

2016 High School Football Preview



Air Luttrull

Oakridge QB Brady Luttrull ready to cap a remarkable prep passing career

- Full page previews of 19 varsity teams
- MCC returns three great backs, chasing fourth-straight state title
- Varsity football returns to Hart High School after a much-needed year off

LOCALSPORTS Journal

4



Airing It Out

Oakridge senior quarterback Brady Luttrull has been piling up the passing yards for two years, and this season he's breaking in a new crew of receivers.

14



3 Back Attack

Defending state champion Muskegon Catholic has to be considered a contender again, partly because it has three great senior running backs leading the attack.

24



The Head Coach Who Refuses to Quit

Muskegon Heights head coach Tommie Elliott is temporarily confined to a wheelchair due to back surgery, but that's not keeping him off the Tigers' sideline this fall.

36



The Pirates Sail Again

After a year of no varsity football, the Hart Pirates are set to hit the field again with a bunch of promising players from last season's 9-0 junior varsity team.

38



Opening on the Big Stage

The Muskegon Big Reds will open their season at Michigan Stadium, while Fruitport, Orchard View and Montague will play their first games at Grand Valley State University.

7 Fremont

8 Fruitport

9 Grand Haven

10 Hart

11 Hesperia

12 Holton

16 Mona Shores

17 Montague

18 Muskegon

20 Muskegon Catholic

21 Muskegon Heights

22 North Muskegon

26 Oakridge

28 Orchard View

29 Ravenna

30 Reeths-Puffer

32 Shelby

33 Spring Lake

34 Whitehall

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HAIRCUTS

2016 HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL SCHEDULES

Fremont

8/26 Sparta
9/1 at Chippewa Hills
9/9 Reed City
9/16 at Big Rapids
9/23 Central Montcalm
9/30 Newaygo
10/7 at Grant
10/14 at Tri County
10/21 at Montague

Fruitport

8/27 at Coopersville (at GVSU)
9/1 Spring Lake
9/9 Muskegon
9/16 at Kenowa Hills
9/23 Grand Rapids Union
9/30 Zeeland East
10/7 at Jenison
10/14 at Reeths-Puffer
10/21 at Mona Shores

Grand Haven

8/25 at Reeths-Puffer
9/1 Traverse City West
9/9 at Grandville
9/16 at West Ottawa
9/23 Rockford
9/30 at Caledonia
10/7 East Kentwood
10/14 Hudsonville
10/21 Grand Rapids Union

Hart

8/26 at Ludington
9/1 Oakridge
9/9 Ravenna
9/16 at Whitehall
9/23 at Shelby
9/30 Mason County Central
10/7 Montague
10/14 at North Muskegon
10/21 White Cloud

Hesperia

8/25 Blanchard Montabella
9/1 at Wyoming Godwin Heights
9/9 at Morley Stanwood
9/16 Holton
9/23 at White Cloud
9/30 Lakeview
10/7 Kent City
10/14 at Muskegon Catholic
10/21 Shelby

Holton

8/25 Lake Michigan Catholic
9/3 at River Valley
9/9 at Kent City
9/16 at Hesperia
9/23 Morley Stanwood
9/30 White Cloud
10/7 Lakeview
10/14 Evert
10/21 at North Muskegon

Kent City

8/26 Ravenna
9/1 at Comstock
9/9 Holton
9/16 White Cloud
9/23 at Lakeview
9/30 at Morley Stanwood
10/7 at Hesperia
10/14 Maple Valley
10/21 Tri County

Ludington

8/26 Hart
9/1 at Farwell
9/9 Manistee
9/16 at Muskegon Catholic
9/24 at Muskegon Heights
9/30 Orchard View
10/7 Baldwin
10/14 Lakeview
10/21 Mason County Central

Mason County Central

8/25 at Benzie Central
9/1 at Shelby
9/9 Whitehall
9/16 at Montague
9/23 at North Muskegon
9/30 at Hart
10/7 Oakridge
10/14 Ravenna
10/21 at Ludington

Mona Shores

8/25 West Ottawa
9/1 Zeeland West
9/9 at Rockford
9/16 at Reeths-Puffer
9/23 at Jenison
9/30 Kenowa Hills
10/7 Grand Rapids Union
10/14 at Muskegon
10/21 Fruitport

Montague

8/27 at Orchard View (at GVSU)
9/1 at Ravenna
9/9 Shelby
9/16 Mason County Central
9/23 Whitehall
9/30 North Muskegon
10/7 at Hart
10/14 at Oakridge
10/21 Fremont

Muskegon

8/27 Ann Arbor Pioneer (At U-M)
9/3 Stevenson
9/9 at Fruitport
9/16 Byron Center
9/23 Reeths-Puffer
9/30 at Grand Rapids Union
10/7 at Kenowa Hills
10/14 Mona Shores
10/21 Jenison

Muskegon Catholic

8/25 Oakridge
9/1 LaSalle
9/9 at Orchard View
9/16 Ludington
9/23 at Baldwin
9/30 Muskegon Heights
10/7 at Manistee
10/14 Hesperia
10/21 at Redford Union

Muskegon Heights

8/25 at Baldwin
9/1 West Catholic
9/9 Benton Harbor
9/16 Manistee
9/24 Ludington
9/30 at Muskegon Catholic
10/7 at Orchard View
10/14 at Colon
10/21 at Benton Harbor

North Muskegon

8/26 at Reed City
9/2 at Whitehall
9/9 at Oakridge
9/16 at Ravenna
9/23 Mason County Central
9/30 at Montague
10/7 Shelby
10/14 Hart
10/21 Holton

Oakridge

8/25 at Muskegon Catholic
9/1 at Hart
9/9 North Muskegon
9/16 at Shelby
9/23 at Ravenna
9/30 Whitehall
10/7 at Mason County Central
10/14 Montague
10/21 Orchard View

Orchard View

8/27 Montague (at GVSU 4pm)
9/1 Reeths-Puffer
9/9 Muskegon Catholic
9/16 at Benton Harbor
9/23 at Manistee
9/30 at Ludington
10/7 Muskegon Heights
10/15 at Allen Academy
10/21 at Oakridge

Ravenna

8/26 at Kent City
9/1 Montague
9/9 at Hart
9/16 North Muskegon
9/23 Oakridge
9/30 at Shelby
10/7 Whitehall
10/14 at Mason County Central
10/21 Grant

Reeths-Puffer

8/25 Grand Haven
9/1 at Orchard View
9/9 Grand Rapids Union
9/16 Mona Shores
9/23 at Muskegon
9/30 Jenison
10/7 at Thornapple Kellogg
10/14 Fruitport
10/21 at Kenowa Hills

Shelby

8/26 at Grant
9/1 Mason County Central
9/9 at Montague
9/16 Oakridge
9/23 Hart
9/30 Ravenna
10/7 at North Muskegon
10/14 at Whitehall
10/21 at Hesperia

Spring Lake

8/25 Northpointe Christian
9/1 at Fruitport
9/9 Sparta
9/16 at West Catholic
9/23 at GR Catholic Central
9/30 Coopersville
10/7 at Holland Christian
10/14 Allendale
10/21 at Comstock Park

Whitehall

8/26 at Kelloggsville
9/2 North Muskegon
9/9 at Mason County Central
9/16 Hart
9/23 at Montague
9/30 at Oakridge
10/7 at Ravenna
10/14 Shelby
10/21 Harper Creek

School conference alignments

OK RED

Grand Haven
East Kentwood
Rockford
West Ottawa
Grandville
Hudsonville
Jenison
Caledonia

OK BLACK

Mona Shores
Reeths-Puffer
Muskegon
Fruitport
Union
Wyoming
Kenowa Hills

OK BLUE

Spring Lake
Sparta
Coopersville
Allendale
Comstock Park
GR Catholic Central
GR West Catholic

CSAA Gold

Newaygo
Fremont
Reed City
Tri County
Grant
Chippewa Hills
Central Montcalm

CSAA Silver

Hesperia
Holton
Kent City
Big Rapids
Lakeview
Morley Stanwood
White Cloud

LAKES 8

Ludington
Muskegon Catholic
Muskegon Heights
Orchard View
Manistee
WMC (no football)

WEST MICHIGAN

Hart
Mason County
Central
Montague
Oakridge
North Muskegon
Ravenna
Shelby
Whitehall

Baldwin, Independant
Z. East, OK Green
Z. West, OK Green
Holland, OK Green

Airing it out

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

Brady Luttrull is obviously a kid who loves a challenge.

That's a good thing, because he's been forced to overcome some scary injuries over the past few months that threw his football preparation weeks behind schedule.

And soon he'll be leading an inexperienced team as it fights to maintain the Oakridge tradition of excellence on the gridiron.

But Luttrull has faced plenty of hurdles before.

As a sophomore, he was thrust in the role of starting quarterback for the traditionally powerful Oakridge varsity, which qualified for the state playoffs 19 of the previous 21 seasons and won state titles in 1997, 2005 and 2008.

He handled the assignment with amazing ease, leading Oakridge to an 8-2 season, a West Michigan Conference championship and another berth in the playoffs.

Last season, with Luttrull again under center, the Eagles were 7-3, finished second in the conference and again made the playoffs.

Along the way Luttrull established himself as one of the premier passers in West Michigan, completing 247 of 426 attempts for a gaudy 4,230 yards and 50 touchdowns over two seasons.

So Luttrull is still brimming with confidence as he heads into his senior season. He speaks with the certainty of a tested upperclassman who knows the job will get done.

"I'm confident in my team because we have a group of guys who work their butts off, and have a lot to prove," he said. "Everyone thinks we're going to have a down year, so that gives us more motivation to work harder and accomplish all of our goals."

Oakridge Coach Cary Harger says it's great to have a senior standout under center this year, particularly with so many new players.

"The young guys already have a sense of confidence because of his leadership, that things are going to be OK," the coach said.

Living a dream

Luttrull's family moved from the Orchard View to the Oakridge school district when he was in the second grade.

He grew up attending Eagles football games, watching the legendary teams of Coach Jack Schugars dominate the always tough West Michigan Conference and annually compete for state titles.

"It was always my dream to be a varsity football player, and to be the quarterback," he said.

Luttrull had the advantage of growing up next door to Austin Wright, who was three years older and became the starting quarterback for Oakridge before Luttrull inherited the job.

As Wright grew and developed, Luttrull picked up knowledge along the way.

"We were always outside throwing the football around, and he taught me things that helped me a lot," Luttrull said.

Luttrull was a quarterback every season during his little league years, and brought a new dimension to the traditionally run-happy youth football world.

"I guess I had arm strength since mini-mites," Luttrull said. "When I was on the team we passed. Nobody was really expecting it. We caught other teams off guard and scored a lot."

Luttrull had to learn a new position during his freshman year in high school, when he played junior varsity. Nate Wahr, who later became one of the Eagles' standout receivers, was entrenched as the JV signal caller, and the coaches were happy with his performance.

Luttrull played his only year of JV football as a running back. But the more the varsity coaches noticed him, the more they wondered if he would make a really good varsity quarterback.

By the time summer practice was done before his sophomore season, he was named the starting quarterback while Wahr was moved to receiver.

Luttrull's first game as quarterback didn't go very well at all.

The Eagles faced powerful Grand Rapids West Catholic and came out on the short end of a 31-0 score. Oakridge hurt itself with four turnovers, including one interception thrown by Luttrull.

After that drubbing, some fans were probably wondering if the Eagles were any good, and whether the sophomore quarterback was the right guy for the job.

But Luttrull said the loss didn't shake his confidence at all.

"It was a learning experience," he said. "I knew that first game wasn't going to determine how the whole season went. I really didn't know what to expect going in. I watched a bunch of film from that game and learned from it."

"As a team overall we weren't down. And after that game I felt like I could do this."

Harger also saw a lot of positive things in Luttrull's first game.

"He knew what he could do," Harger said. "We knew what he could do, and he even surprised us with some of the things he could do. We were very pleased. We knew we had made the right decision."



Oakridge QB Brady Luttrull ready to lead new cast of Eagles into battle

'He can definitely air it out'

Luttrull quickly became comfortable as the varsity quarterback, and Oakridge went on to win the last eight games of the regular season and the 2014 West Michigan Conference championship, before falling to Hopkins in the first round of the state playoffs.

Luttrull's final stats were pretty amazing for a sophomore. He completed 88 of 166 passes for 1,666 yards with 21 touchdowns and only five interceptions. He was a second-team All-Area selection.

His junior season started out with a bang, when Oakridge stunned defending Division 8 state champion Muskegon Catholic 45-26, ending the Crusaders' amazing 26-game winning streak.

Luttrull had a spectacular game, connecting with senior wide receiver James Cooper III for six touchdown passes. He completed 25 of 30 throws in the contest for 315 yards.

"That was real exciting, to snap their winning streak," he said. "We were experienced and knew what we were doing. It felt really good."

The Eagles won five of their next six games, and faced undefeated Montague in Week 8 with the West Michigan Conference championship on the line.

Luttrull had a decent game, completing 10 passes for 226 yards and a touchdown. But he also threw three interceptions, including one in the end zone on the final play of overtime, allowing Montague to claim a 36-29 come-from-behind victory and

the league title.

"That was tough," Luttrull said. "Our best lineman was suspended for that game, and Nate Wahr was sick and couldn't play until the second half. It was hard to play for the conference championship and then lose in overtime. It shows you that you can't take anything for granted. You have to earn it."

The Eagles finished the season with another first-round disappointment in the playoffs, losing to Grand Rapids West Catholic.

While the season ended on another sour note, Luttrull's final passing statistics were brilliant. He completed 159 of 270 passes for 2,578 yards and 32 touchdowns, earning second-team All-Area honors.

"He can definitely air it out," Harger said. "He obviously needs people who can catch the ball, but Brady's placement of the ball, his ability to put it right there, right now, where it needs to be, has just been awesome."

New challenges

The past few months have been filled with uncertainty for Luttrull.

On a few scary occasions he even wondered if he would be able to take the field for his senior football season.

In the spring he suffered a shoulder injury in his throwing arm that cut his varsity baseball season in half.



Brady Luttrull prepares to take the snap in last year's season opening game against Muskegon Catholic Central.

"I tore two tendons in my elbow and missed the rest of the baseball season," said Luttrull, 17, the son of Jim and Jody Luttrull. "It was just from throwing too much. At one point we played 13 baseball games in 14 days, and on top of that I was throwing on the weekends in football.

"I remember telling my coach that I couldn't throw across the field from shortstop to first base. I went to the doctor the next day, and sure enough, I tore two different tendons. I had to go through rehab and have a platelet injection. I didn't throw for about 10 weeks. It was hard to wait. I just started throwing two or three weeks ago, but I have to wear an arm brace."

In July, just when he was medically cleared to start throwing a football again, he badly sprained his right ankle while playing basketball in the school gym.

"I had planned on hitting throwing camps hard this summer, then I sprained my ankle playing basketball, which I shouldn't have been doing," Luttrull said. "It happened in the first 10 minutes. I was coming down from a rebound and stepped on someone's foot.

"It was pretty bad. The people doing the x-rays said they didn't know how it wasn't broken. I had been cleared to throw around the first of July, I threw about a week before that happened, then I was out about another two weeks."

Now that Luttrull is healthy again, there are other matters to deal with.

In the back of his mind is the unsettled issue of college. He would like to play college football somewhere, but he's a small quarterback playing for a small school, so he hasn't been overwhelmed with offers yet.

On the bright side, he's a three-sport athlete who also excels in baseball, which may open more doors at the collegiate level.

"There's the possibility of baseball, but I want to play college football, too," he said. "It's kind of tough, it's always on my mind. Not a lot of colleges have talked to me yet. A few, but not a lot."

In the meantime he's focused on leading a young football team into battle. He's the only returning starter from last year's offense, while only three are back on defense.

That means Luttrull will have to break in a new receiving corps. After two years of airing it out to the tall, fast and talented trio of Wahr, James Cooper III and Jaegar Beattie, Luttrull has to develop timing and touch with three brand new receivers, while counting on a new offensive line to give him the time and protection he needs to pass.

"They were the three best receivers any quarterback could hope for," said Luttrull about his former teammates. "The trust I had in them was unbelievable. Cooper was obviously number one, but I was really comfortable with all of them. I knew we could trust all of them in one-on-one situations."

But the talented senior isn't scared.

"We just have to keep working and building that connection this year," he said about the new receivers. "I know we will eventually. They definitely have the talent, that's for sure. We're still getting a lot of drops in practice right now, but we'll get it.

"In the end is when you want to be good."

The Luttrull File

Age: 17

Class: Senior

Height/weight: 5-11, 171

Varsity sports: Football, basketball, baseball

Career record on varsity: 15-5

Conference record: 12-1

Conference titles: 1

Career passing stats: 247-for-426, 4,230 yards, 50 TDs

Favorite college team:

Michigan

Favorite football player:

Antonio Brown

Favorite food: Mom's spaghetti

Favorite class: Advanced weightlifting



Good luck to all of the area teams!



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Pack hopes to come back in a new conference this fall

By Dave Hart
LocalSportsJournal.com

FREMONT - The Fremont football squad has reasons for optimism, despite going winless in 2015.

Last season was certainly disappointing for Fremont, which was outscored 374-92 by nine opponents.



