

LOCAL SPORTS Journal

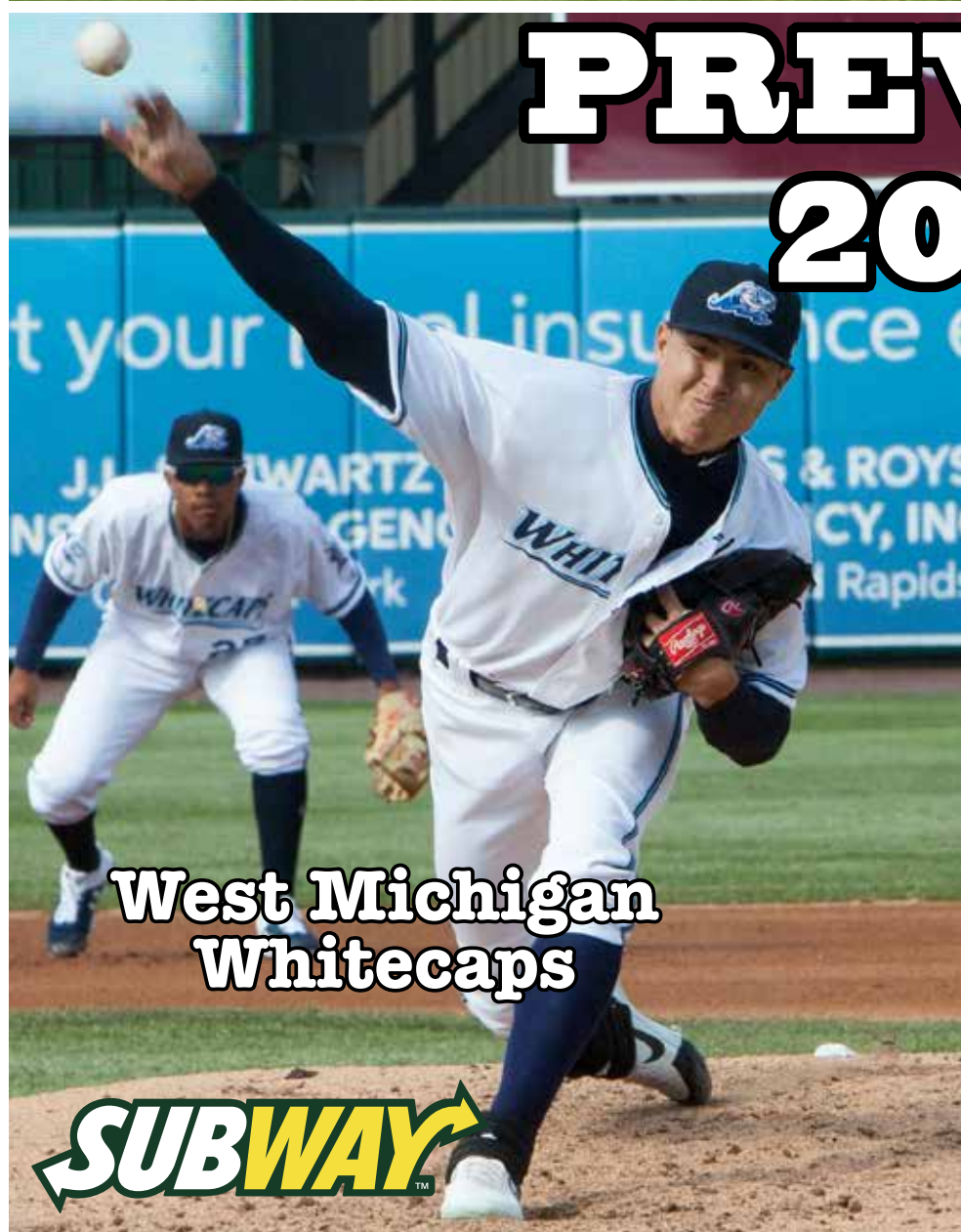


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LOCAL SPORTS Journal

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Food, Fun and Future Tigers

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Another Title for the Ironmen?

The West Michigan Ironmen arena football team will be wrapping up their 2019 season with playoff games in June, with hopes of winning a second straight league championship.

LocalSportsJournal.com

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PLAYIN' BALL WITH THE BIG BOYS

Entering their third season in the elite Great Lakes League, the Muskegon Clippers are ready to compete for a championship

By Dave Hart
LocalSportsJournal.com

The Muskegon Clippers are hoping their third try is a charm to finally crack into the playoffs in the Great Lakes Collegiate Summer Baseball League.

The Clippers, who are entering their third season in the GLSCL, improved from their inaugural year by winning six more games in 2018 and posting a 24-18 record.



Muskegon ended the season just one game out of the final playoff spot, which was clinched by the Saginaw Sugar Beets, who advanced to the league championship series before losing to the Southern Ohio Copperheads.

Just coming close to making the playoffs is not good enough for the Clippers, who are part of the vast summer collegiate baseball world. Summer collegiate teams allow college players to remain active on the field over the summer months, after their college seasons wrap up.

