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Modeling Montague Values

Coach Pat Collins, QB Drew Collins say it's all about the pursuit of excellence, not just the outcome

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On the cover: Montague football Coach Pat Collins and son Drew Collins. Photo/Jason Goorman

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Montague's Pat and Drew Collins

It's all in the pursuit

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

There's something different about Montague High School, and it touches just about everything that happens on campus, from the classrooms to the athletic fields.



The school has long been known for maintaining unusually high standards and expectations

for students. That approach can be more difficult to implement at public schools, where students come from all types of home environments and circumstances, but at Montague they insist on setting the bar high.

Longtime varsity football coach Pat Collins loves that type of environment.

He embraced it as a Montague student-athlete back in the 90s, and says it's been a key component of his successful program during his 17-year tenure as coach.

"It can be hard sometimes, because things can get intense," Pat Collins said. "We are very serious here about everything – athletics, academics, the band program, everything. I love it. I want everybody to be successful. For our kids to experience that type of culture is great for them, before they move on in life."

Collins' son, All-State senior quarterback Drew Collins, feels the same way about his hometown and his school.

"Some people say it's in the water," Drew said with a grin. "But it's really about heart. My Uncle Matt (who coached his youth football teams) said you always have to have heart. That was hard to understand in the third grade, but as I've gotten older I've understood it more.

"There's something about those Montague values, having good character, winning the right way and losing the right way. When you have that kind of environment, and everybody is on the same page, you are bound to be successful. The heart of this community, and the character of this community, have played a big role in what we've done."



Head Coach Pat Collins



Senior QB Drew Collins

Both father and son have done a great deal to uphold the high standards at Montague.

In 17 seasons as head coach of the Wildcats, Pat Collins has posted a pretty amazing 156-45 record. His teams have won or shared six West Michigan Conference

championships.

They have also captured 11 district championships, seven regional titles, and two state championships, in 2008 and 2009.

Drew Collins has done a great job carrying on that winning tradition in his three years as quarterback for the Montague varsity.

He led his team all the way to the state finals in 2018 as a sophomore, and to the semifinals in 2019 as a junior, when he earned All-State honors. He also helped the Wildcats win conference titles in 2018 and 2020.

But both father and son will tell you that the high standards at the school, and in their football program, are not about always being the very best.

The important thing, they say, are the lessons that are learned during the constant pursuit of excellence.

That point is very important to Pat Collins, because his ties to K-12 education go far beyond the football field.

Besides also serving in recent years as the school's athletic director, he has worked with mentally and emotionally impaired students, developed the school's online learning program, and is currently director of student services for the entire school district, while also is serving as vice principal of the high school.

He believes kids should always be encouraged to pursue ambitious goals, in the classroom and in extracurricular activities. Whether they achieve those goals or not, they are better off for the effort, because they have pushed themselves, gained self-confidence and learned the value of maximum effort.

"We always set the bar at the top, but there are only so many teams that walk off the field after the final game every season with a victory," said Pat Collins, who added that the permanent motto of the football program is Champions for Life. "It's very difficult to do. This is our 17th year in a row that we are trying to be one of the teams to win our last game (the state finals), and we've only done it twice.

"Once the disappointment subsides (after losing in the playoffs), we always feel very good, very blessed about what we've accomplished. Win or lose, we're proud that we set a goal, attacked it and worked hard

for it. Whether you win it all or not, you want the kids to understand that this is what it takes to be successful in life. You work your butt off.”

Constant pursuit of excellence

Of course the satisfaction of knowing they gave it their all while falling short doesn't last long for the Wildcats, because the constant pursuit of excellence begins again right away.

At Montague they get back up, dust themselves off and try even harder, because that's all part of the life lesson.

Pat Collins had modeled that ideal several times over the years, to the great benefit of the Montague football program.

It started during his playing days at Montague, under his former head coach and mentor, Ken Diamond.

mond started and won back-to-back titles.”

Drew Collins has clearly absorbed and adopted that never-quit concept, and it's been his driving force throughout his varsity career.

In 2018, when he was the starting QB as a sophomore, the Wildcats overcame a two-loss regular season, got hot in the playoffs and advanced all the way to the Division 6 state finals against Jackson Lumen Christi, but lost.

Montague again had two losses in the 2019 regular season, to conference rivals Oakridge and Ravenna, but again got hot in the playoffs, and were one win away from making a second straight appearance in the finals.

They played Maple City Glen Lake in a semifinal matchup at Clare High School, and everything seemed to be going well.

The Wildcats had a seemingly safe 24-

Glen Lake's extra point attempt was good, and Montague lost 31-30.

The defeat was very hard on Drew, who had a terrific game, rushing for 175 yards and two touchdowns and completing 5 of 7 passes for 98 yards and one touchdown. But he said he and his teammates had nobody to blame but themselves.

“It would have been easy to blame the refs, but we had to take the fall ourselves, because we could have put them away earlier,” he said.

Drew had a photo that someone had taken, showing himself and several of his teammates sitting on the turf in tears after the shocking semifinal loss. He stapled it to a tree near the team's practice field, to provide inspiration for the 2020 season.