Tank

But the Packers have left the Lakes 8 Conference and moved to the Central States Athletic Association's Gold Division, where they will be playing against some opponents they've beaten in recent years.

The CSAA Gold Division includes Central Montcalm, Grant, Newaygo, Reed City, Tri-County and Chippewa Hills.

Fremont will also have a fresh start under a new leader - first-year coach **Rick Tank**, who was the varsity defensive coordinator for the past six years, and coached three years at the junior varsity level before that.

"We are excited about the move into the new conference," said Tank, whose team will open the season with a non-league home game against Sparta on Aug. 26, then open league play Sept. 1 at Chippewa Hills. "We will get a chance to play teams that we have had prior success with, and we'll be able to build natural rivalries with closer districts.

2015 RESULTS

- Sparta 20, Fremont 19
- Reeths-Puffer 55, Fremont 0
- Ludington 57, Fremont 26
- Fruitport 32, Fremont 8
- Orchard View 19, Fremont 7
- Spring Lake 35, Fremont 0
- M. Catholic 49, Fremont 14
- Hesperia 58, Fremont 0
- Montague 49, Fremont 18

"We struggled last season in the Lakes 8, along with having (non-conference opponent) Reeths-Puffer on the schedule."

Tank is encouraged by the return of eight lettermen on both sides of the ball, seven of whom are two-way players. The Packers will also be assisted by several players who decided to come out for football this year, some for the first time.

Returning at quarterback will be junior **Kaleb Kooman** (6-0 175), who gained important experience last year, even as the losses piled up. He will be in charge of directing the Packer's Pro-I formation offense.

"He is one of the toughest kids we have on the team," Tank said. "He can run and has a strong arm. He knows how to run our offense." The Packers' running attack will be led by returning senior **Wei Peng Chen** (5-9 170).

Chen will be the go-to man in the running game, according to Tank. He has a good vision, is quick on his feet, and is able to accelerate quickly and move through heavy traffic, the coach said.

Fremont's receiving corps should be strong, with three seniors leading the way.

Connor Gronso (6-1,155) is expected to lead the group.

"Connor has quick feet and is not afraid to go after the ball in traffic," Tank said.

Alex Walker and **Tyler Zimmerman** are also expected to play big receiving roles.

Walker is the type of player who is not afraid to make contact, especially up the middle against much larger linebackers, according to Tank. Zimmerman is expected to make an impact in his first year of organized football.

Fremont's offensive line will be anchored by senior center **Cooper Kukul** (6-4, 260).

Kukul, who is the tallest player on the Packers' roster, spent a lot of quality time in the weight room over the summer and has an excellent attitude, according to Tank.

He has been a starter since his sophomore season, will also play on the defensive line, and is expected to be a leader on and off the field, the coach said.

Also playing on both sides of the ball will be seniors **Alex Gates** (5-10, 185), **Ethan Frens** (6-2, 195) and **Coleman Barnhardt** (6-0, 200).

Gates will play offensive guard and linebacker and is a tough kid, according to Coach Tank. He loves contact and has great upper body strength.

Frens, who missed the last few games in 2015 due to injury, will play on the offensive line and at defensive end.

Barnhardt is a jack-of-all-trades who can play several different positions.

Playing on the defensive line will be seniors **Travis Wyaat** (5-1, 285), **Chris Hubbard** (5-10, 265) and **Jared Bush** (5-6, 185).

Wyaat is the biggest kid on the team and will provide much-needed bulk in the trenches.

Senior **Nick Sanborn** (5-7, 140) is expected to lead the Packers in the secondary.

He will be joined by Gronso, Walker, Kooman and Zimmerman, who each will play on both sides of the ball.

"I like how this team is bonding together already," Tank said. "They are all about one team and they naturally gel together. They believe in unity and are ready to achieve great things."



FR: Coleman Barnhardt, Wei Peng Chen, Kaleb Kooman, Alex Gates. BR: Chris Hubbard, Connor Gronso, Cooper Kukul, Ethan Frens, Travis Wyaat. Photo/Lloyd Smith

PACKER REPORT

Coach: Rick Tank

Assistants: Rebel Smith, Dale Bacon, Adam DeKryger, Conley Devon, Tom Elmer, Sean Henry, Zach Hummel, Nate Morse, Dustin Runions

2015 record: 0-9

Conference record: 0-5

Offensive returners: 8

Defensive returners: 8

Projected QB: Kaleb Kooman

Coach quote: "We're trying to change the culture of Fremont football. We can change for the good. We are Fremont."
- Rick Tank

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1904 Peck St, Muskegon
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Trojans ready for the challenge of playing in O-K Black

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

FRUITPORT - The O-K Black Conference is tough and competitive in a lot of sports, particularly football.

But that's OK with Fruitport coach **Greg Vargas**. He knows he's leading a program with a strong and proud tradition, and he's excited about playing local rivals like Muskegon, Mona Shores and Reeths-Puffer, as well as new league rivals Kenowa Hills, Grand Rapids Union and Wyoming.

"We have a few kids opting not to play," said Vargas, whose team finished 4-5 overall last year and 3-1 in the Lakes 8 Conference, good for second place. "I think a contributor to that is our change of conference. I think some people are a little apprehensive.

"If they look at things objectively, we've played some pretty tough teams over the past three years. I think it's beneficial to our kids to play against some top programs. If you're going to play, play against the best, and see how you stack up."

2015 RESULTS
Grand Haven 43, Fruitport 14
Mona Shores 55, Fruitport 14
Fruitport 22, Spring Lake 13
Fruitport 32, Fremont 8
Fruitport 56, Ludington 14
M. Catholic 29, Fruitport 26
Fruitport 49, Orchard View 14
St. Johns 37, Fruitport 14
DeWitt 42, Fruitport 14

The Trojans came within a whisker of winning the Lakes 8 title last fall. They pushed Muskegon Catholic, the eventual conference and Division 8 state champion, to the final minute before losing 29-26.

Now Fruitport will try to vie for top honors in its new league, with some familiar and new faces leading the charge.

Directing the offense this season will be senior quarterback **Connor Routt**, who was the backup to standout **Jarod Wierengo** last season.

"He's kind of a cool, calm and collected sort of guy," Vargas said about his new starting signal-caller. "He doesn't throw the deep ball a lot but he's accurate underneath. He's deceptively fast. He shows up and you might never guess he's a quarterback. He's deceptively athletic.

"We're looking for great things out of him." One very key player returning from last season is running back **Levi Six**, a three-year starter who broke out last year by gaining 603 yards on the ground.

"In my opinion he is the ultimate competitor," Vargas said about Six. "He leads by example. He's an All-State wrestler and was an All-Area player at linebacker last year. He's got toughness and power to knock people over, but we can also run him in the trap, where he'll sit there a second, then take a few steps and break out. He's kind of the complete package."

Another returning running back is senior **Bailey Lynn**, who played more of a blocking role last season and will probably see more carries this year.

Anchoring the offensive line will be senior All-Conference and All-Area tackle **Derek Monje**, whom Vargas says moves extremely well despite his imposing 6-4, 200-pound frame.

Wyatt Kendra, a three-year starter who plays on both sides of the ball, will figure a lot in the offense this year, playing wide receiver and slot receiver, and possibly seeing some action in the backfield, as well.

Other returning starters on offense include senior slot receiver **Connor Schuitema** and senior offensive guard **Eddie Leonard**.

Junior **Lucas Kleyn**, who played junior varsity last season, will either play at tight end or along the offensive line. Junior **Aric Stewart** is expected to be a starting wide receiver.

Another junior, **Ethan Norman**, who spent some time on varsity last year before going back down to junior varsity, is expected to start on the offensive line.

"I think we have some solid skill players who have good speed," Vargas said. "We need to get them the ball. We need to protect them a little bit and let them do their thing.

"Our ground attack will be our strength, and we'll look to the short passing to move the ball. We have sure-handed kids at slot and wide receiver."

The defense also returns six starters from last year - Monje (tackle), Kendra (safety), Schuitema (cornerback), Lynn (linebacker, cornerback), junior tackle **Dallas Rogers** (6-1, 290) and senior linebacker **Dylan Wilson**, whose 2015 season was cut short by a knee injury.

Juniors **Parker Tawney** and **Sam Steinhower**, who both played on the JV squad last year, are expected to start at linebacker.

Senior linemen **Tyler Brandenburg** and **Brendan Peterman**, who played reserve roles last year, are projected starters who could see a lot of time on both sides of the ball.

Fruitport expects to have between 30 and 35 players on the varsity roster.

"Every kid is going to have to contribute every Friday night and every day leading up to Friday night," Vargas said.



FR: Levi Six, Bailey Lynn. BR: Connor Schuitema, Dallas Rogers, Derek Monje, Wyatt Kendra. Photo/Jason Goorman



TROJAN REPORT

Coach: Greg Vargas

Assistants: Shaun Danicek, Dale Grimm, Tony Johnson, Dean Six

2015 record: 4-5

Conference record: 3-1

Projected quarterback: Connor Routt

Offensive returners: 6

Defensive returners: 6

Coach quote: "We would like to put our best effort and product on the field every week. We really believe what the great coach Nick Saban says - if you focus on your performance goals, wins will come." - Greg Vargas.

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Former MCC coaches bringing a new approach to Bucs

By Andrew Johnson
LocalSportsJournal.com

GRAND HAVEN - After failing to reach the playoffs for the fourth straight year in 2015, Grand Haven is hopeful that a little Muskegon Catholic luck is the key to success.

New head coach **Jason Tester** is a former MCC standout who has built a new coaching staff featuring several other former Crusaders. On that list is **Mike Holmes**, the former MCC head coach who won six state titles in 25 years on the sidelines. Other MCC imports include **Chris Martinez** and **Scott Fodrocy**, who will be joining several holdovers from the previous Grand Haven staff.

"We're hoping to install into the players that their destiny is based on what they build," said Tester, who spent the past three years as a defensive coordinator at a high school in Georgia.

Tester will try to improve on last year's 3-6 overall record and 1-4 mark in the O-K Red Conference.

His first course of action on the offensive side of the ball was to start developing two quarterbacks at every grade level in the program.

2015 RESULTS

Grand Haven 43, Fruitport 14
FHC 39, Grand Haven 19
Grand Haven 17, R-Puffer 14
Hudsonville 49, G. Haven 7
Lowell 35, Grand Haven 0
Rockford 48, Grand Haven 7
Grandville 36, Grand Haven 12
E. Kentwood 37, G. Haven 7
Grand Haven 51, W. Ottawa 29

The quarterback competition on the varsity will be between senior **Logan Taylor** and junior **Adam Nelson**, with Taylor having the upper hand before August practices.

"The biggest thing is that neither of them have been under center at the high school level," said Tester about his quarterbacks. "Logan has taken it on and done good things for us. He's done a good job but had some growing pains as part of the process."

While people may focus on the quarterback position, Tester is hopeful that the Buccaneers will have a balanced attack in the 2016 season,

with a big contribution from senior tailback **Joey Zelenka**.

"With how we've changed the offense, the backfield is a position that is going to need some added depth," said Tester. "It'll give kids a chance to stand out because our goal is to have a balanced attack. So far at this point Joey has stood out for us in the backfield."

The Buccaneers believe team speed will be a strength, which should provide more candidates for the ground game.

"I'm pleasantly surprised with our team speed and the agility we've shown so far," said Tester. "We're going to run the ball and stretch defenses both vertically and horizontally."

Grand Haven will benefit from an experienced offensive line led by seniors **Jacob Bessinger** and **Mason Behm**. Joining them will be junior **Parker Kingma**, who was on the varsity squad as well last season.

"They have a great work ethic and have brought it so far," said Tester about his offensive line. "They've done really well so far, and their experience will be an added benefit for us."

Obviously the offense will be crucial to any success that Grand Haven has, but fans will learn the most about Tester on the defensive side.

"Defense is my specialty and so on the offensive side I'm trusting my coaches and their feedback," said Tester. "So far they're happy with where we're headed."

One of the standouts for Grand Haven on defense will likely be senior **Adrian Nelson** at the linebacker position.

Nelson, along with several other top players, will be depended on more in the upcoming season, because unlike previous seasons, Grand Haven likely won't rotate as much.

"We've gone from how they platooned to where now we have guys who would be two-way players," said Tester. "We're blessed to have some of the guys that need to be on the field on each side of the ball, and our defensive mentality is to put our best 11 guys out there each possession."

Tester has been busy sorting out his roster. He indicated that several offensive and defensive starters are returning from last year, but he's not ready to discuss many individuals yet, until competition in practice plays itself out.

"The kids who play smart and disciplined will get time," Tester said. "We have a lot of battles taking place so it's impossible to say anyone stands out right now."

Tester is aware that for Grand Haven to have any success in the upcoming season, he'll need his large senior class to buy into the new program.

"Our strength will be our 24-25 returning seniors and their commitment and focus to the program," said Tester. "I've been lucky to have a group of guys who have accepted a new coach and worked hard at whatever we've asked of them."



Logan Taylor, Brady Jonas, Adrian Nelson. BR: Mason Behm, Jacob Bessinger, Joey Zelenka. Photo/Jason Goorman

BUC REPORT

Coach: Jason Tester

Assistants: Jim Gallery, Chris Martinez, Mike Holmes, Steve Oele, Brandon Suchecki, Brett Hershey, Mike Takas, Scott Fodrocy, Joe Nelson, Dennis Striegle, Jeremy Holmes, Gino Peters, Randy Poel

Projected QBs: Logan Taylor, Adam Nelson

2015 record: 3-6

Conference record: 1-4

Team Goals: "To get closer as a group, play sound, physical football, and to reach the playoffs by focusing on the moment in front of us." - Jason Tester

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New Pirate squad set to relaunch varsity football in Hart

By Fred Inglis
LocalSportsJournal.com

HART - Walk around the Hart High School campus these days and you see large machines and construction workers doing widespread renovations.



Witteveen

It's a perfect metaphor for the Hart varsity football program. The new Pirates are ready to demolish their old image and rebuild off last season's foundation.

That foundation was constructed at the junior varsity level, because the school dropped varsity football for a year following the 2014 season. The JV squad rekindled hope by posting a 9-0 record last fall. Now the players will burst onto the varsity stage this season, eager to breathe new life into their school's long-suffering program.

"These kids are ready to get rid of that stigma that we don't have good players," said Rick Witteveen, the new Hart coach. "The talent is here. It's always been here.

"We had a community picnic last week and I asked the community to buy in, not because you have a kid on the team, but because this is part of city pride."

2014 RESULTS
Hart 37, Manistee Catholic 8
N. Muskegon 49, Hart 22
Oakridge 54, Hart 12
Ravenna 63, Hart 6
Shelby 57, Hart 0
Whitehall 72, Hart 0
Mason CO Central 41, Hart 0
Montague 39, Hart 12
Baldwin 54, Hart 6

Witteveen insists every position is up for grabs on the new varsity squad, but it will make major headlines if senior **Brady Tate** isn't starting on offense, defense, as well as the special teams unit.

Tate is the only Hart football player with varsity experience. It was not a positive journey. The Pirates were 1-17 during his freshman and sophomore seasons.

But Tate was one of the four Hart juniors allowed by the Michigan High School Athletic Association to play on the 2015 JV team. And he made the most of the opportunity.

Tate, a 5-9, 165 pound running back, rushed for 1,047 yards on 84 carries. He scored 22

touchdowns on the season - 14 on the ground, three through the air, three on kick returns and three on interceptions.

"He's a gifted athlete," Witteveen said. "But more than that he's a great young man. He's not real vocal, but he leads by example and his work ethic.

"He's got speed, makes good cuts, but more than anything he's got awesome vision. He sees the field."

Also playing a role in the running game will be **Jacob Hoeko**, a fullback who ran for 128 yards on just 11 carries and scored two TDs for the JV squad.

Expect junior quarterback **Cameron Tanner** to lead Hart's Pro Set/Power-I offense. Last year Tanner completed 24 of his 40 pass attempts for 535 yards and seven touchdowns for the JV team. He also did damage on the ground, rushing for nearly 500 yards and nine touchdowns.

"Cameron is a gifted athlete and a leader," Witteveen said. "He's got a solid arm. He has some pretty good targets too."

Receivers **Mitch Mast** and **Kaleb Adams** are both over six feet tall, and 5-7 **Angel Aguilar** has the speed to find the open field. **Peyton Van Sickle** and **Aaron Van Sickle** will also contribute to the passing game.

Senior tackle **Israel Flores** (5-11, 290) and junior **AJ Bernal** (5-10, 230) are strong candidates to anchor the offensive line.

The line as a whole won't be very big, but that doesn't matter to Witteveen.

"You don't have to be big if you can hit," the coach said.

Witteveen expects many of the same athletes from the offense to lead his 3-4 defense. Tate and Tanner will be in the secondary. Last season Tanner turned two of his four interceptions into touchdowns.

Hoeko, another two-way player, will be a big force on the defensive line after recording 25 tackles and three sacks for the JV.

Junior **Jesse McGhan**, who led the 2015 JV Pirates with 48 tackles, is expected to anchor the linebacker corps. He may also see some time on offense at quarterback, along with Tanner.

Last season the Hart JV outscored opponents 311-121, which is a good sign for the future. But Witteveen knows JV statistics don't always translate to the varsity.