The Clippers were dominant during their first three years of existence, playing in the Michigan Summer Collegiate Baseball League and winning two championships.

But in 2017 they joined the elite Great Lakes league, which has much stiffer competition. Through their first two seasons they have learned more about player recruiting, building a competitive roster and how to compete against higher-caliber teams.

The fact that they are moving in a positive direction became evident last season, when they came so close to making the playoffs. Now they are hoping to take the next step and establish themselves as a power in the GLSCL.

"Certainly like every year our goal is to make the playoffs and play for a championship," said Clippers Manager Walt Gawkowski.



"I think that this team on paper is the most talented team we have had yet."

The Clippers will open the season with a three-game series against the Lake Erie Monarchs on Tuesday, June 4 at Marsh Field in Muskegon.

Even though the Clippers will be fielding a relatively new team, with only five players returning from last season, management still feels they

can field not only a playoff team, but a championship contender.

Nolan Bryant and Micah Allen are the only offensive returners from last year's team.

Bryant, who played at Rockford High School, is returning for his third season with the Clippers.

Last season the Davenport University infielder posted a .295 batting average with 10 doubles, two home runs and 26 RBIs.

"He is a special player and a quiet leader," said Gawkowski about Bryant. "I am glad he is returning for a third season, which is rare for players to do in this league."

Allen also returns to Muskegon after posting a .283



Fan favorite Nolan Bryant, an infielder from Davenport University, will be returning to the team this summer. Photo/Marc Hoeksema

batting average with 12 doubles, three homers and 22 RBIs in his first season with the Clippers. He is expected to mostly play at first base this season.

Pitchers Jacob Gilhaus, Bryce Davis and Sean Casey will also be returning to the Clippers.

Gilhaus appeared in 13 games last season for the Clippers, posting a 3-1 record with a 3.34 ERA. He struck out 29 batters in 39 1/3 innings.

Gawkowski thinks Gilhaus is a great teammate and has the ability to pitch in different roles and situations.

Davis will return as well after throwing 11 1/3 innings for Muskegon last year with 15 strikeouts.

"He has an electric arm," Gawkowski said about Davis. "He struggled a little last summer but has shown improvements this spring at the University of Toledo."

Casey will also return to the Clippers after appearing late in the season. Casey, who is a Grand Haven native, played his college ball at Muskegon Community College.

The Clippers are excited to have three players joining the team from the University of Missouri.

They are catcher Tre Morris, outfielder Josh Holt Jr. and outfielder/first baseman Ty Olejnk.

Morris is considered a great athlete while both Holt and Olejnk both have great speed.

The Clippers will also have some fresh new arms with the addition of pitchers Brady Miller (Western Michigan), Dane Armbrustmacher (Central Michigan), Brock Begue (Cuyahoga CC) and Ian Leatherman (Central Michigan).

Miller was a co-Mid American Conference Player of the Week this season for the Broncos as a freshman.

Armbrustmacher and Leatherman had a quite a few pitching appearances for the Chippewas this spring, and Begue is the ace for Cuyahoga Community College.

"We are very excited about this season and we are ready to get to work," said Gawkowski. "We feel we have a great product for the people of Muskegon."

The Clippers will host 21 of their games in June and July at historic Marsh Field, which the team has made many improvements to over the years.

"We are continuing to make improvements on the ballpark," Gawkowski said.

"We are in the process of slapping on a new coat of paint as well as expanding our party deck and putting in some high-top tables for people to relax while enjoying a game."





PROMOTIONS

SCHEDULED PROMOTIONAL NIGHTS:

JUNE 4.....OPENING DAY/MAGNET SCHEDULE
 JUNE 14.....CLIPPERS HERO NIGHT
 JUNE 15.....BANDS, BREWS, & BASEBALL
 JUNE 16.....HIGH SCHOOL BASEBALL ALL-STAR
 JUNE 18.....FREE T-SHIRT GIVEAWAY
 JUNE 22 & 23.....PARENTS WEEKEND
 JULY 2.....BOYS AND GIRLS CLUB
 JULY 5.....CLIPPERS HONOR BERNIE "CHICO" LABUTE
 JULY 6.....CLIPPERS CLOBBER CANCER
 JULY 21.....HOST FAMILY APPRECIATION
 JULY 23.....FAN APPRECIATION

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JUNE						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
GREAT LAKES SUMMER COLLEGE LEAGUE		4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30						
JULY						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
1	2	3	4	5	6	
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23				

FIRST PITCH - 7:05
 GAMES ON 6/16, 6/23, 7/4, 7/7 - 5:05PM
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2019 SCHEDULE

Muskegon Clippers

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DETROIT TIGERS 2019 SEASON SCHEDULE

