

# LOCAL SPORTS Journal

OCTOBER 21, 2020

FREE

**Muskegon  
Catholic's  
Joe Waller**

## SHORT SEASON, AMAZING GAMES

Despite a late start and a COVID-clipped schedule, the Muskegon area's prep football stars are shining

**Plus...**



*Montague girls golf team's great season, incredible run to the state championship.*

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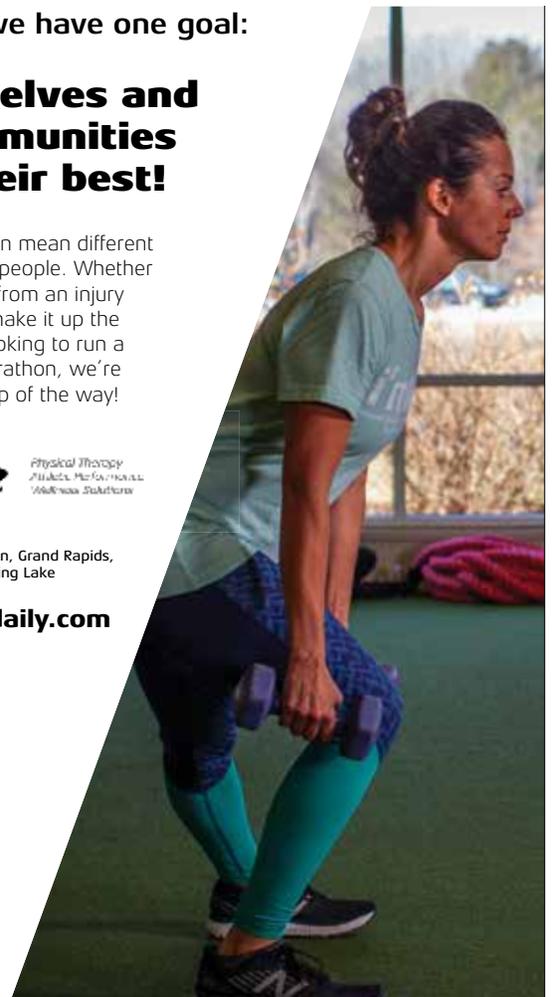
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# PEAKING AT THE PERFECT TIME



## The Montague girls golf team got very hot in the final weeks and plowed its way to a state title

By Steve Gunn  
LocalSportsJournal.com

In 2014, Phil Kerr became coach of the Montague boys golf team, and in each of his first two seasons he had a girl on the roster, because the school did not offer girls golf.

Two years later Kerr started the Montague girls golf team, because he had noticed several others who were eager for a chance to play their sport at the high school level.

The new team was small and not very good for the first couple of years, which is not unusual for new programs.

But the program's progress has been rapid and impressive.

In 2016 the team only had seven players, and they were mostly seniors who had never played at the high school level before. This fall the Wildcats had 17 players and fielded two complete varsity teams – the Montague A squad and B squad.

As it turned out, the A squad was really, really good!

The Montague girls completed an amazing 2020 season on Oct. 18, when they rolled to victory at the Division 4 state finals at Forest

Akers West golf course at Michigan State University.

The Wildcats ran away with the state title, finishing with a team score of 343, which was 27 shots better than runner-up Lansing Catholic, which finished with a 370.

The 343 was the best team score in Montague program history. “They earned it,” Kerr said about his team’s first state championship. “We put this goal out there at the beginning of the season. These girls put five months into it, and I’m really proud of their hard work. I’m glad they got to see it pay off.

“We were focused on coming out conservative (at the state tournament), then taking a look at the leader board after a few holes and seeing where we stood, but the girls got off to a tremendous start, and we were ahead by five or six.

“A couple of the girls said they looked at the board after six holes and thought we would win. They ended up shooting the best score in school history. It just shows you how strong this group is. They play for each other, they want to win as a team, and they did.”

### *Fast growth for a new program*

It took a few years for the new team to start clicking, of course. When Kerr started the girls program in 2016, winning was a distant thought. The coach was just trying to get things off the ground, and the Wildcats were pretty bad at first.



**Montague's Mackenzie Goudreau gets ready to tee off during the state finals; Orianna Bylsma, who finished fifth individually, lines up a putt. Photos/Latisha Mikkelsen**

What was remarkable was how quickly the number of players in the program grew, and how quickly those players improved.

"In the first year we only had six girls on the team, mostly seniors who were looking for something to do in their senior year," Kerr said. "We kind of talked the program up, and the next year the numbers kind of exploded. We had 11 or 12 girls the next year, but all of those girls were pretty much brand new, and we didn't have much success. We started showing signs of success toward the end of the season."

"In the third year (2018) we started getting more competitive. We weren't beating teams like North Muskegon or Whitehall yet, but we started beating some other teams, like Ludington and Manistee. It was the first time we played another team and actually won."

The 2019 season was a breakthrough for the Wildcats, who finished third in regionals and qualified for the state finals for the very first time. They finished fourth at the Division 4 finals in only their fourth year of existence.

"Last year we really took off," Kerr said. "Our No. 1, Orianna Bylsma, made a big jump, from shooting around 100 in her freshman year to the mid-80s last year. Megan Brown was shooting in the low 90s for most of the year, then shot an 89 at the state finals. Two other girls – Katie Unger and Gabby Moreau – came off from the JV team and didn't play a varsity tournament until last year, and both shot in the 90s."



**Katie Unger chips out of the sand trap.**

### **Winning it all in 2020**

That set up the 2020 season, when everyone involved with the team was completely focused on taking the next step and winning the state title.