His message? Let's get over it, because it's time to start pursuing excellence again.

“That's a picture of us crying after the



“He's a very hard worker. When you put together every little hard working moment, over time it just grows, and his growth has been pretty big, in terms of speed and arm strength and accuracy.” - Coach Collins about Drew.

In 1990, Pat was a sophomore playing on a team that finished with a 1-8 record. Despite that dismal outcome, the returning players set a state championship as their future goal.

Two years later, in 1992, the Wildcats were 9-0 in the regular season, won four playoff games and advanced to the state finals, before losing to Detroit DePorres.

Collins returned to Montague as the head coach in 2004 and continued the pursuit of excellence.

The Wildcats finally reached that summit in both 2008 and 2009, when they won back-to-back state championships.

“I told my wife, ‘We need to finish business in Montague, we need to finish the deal,’” Pat said. “We took what Ken Dia-

mond started and won back-to-back titles.”

Montague had the ball first in overtime and took a 30-24 lead when Drew scored from five yards out. The extra point attempt failed and the Wildcats led by six points.

Glen Lake faced fourth down from the Montague 5-yard line on its OT possession. The Wildcats needed just one more defensive stop to win and go back to the finals.

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, the referees called it a touchdown.

game,” Drew said while pointing at the photo. “Everyone in that picture except one guy is back this year. It's a meaningful picture for us, for sure.

“We've fallen short a couple of times. It took us a state finals loss, and a one-point semifinal loss in overtime, to figure out that the little things matter. That's been kind of the theme this year – do the little things right, because the other team may not be doing them.”

Father and son

There are a lot of similarities between Pat Collins and his oldest son. Both have been All-state quarterbacks who led their

Continued on next page...

teams to the state finals. Both have won a lot of games and trophies, and have helped Montague remain on the map of state high school football powers.

Pat and Drew also seem to be very close, and clearly share the same values when it comes to family, the school and their community, how they treat others, and how they approach life's challenges.

Not surprisingly, Drew already says he's interested in coaching football in the future, and nobody will be stunned if he someday ends up doing that at Montague.

Considering all of that, some people would probably assume that Pat groomed Drew to follow closely in his footsteps from the time he was small – but that really wasn't the case.

As a little boy, Drew was not that



“I think my dad, and all the other coaches, have been great role models. Having been influenced by them, I’ve always known that we would have great character as a team, and character is more important in a football game than people know.” - Drew Collins about Pat Collins.

coach's son who attended every practice and stood on the sideline during every game. He even declined an offer to be the varsity ball boy when he was in elementary school, a job that most youth league football players covet.

“He never really wanted to be on the sideline or at practice,” Pat said. “He was the type of kid who would rather be home playing football in the yard with his friends or by himself, or in the stands watching a game.”

“I wanted to be like all the other kids in the Montague program,” Drew added about passing up on sideline access when he was small. “The other kids didn't have that privilege.”

Developing Drew into a quarterback was not his father's idea. In his earliest years of youth football he was a running back, before his coach, his late uncle Matt Collins,

decided that he had the tools to be a great QB.

“When he made the decision to play Drew at quarterback, I trusted him, and told him ‘Whatever you want to do,’” Pat said about his brother's decision.

When Drew took over as the starting varsity quarterback as a sophomore, in the third game of the season, it was not his dad's call. He said he left that decision up to assistant coaches, because he didn't want to appear to be biased.

“I stayed out of it as much as I could,” Pat said. “I value the coaching staff, and I feel like I've been pretty good about not being biased.”

Drew was good right away, passing for 139 yards and three touchdowns in a 55-0 victory over Mason County Central in his

first start. Over his sophomore season he completed 104 of 179 passes for 1,947 yards and 18 touchdowns, and rushed for 598 yards and seven TDs.

Of course that season ended with the loss in the state finals to Lumen Christi. Drew had his ups and down in that game, completing 5 of 12 passes for 142 yards, including two touchdowns, but also throwing two interceptions.

The 2019 season was a breakout year for Drew, when he earned All-State honors by completing 162 of 241 passes for 2,435 yards and 28 touchdowns, and rushing for 807 yards and 16 touchdowns.

The Wildcats again finished 7-2 in the regular season, then got hot again in the playoffs, only to have everything unravel in the shocking semifinal loss to Glen Lake.

The challenge of 2020

That led to the very strange 2020 season, which the Michigan High School Athletic Association originally postponed until the spring of 2121 due to COVID-19, then reversed that decision and announced that there would be a shortened six-game regular season in the fall, with an expanded playoff format.

Drew and many of his teammates never really stopped practicing, even when they thought they wouldn't play until spring.

That left the team in a strong position when the fall season finally started, and they've been on a roll.

Montague ripped through the regular season with a 6-0 record, won a conference title, and entered the playoffs as the No. 1

ranked Division 6 team in the state. The highlight of the regular season was a 34-31 double overtime victory over rival Whitehall in Week 5, en route to a conference championship.