*ALL TIMES EASTERN AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE

JUNE		TIME	W/L
Sat, 1	at Atlanta	4:10p	---
Sun, 2	at Atlanta	1:20p	---
Tue, 4	Tampa Bay	7:10p	---
Wed, 5	Tampa Bay	7:10p	---
Thu, 6	Tampa Bay	1:10p	---
Fri, 7	Minnesota	7:10p	---
Sat, 8	Minnesota	4:10p	---
Sun, 9	Minnesota	1:10p	---
Tue, 11	at Kansas City	8:15p	---
Wed, 12	at Kansas City	8:15p	---
Thu, 13	at Kansas City	8:05p	---
Fri, 14	Cleveland	7:10p	---
Sat, 15	Cleveland	6:10p	---
Sun, 16	Cleveland	1:10p	---
Tue, 18	at Pittsburgh	7:05p	---
Wed, 19	at Pittsburgh	7:05p	---
Fri, 21	at Cleveland	7:10p	---
Sat, 22	at Cleveland	4:10p	---
Sun, 23	at Cleveland	1:10p	---
Tue, 25	Texas	7:10p	---
Wed, 26	Texas	7:10p	---
Thu, 27	Texas	1:10p	---
Fri, 28	Washington	7:10p	---
Sat, 29	Washington	4:10p	---
Sun, 30	Washington	1:10p	---
JULY		TIME	W/L
Tue, 2	at Chicago Sox	8:10p	---
Wed, 3	at Chicago Sox	8:10p	---
Thu, 4	at Chicago Sox	2:10p	---
Fri, 5	Boston	7:10p	---
Sat, 6	Boston	4:10p	---
Sun, 7	Boston	1:10p	---
Fri, 12	at Kansas City	8:15p	---
Sat, 13	at Kansas City	7:15p	---
Sun, 14	at Kansas City	2:15p	---
Mon, 15	at Cleveland	7:10p	---
Tue, 16	at Cleveland	7:10p	---
Wed, 17	at Cleveland	7:10p	---
Thu, 18	at Cleveland	7:10p	---
Fri, 19	Toronto	7:10p	---
Sat, 20	Toronto	6:10p	---
Sun, 21	Toronto	1:10p	---
Tue, 23	Philadelphia	7:10p	---
Wed, 24	Philadelphia	1:10p	---
Thu, 25	at Seattle	10:10p	---
Fri, 26	at Seattle	10:10p	---
Sat, 27	at Seattle	4:10p	---
Sun, 28	at Seattle	4:10p	---
Mon, 29	at LA Angels	10:07p	---
Tue, 30	at LA Angels	10:07p	---
Wed, 31	at LA Angels	4:07p	---

AUGUST		TIME	W/L
Fri, 2	at Texas	8:05p	---
Sat, 3	at Texas	8:05p	---
Sun, 4	at Texas	3:05p	---
Mon, 5	Chicago Sox	7:10p	---
Tue, 6	Chicago Sox	7:10p	---
Wed, 7	Chicago Sox	1:10p	---
Thu, 8	Kansas City	7:10p	---
Fri, 9	Kansas City	7:10p	---
Sat, 10	Kansas City	6:10p	---
Sun, 11	Kansas City	1:10p	---
Tue, 13	Seattle	7:10p	---
Wed, 14	Seattle	7:10p	---
Thu, 15	Seattle	1:10p	---
Fri, 16	at Tampa Bay	7:10p	---
Sat, 17	at Tampa Bay	6:10p	---
Sun, 18	at Tampa Bay	1:10p	---
Mon, 19	at Houston	8:10p	---
Tue, 20	at Houston	8:10p	---
Wed, 21	at Houston	8:10p	---
Thu, 22	at Houston	8:10p	---
Fri, 23	at Minnesota	8:10p	---
Sat, 24	at Minnesota	7:10p	---
Sun, 25	at Minnesota	2:10p	---
Tue, 27	Cleveland	7:10p	---
Wed, 28	Cleveland	7:10p	---
Thu, 29	Cleveland	1:10p	---
Fri, 30	Minnesota	7:10p	---
Sat, 31	Minnesota	6:10p	---
SEPTEMBER		TIME	W/L
Sun, 1	Minnesota	1:10p	---
Mon, 2	Minnesota	1:10p	---
Tue, 3	at Kansas City	8:15p	---
Wed, 4	at Kansas City	8:15p	---
Thu, 5	at Kansas City	1:15p	---
Fri, 6	at Oakland	10:07p	---
Sat, 7	at Oakland	9:07p	---
Sun, 8	at Oakland	4:07p	---
Tue, 10	NY Yankees	6:40p	---
Wed, 11	NY Yankees	6:40p	---
Thu, 12	NY Yankees	1:10p	---
Fri, 13	Baltimore	7:10p	---
Sat, 14	Baltimore	6:10p	---
Sun, 15	Baltimore	1:10p	---
Mon, 16	Baltimore	4:10p	---
Tue, 17	at Cleveland	7:10p	---
Wed, 18	at Cleveland	7:10p	---
Thu, 19	at Cleveland	7:10p	---
Fri, 20	Chicago Sox	7:10p	---
Sat, 21	Chicago Sox	6:10p	---
Sun, 22	Chicago Sox	1:10p	---
Tue, 24	Minnesota	6:40p	---
Wed, 25	Minnesota	6:40p	---
Thu, 26	Minnesota	1:10p	---
Fri, 27	at Chicago Sox	8:10p	---
Sat, 28	at Chicago Sox	7:10p	---
Sun, 29	at Chicago Sox	3:10p	---