That started with Coach Kerr, who was not able to coach the boys team last spring because the season was wiped out by COVID-19. He finally decided that two teams were too many, and

resigned as boys coach later in the spring.

"Coaching both seasons, it's really a year-round job, and we have a 4-year-old and a 7-year-old at home," he said. "For the sake of my family, I had to give up one or the other. It was a difficult decision, because I have a lot of history with the boys. The main difference is that I started the girls program, it's kind of become my baby, and I wanted to see it through."

Kerr had a lot of tools to work with on his girls roster this fall, because four of five shooters from the 2019 squad were back, and they all seemed determined to improve their games.

The top returners were Bylsma, Brown, Unger and Moreau. Freshman Mackenzie Goudreau and sophomore Natalie Kellogg also became factors in the lineup, and the Wildcats were ready to make some noise.

They posted a 4-0 record in dual meet and tri-meet competition. They won the championship at the Whitehall Invitational, the Tullymore Invitational in Big Rapids, the Katke Classic in Big Rapids and the Lady Mustang Invitational in Grand Rapids.

They also gained good experience by beefing up their schedule and playing in several tournaments against some of the top teams in the state. They didn't win those tournaments, but always did well and gained a lot of confidence along the way.

"We came in second to Forest Hills Northern, a three-time state champ in Division 2," Kerr noted. "In other events we went up against powers like Traverse City West and Grand Rapids South Christian. We definitely got out of our comfort zone and beefed up the schedule, and I think that paid off huge for the girls."

Their biggest success of the regular season came at the Greater Muskegon Athletic Association City Golf Tournament in September at Stonegate Golf Course in Twin Lake.

The Wildcats claimed local supremacy by winning the event by 10 shots over second-place Whitehall, and in the process ended a streak of 13 straight years that either Mona Shores or Reeths-Puffer had won the title.

Montague displayed more depth than any other team, placing five golfers in the top 10, and that was more than enough to secure the championship.

The top shooter for Montague that day was Brown, who finished third individually with an 84. Bylsma was sixth with an 89, Moreau was seventh with a 94, Goudreau was eighth with a 94, and Unger was 10th with a 96.

"We started looking at this tournament in June," Kerr said right after his team accepted the GMAA trophy. "One of our big goals was to show up and win this today. It feels like a relief right now, but we are very excited."

The Wildcats really peaked at the end of the season, setting a

**Continued on next page...**



**“We just peaked at the right time. One of our goals at the beginning of the season was to shoot in the 340s as a team, and we hadn’t done it. We hadn’t reached our full potential. We were saving it, I guess!” - Phil Kerr, Montague golf coach.**

new record for all-time low team scores in each of their three final events. When the pressure was on, Montague just kept getting better and better.

### ***Three record-breaking tournaments***

It started in the Division 4 regional tournament at Grand Traverse resort, which they won with a team score of 351, which was a new schol record.

Brown led with an 87, which was good for third place overall. Bylsma, Moreau and Goudreau all shot 88s for a fourth place finish. Unger shot a 95, which was good for eighth overall.

The Wildcats warmed up for the state finals by playing in the Traverse City Invitational on Oct. 12, where they finished second overall, but again broke the school record with a team score of 346.

“We just peaked at the right time,” Kerr said. “One of our goals at the beginning of the season was to shoot in the 340s as a team, and we hadn’t done it. We hadn’t reached our full potential. We were saving it, I guess!”

Montague was at its very best in the state championship tournament, once again breaking the all-time team record with a 343 and leaving the competition far behind.

Leading Montague at state was Bylsma, who finished fifth overall in the individual standings with a score of 81.

Bylsma started the day with a triple bogey (7) on the par 4 first hole, but rebounded with a birdie on Hole 2 to get her round back on track.

“It’s really super exciting for me,” Bylsma said afterward. “Last year I placed in the top 25, and this year I knew who my competition would be.

“With a seven on the first hole, I knew I had to pull it together. I tried my best to not get down about it, because I knew I had to do something for the team.”

Following Bylsma was Brown, who finished with a score of 84, which was good for eighth overall.

Rounding out the Montague scores were Unger with an 88 (12th overall), and Goudreau and Moreau, who each shot a 90 and finished tied for 16th place

It was the entire lineup, not just one or two stars, that secured the championship for Montague.

“The girls have all done it together,” Coach Kerr said. “It’s a credit to their belief in one another. Our program is just deep, and to have all the girls finish in the top 20 in the state is impressive.”

Word got back to Montague quickly that the team had won a state championship, and Kerr and the players received the hero treatment when they rolled into town on Saturday night after the drive back from Lansing.

“Montague is pretty close-knit, and they brought us into town with fire trucks, a police escort and people cheering in the streets,” Kerr said. “I know I stayed up late that night trying to answer a bunch of congratulations texts. We got lots of love from the community up here.”



