does it take to qualify for the Michigan High School Athletic Association state football playoffs 13 years in a row, and 22 out of the past 23?

Oakridge junior two-way lineman Cole Harger has a pretty good idea:

"It takes dedication from all of the guys," the 6-foot-2, 210-pound junior said. "I can remember the day that school was done for the summer last year. We had a half day for exams, and after those were done, we were out on the field doing drills. It started, right then and there, with voluntary work."

"Being a younger player in the program, you're always trying to push yourself to get better. You want to build on what the last team accomplished, so you've got to keep working."

The sort of dedication from Oakridge players has paid off for years. Since their 2005 Division 5 state championship under legendary coach Jack Schugars, the Eagles have qualified for the playoffs every year.

That run included another state championship in 2008, and a semifinal appearance in 2013. Other years the Eagles didn't advance as far in the playoffs, but always got the required six victories to qualify for the postseason.

That includes this season, when the Eagles went 7-2 then won their first-round playoff game against North Muskegon.

It's the second-longest playoff streak in the Muskegon area, behind only the Muskegon Big Reds, who have made the playoffs 18 straight seasons.

The Oakridge playoff tradition has also become a Harger family tradition.

Eagles head coach Cary Harger - Cole's father - has been a part of the success since he was a teen.

He played on the Oakridge squad that qualified for the playoffs for only the second time in school history. That was in 1989, when the undefeated Eagles were upset at home by Saginaw Michigan Lutheran Seminary, 20-14 in the first round

After graduating from Hope College, Harger returned to the school as a teacher and assistant coach in 1996, then became head coach in 2011 when Schugars retired.

Suddenly he was in charge of carrying on the legacy he helped to create during his playing days. He's not alone in that respect. Three of his assistant coaches - Tim Parker, Dave Randall and Jake Huck - as well as several JV and middle school coaches, are also former Eagles who helped build the program into an annual winner.

"It's something my staff and I take great pride in," Harger said.



## Annual Excellence

"We can address the players and tell them that we know what it takes, because we've been on that end as former players.

"We have an expectation of (at least getting to the playoffs), year in and year out, but it's never going to be just handed to us."

The winning has been even more fun for Coach Harger since last season, when his son was a sophomore who was called up to varsity in Week 2.

"I was always really looking forward to him playing," the coach said about Cole. "I never pushed it on him. But by the time he was eight or so, Coach Schugars allowed him on the sidelines to be a water boy, then he got into middle school football and found a love for it."

Cole Harger said he and his teammates have eagerly accepted the challenge of maintaining the tradition that

his dad and the other coaches helped build.

"With the tradition here, we're expected to do it, but we also want to prove we can do it," he said. "And we see the young guys looking up to us, and we want to set that winning example for them, too."

Coach Harger has watched the game, and the amount of work it takes to maintain an elite program, change dramatically over the years.

"The first year we made it was in 1985, and there was nothing really organized as far as weight training or off-season work," Coach Harger recalled. "It was all just kind of voluntary. Some guys would just do some (lifting) on their own. But making the playoffs opened everyone's eyes. That was a sign of what it took to get there. To be successful, you needed to do the extra work."

"Players are bigger, stronger and faster than they used to be, so you're always trying to push yourself to get bigger, stronger and faster," Cole Harger said.

At smaller high schools like Oakridge, which has an enrollment of just under 600 students, identifying and developing future talent is pivotal.

It starts with the volunteer-driven Oakridge Youth Football Football Club, which develops kids' passion for the sport.

That passion is nurtured by a community that loves its high school football team.

"We feel we're a great representative of the community, and football is a very big part of the community," Coach Harger said. "It's something that people really look forward to."

"Sure, there may be some pressure on the kids to not let everyone down, but it's more about doing as well as the teams before them."



*Veteran Oakridge coach Cary Harger and son, junior lineman Cole Harger.  
Photo/Sherry Wahr*

# THE BIGGEST THAT MADE IT

*The local teams that qualified for the state high school football playoffs*



**Muskegon 9-0**



**Montague 9-0**



**Kent City 9-0**



**Mona Shores 8-1**



**Muskegon Catholic 7-1**



**Oakridge 7-2**



**North Muskegon 6-3**



**Whitehall 6-3**



# MORE THAN KEEPING THE SEAT WARM

## Veteran Spring Lake volleyball coach Sarah Bulthuis comes out of retirement, leads team to a big season

By Steve Gunn  
LocalSportsJournal.com

Some longtime coaches retire and end up regretting it. Sarah Bulthuis was not one of them.