CHICAGO CUBS 2019 SEASON SCHEDULE

*ALL TIMES CENTRAL AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE

JUNE		TIME	W/L
Sat, 1	at St. Louis	6:15p	---
Sun, 2	at St. Louis	1:15p	---
Tue, 4	Colorado	7:05p	---
Wed, 5	Colorado	7:05p	---
Thu, 6	Colorado	1:20p	---
Fri, 7	St. Louis	1:20p	---
Sat, 8	St. Louis	6:15p	---
Sun, 9	St. Louis	1:20p	---
Mon, 10	at Colorado	7:40p	---
Tue, 11	at Colorado	7:40p	---
Wed, 12	at Colorado	2:10p	---
Thu, 13	at LA Dodgers	9:10p	---
Fri, 14	at LA Dodgers	9:10p	---
Sat, 15	at LA Dodgers	8:10p	---
Sun, 16	at LA Dodgers	6:08p	---
Tue, 18	Chicago Sox	7:05p	---
Wed, 19	Chicago Sox	7:05p	---
Thu, 20	NY Mets	7:05p	---
Fri, 21	NY Mets	1:20p	---
Sat, 22	NY Mets	1:20p	---
Sun, 23	NY Mets	1:20p	---
Mon, 24	Atlanta	7:05p	---
Tue, 25	Atlanta	7:05p	---
Wed, 26	Atlanta	7:05p	---
Thu, 27	Atlanta	1:20p	---
Fri, 28	at Cincinnati	6:10p	---
Sat, 29	at Cincinnati	3:10p	---
Sun, 30	at Cincinnati	12:10p	---
JULY		TIME	W/L
Mon, 1	at Pittsburgh	6:05p	---
Tue, 2	at Pittsburgh	6:05p	---
Wed, 3	at Pittsburgh	6:05p	---
Thu, 4	at Pittsburgh	3:05p	---
Sat, 6	at Chicago Sox	6:15p	---
Sun, 7	at Chicago Sox	1:10p	---
Fri, 12	Pittsburgh	1:20p	---
Sat, 13	Pittsburgh	1:20p	---
Sun, 14	Pittsburgh	1:20p	---
Mon, 15	Cincinnati	7:05p	---
Tue, 16	Cincinnati	7:05p	---
Wed, 17	Cincinnati	1:20p	---
Thu, 19	San Diego	1:20p	---
Sat, 20	San Diego	1:20p	---
Sun, 21	San Diego	1:20p	---
Mon, 22	at San Francisco	8:45p	---
Tue, 23	at San Francisco	8:45p	---
Wed, 24	at San Francisco	2:45p	---
Fri, 26	at Milwaukee	7:10p	---
Sat, 27	at Milwaukee	6:10p	---
Sun, 28	at Milwaukee	1:10p	---
Tue, 30	at St. Louis	7:15p	---
Wed, 31	at St. Louis	7:15p	---

AUGUST		TIME	W/L
Thu, 1	at St. Louis	6:15p	---
Fri, 2	Milwaukee	1:20p	---
Sat, 3	Milwaukee	1:20p	---
Sun, 4	Milwaukee	1:20p	---
Mon, 5	Oakland	7:05p	---
Tue, 6	Oakland	7:05p	---
Wed, 7	Oakland	1:20p	---
Thu, 8	at Cincinnati	6:10p	---
Fri, 9	at Cincinnati	6:10p	---
Sat, 10	at Cincinnati	6:10p	---
Sun, 11	at Cincinnati	12:10p	---
Tue, 13	at Philadelphia	6:05p	---
Wed, 14	at Philadelphia	6:05p	---
Thu, 15	at Philadelphia	6:05p	---
Fri, 16	at Philadelphia	6:05p	---
Sat, 17	at Pittsburgh	12:35p	---
Sun, 18	at Pittsburgh	6:08p	---
Tue, 20	San Francisco	7:05p	---
Wed, 21	San Francisco	7:05p	---
Thu, 22	San Francisco	1:20p	---
Fri, 23	Washington	1:20p	---
Sat, 24	Washington	1:20p	---
Sun, 25	Washington	1:20p	---
Tue, 27	at NY Mets	6:10p	---
Wed, 28	at NY Mets	6:10p	---
Thu, 29	at NY Mets	6:10p	---
Fri, 30	Milwaukee	1:20p	---
Sat, 31	Milwaukee	1:20p	---
SEPTEMBER		TIME	W/L
Sun, 1	Milwaukee	1:20p	---
Mon, 2	Seattle	1:20p	---
Tue, 3	Seattle	7:05p	---
Thu, 5	at Milwaukee	7:10p	---
Fri, 6	at Milwaukee	7:10p	---
Sat, 7	at Milwaukee	6:10p	---
Sun, 8	at Milwaukee	1:10p	---
Mon, 9	at San Diego	9:10p	---
Tue, 10	at San Diego	9:10p	---
Wed, 11	at San Diego	9:10p	---
Thu, 12	at San Diego	2:40p	---
Fri, 13	Pittsburgh	3:05p	---
Sat, 14	Pittsburgh	1:20p	---
Sun, 15	Pittsburgh	1:20p	---
Mon, 16	Cincinnati	7:05p	---
Tue, 17	Cincinnati	7:05p	---
Wed, 18	Cincinnati	7:05p	---
Thu, 19	St. Louis	7:05p	---
Fri, 20	St. Louis	1:20p	---
Sat, 21	St. Louis	1:20p	---
Sun, 22	St. Louis	1:20p	---
Tue, 24	at Pittsburgh	6:05p	---
Wed, 25	at Pittsburgh	6:05p	---
Thu, 26	at Pittsburgh	6:05p	---
Fri, 27	at St. Louis	7:15p	---
Sat, 28	at St. Louis	6:15p	---
Sun, 29	at St. Louis	2:15p	---