***Katie Unger wipes away a tear while celebrating with teammate Megan Brown.***



***Montague 2020 state golf champs: Mackenzie Goudreau, Orianna Bylsma, Megan Brown, Gabby Moreau, Coach Phil Kerr. Photo/Latisha Mikkelsen***



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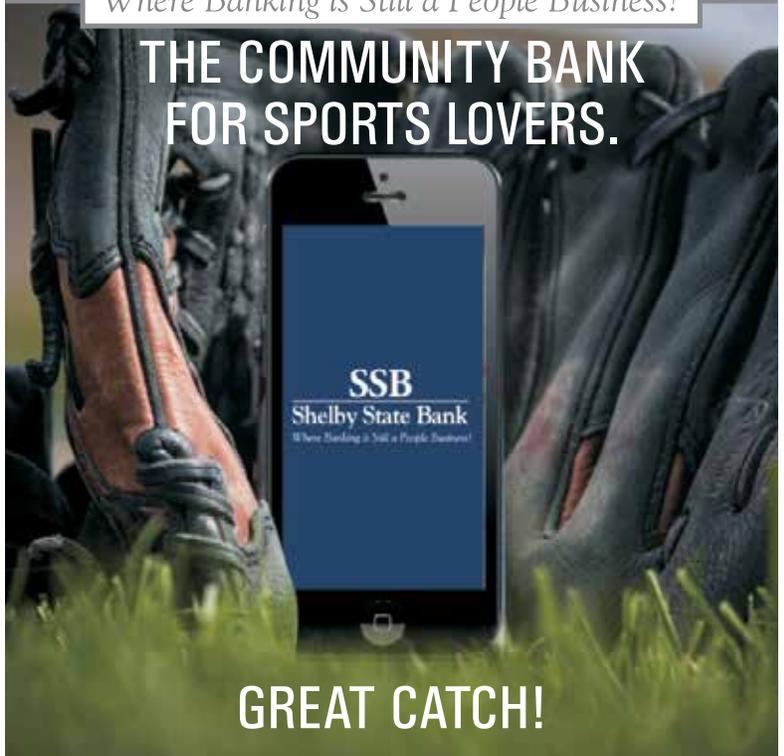
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# The Night the Stars Came Out

There must have been something in the air on the night of Friday Oct. 9, because seven local high school football players put up really big numbers

By Steve Gunn  
LocalSportsJournal.com

Has anyone ever heard of a football player gaining 337 yards in one game – and not scoring a touchdown?

Spring Lake senior running back Steve Ready did that on Oct. 9 during his team's exciting 38-36 conference victory over Allendale.

While Ready didn't directly produce any points, he was the guy who kept the Laker offense on the field and marching toward one crucial touchdown after another. He carried the ball 42 times, and 21 of his runs resulted in first downs.

He averaged an impressive 7.7 yards per carry, despite the fatigue he must have been feeling after running the ball so much.

"It was kind of crazy," Ready said about having such a great game without scoring a touchdown. "I don't know what the odds are of that. I've been hearing about it this week. It was a pretty good game, my best yards-wise. I felt like I was running behind a very solid line. They played great on Friday. They popped open a ton of holes for me and I was able to pick up yards."

Spring Lake head coach Dan Start said he doesn't recall a performance quite like it.

"He moved the ball up and down the field for us all night, then we found ways to get it in," Start said. "That was a first for me. With the number of touches he had, and first downs, I can't think of anything like it."

Whether it was by dumb chance, good weather conditions, or something in the air that night, Ready was just one of several local high school football players who had career-type games on Oct. 9.

Hesperia senior running back Mack Baird rushed for a career-high 201 yards on 24 carries and scored two touchdowns in his team's exciting 21-14 victory over archrival Holton.

Muskegon Catholic junior running back Joe Waller scored five touchdowns and rushed for a career-high 231 yards in the Crusaders' 40-0 victory over Manistee.

Ravenna quarterback Kyle Beebe



**Steve Ready, Spring Lake**  
**337 yards rushing**  
**21 of 42 carries for 1st downs**

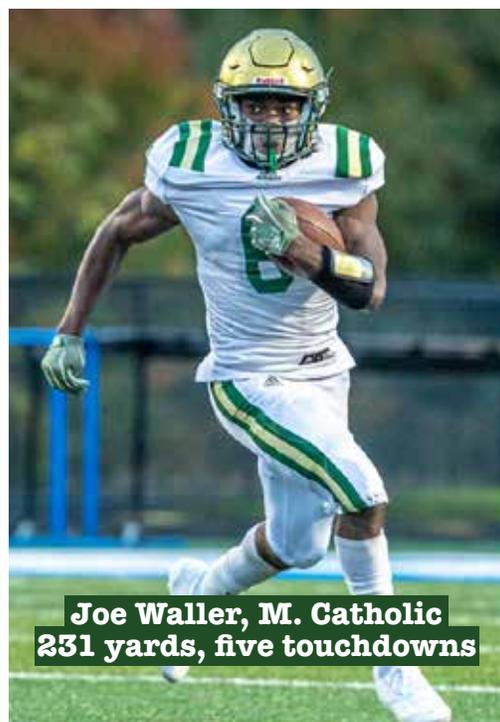
passed for 157 yards and two touchdowns, ran for another 98 and scored four more touchdowns, leading the Bulldogs to a 55-8 win over Hart.

Fremont senior quarterback Payton Mansfield passed for 266 yards, rushed for 147 yards and scored five touchdowns on the ground, pushing the Packers to a 42-26 win over Central Montcalm.

Meanwhile, two more well-known area standouts – Muskegon senior quarterback Amari Crowley and Montague senior quarterback Drew Collins – also had monster nights.

Crowley threw for 194 yards and two scores while rushing for 124 yards and two touchdowns in the Big Reds' 49-20 victory over Zeeland East. Collins completed 11 of 17 passes for 205 yards and four touchdowns in Montague's 63-0 win over Shelby.

It was truly a night for many offensive stars along the lakeshore to shine –including the Spring Lake running back who had an incredible night without scoring a single point.