"We have to grow up in a hurry," says Witteveen. "Experience wise, we got to make that adjustment from Thursdays to Fridays."

The players are working hard to make that adjustment, according to the coach, who has been monitoring their progress in the weight room and during summer workouts.

"They see how much good this is doing for them," Witteveen said. "They're working hard in camps and kids are starting to understand the speed and athleticism of the varsity level. We've seen them make adjustments, elevate their game."



Israel Flores, AJ Bernal, Mitch Mast, Brady Tate, Jesse McGhan.
Photo/Stephanie Clark



PIRATE REPORT

Coach: Rick Witteveen

Assistants: Todd Myers, Shane Tate, Jason Witteveen

2015 record: 0-0

Conference record: 0-0

Projected QB: Cameron Tanner

Offensive returners: 0

Defensive returners: 0

Coach quote: "We'll win some but more importantly I want these kids to have lasting memories. The biggest key is we want them to be in every game in the fourth quarter. If we do that I think we can give them the scheme to finish the job." - Rick Witteveen.

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Panthers thinking big again with backfield talent, depth

By Ron Rop
LocalSportsJournal.com

HESPERIA - The Hesperia Panthers would love to carry the momentum they created last season into the approaching 2016 campaign.

A year ago, armed with a high-powered offense, the Panthers rolled to a 9-0 regular-season mark and a Central State Activities Association Silver Division championship. Their only loss came in the opening round of the Division 7 playoffs against another unbeaten team, the Saugatuck Indians, who beat the Panthers 42-7.

That success was a far cry from the 2014 season, when Hesperia won just one game.

The Panthers, under new Coach Doug Bolles, expect last year's success to carry over, with several talented skill players returning, particularly in the offensive backfield. Those players and their teammates are hungry to prove that last year's run was no fluke, and they are capable of performing better in the playoffs.

2015 RESULTS

- Hesperia 64, Montabella 0
- Hesperia 54, Ludington 33
- Hesperia 38, Kent City 13
- Hesperia 28, M. Stanwood 21
- Hesperia 39, Holton 13
- Hesperia 61, White Cloud 14
- Hesperia 47, Lakeview 20
- Hesperia 58, Fremont 0
- Hesperia 56, N. Muskegon 6
- Saugatuck 42, Hesperia 7

"They had a bad taste in their mouths after that playoff game," said Bolles, who coached at Baldwin last season and takes over for former Hesperia coach Aaron Sims, who resigned in the summer to become head coach at Alpena High School. "They knew they laid an egg, but they also know they lost to a very good football team."

In order for the Panthers to take their season a step or two further this season, they will need their returning skill players to lead the way on offense. It's an outstanding group.

It includes senior quarterback Brendan McAree, a 6-3, 180-pound signal-caller who directed Hesperia's potent wing-T offense, which scored a school-record 452 points last

season, compared to 161 for opponents.

That deceptive offense is dominated by the running game, and the Panthers will have several explosive runners returning from last year's squad.

Running back **Kade Witte** (6-0, 185) is back after rushing for 778 yards last season, despite having foot surgery after suffering an injury at midseason. **Gerrit Yates** (5-10, 170) and **Gage Balkema** (5-10, 200) also return after gaining 559 yards apiece, while bruising fullback **Brandon Goins** (6-2, 220) will try to improve on his 561-yard season.

Junior **Kanin Witte** (5-9, 155) will also be part of the potent backfield attack.

"We will move those guys around," Bolles said. "We have some skilled guys back. I'm blessed that Coach Sims did not leave the cupboard empty. We did lose a few linemen and some leadership, but these guys are hungry."

Up front, Bolles points directly at **Kevin Schooley**, a junior lineman who is a solid 6-0, 230 pounds, as the leader of the offensive line. Center **Chad Lavin**, a 6-0, 220-pound junior, will play a big role after playing on the junior varsity team a year ago.

And speaking of big, Bolles is looking at freshman **Connor VanBuskirk** to leave his mark on the program. VanBuskirk, a 6-3, 345-pounder who bench presses 300 pounds, is expected to help anchor the line.

"With those three guys up there, we are looking for big things," Bolles said. "I am used to running the spread and running the ball out of that, but we are going to stay with the wing-T because it has worked. I don't want to run 98 percent of the time. I'd like to have a little bit of a mix."

Bolles expects about eight of his players to play both ways.

Goins and Balkema will man the inside line-backer positions after earning first-team All-Conference honors on defense a year ago. Both are big hitters, knowledgeable and dedicated in the weight room, according to Bolles.

Both Wittes, along with Yates and Schooley, are key two-way performers who will play big roles on defense.

While Hesperia's running game should be as potent as last season, the Panthers still face challenges. With only 24 players on the roster, and Bolles taking over the team relatively close to the season, there could be a few bumps in the road.

"Me coming in new could be a bit of a weakness at the beginning," Bolles said. "They have to get used to me."

Meanwhile, every team on the schedule will be gunning for the Panthers. But Bolles isn't worried about that, as long as his team prepares properly and plays up to its potential.

"When I was in Baldwin, I told them not to get wrapped up in other teams," Bolles said. "My job and my concern is having my guys ready. If we get good practice tendencies and do our job, we will be fine."



FR: Gage Balkema, Gerrit Yates, Kanin Witte. BR: Kevin Schooley, Brendan McAree, Kade Witte, Brandon Goins.
Photo/Michael Cherry

PANTHER REPORT

Coach: Doug Bolles

Assistants: Bobby Kraus, Chad Payne, Cregg Bolles, Jeremy Stevens

Projected QB: Brendan McAree

Overall team record last season: 9-1

Conference record last season: 5-0

Offensive returners: 6

Defensive returners: 7

Coach quote: "I think we have a target on our back. We will be right up there. Lakeview and Morley-Stanwood are two teams to watch. If we get into good practice tendencies and do our jobs, we will be fine." - Doug Bolles

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Red Devils have a lot of returning talent to work with

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

HOLTON - Last year the Holton Red Devils watched as neighboring rival Hesperia bounced back from a 1-8 season in 2014 to a perfect regular season.

Now the Red Devils, who finished 4-5 in 2015, think they may be set to have a similar experience.



That's because Holton returns nine starters on offense — including several standout performers — and 11 on defense.

Those numbers have left Coach Jack Nummerdor brimming with enthusiasm.

"It's going to be a good year," said Nummerdor, whose team finished 2-3 and in third place in the Central State Activities Association Silver Division last season. "We've got a lot of experience. This is the team we've been looking forward to."

"These guys have figured out the game of football, and they want it. There's a big kind of rumbling amongst the kids about what it takes to get to the next level. They want the playoffs, and they want to get to the next level."

Holton's optimism is based partially on the return of two standouts in the offensive backfield — senior quarterback **Blake Fialek** and senior running back **Brandon Epplett**.

2015 RESULTS
N. Muskegon 35, Holton 6
Holton 57, River Valley 0
Lakeview 41, Holton 6
Holton 30, Kent City 22
Hesperia 59, Holton 12
M. Stanwood 49, Holton 20
Holton 20, White Cloud 6
Onkama 54, Holton 6
Holton 42, Wyoming Lee 6

Fialek, an honorable mention All-Area selection, piled up 1,526 yards passing and added 208 yards on the ground in 2015.

"He's a good leader," Nummerdor said about his quarterback. "He's a vocal leader and backs it up with his play, his demeanor and his work ethic. Kids respond to him."

Epplett, a second-team All-Area pick, rushed for 926 yards last season.

"He's tough-nosed," Nummerdor said about Epplett. "He's got decent enough speed, but he'd rather power through. He's tough. He loves contact."

Other returning starters on offense are senior wideout **Nick Swenson**, junior wideout **Brent**

McLaughlin, senior guard **Mason Butchart** (6-3, 230), junior guard **Hunter Younts** (6-4, 200), senior tackle **Steven Leszek** (6-0, 260), junior tackle **Travis Allison** (6-2, 230) and junior fullback **Mitchell Erickson**.

Nummerdor says Butchart anchors the offensive line.

"He's the guy, when we need short yardage, we run behind him," the coach said.

McLaughlin, who started as a sophomore, and Swenson will give Fialek two good targets in the passing game, according to Nummerdor.

"He's a dynamic type of pass catcher," Nummerdor said about McLaughlin. "He can make the one-handed grabs when needed. He's really come along in the offseason. He's faster, stronger and better. He can be a threat on the outside."

"Swenson is kind of a slot receiver. We know when we need a big play we can look in his direction. He has a small frame, but he'll stick right in there with the big boys."

With a strong-armed quarterback, a good running game and strong receivers, Holton will keep teams guessing about its offensive strategy.

"We'll take what the defense gives us," Nummerdor said. "If the pass is there it's there. Our guys are good enough to throw the ball and catch the ball. We won't be afraid to air it out a bit."

Returning starters on defense include linemen Butchart (All-Area, 89 tackles, 10 sacks), Leszek, Allison, senior **Mack Gould** (5-11, 240), senior **Kyle Ryzdeski** (6-0, 230) and junior **Dalton Giddings** (6-4, 190).

Also back on defense are Epplett (All-Area, 123 tackles, seven sacks) at linebacker, Swenson at cornerback, Fialek and fellow senior **Jake Jalovec** at safety and McLaughlin at cornerback.

Expected to see a lot of playing time are senior linebacker **Cameron Whitener** (a backup last season), junior linebacker **Brett Ward**, junior running back/defensive back **Jeremy Blume** and junior running back/linebacker **Zack Fooks**.

"This is the most depth we've had since I've been here," said Nummerdor, who's starting his third season with the team. "We've got kids coming back who had plenty of playing time but weren't full-time starters."

"These guys know how to play the game the right way. It's still small-school football. We'll have about 25 kids. But they are all ready to play."

"It will all start up front. We have great skill position players, but we've got to prove it in the trenches."

Nummerdor calls experience his team's biggest strength, with so many skilled players returning on both sides of the ball.

A winning season would break a losing trend for the Red Devils, who have finished 4-5 each of the past two seasons, and haven't finished with a winning record since 2007.



FR: Jake Jalovec, Nick Swenson. BR: Brandon Epplett, Mason Butchart, Blake Fialek, Mack Gould. Photo/Jason Goorman

RED DEVIL REPORT

Coach: Jack Nummerdor.

Assistants: Mark Jalovec, Mark English, Jeff Pawlowski, Kevin Klootwyk

2015 record: 4-5

Conference record: 2-3

Probable QB: Blake Fialek

Offensive returners: 9

Defensive returners: 11

Coach quote: "Take each game one at a time, but we obviously want to win the conference and have home field advantage for the playoffs." - Jack Nummerdor

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3 Back Attack

MCC's Christoffersen, Scott, Helton give opposing defenders nightmares

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

Muskegon Catholic's opponents will face a real defensive dilemma this season.

Who do they focus on while trying to keep the Crusaders off the scoreboard?



Most high school football teams feature one running back who gets most of the carries and attracts most of the tacklers.

But MCC has three featured backs – seniors LaTommy Scott, Logan Helton and Walker Christoffersen. Last year they combined to rush for 2,815 yards and 31 touchdowns while leading the Crusaders to their third consecutive Division 8 state championship.

Teaming with senior quarterback Christian Martinez, the three junior running backs provided all the offense the Crusaders needed. They were particularly spectacular during the state playoffs, producing huge plays at key moments to keep the title drive going.

All three return to build on their performance in 2016, along with a solid group of other starters from the state title team.

That means nobody would be surprised to see MCC back at Detroit's Ford Field on Thanksgiving weekend, hunting for a four-peat.

"I'm pretty excited," Scott said. "People are wondering if we're going to go all the way again. We all want to, and I'm pretty sure the team is going to do what it takes to get us there. We just have to drive and push and take it game-by-game."

2015 NUMBERS

LATOMMY SCOTT
1,235 yards, 10.1 yards per carry, 18 TDs.

LOGAN HELTON
897 yards, 7.3 yards per carry, 11 touchdowns.

WALKER CHRISTOFFERSEN
683 rushing yards, 7.2 yards per carry, 457 yards receiving, 12 touchdowns.

"We're a very tight unit," Helton said. "We have three college-potential running backs here. I don't know what other school has that. I like our chances."

With so much talent packed into one backfield, the only potential problem could be damaged egos. Talented young runners want to carry the ball, but at MCC the workload is divided three ways.

But the three featured backs say that's OK with them, because they love playing on a great team.

"It's a lot of fun," Christoffersen said. "With all the different spreads we have, I don't think defenses have any idea what we're going to do. I've looked over there (across the line) and thought that they looked a little bit confused."

"I think they all understand team first," said MCC Coach Steve Czerwon. "In terms of players buying in, there's no substitute for the kind of success we've had. We have three talented kids in the backfield and we're trying to take advantage of all of their strengths."



Walker Christoffersen, LaTommy Scott, and Logan Helton celebrate the Crusaders' third straight state championship last November in Detroit. Photo/Tim Reilly

Three-headed running attack

Scott was born to be a Muskegon Catholic football star.

His father, Tommy Scott, was a standout running back who played for the 1990 and 1991 state championship MCC teams.

His older brother, also named Tommy Scott, was the star running back for the Crusaders in 2014, when they won their second straight state title. He was named the Associated Press Division 7-8 state Player of the Year and accepted a football scholarship to Saginaw Valley State University.

So it's not surprising that LaTommy was playing football of some sort by the time he was three or four. But it wasn't his preferred sport during his earliest years.

"I really didn't start liking football until I was like in the seventh grade," Scott said. "I was more into basketball before that."

Scott, who played alongside his brother as a sophomore, carried on the family tradition last year with style. He led the Crusaders in rushing with 1,235 yards in 122 attempts, for an average of 10.1 yards per carry. He also scored a team-leading 18 touchdowns.

"It's was just a matter of dedication to the team and hard work, plus the fact that my brother was on my back most of the time," Scott said. "He was around a lot. He would tell me how they do things at Saginaw. They work out different in college, and he likes the way they do it in Saginaw."

Helton also started playing football at a very young age. He attended Orchard View schools until the third grade, then transferred to MCC, where his mother had been a member of a state championship track team.

Last season Helton was MCC's second-leading rusher with 897 yards on 119 rushes for an average of 7.3 yards per carry. He scored 11 touchdowns for the Crusaders.

Scott and Helton could have provided a potent running attack by themselves last fall. But then the Crusaders added Christoffersen, who attended Fremont High School until midway through his sophomore year, then transferred to MCC.

"The big reason was that my grandpa on my mom's side went here, and I'm really close to him," Christoffersen said. "I just wanted to make him happy by coming here."

Christoffersen made Crusader fans happy last fall when he recovered from an opening-game hip injury and returned to the lineup in Week 6. He ended up rushing for 683 yards on 95 carries (a 7.2 yard average) and scored two touchdowns on the ground.

His biggest contribution came in the passing game. Despite missing two entire games and part of a third, Christoffersen was MCC's leading receiver with 25 catches for 457 yards and 10 touchdowns.

Czerwon said all three backs bring unique abilities to the table.

"LaTommy uses his speed a little more than the others and has moves that make people miss," Czerwon said. "Logan is fast and also kind of crafty."

"I didn't know what we had in Walker initially. We had

him in the preseason, then he got hurt in the first game against Oakridge. He scored a couple touchdowns in the Fruitport game and made a few defenders miss, and we started to get a feel for what he could do for us.

"They all played really well in big games."

Regrouping after ugly loss

The Crusaders' 2015 season started on a sour note with an ugly 45-26 loss to Oakridge. Helton had a big game for MCC, with 141 yards and three touchdowns, but it wasn't enough.

To make matters worse, Christoffersen went down with a hip injury on the first offensive series of the game, knocking him out for the first part of the season.

But MCC used the loss as motivation for the rest of the season.



Helton in a team huddle following state semifinal victory. Photo/Tim Reilly

"I think it was very good for us," Helton said. "We had that 26-game winning streak, and it was my first loss on varsity. But it really needed to happen to bring us back to reality. The preparation and focus were not where they needed it to be."

MCC's frustration piled up the next week when a game at Muskegon Heights was cancelled. But the Crusaders got untracked in Weeks 3-5 with easy league victories over Orchard View (42-11), Ludington (34-13) and Spring Lake (51-7).

Scott and Helton carried the load while Christoffersen healed. Scott had 169 yards against OV, 133 against Ludington and 102 against Spring Lake. Helton gained 101 yards against Spring Lake.

Christoffersen returned to the lineup for a Lakes 8 Conference showdown against Fruitport, and made the big play that saved the game for MCC.

The Crusaders trailed Fruitport 26-21 with 51 seconds remaining. They had the ball on their own 34 and faced a desperate fourth-and-nine situation.

But Martinez found Christoffersen streaking down the middle past the Fruitport secondary and threw him a 66-yard touchdown pass, giving MCC a thrilling 29-26 victory.

"I knew at that last second we could all come together," Christoffersen said. "We weren't panicking. We just said 'Let's do this, we know we can do this,' and it ended up in our favor. It was really something special."

MCC finished the regular season with a 49-14 win over Fremont (Scott 205 yards, Helton 146) a 36-6 loss to powerful Detroit Country Day and a 48-12 victory over Ravenna.

Then came the challenge of securing a third straight state title.

Big plays in big games

The big three running backs saved their most brilliant efforts for the playoffs.