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A NEW ERA RISING

Muskegon Risers set to play independant summer schedule, then join a top national league in 2020

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

Five years ago, Matt Schmitt, the owner of the new Muskegon Risers soccer team, sold the community on a new concept - a community team playing outside of a league, with no championship on the line.

He announced that his new team would play an independent schedule, and every game would be an event in its own right. The goal was to win each game for the sake of that game itself, put on a good show for fans, and represent Muskegon with pride.

That first-year Muskegon Risers squad did go on to win a lot of games, and the fans bought in, with hundreds checking out every home game and clearly enjoying themselves.



"We always play for Muskegon, first and foremost, and an independant schedule is a natural fit for that philosophy."

Matt Schmitt
Muskegon Risers

Two years later the Risers moved on from independent status and joined a league. But now, headed into the 2019 summer outdoor season, the team is preparing to play an independent schedule one more time, as it prepares to join the elite National Premier Soccer League in 2020.

There is a practical reason for the move. Schmitt says the Risers will use the season to begin to prepare the players and coaches for the higher standards of their new league, so they will be ready for the more rigorous competition coming up in the future.

But he still thinks the 2019 season will be a lot of fun, with a talented, veteran team that's ready to win a lot of games and make the fans proud as it prepares for the transition next year.

There will be nine games on the 2019 schedule, includ-

ing five at home at Muskegon Catholic Central High School. The Risers will open at home on June 1 against Lake St. Clair, and will also have home games on June 8, June 22, July 17 and July 27.

"We always play for Muskegon, first and foremost, and an independent schedule is a natural fit for that philosophy," said Schmitt, a former Reeths-Puffer High School and University of Michigan soccer star. "It's a sports entertainment experience, and people want to see a competitive game and enjoy themselves.

"We will be playing several teams from throughout the state, and we want to make sure we represent Muskegon on the field and come out as victors."

The Risers have come a long way since 2015. They now have two separate squads playing in two different seasons, with the outdoor summer squad playing at Muskegon Catholic Central and the indoor winter team playing at L.C. Walker Arena.

The summer squad broke in with a lot of success in 2015, posting a 10-3-1 record. In 2016, their last as an independent, they went 5-6-1. In 2017 the Risers joined the Premier League of America and finished 5-2-3. Last year they were in the United Premier Soccer League and went 4-3-3.

After last season they applied for membership in the elite NPSL, beginning in 2020. The NPSL is a national circuit that's considered a step above the UPSL, in the manner that it's operated and in the quality of play on the field.

The UPSL includes both professional and semipro leagues. The Risers will be in the semipro circuit, with the eventual goal of transitioning to professional status. There will be several other Michigan teams in the Risers' league next year, including Grand Rapids FC, creating a natural geographical rivalry between the two teams.

The Risers probably could have remained in the United Premier League for one more season, but decided that would make little sense, according to Schmitt.

"The NPSL had an early application process for the first time in its history," Schmitt said. "We saw where we were trending, where our vision was long-term, and it made no sense to continue investing in a league that long-term is not going to be a fit.

"We are going to use this season to have a cultural overhaul, and start implementing new tactics and strategies that we will employ in the new league. This will provide more transition time from a player and coach standpoint."

Schmitt said the decision was made after the indoor Ris-



At top, Cody Loss slides in to defend during the Risers' 2016 campaign; above, Stu Collins and Michael Schmitt get up for a head ball.

ers moved to a more elite league in the 2018-19 season. The team struggled in the standings against the much tougher competition, and the outdoor team will have to be ready for the same type of challenge in 2020, Schmitt said.

But the summer Risers will welcome that challenge as they push to become the team they ultimately want to be, he said.

“We prefer it that way, to challenge ourselves on the field,” Schmitt said. “It’s going to be rewarding for fans, in terms of the quality of soccer they will be seeing, and we’re not going to back down from any challenge on the field.

“We have played against NPSL teams in the past and have a good record against them. We’re planning on playing for championships, right off the bat. We’ve already talked to the guys about that being the expectation.”