**Joe Waller, M. Catholic**  
**231 yards, five touchdowns**

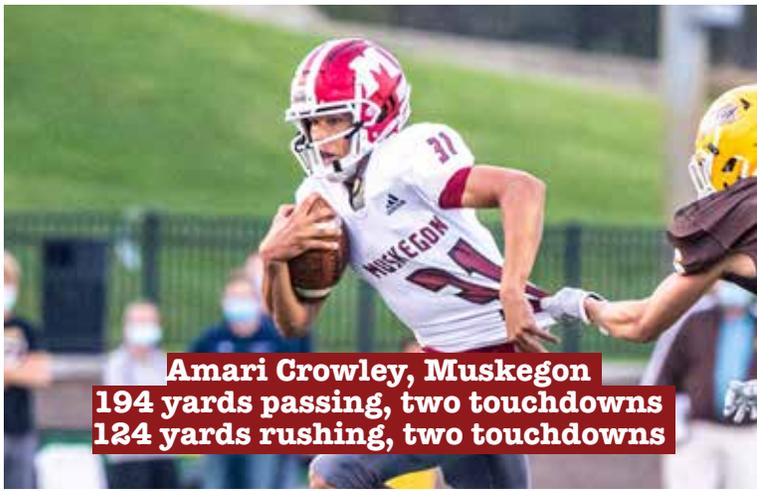
He came close to scoring in the fourth quarter, once on a longer run when he made it to the Allendale 4-yard line before getting pushed out of bounds, and once near the end of the game when he was stopped short at the goal line.

He said he was particularly excited on the longer run, because he could almost taste the end zone.

"I saw it was coming, the game was close, so I wanted that for sure, but obviously I didn't get it," Ready said.

Baird, the Hesperia running back, scored his first touchdown of the night with a five-yard run with 1:06 left in the first quarter. Then he gave the Panthers a two-score cushion over Holton when he broke loose for a 45-yard TD run with 1:12 left in the first half.

Equally important was his work on defense at the end of the game, after Holton had cut the lead to 21-14 and was threatening to score. Baird broke up two passes on Holton's last drive to preserve the victory for his team on Homecoming night.



**Amari Crowley, Muskegon**  
**194 yards passing, two touchdowns**  
**124 yards rushing, two touchdowns**



**Drew Collins, Montague**  
**11 of 17 passing for 205 yards**  
**and four touchdowns**

**“It was by far my best game ever. It was a great feeling to get all of those yards and have us win against our rival on Homecoming. It was awesome. Like I was telling my friends later, the whole night was like something out of a movie!” - Mack Baird, Hesperia running back**

“I knocked the pass out of the sky, and that was all she wrote!” Baird said. “It was by far my best game ever. It was a great feeling to get all of those yards and have us win against our rival on Homecoming. It was awesome.”

To top everything off, Baird was also crowned Hesperia’s 2020 Homecoming King, making it the kind of night he will someday share with his grandchildren.

“Like I was telling my friends later, the whole night was like something out of a movie!” he said.

MCC’s Waller did most of his damage in the first half against Manistee.

He opened the scoring with a two-yard touchdown run with seven minutes left in the first quarter, then added scoring bursts of 25 and 17 yards to leave MCC with a 21-0 lead headed into the second quarter.

There was more where that came from. Waller added a 70-yard scamper that made the score 27-0, then another TD run from 32 yards out with just under two minutes left before halftime.

Waller said he was inspired by some friendly ribbing between himself and fellow Crusader running back Tommy Kartes.

“I just ran as hard as I could,” Waller said with a grin. “Tommy played pretty good a few games ago and I had to show him up. There’s a little friendly competition on the team, but we’re all focused on the same goal.”

Waller is a junior who has been on the Muskegon Catholic varsity since his fresh-

man year, but had to wait until this season to become a starting running back.

“I worked hard to put more weight on so I could play the best I could this year,” said Waller, who attends Western Michigan Christian High School, but plays football for MCC under a co-op arrangement. “I had to prove myself. All through middle school I was a starting running back, but when I got to high school there were a lot of people in front of me.”

Waller said Friday’s game will stick in his memory for a long time.

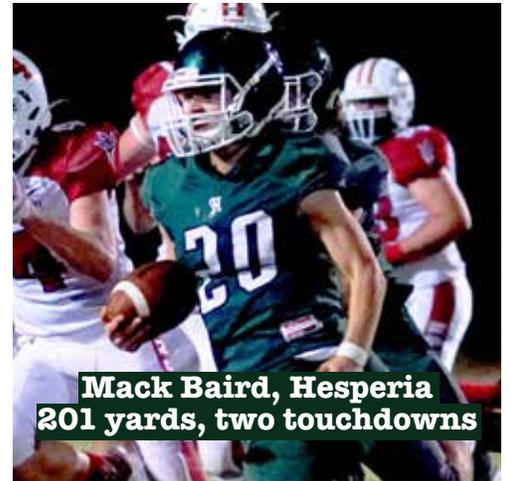
“It was super exciting, just to be able to show everyone what I could do,” he said. “And we are undefeated right now. Our team is just so pumped!”

Mansfield’s big night helped Fremont end its painful 17-game losing streak that dated back to Sept. 14, 2018.

Mansfield scored from one yard out in the first quarter, then had touchdown runs of 6 and 45 yards in the second quarter.

Chippewa Hills scored twice in the third quarter to narrow the score to 28-20, but Mansfield added touchdown runs of 4 and 37 yards in the fourth quarter as Fremont pulled away for good.

“It felt good to end the streak,” said Mansfield, who was named after Chicago Bears Hall of Fame running back Walter Payton. “The holes the offensive line was creating were amazing, the receivers were catching the ball. We were getting better and better every week, and we finally put all the pieces together.”