The Crusaders opened their title defense with a 49-7 whipping of Mount Pleasant Sacred Heart. Scott electrified the home crowd with a 92-yard kickoff return while Christoffersen caught touchdown passes covering 33 and 39 yards.

In the district final against Beal City, Scott ran for 202 yards and three touchdowns, Christoffersen added 109 yards on the ground with one touchdown and caught two touchdown passes, while Helton rushed for 91 yards, including a 47-yard scoring burst.

In regionals, MCC trailed Frankfort 12-7 in the fourth quarter before exploding for a pair of late touchdowns, including a 42-yard run by Scott, to steal a 22-12 victory.

In the state semifinals, St. Ignace rallied in the second half and narrowed MCC's lead to 20-12 in the fourth quarter. MCC sealed the 33-20 win with a 10-yard touchdown run by Martinez, then a brilliant 25-yard scoring run by Scott that provided the highlight reel of the season.

"With all the different spreads we have, I don't think defenses have any idea what we're going to do. I've looked over there (across the line) and thought that they looked a little bit confused." - Walker Christoffersen

Scott probably covered closer to 40 yards on the run after he changed directions, broke tackles, dodged defenders and somehow found the end zone.

"I thought they had me when the line broke off and (a defender) was right there, but I just kind

of kicked off that, reversed and used my speed and went outside," Scott said about his jaw-dropping run. "My teammates didn't give up on me. They kept blocking the whole way."

Christoffersen also came up big in the semifinal win, piling up a game-high 192 yards, including a 44-yard touchdown, on 25 carries.

The Crusaders' offense was finally sidetracked in the state championship game against Waterford Our Lady of the Lakes, scoring only seven points. But the star running backs became star defensive backs.

MCC had four interceptions against Waterford quarterback Clay Serenius, the Associated Press Division 7-8 state Player of the Year. Christoffersen had two interceptions while Scott and Martinez added one apiece.

Christoffersen's second pick saved the day. MCC was clinging to a 7-0 lead when Waterford marched down the field to the MCC 15-yard line with 3:21 remaining in the game.

Serenius was going for the tying score when he threw into the end zone, but Christoffersen stepped in front of the intended receiver and came up with the interception.

The Crusaders then gained two first downs, including one on a 30-yard run by Christoffersen, to kill the clock and seal the 7-0 win and the state title.

"It was a combination of Adam Benoit rushing the quarterback and making him scramble out of the pocket, then Christian Martinez hit him just as he let go of the ball," Christoffersen said about his decisive interception.

"I ended up getting in front of the receiver and getting my hands on the ball. That was one moment I had to take and make it mine, so our team could succeed."

Czerwon wasn't surprised that his offensive stars turned in the big defensive plays when it mattered the most.

"Our best people are expected to stay in shape and go both ways," the coach said.



Christoffersen eludes tacklers in last year's state finals. Photo/Tim Reilly



Scott breaks loose for yardage in the finals at Ford Field. Photo/Tim Reilly



Helton darts toward the end zone against Beal City in the playoffs. Photo/Tim Reilly

Sailors reload with new crew following two great seasons

By Dave Hart
LocalSportsJournal.com

NORTON SHORES - On the positive side, Mona Shores' 2015 football season was another overwhelming success.

The Sailors completed a 9-0 regular season and won their second straight O-K



Koziak

Black Conference title with a dramatic 21-18 win over arch-rival Muskegon. It was the third straight year the team qualified for the state playoffs after decades of futility.

On the other hand, the Sailors lost in the Division 2 district finals, a rematch against Muskegon, 21-10. That was a big let-

down after reaching the state finals in 2014.

"The kids were frustrated, having a great year and losing the way we did," said Mona Shores head coach **Matt Koziak**. "We choose not to define that team by the disappointment because it is tough to beat Muskegon twice in a season."

The Sailors lost all but one starter from last year's team to graduation, so their program will be facing its first real transition test in several years. **Evan DeYoung**, who played defensive end last season, is the lone returning starter.

2015 RESULTS

- Mona Shores 55, W. Ottawa 0
- Mona Shores 55, Fruitport 14
- Mona Shores 31, Rockford 10
- Mona Shores 30 Caledonia 7
- Mona Shores 42, Z. East 7
- Mona Shores 42, R-Puffer 12
- Mona Shores 42, GR Union 8
- Mona Shores 21, Muskegon 18
- Mona Shores 42, K. Hills 20
- Mona Shores 21, FHN 12
- Muskegon 21, Mona Shores 10

But Koziak plans to keep the wins coming, even as the roster changes from year to year.

The future looks bright, with players arriving from a junior varsity team that finished 7-2 last year, as well as more on the way from a freshman team that went 9-0.

"The kids understand that we are trying to build a successful program," said Koziak,

entering his sixth season. "We are hoping that these kids continue to buy into the program and get used to being successful."

One of the biggest holes the Sailors will have to fill is at quarterback, after losing standout **Tyler Trovinger** to graduation.

Mona Shores currently has three options, led by senior **Drew Switzer**, who is currently tabbed as the favorite to start.

Senior **J.P. Pegues** (5-10, 170) and junior **Tristan Robbins** (5-9, 165) are also in the quarterback mix for the Sailors.

"Switzer has taken a step forward this summer," said Koziak. "All three candidates are a product of our system and they are unselfish and good at throwing the ball. They are also great teammates and smart in the classroom."

The top returning running back is senior **Marcus Collins** (5-10 220). Junior **DeAnthony Davis** (5-9 160) will also see time at running back along with playing at the slot receiver position and outside linebacker.

The Sailors lost a ton of talent at the receiver positions, but will look for newcomers to step right in, led by speedy senior **Emari Hardy** (5-9 170), who runs the 40-yard dash in 4.4 seconds.

The Sailors have also added junior receiver **KeyShawn Summerville** (6-1.175), a transfer from Orchard View. He has the best hands on the team and is tall and fast, according to Koziak.

Sophomore **Damari Roberson** (6-1, 180), the younger brother of former standout receiver **Darece Roberson**, will also be an option in the passing game, and could play free safety on defense.

The offensive line will also have a complete makeover. It will be led by DeYoung, who was voted team captain.

The story is the same on defense. Junior **Chuckie Anthony** (5-10,255), who was promoted from the JV team late last season, will be expected to be a major contributor due to the experience he gained last year. He will also play offensive guard.

Junior **Keontae Watson** (6-4,240) will play defensive end and offensive tackle. The coaches noticed him last year on the JV squad, and he's had a great summer, according to Koziak.

The linebacker unit will feature DeYoung, as well as promising sophomore **Jacob Wahlberg** (6-3, 195).

Koziak thinks his secondary, led by three seniors, will be a major strength for the team. Cornerbacks **Keontae Watson** (6-4,230) and **Tariq Moffett** (5-10, 180), along with Pegues, are expected to lead the way.

Koziak knows how difficult it is going to be working with 21 new starters, but he's excited about the new challenge.

"I wish this wasn't the case (losing almost every starter)," said Koziak. "But I am excited to see these kids find out what their identity is for the 54th team."



BR: Emari Hardy, Damari Roberson, KeyShawn Summerville, DeAnthony Davis, Marcus Collins, Keontae Watson. FR: Tristan Robbins, Evan DeYoung, Chuckie Anthony, Drew Switzer.

Photo/Eric Sturr



SAILOR REPORT

Coach: Matt Koziak

Assistants: Aaron James, Chris Hilliker, Holsey James, Kyle Brott, John Slocum

2015 record: 10-1

Conference record: 5-0

Offensive returners: 0

Defensive returners: 1

Projected quarterbacks: Drew Switzer, J.P. Pegues, Tristan Robbins

Coach quote: "We are excited to see how this group steps up despite losing many players to graduation. Our goal is to win a third straight O-K Black Conference title." - Matt Koziak

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After big rebound year, Wildcats want to keep momentum

By Steve Gunn
Local Sports Journal

MONTAGUE - What an amazing turnaround!

After a disappointing 2-7 season in 2015, the Montague Wildcats responded with a 9-0 regular season and 10-1 overall record last year, a West Michigan Conference championship and a two-game run in the state playoffs.



Collins

Pat Collins. "Any time you win our conference you figure you will make a long run in the playoffs for sure. It was hard to lose that final game that way, on the final drive."

Gone from last year's squad are two All-Staters who stole most of the headlines - quarterback **Jacob Buchberger** and fullback **Cameron Brayman**. Also gone are numerous other seniors who led the charge back to the top.

But Collins isn't a little bit worried. With about seven players back on both sides of the ball who started or played a lot last season, the coach thinks he has the ingredients for another big season.

2015 RESULTS

- Montague 35, Orchard View 13
- Montague 70, Ravenna 48
- Montague 55, Shelby 23
- Montague 48, MC Central 28
- Montague 29, Whitehall 28
- Montague 27, N. Muskegon 26
- Montague 42, Hopkins 18
- Montague 36, Oakridge 29
- Montague 49, Fremont 18
- Montague 49, D. Kellogg 12
- NP Christian 31, Montague 28

"We lost some really key players, kids who were used to making all the plays on offense and defense," Collins said. "But we also have a lot of guys back who know what it takes to get it done. We're waiting to see who's going to emerge."

Replacing Buchberger at quarterback will be a major challenge. The Wildcats have two candidates - senior **Dylan Stever**, who was the backup signal-caller last season, and sopho-

more **Sebastian Archer**, who played on varsity as a freshman last year. Stever is more of a thrower and Archer is more of a runner, and they both have valuable skills, according to Collins.

"We're playing (the competition for the starting job) out," said Collins, who said a starter may not be named until shortly before the first game. "They are both doing such a great job, so we're just allowing them both to grow and we'll see what happens."

The Wildcats will be more experienced in the offensive backfield, despite the loss of the bruising Brayman.

Junior halfback **Eddie Caviedes** will be back for his third season as a starter after rushing for 629 yards on 100 carries for a 6.3 yard average last year.

Sophomore **Bryce Stark**, who played mostly as a receiver as a freshman on varsity last year, will also start in the backfield, along with fellow sophomore **Cole Eilers**, a full-back type who played on the junior varsity last season.

"Caviedes is more of a slasher, Stark is kind of a smooth runner, while Eilers is a battering ram, downhill kind of runner," Collins said.

Three returning starters will anchor the offensive line - senior guard **Kyle Koetje**, sophomore tackle **Luke Marsh** and senior guard/tackle **Max Mickelson**.

Senior wideout **Jake Jancek**, who has been battling injuries for a few seasons, is also expected to be a key part of the offensive attack.

The Wildcats will remain a run-first team, but will be able to throw as well, Collins said.

"Our offense is comprehensive," Collins said. "Our philosophy is to run the ball, period, but we have to be ready to do multiple things."

There is also a lot of experience on the defensive side of the ball, with seven starters or experienced players back.

Marsh and Koetje will return to starting spots at defensive end. Stever and Mickelson will return as starting linebackers, while Eilers is expected to replace Brayman at middle linebacker.

Senior **Zach Vannett** (cornerback), Weesies (safety) and Stark (safety) will be back to anchor the defensive secondary. Archer and Jancek will also see significant playing time in the secondary.

Junior safety **Joe Rupert**, who played junior varsity last season, will compete for time.

Collins is looking for improvement on defense.

The team implemented a new 3-3 stack defense last season, which features three linemen and three linebackers stacked together, with the rest of the players moving more freely. The players struggled with the new system at times last year.

"We weren't very consistent," Collins said. "We did things that were very exceptional, then we did other things that were inexcusable."

"We're looking for much improvement."



FR: Zach Vannett, Dylan Stever. BR: Josh Weesies, Kyle Koetje, Ross Grattafiori, Max Mickelson. Photo/Jason Goorman

WILDCAT REPORT

Coach: Pat Collins

Assistants: Brock Meyers, Jeff Stark, Denny Barnes, Dan French, Cody Katter, Brian Jaekel, Craig Smith, Randy Mickelson, Brad Francis, Ryan Wright

2015 record: 10-1

Conference record: 6-0

Projected quarterbacks: Dylan Stever, Sebastian Archer

Offensive returners: 7

Defensive returners: 7

Coach quote: "(The players) want to win their last game. They want to bring back four championships - conference, district, regional and state, one at a time." - Pat Collins

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Talented Big Reds more than ready to return to Ford Field

By Nate Thompson
LocalSportsJournal.com

MUSKEGON - When asked if the 2016 Muskegon Big Reds are the most talented team he's had, head coach **Shane Fairfield** hesitated.

"I can't say that," he said. "I've been around a lot of good players in my time here. It's hard to say. But as far as Division 1, Division 2 (college) level of kids, yes. As far as the most notoriety, yes, they're probably on top."



Fairfield

With more than a half-dozen players with the potential to play high-level college football, the expectation for the Big Reds this fall may be "state championship or bust."

Fairfield said his team faces that kind of pressure every season. And the Big Reds have come very close to tasting championship glory each of the past four seasons. Last year ended a streak of three straight trips to the state championship game when the Big Reds were defeated by Lowell in the Division 2 regional finals, 35-7.

"This team is extremely focused on getting back to that (state title) level," Fairfield said. "They understand the pressure of playing at Muskegon and the expectations that come with it. It comes with the territory."

Muskegon is a popular early state title contender because of its returning offensive play-makers.

2015 RESULTS
Detroit CC 15, Muskegon 12
Muskegon 42, GR Christian 14
Muskegon 39, Grandville 12
Muskegon 56, EGR 28
Muskegon 44, Kenowa Hills 0
Muskegon 47, Zeeland East 6
Muskegon 54, Reeths-Puffer 14
Mona Shores 21, Muskegon 18
Muskegon 56, GR Union 6
Muskegon 40, TC Central 14
Muskegon 21, Mona Shores 10
Lowell 36, Muskegon 7

The list starts with senior quarterback **Kalil Pimpleton**, who is committed to Virginia Tech. The 5-foot-7, 160-pounder threw for 1,180 yards and 10 touchdowns and ran for 1,091 yards and 17 more scores during an often spectacular junior season.

Fairfield said Pimpleton's amazing athleticism is what sets him apart. He bench presses 300 pounds, runs a 4.4-second 40-yard dash and has a 42-inch vertical jump.

Muskegon will utilize Pimpleton's ath-

leticism in many different ways this season - in the return game and possibly at slot receiver or running back, Fairfield said.

Fairfield has the luxury of moving Pimpleton around because backup quarterback **La'darius Jefferson** (6-1, 210) could see a number of snaps under center as well. Jefferson, who will also play at outside linebacker, impressed coaches at Virginia Tech with his size and arm strength when he visited with Pimpleton.

Fairfield is also excited about a talented cast of running backs, including potential Division 1 recruit **Andrew Ward**, a senior. He's also a tackling machine as a 6-1, 195-pound middle linebacker.

AJ Melton will also see time at both running back and linebacker, as will sophomore **Alavante Wallace** (6-1, 210). Junior **Lonnie Clarke** will add a nice burst to the running back position.

The Big Reds' top target at wide receiver is 6-2, 205-pound senior **Jacorey Sullivan**, who has offers from several Mid-American Conference schools. A dangerous kick and punt returner, Sullivan had 499 yards receiving and five touchdowns a year ago.

"He's had an amazing summer," Fairfield said. "He's really become a vocal leader. Physically, he's just a specimen. He demands respect."

Jaden McGough adds to the talent at receiver. The 6-2, 190-pound senior has an offer from Davenport and has impressed at 7-on-7 camps during the summer, Fairfield said.

Fairfield said **Raquis "Rock" McDonald** is a dangerous game-changer with the ball in his hands as a slot receiver, while junior **CJ Jefferson** and senior **Kevin Reynolds** will also get some touches as receivers.

Fairfield said his biggest concern lies on the offensive line. The Big Reds suffered a huge blow when talented junior **Antwan Reed** decided to transfer to IMG Academy in Florida, a private school known for producing a large number of Division 1 recruits.

Two sure bets on the line are center **Devin Sanders** and mammoth sophomore tackle **Anthony Bradford** (6-5, 320). The rest of the line will be filled out by senior **Tyler Birmingham**, senior **Dovell Wilson**, and juniors **Paul Riley** and **Kaleb McMann**.

On the defensive line, **Derek Spann** will be a three-year starter at defensive end, and Fairfield calls the 6-2, 210-pounder "the strongest player physically on the team."

Junior **Eli Jackson** and senior **DJ Jackson** will start at defensive tackle.

Muskegon's stellar linebackers will lead the defense, Fairfield said, with **Ward**, **La'darius Jefferson**, and possibly **Wallace** leading the charge, while **McDonald** will play the "Warrior" position, a safety/linebacker hybrid.

Muskegon must replace a pair of starters at cornerback, but **CJ Jefferson** and **Bo Shanks** should fill the void nicely, Fairfield said.



FR: Kalil Pimpleton, Clinton Jefferson Jr., Kevin Reynolds Jr., Raquis McDonald. MR: Da'Monte Neal, A.J. Melton, La'Darius Jefferson, Jaden McGough. BR: Derek Spann, Willie Shanks, Andrew Ward, Jacorey Sullivan. Photo/Joe Lane

BIG RED REPORT

Coach: Shane Fairfield

Assistants: Brent White, Justin Ego, Tracy Lewis, Tony Terrell, Matt Bolles, Carlton Johnson, Ted Bartholomew, Brooke Bartholomew, Shawn Cook, Jake Mitchell

2015 Record: 9-3

Conference record: 4-1

Offensive returners: 4

Defensive returners: 4

Projected QBs: Kalil Pimpleton, La'Darius Jefferson

Coach quote: "These guys understand the pressure of playing at Muskegon and the expectations that come with it. It comes with the territory."