The Risers expect to have a lot of success in 2019, as they prepare for the tough new league. They currently have an experienced roster of 12 players, including fan favorites like defenders Michael Schmitt and Cody Loss, forward Justice Sikkema, and forward/midfielder Ryan Wagenmaker.

All but one of the players on the roster have played for the Risers in the past few years, and most of them are local, according to Schmitt. The plan is to start figuring out what players will be capable of making significant contributions in the NPSL in 2020, and make necessary roster adjustments along the way - but also to win a lot this season.

“We are identifying a core group of local guys who can compete at a high level, and identify areas where we need improvement and recruit guys from out of the area, but the core will be local talent,” Schmitt said.

“We have told the guys, they are going to face some stiff competition, starting this year, but we expect to win every game. We have a ton of returning guys, and the chemistry is there. We are expecting a big year, absolutely.”

One of the returning players is long-time team captain Stu Collins, who will be transitioning to a new role. This season he will serve as a player/associate coach, with Schmitt serving as the head coach on the sideline. In 2020 Collins will retire as a player and become the new head coach.

He has had a lot of success as an assistant coach with the Davenport University men’s soccer team, which won a national championship in 2014 .

Ben Ritsema, the Risers’ longtime summer and winter coach, will now focus exclusively on the winter indoor squad.

“He’s won national titles with Davenport, he’s a very strong recruiter, and strong in tactics and strategy,” Schmitt said about Collins. “He’s probably one of the best soccer minds in the state.”

The Risers will also be branching off in a new direction this season, introducing a women’s team that will play one game this summer, then is expected to play a full schedule in 2020.

The women’s team will debut in an exhibition game on Aug. 3 at Muskegon Catholic Central.

“We’re going to take our time with it,” Schmitt said about the new women’s team. “We learned some valuable lessons with the men’s team, and we’re going to take our time, play some independent games, build up a player pool, identify the right coaches, then when we feel good about the product on the field we will look to lock a league in.”



North Muskegon standout forward Justice Sikkema adds speed and a deadly foot to Muskegon’s arsenal.

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WEST MICHIGAN WHITECAPS:

Food, Fun and Future Tigers

By Andrew Johnson
LocalSportsJournal.com

COMSTOCK PARK – With the Detroit Tigers being outscored 57-15 in their last seven home games at the time of this writing, it's becoming obvious that the best hope for the Motown team lies in the future.

And a big part of that future is developing right down the road, at Fifth Third Ballpark in Comstock Park, home of the West Michigan Whitecaps.

While the Whitecaps were off to an uncharacteristic 17-25 start as of this writing, fans can still get a good luck at several young players who may have big roles in the Tigers' future.

As much as the Whitecaps love to win games and championships for their fans - which they have done a lot in their history - their number one priority as the Tigers' lower Class A minor league team is to begin to prepare players for Detroit.

A lot of them have made it over the years, and several very young and talented current Whitecaps are strong candidates to keep that tradition going.

"I think this year more than in previous years, the collective age (of the Whitecaps roster) is younger," said Whitecaps radio play-by-play man Dan Hasty, explaining the up-and-down play of the Whitecaps so far this season. "When I started five years ago, it was an older team, and the Whitecaps had always been kind of an older bunch. Now as the Tigers have gone into rebuild, they're going younger."



Former Detroit Tigers star catcher Lance Parris, who's in his second year as manager of the Whitecaps.

"In the past we had an older team, which had some benefits. You win more games at this level. You'd have guys who were three or four years older and guys who weren't typically impacting the big leagues. Maybe you're sacrificing some in the win column, but now you have more guys who come through here that may end up in Detroit."

More than 100 former Whitecaps have moved on to play Major League Baseball. With the Tigers currently in a total rebuild mode, and focusing on developing young talent, the role of teams like the Whitecaps becomes more critical.

"We'll get to see some of these guys graduate into the big leagues," Hasty said. "Just this last week we saw two members of the 2017 Whitecaps team graduate into the big leagues."

Those two players were pitchers Gregory Soto and Eduardo Jimenez, who were called up to Detroit.

"To see the quick turnaround less than two years removed from West Michigan shows what is happening for these guys now," Hasty added.

One current Whitecap with high expectations is center fielder Parker Meadows. He is currently ranked the seventh highest prospect in the Tigers farm system, according to MLB Pipeline.

"He's gotten off to a slow start," said Hasty about the 19-year-old, who is currently batting .217 on the season with three home runs and 18 RBIs. "In 2011 (Tigers star) Nicholas Castellanos got off to a slow start here in West Michigan. His first half was brutal but in the second half he tore the world apart."

"Meadows was drafted around the same area as Meadows, and I got the feeling in the second half we'll see a similar improvement."

One aspect that stands out for Meadows is his speed, which was showcased on April 12 when his first home run of the season was an inside-the-parker.

"It's awesome," said Hasty about seeing Meadows showcase his speed both around the bases and in center field. "I get the feeling we have yet to see the last inside-the-park home run from him. Every hitter seems to have their thing, and if you're already at second base when the ball hits off the outfield wall, that's an inside the park home run waiting to happen. Maybe that'll be his thing."