**Mack Baird, Hesperia**  
**201 yards, two touchdowns**



**Kyle Beebe, Ravenna**  
**147 yards passing, two TDs**  
**98 yards rushing, four TDs**



**Payton Mansfield, Fremont**  
**266 yards passing, 147 yards**  
**rushing and five touchdowns**

# WHO DOES THAT? Mona Shores' Brady Rose scores 4 TDs, passes for another in one quarter, putting himself in the state's Mr. Football conversation

LocalSportsJournal.com

In college football, if a team has a legitimate Heisman Trophy candidate, the school's sports information department goes to work, promoting that player nationally for the prestigious award.

High schools don't have sports information departments, so if there is player promotion to be done, that job will fall largely on the head coach.

Mona Shores football coach Matt Koziak has been taking that job seriously when it comes to Brady Rose, who may very well be the best all-around high school football player in the state, and must be considered for the 2020 Michigan Mr. Football award.

Koziak began talking up Rose's credentials last fall, after the junior backup quarterback scored five touchdowns and ran in the winning conversion in a wild 57-56 victory over Walled Lake Western in the Division 3 state semifinals, then scored three touchdowns and had an interception in a 35-26 win over Detroit Martin Luther King in the state title game.

The coach obviously knew Rose would not win the award last year, but figured he would pick up where he left off in his senior year, when he became the full-time starting quarterback and played four or five critical roles for the Sailors, offensively, defensively and on special teams.

He was correct about that.

Rose's latest highlight reel game came on Oct. 2, when he scored four touchdowns and passed for another in Mona Shores' 56-7 victory over Holland.

It wasn't just the fact that he produced all those touchdowns. It was how he did it that was truly amazing.

Rose had a 43-yard punt return TD, caught a 70-yard scoring pass from backup quarterback Mark Konecny, ran in a three-yard touchdown, had a 45-yard pick-six TD, and completed a 63-yard touchdown pass to Demitri Roberson.

And he did it all in just the first quarter!

On top of all that, he blocked a Holland punt in the second quarter that was scooped up and run back for a 75-yard touchdown by Elijah Johnson.

"And he was the first guy to meet the guy who scooped it up in the end zone," said Koziak, whose team went on to win the next three games to start the season 5-0. "If he hadn't been on his stomach (after the block) he probably would have been the guy who scooped it up and scored.

"He definitely has that lion's heart. He wants to be there for his team. He's going to throw his body around out there, no matter what."

Rose's exploits in the Holland game alone were enough to give him plenty to brag about. But he's been performing like that all season.

He also turned in an amazing performance in Week 2 in the O-K Green showdown against powerful Muskegon, when he threw touchdown passes of 45 and 19 yards in the first half, then scored the game-winning touchdown with an 18-yard run in the third quarter.

To top all of that off, he sealed the 21-14 victory by making the game-winning interception at the Mona Shores 6-yard line with 27 seconds left in the game.

"We knew that was probably one of the last plays," Rose said about his game-winning pick. "Someone had to make that play, and it came right to me. It was awesome. Everybody knew the game was over and it was pretty incredible."

Rose finished with 118 yards passing, 105 yards rushing and led the team with 10 tackles against Muskegon.

"He doesn't leave the field,"

Koziak said after the Muskegon game. "He's our starting quarterback, starting free safety, returns punts, and holds for PATs. If that's not a Mr. Football candidate, I don't know what is."

Rose wasn't bad at all in the first game of the season, either, scoring three rushing touchdowns against Reeths-Puffer.

And remember, this is a 5-foot-7, 170 pound athlete producing all of those points for the defending state champs.

If he keeps up this pace, he will be a very strong candidate to become Muskegon County's third Mr. Football in four years. Muskegon's Cameron Martinez won the award last year, and

Muskegon's La'darius Jefferson won it in 2017.

Koziak is doing his best to make sure Rose gets fair consideration by spreading the word to media throughout the state.

"I need people on the east side to know just how good this kid is," the coach said.

"He's so smart and so good. What he did at Holland on Friday, I have never seen that before in high school football, and he did it all in eight minutes! Some people never do that in an entire season, or a career.

"He's just so unique. Every play matters to him. He never takes a play off."



# Redemption

## LocalSportsJournal.com

Montague placekicker Andrew Kooi had been waiting for a second chance for nearly a year.

His last big kick in a big game had not gone so well. It was in overtime during last fall's Division 6 state semifinal game against Maple City Glen Lake.

Montague had a seemingly safe 24-10 lead in the fourth quarter, but Glen Lake came storming back, scoring two late touchdowns, including one as the clock expired.

Montague had the ball first in overtime, and took a 30-24 lead when quarterback Drew Collins found the end zone from five yards out.

Kooi attempted the extra point kick, but it missed the mark.

Despite that, the Wildcats got within one play of clinching the win and securing a spot in the state finals. Glen Lake faced fourth down from the Montague five-yard line, and only one more defensive stop was needed for the victory.

But Glen Lake quarterback Reece Hazelton threw a pass to the corner of the end zone that was caught by Justin Bonzalet. The catch appeared to be out of bounds, but after a long moment of indecision and discussion, the referees called it a touchdown.

Maple City's extra point attempt was good, and suddenly the Wildcats were on the losing end of one of the most stunning games in area high school football history, 31-30.

After the game many Montague fans were furious about the final Glen Lake touchdown, insisting that the replay showed that the catch was made out of bounds. Nobody was blaming Kooi for the missed extra point after the Wildcats' overtime TD.

But Kooi sure blamed himself.

"I was not keeping my eye on the right spot on the ball," Kooi said. "Coach Collins had told me to keep my eye on the ball the whole way, and let the crowd tell me whether I made it or not. But I lifted my eyes too early, and that tends to make my leg cross my body, and it went wide left.