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MCC has talent to compete for fourth straight state title

By Tom Kendra
LocalSportsJournal.com

MUSKEGON - Even by its own lofty football standards, Muskegon Catholic Central is on an incredible run.

The Crusaders have won three consecutive Division 8 state championships, compiling a nifty 38-4 record along the way. And all of this despite naysayers predicting at the end of each



Czerwon

season that the green-and-gold dynasty was coming to an end. "That is certainly not the case, as MCC will field another team this fall with the makings of a state championship run. "We have a good group of seniors who can't wait for their senior year of football to begin," said fourth-year MCC coach Steve Czerwon, dismissing any talk of the school's success leading to complacency. "These kids can't wait to be the leaders of the team."

The strength of the team is three returning senior running backs who are as good as any backfield in the area, and possibly the state.

LaTommy Scott carried 122 times last season for 1,235 yards, for an eye-popping 10.1 yards per carry and 18 touchdowns.

2015 RESULTS

Oakridge 45, MCC 26
MCC 42, Orchard View 11
MCC 34, Ludington 13
MCC 51, Spring Lake 7
MCC 29, Fruitport 26
MCC 49, Fremont 14
Det Country Day 35, MCC 6
MCC 48, Ravenna 12
MCC 49, Mt. P Sacred Heart 7
MCC 48, Beal City 13
MCC 22, Frankfort 12
MCC 33, St. Ignace 20
MCC 7, Our Lady of the Lakes 0

While Scott is the main home-run threat, fullback Logan Helton (872 yards, 11 TDs) is a shifty inside runner and halfback Walker Christoffersen is a gifted runner (683 yards) and the team's leading receiving threat (26 receptions for 457 yards and 10 TDs).

"The key for us as a coaching staff is trying to utilize those three the best that we can," explained Czerwon. "We're working on a little more sophisticated spread package. Those guys are tough to tackle in space, so we want to get them on the edge and let them do their thing."

The Crusaders need to fill the shoes of

departed quarterback Christian Martinez, an outstanding leader who threw for 787 yards and 14 touchdowns (against just three interceptions) and also ran for 471 yards and 11 TDs.

The starter looks to be senior Trenton Bordeaux, last year's backup who showed promise last fall. But all of the buzz is about 14-year-old freshman Cameron Martinez (5-11, 175), Christian's younger brother, who has yet to play a single down of high school football but has already received a Division I scholarship offer from Central Michigan University.

"We will use them both," Czerwon said. "Trenton is doing great. He can run the team and his passing is above average. Cameron gives us another dimension at times. He is a special player who has confidence in his abilities, which is rare for someone so young."

MCC needs to fill key spots on the offensive line, left open by several outstanding graduates - Jacob Holt, Nate Jones and Savion Thompson.

The leader up front is senior tackle Brock Johnson (6-2, 270), an all-state wrestler, along with two fellow seniors, guard Adam Benoit and center Bobby Giudice.

The MCC defense put on a show in last November's state championship game with a shutout of powerful Waterford Our Lady of the Lakes and its star quarterback, Clay Serenius. The Crusaders created a buzz by picking off four Serenius passes, including a late interception by Christoffersen that preserved the Crusaders' 7-0 victory.

Expect more of the same this fall, with the defense lining up in unfamiliar formations and with fewer down linemen, all to take advantage of the unit's outstanding speed.

"We have a lot of guys who can run, so we'll set up to take advantage of our skills," said Czerwon, who had his team meeting for Tuesday yoga sessions at Muskegon Yoga this summer.

Christoffersen will be the leader of the defense from his safety position, while seniors Mason Convertini and Andrew Schulte will play the key inside linebacker spots.

MCC again boasts a Division 8 coaching staff worthy of any Division 1 school.

In addition to Czerwon and veteran defensive coordinator Mike Ribecky, the staff returns secondary coach Kolin Convertini and scout team coordinator Mike Hornak.

Newcomers to the staff are offensive and defensive line coach Frank Lewandoski, who was a star linebacker at MCC and then Northern Illinois, and passing game coordinator Nate Smith, who served as Grand Haven's offensive coordinator last year.

There are some interesting new opponents on the schedule this year, including St. Ignace-LaSalle, which MCC defeated 33-20 in the state semifinals. The game is scheduled for Sept. 2 at MCC.



FR: LaTommy Scott, Cole Charlesworth, Andrew Schulte. BR: Walker Christoffersen, Bobby Giudice, Miles Novotny, Mason Convertini, Trenton Bordeaux. Photo/Marc Hoeksema



CRUSADER REPORT

Coach: Steve Czerwon

Assistants: Mike Ribecky, Kolin Convertini, Mike Hornak, Frank Lewandoski, Nate Smith

2015 record: 11-2

Conference record: 5-0

Offensive returners: 6

Defensive returners: 7

Projected quarterbacks: Trenton Bordeaux, Cameron Martinez

Coach quote: "What happened in the past doesn't matter right now. This is a new year and these seniors want to make the playoffs and have a playoff run of their own." - Steve Czerwon

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Tigers looking to put a rough 2015 season behind them

By Jason Goorman
LocalSportsJournal.com

MUSKEGON HEIGHTS - The way Muskegon Heights football coach **Tommie Elliott** sees it, his program's biggest problems are in the rear view mirror.

The 2015 season was very difficult for the Tigers.

After an exciting win over Newwaygo in the first game, the Tigers ran into some troubles beyond their control. The biggest came in Week 2, when a home game against Muskegon Catholic was cancelled due to security concerns at the high school.

The following week a scheduled home game against Saginaw Nouvel was moved to Saginaw, for the same general reasons. Local news organizations focused on the security situation at the school, and it proved to be a distraction for the players.

"We try not to dwell on the past, but last year, for the first five weeks of the season, we had TV crews at our practices," said Elliott, who is entering the second season of his second stint as head coach at Muskegon Heights. "For a young team, that's a pretty big distraction.



Elliott

2015 RESULTS

Musk. Hts 32, Newwaygo 29
Manistee 24, Musk. Hts 6
Sag. Nouvel 43, Musk. Hts 6
Gab Richard 44, Musk. Hts 0
John Glenn 35, Musk. Hts 0
Musk. Hts 56, Cam-Frontier 6
Orch View 49, Musk. Hts 0
Melv. ABT 20, Musk. Hts 18

"In our first game we were down 21 points to Newwaygo, and the kids dug down to win that game. We had so much positive energy going into Week 2, and then to have that taken away, it sort of took the wind out of us."

The Tigers finished with a 2-6 record, but enter 2016 with a promising mix of returnees and newcomers. There are about 17 players who saw a significant amount of playing time last season on a roster of about 30.

They will be playing their first season in the Lakes 8 Conference, giving the team the chance to compete for a league title for the first

time in years.

"Even though our record was tough, we had a bunch of juniors and seniors last year, and we have most of those kids back," Elliott said. "So this group of seniors has some good experience. Six out of the eight teams we played last year ended up making the playoffs."

The Tigers will be inexperienced in the offensive backfield, but the coaches are excited about the newcomers at those positions.

The starting quarterback will be senior **Clinton Walker**, who didn't play football last fall but has experience in the Muskegon High School program.

Two new running backs will also play key roles - senior **Jerry Anderson**, a transfer student from Mississippi, and junior **Todd Brewer**, who was the leading rusher last year on junior varsity.

"Both kids are very fast," Elliott said. "They can get to the second level, then let their God-given talents take over."

Senior **Jalen Harris** will play the slot position and will be the Tigers' main outside runner.

The Tigers will have more experienced receivers, including senior **Je'Vonte Kendrick**s, who moves around and plays several different offensive positions.

The Tigers will also have a veteran offensive line that features four returning starters. They are seniors **Gerald McCray** (6-0, 210) and **Dwayne Walker** (6-2, 250) and juniors **Ahmad Briggs** (6-2, 225) and **Jalen Lay** (5-9, 230).

"Walker is the leader of the line," Elliott said. "He has great hands, uses his feet well and just keeps going."

The defense should be stronger this year, with eight returning starters.

Kendricks and Harris, the returning receivers, will also return to their starting cornerback positions.

The defensive line will be anchored by three skilled returning starters - seniors **Dekhari Lawrence** (6-3, 220) and **DeAnthony Gordon** (6-4, 195) and junior **Quinshon Winston** (5-6, 230).

Senior **DeKari Johns** returns as a starting linebacker. Anderson, the new running back, will also play linebacker.

Elliott says his team may have the rare opportunity to start a different set of linemen on each side of the ball, so they can remain fresh throughout games.

"If you can do that, we have a chance to be fresh in the fourth quarter, which is huge," the coach said.

Muskegon Heights should benefit by playing more home game this season.

"Last year we only had two home games," Elliott said. "This year we play four games at home, then finish with four straight on the road. We will be tested with some travel and whether we can keep our focus and play football the way we're supposed to play."



FR: Clinton Walker, Jujauntae Trotter, Jalen Harris, Je'Vonte Kendrick. Photo/Jason Goorman



TIGER REPORT

Coach: Tommie Elliott

Assistants: Joey Williams, Odell Taylor, Dequantae Caviness, Jarvis Briggs, Beshawn Payne

2015 record: 2-6

Conference record: none

Offensive returners: 7

Defensive returners: 8

Projected quarterback: Clinton Walker

Coach quote: "This year we play four straight games at home, then finish with four straight on the road. We will be tested with some travel and whether we can keep our focus and play football the way we're supposed to play."

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American Youth Basketball Tour hopes your team will have a great season!



New coach inherits a talented team that could win league

By Andrew Johnson
LocalSportsJournal.com

NORTH MUSKEGON - North Muskegon fans are hopeful that new head coach **Larry Witham** will bring back a winning culture.

And Witham has a chance to get off to a good start, due to the return of 10 starters on offense and eight on defense from last year's 3-6 team.



Witham

Witham couldn't pass it up.

"I had planned on spending the rest of my career at Hart, I was happy there and had no intention of moving anywhere," said Witham, a North Muskegon graduate who has children still enrolled in the school district. "But this is my home, I was born and raised here.

"When it opened up, people came and asked if I was interested, which I had to be. I can see the lights turn on at the stadium, which is nine blocks from my house."

Witham takes over a team that hasn't been in the playoffs since 2009. He will try to restore the type of glory that he and some of his family members experienced during their playing days at the school.

2015 RESULTS

N. Muskegon 35, Holton 6
Whitehall 54, N. Muskegon 13
Oakridge 53, N. Muskegon 27
Ravenna 63, N. Muskegon 40
Mason CC 40, N. Muskegon 14
Montague 27, N. Muskegon 28
N. Muskegon 32, Shelby 20
N. Muskegon 33, Manton 6
Hesperia 56, N. Muskegon 6

His uncle scored the first touchdown in Norsemen history in 1925, his dad was on the 1941 team that never surrendered a point, and his brother was on the 1971 state championship team as an all-conference tailback.

Witham, who was on the 1979 state semifinal team, will have plenty of tools to work with this season.

Perhaps the Norsemen's most potent weapon will be senior running back **Vernonell**

Smith, who rushed for 1,300 yards on 188 carries and 17 touchdowns last season.

"He's extremely fast and powerful," said Witham about Smith. "He has all the tools you're looking for, including being able to catch and throw the ball a bit. He gives us a lot of different options out of the backfield."

Smith will be joined by talented sophomore running back **Chandler Edwards**, who apparently has a very promising future at the varsity level.

"He's 5-10 and 175 pounds but has blazing speed," Witham said. "I've been a coach for over 30 years and he might be one of the fastest kids I've ever seen. He'll hopefully give us a good dual threat with Smith in the backfield."

In front of Smith and Edwards will be senior fullback **Thomas Montgomery** (6-2, 220), who is also capable of doing damage as a runner and receiver.

Senior receiver **Riley Fairfield** will give the Norse a downfield threat. He rolled up 500 receiving yards and five touchdowns last year, and could easily improve on those numbers this fall.

"He has great hands and runs great routes," Witham said. "He's a real weapon for the quarterback because he has the ability to win 1-on-1 against defensive backs."

The Norse return of a big offensive line featuring seniors **Cam Waller** (5-11 200), **Jake Bean** (6-3, 270) and **Hunter Schots** (6-0, 200), along with juniors **Jake Achteroff** (6-6, 275), **Just Edwards** (6-1 230), **Mitchel Wolters** and **Logan Visscher**.

The biggest question on offense will be at the quarterback position, but the Norse appear to have three good options.

Senior **Thomas Lane** has been a varsity backup quarterback while sophomores **Mack Young** and **Jesse Cook** (6-5, 190) have each played the position at the junior varsity level.

"At this point I wouldn't be hesitant to start any of them," Witham said. "However at this point the sophomores are probably a little ahead."

The Norse defense is equally promising.

Montgomery, the fullback, will anchor the defense from his middle linebacker position. He finished last season with 95 tackles, one fumble recovery, two interceptions, and two forced fumbles.

Joining Montgomery at the linebacker position will be juniors **Brett Huff** and **Anthony Oviedo**.

The secondary will feature junior **LeQuan Hooper** and sophomores **TJ McKenzie** and **De'Shary Warren**.

While Witham knows there's a lot of talent on the team, he's mindful that he's also working with a fair number of inexperienced players.

"At best we'll have eight sophomores on varsity," the coach said. "It's not that we need the numbers, it's more that these kids can play. But they haven't been in the heat of battle yet. They'll have to grow up quickly."



Jake Bean, Vernonell Smith, Thomas Montgomery, Cam Waller.
Photo/Marc Hoeksema



NORSE REPORT

Coach: Larry Witham

Assistant: Jamie Woodruff, Tim De-Jonge, Dave Nelson, Bryan Rypstra, Vince Pannucci

2015 record: 3-6

Conference record: 1-5

Offensive returners: 10

Defensive returners: 8

Projected quarterbacks: Mack Young, Jesse Cook, Thomas Lane

Coaches quote: "We preach three things - great effort, enthusiasm, and passion for the sport. If we can do all three I believe a league title, running the table and making the playoffs are achievable." - Larry Witham

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Despite being confined to a wheelchair this season following major back surgery, Muskegon Heights' Tommie Elliott is...

THE HEAD COACH WHO REFUSES TO QUIT

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

Football coaches specialize in motivating players.

Many are famous for passionate pregame speeches, or inspired halftime talks, to keep their athletes focused in a physical and exhausting sport.

But Muskegon Heights varsity coach Tommie Elliott won't need many words to inspire his players this season. Just the mere fact that he's around is enough.

That's because Elliott has temporarily lost his ability to walk, and will coach this season from a wheelchair. He had major surgery in March to remove a bone mass that was growing out of his spine and into his spinal column, and the recovery takes 12-18 months.

Such a difficult circumstance would force a lot of coaches to hang up the whistle, at least temporarily. And for a while Elliott thought about stepping aside, because he wondered if he could do the job right.

But with the season set to begin, Elliott is back on board, determined to make 2016 a success, despite the challenge involved.

"It's been a crazy journey," said Elliott, 48, who is beginning the second season of his second stint as Muskegon Heights coach. "I thank God for giving me the strength to get back to this point."



Elliott

"There was a time when I wasn't sure I could coach this season, or had the desire to coach. During January and February I really considered resigning, because I thought it wouldn't be fair to the kids.

"I have a good group of seniors who encouraged me to keep pushing and fighting to get back to them, but the main reason I came back is my wife and daughter. When it became apparent that I had enough of my independence back, they said 'You need to go coach. Those kids need you, you need those kids - and we don't want you home

that much,'" Elliott added with a chuckle.

"It would be easy to toss in the towel. But my wife reminds me all the time, 'We've been together since 2003 and you've never been a quitter, and you're not going to start now.'"

Pressing forward

Elliott has been involved with prep football far too long to just walk away, even with his current circumstances.

He played prep football at Muskegon under legendary Coach Dave Taylor. His senior season was in the fall of 1985, one year before the Big Reds won a state championship.

He wasn't out of school long before he felt the urge to coach. He started as a volunteer assistant at Steele Middle School, and was a part of the Big Reds' varsity staff by 1988.

He served for eight years under Taylor and five more under Coach Tony Annese before becoming head coach at Muskegon Heights in 2005.

His first season was his best, when the Tigers went 7-3, made the playoffs and secured their first winning season since 1992. Things got progressively worse for Elliott's teams, however, and he was let go following a 2-7 season in 2008.

Elliott went on to serve as an assistant coach at Mona Shores in 2009-10 and Grand Rapids Union from 2011 through 2014. Despite his previous experience, he re-applied at Muskegon Heights when the head coaching job opened up in 2015, and was welcomed back with open arms.

Last season his very young, inexperienced team finished 2-6. This year the Tigers will be much more seasoned and hope to make major strides in their first year competing in the Lakes 8 Conference.

Elliott has pressed on with his coaching career despite a lot of obstacles.

The biggest involves his 11-year-old daughter, Torrie Elliott, who has been battling brain cancer since the age of three.