She loved the 27 years she spent as the varsity volleyball coach at Spring Lake High School. But she was very comfortable with her decision to step aside in 2013, after her team won a district championship and advanced to the Class B regional finals.

Bulthuis turned the job over to her daughter, Cassidy Hazekamp, and happily watched the action from the bleachers for two years. She thought the high-pressure coaching days were behind her, and she was OK with that.

"I was working and doing a lot of other things," Bulthuis said

about her time away from the volleyball court. "We have a cabin up north that we went to a lot more. I was starting to say yes to a lot of other things in life."

But four years after retiring, Bulthuis is back on the Spring Lake bench for another stint as head coach, out of loyalty to the school, the team and her daughter.

While that was not exactly her plan, she's having a lot of fun.

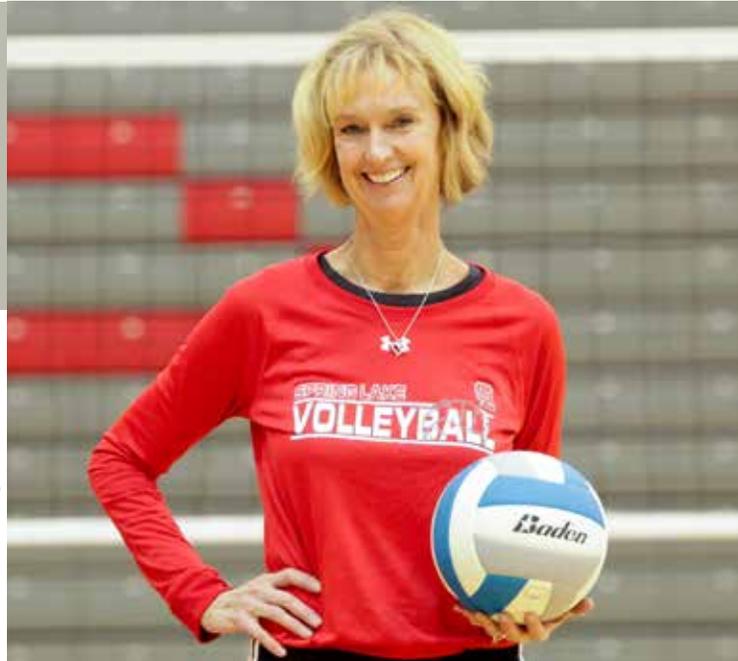
One reason is because her Spring Lake Lakers have had a great season, posting a 30-5 regular season record and winning a share of the championship in the brutally tough O-K Blue Conference.

They entered the state tournament ranked eighth in the state in Class B.

Not long ago, Bulthuis never dreamed she would be preparing the Lakers for another district tournament. And under different circumstances, she probably would have passed on the chance to take over the team again.

But family ties brought her back.

It seems her daughter was starting her varsity coaching career just as she was starting her family. Two baby girls came along within 18 months, and it soon became apparent that coaching had to take a



*Bulthuis thought she was done coaching after 27 seasons, but is back on the bench. Photo/Jason Goorman*

back seat to motherhood for a while.

But Hazekamp didn't want to give up the Spring Lake job for good, so she asked her mom to help think of somebody who would be willing to coach for a season or two, until she was ready to return.

Of course there was only one realistic candidate for that role, and Bulthuis accepted the challenge. Hazekamp stayed on as assistant coach, and mother and daughter have worked well together.

## All-Conference Lakers

**Madeline Zenas - 863 Assists, 34 aces, 168 points, 226 digs, 49 blocks**

**Jenna Core - 280 kills, 270 digs, 33 aces, 168 points, 70 blocks**

**Lauren Hellman - 191 kills, 39 aces, 140 points, 58 blocks**



*Bulthuis watches players at the net during a recent practice. Photo/Jason*

"When she asked me to help her find (a temporary coach), I told her to let me think about it for a day or two, and see if I could come up with a person and a plan," said Bulthuis, an elementary physical education teacher at Jeffers Elementary in the Spring Lake district. "Then I went home and asked my husband what he would think if I decided to go back and do it again for a year or two, and he said it was totally my call.