"I had a lot of trouble sleeping after that game, particularly the first week after that. I was just thinking about the seniors. Some nights I got calls from those seniors, supporting me and telling me how much they loved me. That definitely helped me out, but



in my mind it was still hard to accept that my one kick cost us the game."

Kooi's chance to redeem himself finally came on Friday, Oct. 16, in Montague's showdown with neighboring rival Whitehall. Both teams were undefeated and fighting for first place in the West Michigan Conference. Montague trailed 24-21 with only 1:20

**Montague kicker Andrew Kooi blamed himself for a crucial missed extra point in the 2019 state semifinals. But he made up for it with two huge field goals that won the game over rival Whitehall.**

left in the game, after a fumble gave Whitehall great field position, and the Vikings responded with a go-ahead touchdown.

The Wildcats took the ensuing kickoff, and quarterback Drew Collins guided them down the field and put them in position for a field goal.

Kooi, who also starts at wingback for Montague, caught two passes on that critical drive.

Finally, on fourth down from the Whitehall 9, Kooi had his chance for redemption, and he made the most of it, nailing a clean 26-yard field goal as the clock expired to tie the game 24-24 and send it to overtime.

"I made sure I kept my eye on the ball," he said with a grin. "I learned from my mistakes last year."

It was a huge moment for Kooi, and his emotions overcame him when he reached the sideline after the kick.

"I started crying," he said. "Coach Smith was like, why are you crying, and I said it was because I was just so happy. It was kind of like redemption for me, definitely an awesome moment in my life."

The emotional moment was short-lived, however, because Kooi and the Wildcats still had work to do.

Montague got the ball first in overtime, and Collins ran it in for a 10-yard touchdown on the first play from scrimmage, Kooi's extra point was good, giving the Wildcats a 31-24 lead.

Whitehall answered on its possession, the extra point was good, and the game was tied again, 31-31.

The Vikings got the ball first in the second OT, and missed a field goal attempt. Montague took possession, failed to get in the end zone, and set up for a game-winning field goal.

Kooi again calmly answered the call, nailing a 23-yarder to clinch the exciting victory and keep the Wildcats unbeaten at 5-0.

The two field goal attempts were Kooi's first of the season, because Montague usually scores touchdowns

But Kooi said neither of his two dramatic field goals seemed much different than an extra point attempt, and he's done well with those this season.

"I was a little more nervous, but not that nervous," Kooi said. "Besides one kick at Hart, I hadn't missed an extra point in months. I'm like 30 for

31 this year, so that has kind of built up my confidence over time."

Montague Coach Pat Collins let his emotions flow after the game.

"He puts a tremendous amount of time in, he's a great kid," the chocked-up coach said about his kicker. "He missed that kick in the semis and came back and did this tonight. I'm so proud of that kid."

# A FIRM COMMITMENT

**Muskegon Lumberjacks owners Dan Isreal and Bob Kaiser passed up on the opportunity to take a season off, and so the Jacks will play in 2020-21, despite the potential for big financial losses.**

By Steve Gunn  
LocalSportsJournal.com

Dan Israel and Bob Kaiser are both successful businessmen, and they understand that it's necessary for any company to turn a profit, or at least break even, to remain functional for very long.



But they are also both hockey dads and passionate supporters of junior hockey, and they know that the young men playing for the Muskegon Lumberjacks would lose a great deal if they missed a season of development in the United States Hockey League.

That's why the two owners of the Lumberjacks decided in late August to go ahead and keep the Lumberjacks active for the 2020-21 season, despite

current state COVID restrictions that will severely limit the number of tickets they can sell for games, and all the extra expenses they will incur by imposing necessary COVID precautions.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer recently eased crowd restrictions a bit, so the Jacks will be allowed to have up to 20 percent capacity in the arena. It's hard to say how much revenue that will provide the team, considering they averaged about 2,200 fans per game last season.

Israel and Kaiser, who both live and operate businesses in the metro Detroit area, had the option of keeping the Lumberjacks inactive this season without jeopardizing the franchise's standing in the USHL.

Most of the other teams in the league, spread out over numerous states in the Midwest, will be able to operate with normal crowds, and not take the type of financial risks that the Jacks will take by playing this season.

Yet Israel and Kaiser decided to go forward, and take a big financial hit if necessary, to keep faith with the players, fans, sponsors,



**Dan Israel**



**Bob Kaiser**

and the Muskegon area as a whole.

"Bob and I don't get to know the players as well as when our kids were playing, but we love what they are doing," Israel told Local Sports Journal. "We love the sport and love the players, or else we wouldn't be in the business."

"We believe in the long term that this is the best decision. In the short term the easy thing to do would have been to shut down. But we have a franchise that has gained tremendous respect in recent years, in the Muskegon community as well as the hockey world, and we felt in order to preserve what we have built, it was the right decision to go ahead and take a short-term loss."

The two owners were willing to go to great lengths to keep the team active this season. Before learning over the summer that Muskegon's city-owned Mercy Health Arena would be open and available, Israel and Kaiser even discussed the possibility of finding a different arena in a city outside of Michigan in 2020-21, with the understanding that they would come home in 2021-22.

Of course that won't be necessary now. The arena has been open and functional for several months, so the Jacks will be able to stay at home, even if they crowds in the seats remain small due to state-imposed regulation.

"It was incredibly tough, one of the tougher decisions I have

***"We have a franchise that has gained tremendous respect in Muskegon as well as the hockey world. We felt in order to preserve what we have built, it was the right decision to go ahead and take a short-term loss." - Muskegon Lumberjacks owner Dan Israel***

made recently,” Israel said. “But we we didn’t want to hurt the kids or the community. The Lumberjacks are an important part of Muskegon.