"Because of the brain cancer, during surgery, she had a stroke on the right side of her body," Elliott explained to LSJ last season. "So she has limitations with things, with strength and everything, on her right side. She has every type of seizure you can name, so she has a lot of side effects that happened because of the brain tumor.

"But she still has a big beautiful smile on her face every day, and if she can go through what she's going through, I don't complain about my pain, because my daughter deals with so much more than I have to."

Elliott started having serious back issues in 2008 and learned that he was afflicted with stenosis (painful arthritis of the spine), degenerative bone disease and three herniated disks. He was forced to leave his full-time job as an at-risk student liaison in



Muskegon Heights football coach Tommie Elliott watches the action from the sideline during a recent August preseason practice. Photo/Tim Reilly

2001 and go on disability, even as he pressed on with his coaching career.

By last season he was walking with a cane, fighting through the discomfort as he dove into his second tenure at Muskegon Heights.

But he started having more difficulty walking as the season progressed, and a new problem soon became frighteningly obvious.

Ironically, he just went in for surgery as his daughter Torrie was leaving the hospital after a month-long stay. That meant he had to go three full months without being able to spend time with her at all.

"She got home the day before I left to have my surgery," Elliott said. "I had a chance to hug her, give her a kiss and say goodbye. I was in the hospital for the next 60 days.

"I want them to understand it's about the work I put in to get back to them. I want them to see that you have to work for what you want, and if you're willing to put in the work good things can happen." - Tommie Elliott

"The last day I walked was Nov. 26," Elliott said. "I fell on my face. I was leaving the hospital. I took a step, couldn't feel my foot hit the ground, and I fell down face first. I still had enough body control to turn slightly so I didn't hit my face on the ground. I came down on my shoulder instead.

"Nobody was with me that day. Luckily a guy who saw me fall came over and helped me up and I was able to get back in my car and drive home. I haven't walked or driven since then."

After months of medical appointments and tests, Elliott learned that his inability to walk was not related to his previous back problems. He had an entirely new challenge to deal with.

"They found out I had a bone mass running from my spine into my spinal column," he said. "It was pressing on a column of nerves that goes down my spine, which shut down the nerves in my legs and stopped me from walking.

"If it would have kept growing it would have eventually severed my spine and I would have been paralyzed."

He had successful surgery in Grand Rapids on March 1, but had to spend the next 60 days recovering and going through therapy at Mary Free Bed Hospital.

"I decided to go into therapy and give it all I got. I told my therapist that I was going to be the hardest working patient in the place. I'm making some progress. The Lord is blessing me and giving me the strength to meet each obstacle that comes before me."

'I've learned humility'

Even after regaining strength through therapy, and receiving the blessing of his family to return to coaching, Elliott had to carefully consider the idea.

"I really weighed the pros and cons," he said. "I had to figure out what I was going to have to offer as a coach. I can't demonstrate techniques anymore, other than hand placement. I know I'm a good communicator, and I think I do a pretty good job of breaking down film. I just can't be out there to demonstrate a certain stance or anything like that."

Elliott said school officials have been fully supportive of his decision to return.

"Glen Metcalf (the school's athletic director) visited me at least three or four times in the hospital and brought cards from the kids and the staff," he said. "He said they wanted it to be my decision. He said that if I felt like I could do the job, keep the job.



Muskegon Heights' Dekhari Lawrence does footwork drills while several teammates watch closely. Photo/Tim Reilly

"I appreciate the staff and the board allowing me to continue to coach the sport I love."

Metcalf is convinced that Elliott will do just fine this season.

"When I went to visit him I was kind of worried about it," Metcalf said. "But every time he was in good spirits, and he told me that when he was back up and around, he would be back at the school."

"He's one of those guys who's not going to let something like this stand in the way of doing his job. He's a hard worker. If anybody is going to turn this program around, it's going to be him."

Elliott has been getting by with a lot of help from his assistant coaches, and that will continue throughout the season.

"It's been going OK," he said. "I have a good group of coaches who have been jumping on things. Our weight room is in the basement, and I can't go down there, but I have two coaches who said not to worry about weight training, they would handle that."

Elliott also came up with a plan to function during games. Assistant coach Beshawn Payne has volunteered to wheel

him up and down the sidelines this fall, so he can stay on top of the action.

"He said 'I got you coach. I will take you wherever you need to go,'" Elliott said. "He's pretty much been doing that all summer. He's been a life saver for me. I've got some real stand up guys on my staff who have really been helping me through this situation."

"This situation has taught me to humble myself and ask for help, which is something I've never had to do before. I've learned humility."

Elliott said the players seemed a little bit stunned when he showed up for summer workouts in a wheelchair. But he said he hopes to use his experience to inspire them in football this season, and teach them the value of perseverance during the tough times in life.

"At first I don't think they knew how to react," he said. "I think it shocked a lot of them. I want them to understand it's about the work I put in to get back to them. I want them to see that you have to work for what you want, and if you're willing to put in the work good things can happen."

At least two players say they are inspired



Elliott makes his point to players on the field. Photo/Tim Reilly



Dwayne Walker jumps during a summer drill. Photo/Tim Reilly

by Elliott's courage – and very happy to have him back this season.

"It hurt to see this because Coach EI is trying to rebuild this team and bring pride back to the community," said senior Dwayne Walker. "We're glad that he's OK."

The players are not at all surprised that Elliott decided to keep coaching, despite his inability to walk.

"His love for the game is too strong," said junior Jalen Lay. "Nothing is going to hold Coach EI back – nothing."

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Eagles will be inexperienced, but not at the QB position

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

EGELSTON TOWNSHIP - The Oakridge football program faces a new challenge this fall - a great deal of inexperience.

Oakridge, a traditional power in the West Michigan Conference, returns only one starter on offense and two on defense.

But Coach Cary Harger thinks the new players, who have worked hard to develop their skills while watching previous teams achieve success, are ready to step up and keep the tradition alive.

And it's quite a tradition. Oakridge has qualified for the state playoffs 21 times over the past 25 seasons.

Last year was a typical season for the Eagles. They were 7-3 overall and 5-1 in the tough West Michigan Conference, finishing in second place.

The Eagles came very close to winning the conference, dueling Montague to overtime in a showdown for the championship before falling in a heartbreaker, 36-29.

"I told (Montague coach Pat Collins), that's what a conference championship game should look like, when it has to be decided in overtime," said Harger, whose team lost to Grand

2015 RESULTS
Oakridge 45, M. Catholic 26
Detroit Loyola 42, Oakridge 13
Oakridge 53, N. Muskegon 27
Oakridge 49, Shelby 7
Oakridge 46, Ravenna 19
Oakridge 22, Whitehall 7
Oakridge 60, M. Co. Central 14
Montague 36, Oakridge 29
Oakridge 41, Orchard View 13
West Catholic 28, Oakridge 14

Rapids West Catholic in the playoffs last fall. "It was a battle on both sides."

One very key player returning from last year's squad is senior quarterback Brady Luttrull, a passing specialist who has demonstrated the ability to move the Eagles quickly downfield on a consistent basis.

Luttrull had a huge junior season in 2015, completing 159 of 270 passes for 2,579 yards and 32 touchdowns.

"He's been a huge asset for the program," Harger said about Luttrull. "He has a tremendous work ethic and that's improved every year. Our offensive coordinator, Nate Danicek,

has done a tremendous job with him when it comes to reading defensive coverage and defensive formations."

Last year, Luttrull had the benefit of throwing to three tall and talented wide receivers - James Cooper III, Nate Wahr and Jaegar Beattie. But all three have graduated, leaving the crucial pass-catching duties to a new group of starters.

Senior Caleb Ehnen will play a key role in the receiving game this year, either on the outside or as a tight end. Junior Alex Shoop, who played junior varsity last year, will be another receiver.

One big addition could be senior receiver Marcus Stewart, who transferred to Oakridge from Orchard View following the football season last year.

"He was one of the fastest kids on the track team," Harger said. "He's made some nice catches in 7-on-7s so far. He's caught the ball really well. He has that potential to be a big play receiver for us."

"I feel pretty good about it," the coach said about the passing attack. "I know Brady is feeling some pressure after losing such a great receiving corps from last year, but so far things are going pretty well. Brady is gelling well with the new receivers."

The rest of the offense, like the receivers, will be inexperienced.

Senior running back Greg Garcia, a reserve last year, will fill the vacancy created by standout Kolin Chahorski, who was one of the best runners in the conference before graduating in the spring.

Senior Riley Haase and sophomore Blake Masterman will also contribute to the running game.

One challenge for the Eagles will be replacing the entire offensive line. Candidates to start up front this fall include seniors Garrison Curry (6-6, 300), Morgan Meinders, Takari Sanders, Anthony Walker, Bill DePender and Jake Groendal (tight end), junior Hunter White and sophomores Brandon Wilde, Peyton Young and Koleman Wall (tight end).

The defense will also feature a new crew, with only Sanders (defensive line), Haase (linebacker) and senior Jake Groendal returning after seeing significant playing time last season.

Candidates for the defensive line include Young, Curry, Sanders, DePender, White, Wilde and junior Pedro Castorena III.

The linebacker corps could include Garcia, Meinders, Ehnen, Walker, and Masterman.

Vying for playing time in the defensive secondary will be Shoop, Luttrull, Stewart and Wall.

While there will be a lot of new faces on the field, Harger doesn't expect a letdown.

"They are hungry, enthusiastic and very positive, Harger said. "I was worried there for a while with such a new group, but a lot of these guys were watching from the sidelines as juniors last year, and they're hungry."



BR: Blake Masterman, Takari Sanders, Greg Garcia FR: Alex Shoop, Brady Luttrull, Marcus Stewart. Photo/Sherry Wahr

EAGLE REPORT

Coach: Cary Harger
Assistants: Tim Parker, Nate Danicek, Dave Randall, Jake Huck
2015 record: 7-3
Conference record: 5-1
Projected quarterback: Brady Luttrull
Offensive returners: 1
Defensive returners: 3
Coach quote: "Ultimately our goal is to win a state championship, no matter how lofty that might seem with the young group we have. These guys see the championship banners in the weight room and they want a part of that." - Cary Harger

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Cardinals relying on group of high quality running backs

By Jacob Arvidson
LocalSportsJournal.com

MUSKEGON TOWNSHIP - A strong running game can turn any team into a great team.

The Orchard View coaching staff believes they have the quality and quantity at the running back position to propel the team toward a successful season.

The Cardinals only found their way to three wins in 2015, finishing 3-6 and tying for third place in the Lakes 8 Conference. But this season head coach **Joe Tanis** trusts that his team's leadership, chemistry and backfield depth will lead to a bigger number in the win column.

"This group has played together for a long time," Tanis said. "We've got a bunch of hungry guys that feel like they have something to prove this year."

Leading the charge will be team captains **Sam Mitchell**, **Andrew Puckett**, **Jayden Day** and **Anthony Martin**.

"Those four guys do a great job as leaders," Tanis said. "We also have other guys who I feel do a good job of stepping up into leadership roles. I think there are a lot of guys who are vocal and are doing things the right way."

2015 RESULTS

Montague 35, Orchard View 13
Manistee 40, Orchard View 14
Muskegon CC 42, OV 11
Spring Lake 14, Orchard View 7
Orchard View 19, Fremont 7
Orchard View 33, Ludington 13
Fruitport 49, Orchard View 14
Orchard View 49, Musk Hts. 0
Oakridge 41, Orchard View 13

The Cardinals have been blessed with a plethora of talented options in the offensive backfield.

Manning the quarterback position is Mitchell. The senior only had two starts in 2015, but was the full-time JV starter in 2014 and knows how to run the offense.

Tanis feels confident in Mitchell, but even more confident in the guys lining up behind the senior quarterback.

"I feel like we've got a set of running backs that are very deep and high quality."

Junior **Isaiah Reyes** will be the main guy. Tanis said the Cardinals got significantly better last season after Reyes was called up from the junior varsity midway through the campaign.

Day will also be in the backfield. Between his freshman and sophomore seasons, he racked

up 16 starts at the quarterback position. Now a senior, Day will continue to help his team by starting as a running back.

Tanis is prepared to line up in a three running back set. Senior **Anthony Martin**, junior **TJ Boykins** and junior **Noah Chidester** are all capable of being that third starter, according to the coach.

Chidester and Martin both missed last season due to injury, but Tanis says both are ready for action again and will play important roles. Boykins made his way into the varsity squad as a sophomore last season and is poised to continue improving as a varsity-level ball carrier.

OV will not be one-dimensional on offense. "We'll be adding a tight end to our offense this year," Tanis said. "As we evolve with a new offensive coordinator, that's a position we didn't really have in the past."

The coaches have moved senior **Mason Shirrel** from the offensive line to tight end in order to provide more receiving threats downfield.

Shirrel will be heading into his fourth year on varsity. His 6-foot-5, 225-pound frame made him the perfect candidate for the tight end position.

Wideouts **Tre Kelly** and **Cameron Williams** will look to stretch opposing defenses and put points on the board for the Cardinals.

"Williams' 6-5 frame makes him tough to defend, even against athletic corners, and Kelly has the explosiveness to change the pace of a game," Tanis said.

Two new players that Tanis foresees having a major impact on the field this year are junior **Andrew Puckett** and senior **Kennan VanNatter**. Both will play on the offensive line.

On defense the Cardinals will build around two talented lettermen. Junior **Kawan Payne Jr.** will be a third-year starter at the cornerback position and senior **Julian Crawford** (6-2, 240) will attempt to disrupt opposing quarterbacks from the defensive end position.

"There are a few players that aren't necessarily newcomers because they played last year, but they've made big strides," Tanis said. One of those players is Boykins. The junior moves from the defensive line into a linebacker role. "I expect him to have a breakout year," Tanis said.

On the defensive line, Tanis will look to junior **Fletcher Payne Jr.** to clog the middle and make life difficult for opponents.

Puckett and Day will also see increased roles defensively, both at the linebacker position. Tanis said Day will also float to the strong safety spot at times.

Depth may be a luxury in some positions at OV, but the linemen are few and far between.

"We don't have a ton of depth up front with our line," Tanis said. "Injuries can certainly be big time there. We're one or two plays away, or guys away, from being in a tough spot."



FR: Kawan Payne Jr., Sam Mitchell, Anthony Martin. MR: Jayden Day, Andrew Puckett, TJ Boykins. BR: Julian Crawford, Mason Shirrel, Jake Crittendon. Photo/ Joe Lane



CARDINAL REPORT

Coach: Joe Tanis

Assistants: Josh Keur, Caleb Brown, Brian Andrews, Morgan Wansten, Larry Seitz, Eric Prow, Pat Ferrier, Fletcher Payne, Gary Allen, Denny Keith

2015 record: 3-6

Conference record: 2-3

Offensive returners: 2

Defensive returners: 2

Projected quarterback: Sam Mitchell

Coach quote: "The cliché is to win the first game. Two years ago we won that game and had a winning record for the first time in a while. Last year we lost that opening game and I felt that it kind of killed us. So obviously the goal is to win the first game." - Joe Tanis

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Bulldogs working hard to restore postseason tradition

By Mitchell Boatman
LocalSportsJournal.com

RAVENNA - Not so long ago, Ravenna was a fixture in the state football playoffs.

Between 1990 and 2015, the Bulldogs qualified for the playoffs 18 times, with the most recent appearance being in 2014, when they finished with a very respectable 8-3 record.



Smith

They also won four state titles in that era and advanced to the semifinals three different seasons. But Ravenna took a step backward last season, finishing 3-6 after losing its last three games and missing the postseason.

The disappointing stretch run included a hard-fought 45-35 loss to Whitehall, then blowout losses to Mason County Central and powerful Muskegon Catholic.

The Bulldogs were 1-4 in the tough West Michigan Conference after competing for the league title the year before.

The team also failed to qualify for the playoffs in 2012 and 2013, finishing 4-5 each year. That means the season has ended after Week 9 in three of the past four seasons in Ravenna, a trend that Coach David Smith very much wants to reverse.

2015 RESULTS

- Ravenna 62, Kent City 7
- Montague 70, Ravenna 48
- Detroit Loyola 42, Ravenna 7
- Ravenna 63, N. Muskegon 40
- Oakridge 46, Ravenna 19
- Ravenna 45, Shelby 7
- Whitehall 45, Ravenna 35
- Mason Central 47, Ravenna 0
- M. Catholic 48, Ravenna 12

When asked about his goal for this year's team, Smith had only one thing on his mind.

"Make the playoffs," said Smith, whose team has been talented in recent seasons, but was also stung by many injuries.

How will the team get back to the playoffs? "Play hard, stay healthy, and don't turn the ball over," Smith added.

Ravenna's strategy for having a turnaround season starts at the quarterback position. That's not unusual for any team.

But the new quarterback this season is a familiar face that Ravenna fans will be happy to see back in the lineup. It's senior David Thompson, who has been a huge factor in

the Bulldogs' offense for the past two seasons, playing any number of different positions.

Thompson rushed for more than 800 yards in 2015 while also racking up more than 450 yards as a wide receiver. He scored 14 total touchdowns.

The only problem is that Thompson has no experience playing quarterback. Smith isn't worried, though.

"(Thompson) has the skill set to be a dual threat QB," said the coach, who returns seven starters from last year's offensive unit.