"You just watch him and you see the outrageous talent he has. He just has to figure out his body and put it all together. If he hits the ball down the right field line, it's almost a guaranteed triple."

Another hitter who has stood out so far for West Michigan is infielder John Valente, who currently has a .300 average.

"He is ridiculously hard to strike out," said Hasty about the former St. John's collegiate player who was ranked among the top 10 hardest hitters to strike out during his senior college season. "He has a knack for putting the ball into play, and he plays great defense all over the field."

Outfielder Ulrich Bojarski is another Whitecap who caught a couple headlines after batting for the cycle on May 5 against Burlington.

"He's had a great season," said Hasty about Bojarski, who is currently batting .299 with five home runs and 21 RBIs. "He was with the Whitecaps for a bit last year and couldn't really get comfortable at the plate, but you could see enough to be intrigued."

The offense for the Whitecaps may be a bit stronger than the pitching at this point in the season, but one starting pitcher has shown a lot of promise.

Garrett Hill only holds a 2-1 record in seven starts, but he currently has a sparkling



1.41 ERA while allowing only six runs on 19 hits over 38 1/3 innings pitched.

"He's a perfect fit for the Midwest League," said Hasty about the 23-year-old who is in his second season of professional baseball. "He's a very smart young man, and he's the oldest member of the rotation. You can count on him to come out and give you quality innings. He's been unbelievable in a short amount of time, and he'll easily be on the All-Star team."

That great ballpark food

It's a well known fact that the Whitecaps' ability to draw a lot of fans every summer involves more than just baseball. The team specializes in showing fans a good time, regardless of how the team does on the field, and a huge part of that is food.

The Whitecaps have a very unique and popular menu. The team keeps it fresh every January by asking fans for ideas for new food creations, narrowing the list of nominations down to 10, then allowing fans to vote on them every February.

This year's winner was the "Rocky Balburrito," created by Marc Viquez, which is described as a cheesesteak sandwich rolled into a burrito and deep fried.

"When we invite West Michigan to enter recipes we get tons of ideas," said Whitecaps director of marketing and media relations Steve VanWagoner. "The Rocky Balburrito is really popular. It's essentially a deep fried Philly cheesesteak sandwich."

Some other new food items for 2019 include the Grub Tub (a clip holding popcorn, nachos or french fries attached to a souvenir soda cup), chicken fries, spare ribs and street corn nuggets.

According to VanWagoner, food is one of the most important aspects when it comes to attracting fans to the ballpark.

"Food is an important aspect in entertainment, and it has to be good," he said. "The food here is really good, and when I talk to season ticket holders, they love the food."

Honoring Latin influence on baseball

If you head out to a Whitecaps game on July 13 or Aug. 17, you may not recognize the team right away.

That's because West Michigan will actually adopt the team name of Calaveras de West Michigan on those days. The name change is a part of a movement throughout minor league baseball to celebrate Latin culture and its immense influence on baseball.

"We're changing the name as part of the Copa series," VanWagoner said. "The idea is to be welcoming to everyone as a ball club and venue. We'll have flags, Hispanic food, music and a public address announcer announcing players in Spanish."

While the change will be very noticeable during those two upcoming games, a few of those elements will be sprinkled in through the season.

"What we need to do is show our sincerity by doing this all of the time," VanWagoner said. "You may come out to a game this summer and from time to time hear some public announcements in Spanish, with Latin flags or Hispanic food."

Bringing back the old stars

One of the most popular promotions the Whitecaps offer every summer are Tiger Wednesdays, when former Detroit Tigers are on hand to meet fans and sign autographs. This year it will start on June 26 when former Tiger Frank Catalanotto will be on hand.



Former Whitecaps pitcher Eduardo Jimenez, who was recently called up to the Tigers.

“But he as a former eight time All-Star and former world champion Tiger, and had the fans overwhelmed. To have Parrish, a former Tiger, really means a lot to people who are diehard fans.”

“Bob is not only loved and adored by the organization and the people who work here, but he’s loved and adored by the community because he makes them smile,” VanWagoner said. “He’s an entertainer through and through. He’s a teacher at Rockford, but when he steps into the ballpark he becomes an entertainer, from singing ‘Take Me Out to the Ballgame’ to getting little kids to just say hysterical things. He’s an energy bunny and we love him.”



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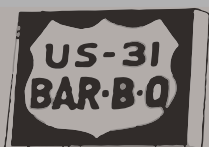
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Another title for the Ironmen?

The West Michigan Ironmen arena football team will have playoff games in June, as it shoots for an AIF championship

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

The West Michigan Ironmen arena football team has a solid core of great fans, and the team wants them to know that they may be rewarded for their loyalty with some exciting action in June.

That's when the American Indoor Football league playoffs will occur, and the Ironmen will be competing for a championship.

A few more great games would certainly be welcomed by Ironmen fans, who love the team because it's always good, but have sat through a few snoozers so far this season.