“Bob was emphatic about going ahead and playing, despite the possible losses.”

### ***Lots of changes this season***

The 2020-21 Lumberjacks season will be different in a lot of ways. The first big change will be the schedule, which will consist of 54 games this season, rather than the usual 60.

In most recent years the USHL has started its regular season in late September or early October. This year things will kick off a month later.

The Lumberjacks’ first game will be on the road on Nov. 6 against the Dubuque Fighting Saints. Their first home games will be three weeks later, on Thanksgiving weekend (Nov. 26-27) against the Youngstown Phantoms.

The team will play only five home games in November and December, but things will pick up significantly in 2021, with 19 home games between Jan. 2 and April 10. The regular season will wrap up on April 24 in Chicago.

All regular season games will be played against the five other teams in the Eastern Conference – Chicago, Green Bay, Team USA, Dubuque and Youngstown.

The Jacks asked the league to keep the team on the road for the first few weeks of the season, and give them more home games in the last four months, in the hope that crowd restrictions will be eased even more, and more fans can be allowed in the building.

“That’s why we’re on the road to start the season,” Israel said. “The league was very cooperative and very helpful with that. Going on the road hurts us financially, too, because road trips are expensive, but we are banking on our governor loosening restrictions.”

Another change will be the size of the league.

Two USHL teams – the Cedar Rapids Roughriders and Madison Capitols – took advantage of the league’s offer to sit out the season. Madison dropped out for a year because Wisconsin COVID restrictions made it impossible for the team to play. Cedar Rapids went dormant due to severe damage to their arena caused by recent storms.

### ***The team should be really good!***

One bright spot is that the Lumberjacks may be serious contenders to win their very first Clark Cup championship.

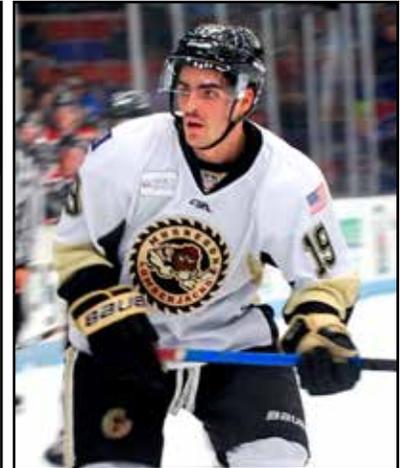
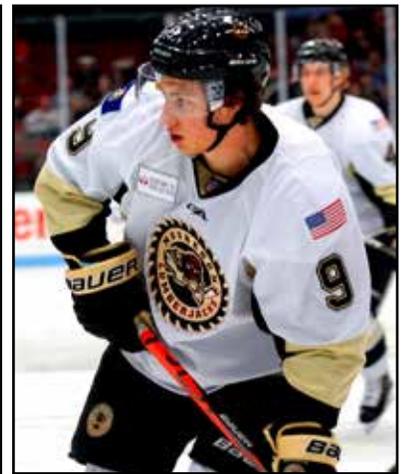
Last year the Jacks were mediocre, posting a 21-23-5 record, which left them in sixth place in the Eastern Conference when the season was halted due to COVID in March. But that was expected, because they had assembled a group of mostly first-year players who needed experience at the USHL level. But many of those players were very talented, and most have returned for the 2020-21 season.

The group of returnees includes standouts like forwards Rhett Pitlick, Dylan Wendt, Cameron Berg and Christophe Fillion, and defenseman Hank Kempf.

That means the Jacks expect to have a very good team this season, capable of competing for regular season and postseason championships.

If the Jacks had accepted the league’s offer and opted out for a season, those players would have been dispersed to other teams in through a special draft, like the Cedar Rapids and Madison players were. That would have meant starting all over in building a roster when the team returned next season, which was something the very competitive Israel was not willing to do.

“That was an extremely important part of the equation,” Israel said. “We felt that if we lost the team we had, the base of the team would be gone. We didn’t expect to have a title-caliber team last season. We were grooming that core group for this upcoming season. We feel we will have what it takes to win the whole thing. That was a huge factor.”



***RETURNING THIS SEASON: Forwards  
Cameron Berg (17), Rhett Pitlick (9), Dylan  
Wendt (11) and Christophe Fillion (19).  
Photos/Jason Goorman***

There will be some new challenges this season, like various protocols the players will have to observe on a regular basis to keep from contracting or spreading COVID.

The city and the team have already taken steps to increase the level of safety for fans and other non-players or coaches who come to games at Mercy Health Arena.

Besides following required guidelines and safety measures, Mercy Health Arena “recently installed ventilation systems designed to modulate the ventilation of air, based on occupancy and demand,” a team media release said. “The systems neutralize odors, break down volatile organic compounds and kill and neutralize viruses and bacteria. In short, the newly installed systems are continuously cleaning the air.”

Of course the biggest uncertainty at the moment is the number of tickets the team will be able to sell, and how best to accommodate fans who are itching to get to a game.

Season ticket holders will be accommodated before any tickets are sold to the general public, according to the team.

Ticket sales could remain severely limited for all or most of the season, and the Lumberjacks are naturally concerned that some fans may drift away before the 2021-22 campaign begins.

But Israel said Muskegon fans are incredibly enthusiastic and loyal, so he isn’t too worried about that.

“Our attendance has been up every year that I’ve had the team,” Israel said. “We hope we don’t lose our fan base. The Lumberjacks have a really good fan base, and we hope when the restrictions are lifted, there will be a boomerang effect and they will want to come back out and get engaged again and cheer on the team.