Thompson has already proven he can be a threat running the ball, and that is where Ravenna will look for its offense, according to Smith.

"Our offense will be centered around our rushing attack, but we will also throw the football," said Smith, who doubles as the team's offensive coordinator.

While Thompson has plenty of experience on offense, other guys who will be featured in the attack do not.

Seniors Fred Averill (fullback), Brandon Millis (slot back), Anthony Arbogast (wide receiver) and Matt Russell (wide receiver) and junior Cameron Passenier (tailback) are all stepping into bigger roles after seeing limited action last year.

The good news is that the inexperienced skill position players will be operating behind a big and experienced offensive line. Ravenna returns all five starters from last year's line, and Smith considers that his team's biggest strength.

Returning are seniors Jordan Poffinbarger (6-1, 300), Shane Goebel (6-2, 265), Tanner McFarren (6-2, 220) Tristin Ford-Dykman (6-0, 210) and junior Zach McCleary (5-11, 190).

"(We have) good size and strength for a small school," Smith said.

The bigger challenge for Ravenna could come on the defensive side of the ball. Smith cited inexperience in the secondary as the biggest weakness for his team.

Ravenna will return just five players from its starting defense last season. Among them are Averill and Goebel on the defensive line and McFarren at linebacker. Poffinbarger (defensive line), McCleary (linebacker) and Millis (defensive back) are all expected to step into bigger roles on defense and become two-way starters.

The Bulldogs will roll out a largely untested secondary that will have to develop quickly for the team to succeed. A key factor for Ravenna will be putting pressure on opposing quarterbacks, so the new cornerbacks and safeties will have the chance to refine their skills.

Frequently teams like Ravenna, with little experience in so many key positions, are happy to focus on improving week-to-week.

But the Bulldogs have their sights set on bigger things, because that's the tradition in Ravenna.



Tanner McFarren, Tierstyn McBride, David Thompson.
Photo/Jason Goorman

BULLDOG REPORT

Coach: David Smith

Assistants: Neil Sladick, Scott Iwaniw, Kyle Jawor

2015 record: 3-6

Conference record: 2-4

Offensive returners: 7

Defensive returners: 5

Projected QB: David Thompson

Team goals: "Make the playoffs. Play hard, stay healthy and don't turn the ball over. We have good size and strength for a small school." - David Smith

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Rockets think they have the talent to get back to playoffs

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

MUSKEGON TOWNSHIP - The last few seasons have been difficult for the Reeths-Puffer football squad.

After finishing 7-3 in 2013 and making the playoffs, the Rockets have turned in disappointing 3-6 records for two straight seasons.

Last year was particularly frustrating. The Rockets started out with a pair of victories over Holland and Fremont, and were 3-2 after five games. But they ended their season in a tailspin, dropping their last four contests.



Jewett

They finished 2-4 in conference play, with losses to cross-town rivals Muskegon and Mona Shores.

But that sort of excessive losing should end this year, according to Coach Kyle Jewett.

Reeths-Puffer returns a team full of skilled and experienced players who should produce a lot of positive results, despite the challenges of playing in the tough O-K Black Conference.

"I'm excited every year - coaching the kids is a joy in itself - but we've been building and building and building, and now I think it's coming," Jewett said. "We have a hungry and talented squad that is ready to make the playoffs."

"We not only have a lot of seniors, but seniors who played a lot as sophomores, and all of them played as juniors. They have real game experience."

2015 RESULTS

Reeths-Puffer 21, Holland 13
Reeths-Puffer 55, Fremont 0
GH 17, Reeths-Puffer 14
Lowell 56, Reeths-Puffer 0
Reeths-Puffer 33, GR Union 6
Mona Shores 42, RP 12
Muskegon 54, Reeths-Puffer 14
Kenowa 28, Reeths-Puffer 14
Z. East 48, Reeths-Puffer 12

Jewett's optimism begins with the return of an intact offensive backfield that showed a lot of promise last season.

Leading the way will be senior quarterback **Blake Ross**.

"He's a very accurate passer," Jewett said about Ross. "He doesn't have great arm strength but he's a tough kid. He's a very strong kid who runs pretty well."

"He has a ton of experience and will surprise people with his efficiency. He's put in a great deal of work and I think you can count on him to have a big year."

Jewett is also excited about the return of senior running backs **Nate McCrary**, **Theo Stevenson** and **Nate Veihl**.

"Theo and Nate together provide a great one-two punch," Jewett said. "They complement each other well. I think they will have a breakout season."

Added to the mix are three experienced receivers - seniors **Armund Gordon**, **Collin Houseman** and junior **Mike Weissert**. Gordon started last season while Houseman and Weissert saw considerable playing time. **Brennan Johnson** will add depth at the receiver position.

The offensive line will be anchored by three returning starters - senior guards **Tony Daves** (6-2, 280) and **Hunter Guine** (6-1, 300) and junior tackle **Logan Santose** (6-4, 275).

Senior **Dawson Romanosky** will play center while junior **Carter Johnson** will also see a lot of playing time along the line. Senior **Tylor Skinner** will play tight end.

On defense the Rockets will build around a linebacker corps that returns intact from 2015 - comprised of the starting running backs. Veihl will start at middle linebacker while McCrary and Stevenson will play on the outside.

Along the line, Skinner, Daves, Romanosky and Carter Johnson will provide much of the manpower.

Houseman and Weissert will again be the starting cornerbacks. **Brennan Johnson** will be a safety.

A lot of other players are also vying for playing time, according to Jewett.

"It's finally kind of coming," Jewett said. "We're not making any bold predictions, but we finally have two solid classes of kids we know can compete. That's all you can ask for as a coach."

While the coach is optimistic about having a turnaround season, he also realizes that the Rockets play in a tough conference with a lot of other talented teams, beginning with Muskegon.

One plus will be the absence of state power Lowell from the schedule. The Red Arrows have plagued the Rockets in recent seasons, beating them 56-0 last season, 42-6 in 2014 and 42-7 in 2011.

Back on the schedule is an old rival - Fruitport - which is leaving the Lakes 8 Conference and joining the O-K Black this season. The Rockets and Trojans last met in non-conference action in 2013, with Reeths-Puffer winning 26-7.

"We're not concerned about any holes in our lineup or conditioning or anything like that," Jewett said. "But playing in the conference that we do, with the schedule we have, we know that no matter how experienced or talented we are, every single week we're going to play someone pretty darn good."

"That can be a blessing and a curse. Hopefully we'll come out of it battle-tested and ready to make a deep run in the playoffs."



FR: Zack Vanderleest, Trent Nummerdor, Matt Sokolowski, Christian Slusser, Brett Thomas, Carter Johnson. BR: Kieran Selgor, Derek Geiger, Dawson Romanosky, Hunter Guine, Tony Daves, Logan Santose Photo/Marc Hoeksema

ROCKET REPORT

Coach: Kyle Jewett

Assistants: Dean Jewett, Jeff Uganski, Don Ketner, Billie Shanks, Bob Peterson, Sean O'Brien

2015 record: 3-6

Conference record: 2-4

Offensive returners: 8

Defensive returners: 8

Probable quarterback: Blake Ross

Team goals: "Our number one goal every year is to make the playoffs. We're not afraid to talk about state championships. That's the goal of every kid and coach in the program. The number one thing is getting those six wins and be prepared to make a deep playoff run." - Kyle Jewett

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Tigers seek return to playoff form after winless season

By Fred Inglis
LocalSportsJournal.com

SHELBY - Nobody understands the highs and lows of prep football more than Shelby coach **Lorenzo Rodriguez**.

His Tigers reached the Division 6 state semifinals in 2012 and 2013. Since then Shelby has lost 14 of 16 games, and last year was the school's first winless season since 1985.



Rodriguez

"0-9 was not fun for anyone, but I take it week by week, year by year," Rodriguez said. "I enjoy the game and I enjoy the kids. The thing is they never gave up, so how could I?"

When Rodriguez first took the head coaching position in 2006, Shelby's enrollment was 532, but it's now down to 382. That means a smaller talent pool and player turnout.

Just how tough was last season? Shelby was outscored 311-121. But Rodriguez is hoping for better results this season with four returning starters on offense, five on defense, as well as four other players on each side of the ball who saw considerable playing time.

"Our defense was on the field too much, and they got worn down," Rodriguez said about last season. "But we've got a lot of guys returning, and we're faster and more athletic on both sides of the ball."

2015 RESULTS
Grant 22, Shelby 9
Mason Central 22, Shelby 7
Montague 55, Shelby 23
Oakridge 49, Shelby 7
Manistee 28, Shelby 21
Ravenna 45, Shelby 7
N. Muskegon 32, Shelby 20
Whitehall 41, Shelby 13
Spring Lake 17, Shelby 14

The Tigers employ a 3-4 defense, and one of the seniors expected to make an impact is interior lineman **Jerry Gaytan** (6-0, 205).

The linebacker position may be the most promising area on the defense. Juniors **Alex Dean** and **Cody DeVries** will fill the inside linebacker spots, while seniors **Patrick Sawyer** and **Tristan Hill** will cover the outside.

Both Sawyer and Hill are versatile enough to rush the quarterback, stop the run, and drop back to cover receivers.

"Hill is a solid player," Rodriguez said. "He

may be our best pass rusher with his speed and experience. I expect to see continued improvement from all those linebackers."

Rodriguez says the "take charge" guy on defense is junior **Blake Jones**, who gained valuable experience in the secondary last year. Another junior, **Latrell Sobers**, will join Jones in the defensive backfield.

Shelby's Wing-T offense will feature an entirely new backfield, since the Tigers lost their quarterback and two main running backs to graduation.

Jones, the leader on defense, will also be counted on to revitalize the offense from a running back slot. He carried the ball 50 times last year for 260 yards, along with 75 receiving yards.

Sobers may be the wild card in the Tigers' offensive lineup. He was the top running back on the junior varsity team last year.

"Latrell is going to be fun to watch," adds Rodriguez. "He's a 'make you miss in a phone booth' type kid."

Hill, who played tight end last season, will move to the backfield this season and use his large size to gain important yards.

The new quarterback will be junior **Kristian Oberlin**, who was the signal-caller for the JV last fall.

"He knows how to handle himself," Rodriguez said about Oberlin. "He's big into football and has gained valuable lessons at QB camps at Michigan and Central Michigan, so he's into it."

The offensive line will be led by junior center **Patrick Tice**. Gaytan and junior **Jairo Lopez** are listed at tackle. Senior **Rudy Calixto** and junior Dean will be the busy guards.

Shelby lost its all-star kicker **Gio Valdez**, who took his talents to Davenport University. Sobers will get the first chance to assume the role.

"With a young team we do have to pay more attention to detail," Rodriguez said. "It's more of a look me in the eye, let's make sure we're on the same page thing. It's a step-by-step process."

"The entire conference is young. I think Oakridge is the only team with a returning quarterback."

Rodriguez has never been short on enthusiasm or confidence, but both qualities were tested the past two seasons. Now with a younger and more athletic team, he's recharged.

"I don't want this team to carry the burden of the last two years," he said. "I want them to be themselves and play the way they play football. We want to make sure they're having fun and learning life lessons."

"We got to the point where we couldn't sneak up on people anymore (after the state semifinal seasons), but maybe we can start sneaking up on them now."

"Hey, it's high school football. Anything can happen."



FR: Latrell Sobers, Alex Dean, Kristian Oberlin, Blake Jones, Tristan Hill, . Photo/Stephanie Clark



TIGER REPORT

Coach - Lorenzo Rodriguez

Assistants - Phil Fortier, Jason Carpenter, Tom Brozek

2015 record: 0-9

Conference record: 0-6

Projected QB - Kristian Oberlin

Offensive returners: 4

Defensive returners: 5

Coach quote: "Our team goal is to win the conference and return to a playoff level team. I expect nothing less. I feel the league is wide open and we have the athletes to compete. It's going to be fun to watch our kids grow week to week." - Lorenzo Rodriguez

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Lakers have new coach, ready to take on the O-K Blue

By Nate Thompson
LocalSportsJournal.com

SPRING LAKE - When Dan Start learned the head coaching position at Spring Lake High School was open on the website Footballscop.com, he hoped he had finally found an opportunity to come back to West Michigan.

The 2002 Grandville High School graduate had spent the past several seasons as an offensive coordinator at Boynton Beach and Jupiter high schools in South Florida, but yearned for the chance to lead his own program in his home state.

So when he learned 17-year Spring Lake Coach Jerry R a b i d e a u stepped down in early November, Start did his best

to make a strong impression during his interview with Athletic Director Cavin Mohrhardt.

He watched game film from the Lakers' 2015 season, recalled some highlights and obviously impressed the boss. Now he's eager to get started on his first season with the team.

"It's such a difficult region to find a head coaching position," Start said. "So when this job opened up, I saw it as a tremendous opportunity.

"I had a nephew who graduated from Spring Lake, so I knew of the school from afar. It has a strong football tradition and academically, it's one of the top schools in the state."

Start will take over a Lakers program that is making a big transition to the O-K Blue Conference after competing in the Lakes 8 Conference for the past 10 years.

The Lakers were 4-5 overall last season and finished 2-3 in their final year in the Lakes 8.

They will tackle a new schedule this fall that includes three-time defending Division 5

state champion Grand Rapids West Catholic, defending Division 6 runner-up Grand Rapids NorthPointe Christian, and strong league foes Allendale and Grand Rapids Catholic Central.

Neighboring archrival Fruitport is still on the docket in Week 2, but this time as a non-conference foe.

Start and his staff will have a foundation to build on, with starters or experienced lettermen returning on both offense and defense.

The coach has been encouraged by the players' enthusiasm in 7-on-7 camps and the turnout in the weight room throughout the summer.

"We've had about 45 to 50 kids in the weight room every day, which I believe is up considerably," he said. "I think we're going to be smaller up front, but we've got a lot of athletic kids. The kids have been really excited to get to work."

Start said he's leaning toward installing a Wing-T/wishbone style offense, but said he'd like to have the versatility to occasionally use multiple receiver sets.

The new coach is happy to have an experienced quarterback in the fold - 5-10, 165-pound senior Cameron Ball, who will be a third-year starter. Ball is a threat to rack up big yards on the ground, but Start is also excited about running backs Joe Chittenden, a sophomore, and Gavin Paul, a junior.

In the passing game, Start says the Lakers have a pair of potential big targets in junior tight end/receiver Griffin Lorimer (6-4, 210) and junior receiver Jason Keena.

The biggest question marks may lie on the offensive line, Start said. The main piece of the puzzle is senior center Aaron Clark (6-3, 235), with a lot of holes yet to be filled.

"The rest of the line is kind of up in the air," Start said. "We're going to be trying kids out and see where they stick. So it's too early to say."

On defense, Start said sophomore Aleck Frederick could develop into a quality speed rusher off the edge. Lorimer and end/linebacker Sam France will also be key pieces on the D-line, but Start said the Lakers need to develop run stuffers at tackle.

Start likes his cast at linebacker, which includes seniors Joe Hissom, Drew Cather, as well as Gavin Paul.

In the secondary, Keena and Michael Beck expect to compete for the starting safety positions, while Start likes the potential of corners Isaiah Pierce, Ball and Chittenden.

Start said he anticipates a learning curve for the players, but hopes his squad will be finetuned by the opener.

"The goal is getting the kids out and getting them acclimated to what we're trying to do," he said. "I know it's going to take some time, but if they're competing on a daily basis and want to get better. I anticipate we're going to have quite a bit of success down the road."



FR: Sam France, Josef Hissom, Cameron Ball, Isaiah Pierce. BR: Jason Keena, Gavin Paul, Aaron Clark, Griffin Lorimer. Photo/Jason Goorman

2015 RESULTS
 Coopersville 28, S. Lake 10
 Spring Lake 22, Holland 13
 Fruitport 22, Spring Lake 13
 Spring Lake 14, O-View 7
 M. Catholic 51, Spring Lake 7
 Spring Lake 35, Fremont 0
 Ludington 32, Spring Lake 7
 Climax-Scotts 48, S. Lake 7
 Spring Lake 17, Shelby 14

LAKER REPORT

Coach: Dan Start

Assistants: Clint Myers, Brian Sabo, Len Grimmer, Aaron West, Bo Ryther

2015 Record: 4-5

Conference record: 2-3 (3rd)

Offensive returners: 5

Defensive returners: 5

Projected QB: Cameron Ball

Coach quote: "If they're competing on a daily basis and want to get better, I anticipate we're going to have quite a bit of success down the road." - Dan Start

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Whitehall wants to keep winning with a lot of new faces

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

WHITEHALL - Some might assume that the Whitehall football team is headed for tough times, with 14 players, including several standouts, lost to graduation in June.

After all, headline-makers like **Zarren Aylor**, **Keenan Aylor** and **Jwan Britton** won't be around to power the Vikings' attack anymore.



Sigmon

But Coach **Tony Sigmon** and his staff have been working to build a program that can sustain personnel changes and produce a quality team every year.

Their work will get its first major test this season, and Sigmon is optimistic.

His confidence is based on the return of a handful of quality players from last year's squad, and the arrival of a big, talented junior class that did a lot of winning in two years at the junior varsity level.

"Our kids have come a long way in a short period of time in terms of expectations," Sigmon said. "We can't help but feel we've built a program to some capacity. It's an exciting time to be a football player at Whitehall. These kids want to build off that momentum and energy."