"So I went and asked Cassidy, 'what about me?' and she said that would be awesome. I told her I don't want it for another 20 years. She can have it back whenever she is ready."

This isn't the first time that Bulthuis has ended up altering her life plans for volleyball.

After graduating from Spring Lake High School, she became a member of the women's basketball team at Muskegon Community College. MCC's volleyball program was just getting started back in those days, and the volleyball coach started recruiting basketball players, since the sports were played in different seasons.

Bulthuis never played volleyball in high school, but gave it a try, and suddenly her athletic career was headed in an entirely new



direction.

"I played basketball and softball in high school, then went to MCC on a basketball scholarship," she said. "Then the volleyball coach came to basketball practice, a bunch of us decided to play, and I completely fell in love with it.

"I played two years at MCC, then I was recruited by Hillsdale and played my final two years there. My senior year we made it to the national tournament and made the quarterfinals."

Bulthuis broke into volleyball coaching with the Grand Haven High School JV team. In 1988 she was offered the varsity coaching job at Spring Lake, and suddenly she was back at her alma-mater for what turned out to be a long stint.

She had her share of success over the next 27 seasons, winning nine conference championships and seven Class B district titles.

She also had the pleasure of coaching her daughters, who both became standouts in the sport. Oldest daughter Betsy went on to play college volleyball at Alma College and is currently an assistant coach at Hudsonville High School. Cassidy played at Hope College.

"My children were raised in a gym," Bolthuis said with a chuckle. "That's how they know me."

Bulthuis' last district title came in 2013, and at the time she thought that was a perfect way to wrap up her coaching career.

"In September of that season, I said to my husband, I think this is

going to be the last one," Bulthuis said. "I enjoyed it but I was tired, and there were so many other things I wanted to do. For 27 seasons I absolutely loved it, but coaching is such a huge time commitment these days. It's 365 days a year now. If you don't do anything in the offseason or in the summer, your program will not be successful.

"It's kind of ironic, but that was one of my best seasons at Spring Lake. We won districts, beat Forest Hills Eastern in regionals, then lost to Grand Rapids South Christian in the regional finals. It was the first time we ever got past the first round of regionals."

Coming back to the bench this fall has been more exciting than Bulthuis ever imagined.

The season started on a high note for Bulthuis, when she captured her 700th career victory in the NorthPointe Christian Tournament in August.

She also helped the Lakers rebound from a 12-win season last year to a 30-win total this fall, which included a 10-2 conference record and a share of the O-K Blue title with Grand Rapids Catholic.

"I felt like this was a good group," said Bulthuis. "I knew the returning seniors were going to have some good experience, and the juniors coming up were good players. They seemed to be a fairly talented team. I was really hoping we could compete in the tough conference we're in. I was pleasantly surprised."



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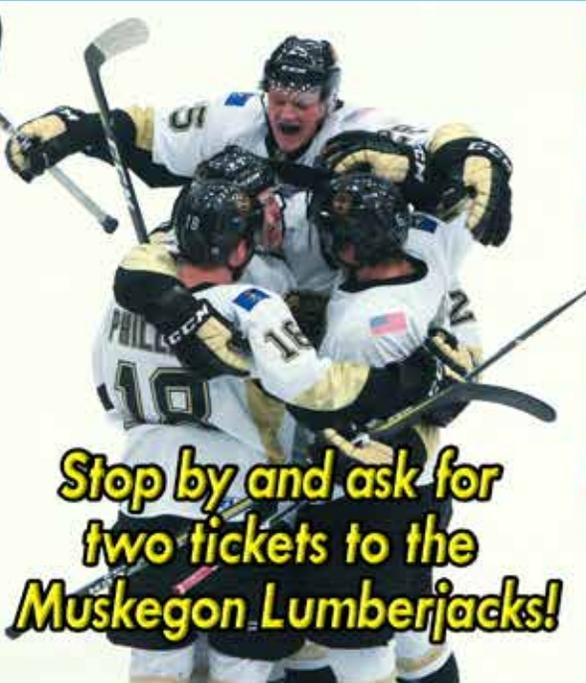
  
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					TC	TC
5	6	7	8:10:30AM CIL	9	10	11 YNG
12 3:45 YNG	13	14	15	16	17 @SF	18 @SF
19	20	21	22 @YNG	23	24	25 LIN
26	27	28	29	30		