The Ironmen opened the season with a lopsided 95-0 victory over the Illinois Renegades in a non-league contest at Muskegon's L.C. Walker Arena. They have also beaten up on their Midwest Division rival Indianapolis Enforcers 68-6 and 37-6.

They have had one close regular season game so far, a 33-28 loss to the West Virginia Roughriders, an established, Northern Division squad that played in the league championship game last season.

Indianapolis is an expansion team—, and has not progressed very far from a competitive standpoint. The Ironmen are also new to the league, but are far from being a new team. They are in their fourth year of existence, have always been competitive, and have retained a

solid core of quality players every season.

While several games have not been close, the Ironmen have approached them with the same intensity they always do, and the fans appreciate the consistent effort.

"We know that our competition is not always going to be great, but we have a responsibility to play great, no matter what," said Ironmen General Manager/Coach Nate Smith. "We put that mentality at the forefront. Our fans know what to expect, that we will work hard, play physical and give them an entertaining night out."

Meanwhile, there is exciting action on the horizon, and hopefully some of it will be played in Muskegon. The Ironmen have one regular season game left, on June 1 against Indianapolis, then the three-round league playoffs will begin.

The Ironmen, featuring offensive stars like quarterback Alex Carder, running back Dakota Smith and wide receiver Carrington Thompson, will host the division final playoff game on June 8, against Indianapolis. There's a very good chance they will win that game, then things will start to get really interesting.



The second playoff game, on June 15, would pit the Ironmen against the winner of the Northern Division playoff game, and it's likely to be a rematch against West Virginia. The winner of that contest will advance to the league championship game on June 29.

At this point the Ironmen are only guaranteed one home game in the playoffs, in the first round. The second round game and the championship game will be hosted by the team with the best record, so there's no telling at this point where they will be played.

But the competition will get much tougher, and the Ironmen will have to work if they hope to claim the league title.

"Once we get out of our division, there are some really good teams, some that have been established," Smith said. "There are several very good teams based in the Carolinas, and Georgia has some really good teams. I think we will see West Virginia again, definitely."

"I think those teams can look forward to a

battle with us. It will be like a heavyweight bout, going back and forth. It will come down to teams that play with good chemistry, play well together and are focused. That's us."

The Ironmen will actually be playing for their second straight league championship. Last year they competed in the Midwest Professional Indoor Football league and won the title, beating the Midway Marauders 68-44 in the championship game at L.C. Walker Arena last April.

The year before, in 2017, the Ironmen competed in the Champions Indoor Football league, one of the elite leagues in the nation. They finished below .500 for the only time in their history, but were competitive in just about every game. They had hoped to remain in the CIF, but a series of circumstances, and prohibitive travel costs, prevented that.

In 2016, their first season, the Ironmen competed in the American Indoor Football league and advanced to the championship game, before losing.





The Ironmen joined the Midwest Professional Indoor Football League this season, and were not sure what to expect. The results have been so-so thus far. The competition in their division has not been good, and one team that was supposed to be in the division, the Chicago Aztecs, abruptly folded before the season began, resulting in the cancellation of one Ironmen game.

A tem from Louisville, Kentucky came into the league at midseason to replace Chicago, but cancelled its first visit to Muskegon because it didn't have enough players to compete. The Ironmen scrambled to find a non-league opponent and ended up playing an outdoor team from Muskegon that had never played arena style.

Despite all that, Smith said he's seen some positive signs from the league, and hopes the Ironmen can remain a part of it in the long-term, as it grows and improves.

"I think the league is moving in the right direction," he said. "It's pretty obvious there are the haves and the have-nots. I think we fit really well into the upper echelon. The West Virginia game points to that. They are near the top and we easily competed with them.

"The league is trying to eliminate some issues, like teams that cancel games, don't travel well or don't have good facilities. If it continues to progress, it could be a really good fit for us in the future.

"We are actively involved in helping the league. We are already one of the teams that have an influence on how things are going to go. (League officials) have been to our games, and they are amazed at our fans and their level of loyalty and support."

The Ironmen have a lot to be proud of, in terms of franchise stability. In the unpredictable world of professional arena football, where teams frequently fail due to a lack of fan interest and ticket sales, and players come and go at a dizzying pace, the Ironmen stand out.

Their roster includes 17 players who have been with the Ironmen at some point in previous seasons, and several who have been around all four years. And the team consistently averages between 1,500 and 2,000 fans for home games.

"We have such a solid fan base," Smith said. "We tend to take it for granted a little bit, but then other teams come in, look around and say 'Wow, this is special.' I feel like we have a good relationship with our fans. It's a two-way street. They love to be part of what we're doing. We win, they win, all together."



IRONMEN 2019 season



Ironmen 95, Illinois 0
Ironmen 68, Indianapolis 6
W. Virginia 33, Ironmen 28
Ironmen 37, Indianapolis 6
Ironmen 44, Muskegon 37
Division finals, June 8
League semifinals, June 15
League title game, June 29

** June 8 playoff game at home*



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