2015 RESULTS

Whitehall 41, Kelloggsville 0
Whitehall 54, N. Muskegon 13
Whitehall 41, Mason Co. 14
TC Central 28, Whitehall 21
Montague 29, Whitehall 28
Oakridge 22, Whitehall 7
Whitehall 45, Ravenna 35
Whitehall 41, Shelby 13
Whitehall 34, Grant 7
Chip Hills 20, Whitehall 16

Whitehall has been one of the area's top turnaround stories in recent years, posting a 15-7 record over the past two seasons while making the playoffs both years.

The Vikings were 6-4 last season. They won their first three games before losing a pair of heartbreakers – 28-21 to powerful Traverse City Central and 29-28 to archrival Montague – then losing 22-7 to Oakridge.

They won their last three regular season games to get into the playoffs again, then experienced another close loss, 20-16, to Chippewa

Hills.

Now the Vikings are ready to keep building on their success with a lot of new faces. There are only nine seniors on the team this year. The offense returns only two starters while the defense returns four.

The first task is replacing quarterback **Zarren Aylor**, who gave opposing defenses fits with his passing and running skills.

Sigmon thinks he has the perfect replacement – senior **Casey Huizenga**, who was Aylor's backup last season.

Huizenga's skills are very similar to Aylor's, according to the coach. Huizenga will also play safety on defense.

"We think he can be pretty good," Sigmon said. "He is working into his fourth year with our offense, and has a lot of comfort with what he's doing. We're looking at him as a dual threat kind of quarterback. You can't put him in a category as just a runner or thrower. He can do both."

Whitehall will also have to replace Britton, a running back who gained more than 1,000 yards last season. That job will fall to senior **Joe Dowdell**, and Sigmon says he's more than ready.

Dowdell would have been a featured back at a lot of other schools in 2015, but had limited carries due to a crowded backfield. He still managed to gain 370 yards and average about eight yards per carry.

Dowdell will also play cornerback on defense.

"He's a hard, downhill runner," Sigmon said. "He will find the hole, get downfield and give you a move if he needs to. His number one strength is the way he hits that hole. He's going to be a big-time playmaker for us."

Another returning standout is senior lineman **Jody Jansen**, who was a first-team All-Conference defensive tackle last year while leading the team with four sacks. Jansen will also play offensive guard this season.

Senior lineman **Alex Bell** is also back and will likely start at offensive guard.

Senior **Kainan Grant** returns and will see time on both sides of the ball, as a receiver and in the defensive secondary.

Lukas Evans is another senior who will be counted on heavily. He worked his way into the lineup last year at defensive end and tight end.

Senior lineman **Jordin Patterson** will also play a key role for the Vikings.

The rest of the roster will be filled with a group of 15 juniors who apparently have a great deal of potential.

Sigmon prefers not to single out any of the juniors yet, but notes that they posted a 16-1 record in two years of JV football, including an 8-1 mark last season.

"One of the things this group brings is an expectation for success," Sigmon said. "They prepare for it. They had some really nice workouts over the summer, and in the camps they did really well."



Joe Dowdell, Kainan Grant, Lukas Evans, Casey Huizenga. (left to right). Photo/Marc Hoeksema



VIKING REPORT

Coach: Tony Sigmon

Assistants: C.J. VanWieren, Keith Stratton, Matt DeRose, Dan Meinert, Don Rake

2015 record: 6-4

Conference record: 4-2

Offensive returners: 2

Defensive returners: 4

Probable QB: Casey Huizenga

Coach quote: "Number one, win our first game. Number two, win our conference, make the playoffs and talk about putting more trophies in the case." – Tony Sigmon

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THE PIRATES SAIL AGAIN



After a year without Friday night lights in Hart, a new group of varsity players are jump-starting the program

By Fred Inglis and Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

It might make a good script for a movie – except the final scene has yet to be written. A high school shuts down its hard-luck varsity football program for one year, due to a lack of participation and concerns over player safety.

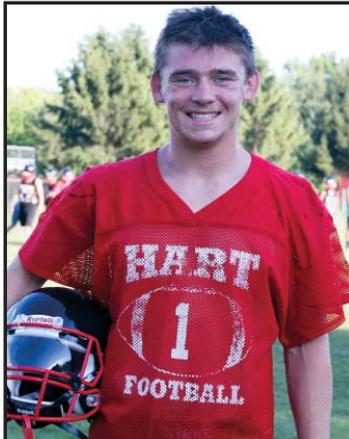
But the school keeps the junior varsity team, which rolls to a perfect 9-0 record and wakes up the town's love of the game.

The JV players get a police escort into town following their last game, with people on street corners cheering their accomplishment.

Everything is looking up, because the promising JV players will become the new varsity players when the team comes back in 2016, and the popular JV coach is scheduled to move up and become the new varsity coach.

But that coach suddenly leaves to assume that same position for a conference rival, just a few months before the new season. Then a man who was out of football last season steps in at the last minute to become the head coach of a team that didn't exist a year ago.

That man is Rick Witteveen, who was originally hired in the spring to assist Larry Witham as he made the transition from JV to varsity coach at Hart High School this fall. But Witham resigned in May to take the varsity position at North Muskegon High School, where he graduated and his children have been attending for years.



Brady Tate played two years of varsity, one year of JV, and now is back on varsity. Photo/Stephanie Clark

While he didn't expect to be a head coach this season, Witteveen said the opportunity is very special to him, because Hart was the first high school to give him an opportunity to become a varsity assistant coach in the early 2000s.

"I always thought that if I ever became a head coach, I would want it to be at one of two schools – the school where I graduated (Hesperia) or Hart," said Witteveen, whose son is a Hart graduate and former football player. "So this is extra special for me."

Hart Athletic Director Jason Hernandez said Witteveen "hit the ground running" when he got the job.

"He continued working with the guys, getting them in the weight room and doing a lot of extra stuff," Hernandez said. "The kids respect him and I think they will play hard for him."

Witteveen had previously been an assistant coach at Shelby and Hesperia, after getting his start at Hart. Taking last year off to tend to his logging business reminded him how much he missed the

game.

"There's really nothing like Friday night lights, and working with kids and scheming to put them in the right position to succeed."

Witteveen inherits the first Pirate football team to finish with a winning record since 1997 – even though it was the junior varsity – and there is an obvious feeling of rebirth among the players and community.

The new coach is happy that the players experienced success at the JV level, but still remains cautious.

"Anytime you win is great and I think it gave them confidence, but you can't be cocky about it," Witteveen said. "Be proud of your accomplishments, but it doesn't win them a game this year."

The new Hart Pirates are scheduled to take the field for their first game on Aug. 26 in Ludington. Their first home game will be Sept. 1 against Oakridge.

A chance to regroup

The quiet, dreary Friday nights of last fall, when there was no football in Hart, couldn't have been much worse than hundreds of Fridays over the years, when losses piled on top of losses, and the program's prestige took an annual beating.

It didn't help that Hart competes in the West Michigan Conference, one of the toughest small school football leagues in the state.

Between 1950 and 2014, the Pirates posted a dismal 205-353-6 record.

They had only 13 winning seasons in that time, compared to 41 seasons when they finished .500 or worse. Since 2004, when Hart went 4-5, the team has not won more than two games in any season. It's record since then is 13-79.

To the program's credit, there have been only two winless seasons since 1950 – 2002 and 2013.

The 2014 varsity squad finished 1-8. It won its first game, 37-8 over Manistee Catholic, then



Hart players run a drill during summer workouts, preparing for the re-launch of the varsity football program. Photo/Stephanie Clark

proceeded to lose its last eight. And it wasn't pretty.

In Weeks 3-7, the Pirates lost 54-12 to Oakridge, 63-6 to Ravenna, 57-0 to Shelby, 72-0 to Whitehall and 41-0 to Mason County Central. Those were all West Michigan Conference opponents.

By the end of the season Hart had been outscored 437-95.

Senior football player Brady Tate, who is expected to be a standout running back on this year's team, experienced some of the lows of playing on the Hart varsity as a freshman and sophomore.

"It got difficult," he said. "All season (in 2014) we only had 15 kids. Then in the last game was ran into the problem of only having 11 kids. It was hard to play both ways all the time and on special teams.

"We would compete in games, but we always ended up getting tired and falling behind. Toward the end of the year everybody was ready for it to be done."

Later in the 2014-15 school year the district decided to pull the plug on the varsity program and give it a year to regroup.

It wasn't so much because of the chronic losing, according to Hernandez, the school's athletic director. It was because a survey of students revealed minimal interest among juniors and seniors, which meant a lot of freshmen and sophomores would have to be called up to fill the varsity roster.

"When we started surveying students, only one senior and two juniors were saying they wanted to play football," said Hernandez, who was not working at Hart when the decision was made, but quickly learned all the details after he started last fall. "That was the point where we had to make a decision.

"I do remember having a lot of conversations about it with our superintendent, who ultimately made the decision. He expected some pushback from some people, but honestly a lot of people appreciated that the decision was made in the best interests of kids and their safety. Having underclassmen pushed into varsity was not a very good situation."

"I do believe that it was the best decision. Not only were the JV players able to experience some success, but they created a positive vibe around the community and in our buildings." - Jason Hernandez

Junior varsity to the rescue

While Fridays were quiet in Hart last year, Thursdays were not.

The school kept the junior varsity program in place, to prepare the young players who would form the next varsity squad. And the team excelled at the perfect time.

Under Witham, a longtime assistant coach at several area high schools, the JV Pirates rolled to a perfect 9-0 record and breathed new life into the Hart program.

Tate was a junior last year, and one of only four upperclassmen who was allowed by the state to play on the junior varsity team. He said it was fun winning for a change, after two years of losing by big margins on varsity.

"It was pretty fun," he said. "There were a lot of times when we could roll with it and take our time and be calm about it. But I definitely missed being on varsity."

Sophomore Dustin Klotz, who played JV as a freshman, said the experience was awesome.



Coach Rick Witteveen instructs a player (left); the Pirate offense huddles; Dominic Ire prepares for a play. Photo/Stephanie Clark

"It was really fun," Klotz said. "We had a lot of talent and we did really good."

The JV team's success captured the attention of the town as the season progressed and the victories piled up. After all, it was the only show in town, and a very good one at that.

The crowds got pretty big at home games, and more and more fans followed the team on the road.

Witham said he will never forget his Hart JV experience, even as he settles in at North Muskegon.

"It doesn't get much more exciting than that was," said Witham. "That's what high school football is all about – kids having fun with the game and the community rallying around the kids, which it did in leaps and bounds."

"We traveled to Traverse City for one game and had more fans than they did. And that was a 5:30 game. People had to get out of work early to get there."

After the team's ninth and final win of the season in Evart, the players were greeted by a makeshift parade as they arrived back in Hart.

"There were people on every corner as they came back into town," Hernandez said. "There was the police escort and everybody was honking horns. And once they got back to the school parking lot, everybody was waiting for them. It was a good experience for the kids, and good motivation for them as they move forward."

"I feel like that was something none of us might ever experience again, seeing people outside on their porches, just watching and cheering," Klotz said.

The success of the junior varsity validated the decision to cancel the varsity season, according to Hernandez.

"I do believe that it was the best decision," he said. "Not only were the JV players able to experience some success, but they created a positive vibe around the community and in our buildings. All around it was a good thing."

The former JV players are now the new varsity squad, and they're excited about the opportunity

to rekindle an old tradition.

"Having success last year brought the community back into it," Tate said. "For a while, when football came back around every year, people would say 'oh, football.'" But now people around town are talking about it again and asking about it.

"Everybody is excited about watching us again. I just hope we can carry it over from last season. It's definitely faster. But after the first 7-on-7 (this summer) everybody started clicking."

The players were stunned when Witham resigned in May, because they fully expected him to move up to the varsity level with them.

But Tate said they are comfortable after working over the summer with Witteveen and his staff.

"It was tough, but when one coach leaves there's nothing you can do but put it behind you and move on," Tate said. "Everyone has warmed up to Coach Witteveen and his whole staff. Everybody has jumped into the flow and put everything we had before behind us."

Witteveen decided to give the players some extra inspiration recently when he had legendary former Oakridge Coach Jack Schugars speak to them at an overnight team camp near Mears.

"I know Coach Schugars personally, and I thought it would be good for the kids to hear from a coach who had so much success," Witteveen said. "It went great. He spoke to them about motivation and what it takes to play in a program – how it's not about I, it's about we. I think the kids came away with a lot."

Witteveen said the players seem extra excited about being the team that restores varsity football in Hart, but also a little apprehensive about the new experience.

"The flip side is that only Brady (Tate) has experienced varsity," he said. "I think they're looking at it as kind of an unknown. They're not sure what to expect. But yeah, they're excited."

The community shares the team's excitement, according to the coach.

"They understand why it happened, and now they're ready to see varsity football back in place," he said.

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Opening on the Big Stage

Big Reds, OV, Montague, Fruitport kick off in college stadiums

By Dave Hart and Andrew Johnson
LocalSportsJournal.com

High school football players are always pumped up to start a new season.

But for players at Muskegon, Fruitport, Orchard View and Montague high schools, this year's openers are a little more exciting than usual.

That's because they get to play in big university stadiums in high-profile season kickoff events.

The Muskegon Big Reds will play at the "Big House," - Michigan Stadium - while Orchard View, Fruitport and Montague will open their seasons at Grand Valley State University.

The Big Reds will grab the spotlight Saturday, Aug. 27 at 7 p.m. as a part of the "Battle of the Big House," which will include seven total games involving 14 teams August 25-27.

Muskegon will play Ann Arbor Pioneer in a battle of the two winningest football programs in the state of Michigan.

"I think our kids are going to be more in awe of the stadium," said Muskegon Coach Shane Fairfield. "There is a bunch of excitement about it, but we have to do everything right because we don't want to drop that one, especially on the big stage."

For some of the Big Red athletes, the game will probably be their only opportunity to play in a college stadium. For others, like standout senior quarterback Kalil Pimpleton, it will be the first of many.

Pimpleton has already accepted a football scholarship to Virginia Tech.

"It's a blessing," said Pimpleton, a second-year starting quarterback for Muskegon. "It's a great opportunity to have my teammates experience this big stage."

Muskegon linebacker/running back Andrew Ward said the news about playing at the University of Michigan was a huge surprise.

"First time I heard it I didn't believe it, honestly," Ward said. "It was a huge shock for me to find out. We are motivated because we do not want to lose on that big of a stage."

Fruitport, Orchard View and Montague will compete in the "Gridiron Classic" at GVSU's Lubbers Stadium on Saturday, Aug. 27.

Montague will play Orchard View at 10:30 a.m. Fruitport



The Muskegon Big Reds are excited to open at 107,601-seat Michigan Stadium on Aug. 27

will face Coopersville in a 4:30 p.m. game.

"Once we got the particulars sorted out, it sounded like a cool opportunity for our kids and our community," said Fruitport head coach Greg Vargas. "I talked early in the winter with OV Coach Joe Tanis, and he said they were playing at Grand Valley but I didn't think much of it."

"Within a matter of a couple of weeks we were contacted to see if we were interested in playing."

Fruitport's athletes are always excited to travel and play in different venues, according to Vargas. But their excitement level is a little more defined as they prepare to play in a big event in a college stadium, with a lot of fan and media attention.

"I think that it's sweet that we get to go out and play at a big Division 2 college football stadium, and cool that we get to show what we can do in front of a big place like that," Vargas said.

"I think it's awesome," said Fruitport senior running back Levi Six. "We don't know what to expect from our opponent (Coopersville), but it's going to be a tough game and we are going to have to play tough and nasty."

The experience will be extra special for Fruitport senior quarterback Connor Routt, who will get his first career start at GVSU.

"I found out that we were playing at Grand Valley through

Levi (Six)," Routt said. "I'm pretty excited because my sister goes there and it is a really big school with a super nice stadium. It's a little intimidating but after the first snap it's always easy."

Orchard View Coach Joe Tanis said the opportunity to play at GVSU has given his players even more incentive to focus throughout the summer.

"The kids are extremely excited. It's a great opportunity for them," Tanis said. "We're playing in the biggest kickoff classic outside of Detroit and Ann Arbor in the state."

OV senior Jayden Day, a third-year starter, agrees with his coach.

"Obviously it's one of the biggest events on the west side of the state, so we have some big expectations," Day said. "GVSU has a great stadium, so we're excited to try and make a big statement. Our goals are to play well and we want to make sure we're really focused on doing the little things right."

Montague Coach Pat Collins said the game at GVSU will be a great opportunity for the players.

"Lubbers (Stadium) has become one of the premier venues in West Michigan," said Collins, who is also the athletic director at Montague. "Playing at GVSU offers our young men an opportunity to step foot on a university campus and have some great fun with each other and our community."

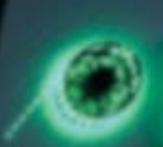


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If bone or joint pain is keeping you from doing the things you love, talk to the orthopedic experts at Mercy Health. Together, we'll explore advanced treatment options and develop a personalized plan that gets you back to your life as quickly and as pain-free as possible. With both non-surgical and surgical options including minimally invasive procedures, we bring excellence and innovation to joint, muscle and bone care. Individualized and innovative. Get both at Mercy Health.

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