DECEMBER 2017						
SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT
					1	2
					WAT	CIL
3	4	5	6	7	8 @GB	9 @GB
10	11	12	13	14	15 CHI	16 CHI
17	18	19 @U18	20	21	22	23
24 @CHI 31	25	26	27	28	29 U17	30

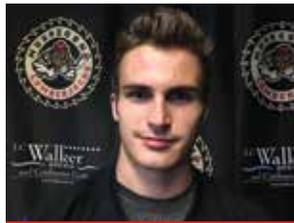
11/8 - School Day, 10:30 a.m. start  
 11/11 - Military Night / jersey auction  
 11/12 - First 500 kids get a food voucher  
 11/25 - Muskegon Fury Night  
 \*throwback jersey auction post game\*  
 12/16 - Teddy bear toss / Toys for Tots Night



**Wyatt Bongiovanni**  
 Forward - 6-1, 195 lbs.  
 2016-17: Tri City 12 goals, 18 assists



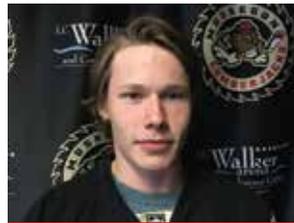
**Marc Del Gaizo**  
 Defenseman - 5-9, 191 lbs.  
 2016-17: Muskegon 3 goals, 20 assists



**Nolan Sullivan**  
 Forward - 5-11, 194 lbs.  
 2016-17: Eden Prairie HS 17 goals, 21 assists



**Montgomery Graham**  
 Forward - 5-11, 180 lbs.  
 2016-17: Tri City 8 goals, 16 assists



**Mikael Hakkarainen**  
 Forward - 6-0, 183 lbs.  
 2016-17: Muskegon 9 goals, 9 assists



**Michael Graham**  
 Forward - 6-1, 201 lbs.  
 2016-17: Fargo 10 goals, 8 assists



**Matthew Vernon**  
 Goalie - 5-11, 170 lbs.  
 2016-17: Yourkton 3.63 GAA



**Bray Crowder**  
 Defenseman - 6-6, 200 lbs.  
 2016-17: Amarillo 2 goals, 11 assists



**Emilio Pettersen**  
 Forward - 5-9, 158 lbs.  
 2016-17: Omaha 10 goals, 17 assists



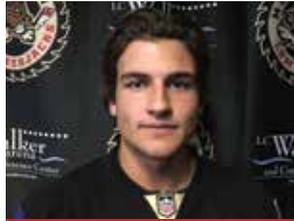
**Bobby Kaiser**  
 Forward - 6-2, 193 lbs.  
 2016-17: Muskegon



**Nash Nienhuis**  
 Defenseman - 5-7, 141 lbs.  
 2016-17: Sarnia 4 goals, 24 assists



**Anthony Del Gaizo**  
 Forward - 5-11, 190 lbs.  
 2016-17: Muskegon 11 goals, 13 assists



**Colby Bukes**  
 Defenseman - 5-11, 192 lbs.  
 2016-17: Muskegon 4 goals, 6 assists



**Collin Murphy**  
 Defenseman - 6-3, 190 lbs.  
 2016-17: Muskegon 0 goals, 2 assists



**Adam Brizgala**  
 Goalie - 6-0, 220 lbs.  
 2016-17: Muskegon 15-8-1, 2.46 GAA



**Jachym Kondelik**  
 Forward - 6-6, 216 lbs.  
 2016-17: Muskegon 7 goals, 8 assists



**Matej Pekar**  
 Forward - 6-0, 165 lbs.  
 2016-17: Oakland U16 13 goals, 14 assists



**Sam Renlund**  
 Forward - 5-11, 174 lbs.  
 2016-17: Omaha AAA 20 goals, 42 assists



**Blake Evennou**  
 Defenseman - 5-9, 181 lbs.  
 2016-17: Lone Star 4 goals, 12 assists



**Matt Staudacher**  
 Defenseman - 6-1, 181 lbs.  
 2016-17: Shattuck St. Mary's 2 goals, 14 assists



**Egor Afanasyev**  
 Forward - 6-2, 192 lbs.  
 2016-17: Little Caesars U16 5 goals, 3 assists



**Donovan Ott**  
 Forward - 6-1, 200 lbs.  
 2016-17: Johnstown 32 goals, 25 assists



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