“We made this decision (to play) believing that the fans will respect it and come back, as well as our sponsors, who are just as important as the fans.”



# Honoring a great coach, AD, and friend

By Steve Gunn  
LocalSportsJournal.com

By the time Ken Erny was honored on the evening of Oct. 1, the surprise wasn't much of a surprise anymore.

His wife Lori and their children and grandchildren were there, surrounding him as he walked across the green grass of the familiar Fruitport High School soccer field.



He looked around and saw many familiar faces from his years of working

and coaching at the high school. They were all watching him as he arrived, as if he were the guest of honor.

In front of him was a mysterious new sign covered with cloth, attached to the front of the soccer field press box.

Something was clearly up, and it had everything to do with him.

Just minutes later, Erny learned exactly what it was. The school had decided to name its longtime soccer facility "Ken Erny Field," in honor of the longtime coach and athletic director who retired on Sept. 1, after being diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral

Sclerosis, a neuromuscular disorder more commonly known as ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease.

The dedication ceremony took place before Fruitport's varsity game against Fruitport Calvary Christian.

Everyone who knew about the event had tried to keep it a secret, but the old coach had figured out that something special was about to occur, and he was deeply touched, frequently to the point of fighting back tears.

"My son Steve said it was an alumni gathering of some sort, but I had to wonder, how can there be an alumni gathering when there are crowd restrictions?" Erny said with a grin. "I thought it was a little fishy, but I tried to be convincing.

"I am very humbled."

Steve Erny, the Fruitport boys basketball coach, was in charge of getting his dad to the field. He realized that Ken knew he would be honored in some way, but doesn't think he knew the full extent of the surprise.

"It might not have been a very well-kept secret, but I don't think he knew about the actual field dedication, so that was the nice thing," Steve Erny said.

"This is a special night, and I've been looking forward to this for weeks," he added. "I knew how humbled he would be, and how humbled we would be as his family. You can see how many people came. It's

pretty hard to get a group like this together during this time, and it's really special to see everyone here. It's a difficult time for the family, but this is a night we will remember for a long time."

Erny became the very first Fruitport varsity soccer coach in 1990, and over 19 seasons posted an impressive 242-133-20 record. Prior to that he coached at the old Fruitport Faith Christian High School, and his all-time prep soccer coaching record is 335-182-32

He was inducted into the Michigan High School Soccer Coaches Hall of Fame in 2015.

Erny became the interim athletic director at Fruitport High School in 1995, a job that quickly became permanent. He served proudly in that role for the next 25 years, through this summer, then decided to retire a few years early after he was diagnosed with ALS.

Under Erny's leadership, Fruitport's athletic program produced many great players, awards, championships and moments. But the people who showed up for the ceremony weren't there to honor Erny the successful soccer coach, or Erny the great AD.

They were there to honor Ken Erny the man, because his greatest success at Fruitport involved setting a great example for students and colleagues, and touching many



**Erny, surrounded by family, waves to friends and well-wishers; Fruitport varsity soccer players stand at attention during the dedication ceremony. Photo/Marc Hoeksema**

lives in a positive way.

That was obvious during the ceremony, when the PA announcer read several emotional messages from former players and assistant coaches who learned so much from the man they described as a mentor and friend.

"You taught me how to be humble and how to try to be a better person and a better man," one former player wrote. "You have had a tremendous impact on me and my entire family."

"He showed me you can do things the right way and still be successful, that you don't have to cut corners or push down others to get ahead," wrote a former assistant coach. "I consider Ken to be many things – a role model, a mentor, and most importantly, a friend."

"As I have grown older, I have learned that the most important things in life are the things (Erny) modeled all along – faith, family and character," wrote Dan Hazekamp, who graduated in 2003 and is the current coach of the Fruitport varsity soccer team.

Perhaps the most touching words came from John Erny, Ken's son, who was the soccer team manager for his dad as a child, and later played on his team in high school.

"I think you treated many of your

players as sons, and that is something I am really proud of," he wrote. "I love you and I am so proud of you and your impact on the Fruitport soccer program."

After the testimonials were read, the cloth was removed from the new sign on the press box, revealing the words "Ken Erny Field."

Erny took the microphone and thanked everyone who played for him or helped him coach over the years, and everyone who participated in the dedication ceremony.

"When I think of this field, I think of all the people who played here," he said. "The players are this program and always will be. I believe one of our themes one year was 'passion and pride.' That's what I think of when I think about Fruitport soccer, in the past, the future, and the present.

"This is not about a coach or a person. Any good coach or leader is only as good as the people he serves. I will not forget your love and friendship."

A while later, after posing in front of the sign with his family and many friends, and hugging a steady stream of well-wishers, Erny revealed that Thursday was his first day back to campus, because rules prevent retirees from coming back for 30 days.

"I've been following (the school teams)

and watching online as much as possible," he said.

He also said the new name of the soccer field brought back a distant memory from his childhood.

"When I was 10 years old in New Jersey and I was playing soccer, my grandmother told me that there was a soccer field at Temple University named Erny Field, after my great uncle who was on the board or something," he said.

"I was like wow, that is so cool. Now I'm getting that strange feeling back from the old days. Obviously that field has been gone for years, but hopefully this field will last for years to come."

Erny said he had hoped to keep working for a few more years, but the challenges posed by the disease made immediate retirement an obvious choice, even though the announcement surprised many people.

"I was hoping to stay longer," he said. "I would have loved to see the new high school and fully engage in that, but absolutely there is no question it was the right thing to do.

"I was sort of a workaholic, and it was time to change gears. I do notice there is a ton of fatigue (associated with ALS), and you have to take advantage of every day."

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