The Wildcats have looked great in the playoffs, blasting past Hart 75-0, then downing two undefeated teams – Clare 50-7 and Muskegon Catholic Central 36-7.

Drew has been great again this season, completing 95 of 137 passes for 1,225 yards and 15 touchdowns. He has also rushed for 489 yards and 12 TDs.

His numbers have remained great because he worked extremely hard throughout high school, improved every year, and always accepted failure as a challenge to do better the next time around.

In other words, Drew Collins has done it the Montague way, and his father couldn't be

more proud of him.

“He’s a very hard worker,” Coach Collins said about Drew. “When you put together every little hard working moment, over time it just grows, and his growth has been pretty big, in terms of speed and arm strength and accuracy.

“Now that he’s a senior, we’re just wondering, what is he going to do next? He’s really in control of what we do offensively.”

Unfortunately, we may never know what Drew might do next, at least at the high school football level.

The Wildcats’ were supposed to play in the regional finals on Nov. 21 against Montrose, with a chance to earn another berth in the state semifinals

But a new interruption occurred on Sunday, Nov. 15, when state officials shut down most sporting events, including the high school football playoffs, for at least three weeks, due to a spike in the COVID pandemic.

If they do get a chance to finish the season, Drew thinks the team has a great chance to finally win another state title, mostly because of the environment the players grew up in, and the leadership they’ve had over the years from their coaches.

“I think my dad, and all the other coaches, have been great role models,” he said. “Having been influenced by them, I’ve always known that we would have great character as a team, and character is more important in a football game than people know.”

Drew says his main motivation for trying to win a title before he’s done goes beyond himself, or even his coaches or teammates. He says he’s playing for the school that has maintained a standard of excellence for generations of students to strive for.

“Playing for Montague is what we all want to do,” he said. “We want to bring a banner back to the school. It’s less about the players and more about Montague.”

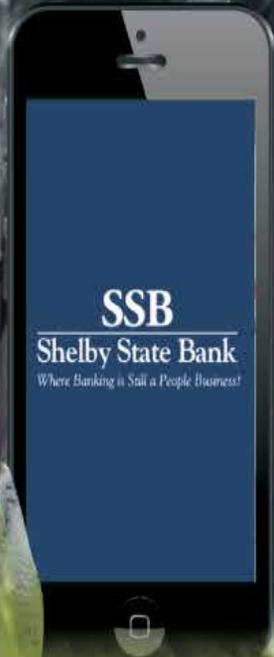


Drew and Pat Collins, who are currently waiting for the playoffs to begin again.

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BIG GAMES ON HOLD

COVID-19 spike interrupts four local prep football teams chasing state championships.

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

There are four Muskegon County teams still standing in the 2020 high school football state playoffs.

But if conditions don't improve around the state with COVID-19 viral infections, those teams may have to settle for being district champions and calling it a season, without having the opportunity to compete any further for a state championship.

That would be a shame, because all four teams were on pretty special missions as they prepared to play in the regional round of the playoffs, with a chance to earn berths in the state semifinals.

REGIONAL TITLE GAMES YET TO BE PLAYED

Division 2

Mona Shores at E. Lansing

Division 3

E. Grand Rapids at Muskegon

Division 5

Oakridge at GR Catholic

Division 6

Montrose at Montague

Mona Shores is the defending Division 2 state champion, and after surviving two close calls in district playoff games seemed primed to be a serious contender to repeat.

Muskegon was playing to reach the state finals for an amazing fifth straight season, and perhaps come away with a victory, after losing three of the previous four Division 3 title games.

Montague also wanted another shot, after losing in the Division 6 state championship game in 2018, and squandering a big lead and losing by one point in overtime last year in the semifinals.

Oakridge was very excited to still be playing, after winning its first Division 5 district title since 2016. The Eagles had lost two straight district title games, in 2018 and 2019, and three in the past four seasons.

But Michigan state officials announced on Nov. 15 that all high school sports would be suspended, including team practices, for at least three weeks, due to the massive spike in COVID-19 infections throughout the state.

The Michigan High School Athletic Association released a tentative schedule for the rest of the playoff games a few days later. The goal is to have the regionals on Dec. 15-16, the semifinals on Dec. 21-22, and the finals on Dec. 28-29.

Yet many people wonder if those games will ever be played once we start getting deep into December.

The games probably won't happen if the COVID infection rate does not decline significantly by early December. There are also questions about whether the games could be played in harsh winter conditions, and whether the players would have adequate time to adjust to the physical challenges again after three weeks off.

The entire scenario is a rerun of the nightmare of last spring, when the state high school boys and girls basketball tournaments were shut down early due to COVID, and no state champions were crowned.

It also brings back the type of confusion that was common in the late summer, when the MHSAA announced that football would be postponed until the spring of 2021, then reversed course a few weeks later and said teams could play shortened six-game regular fall seasons, with an expanded playoff format.

Everybody was happy about that change, because they were allowed to have a fall season after all. And the recent announcement, postponing the rest of the playoffs, had no bearing on most teams because the majority had already been eliminated.

But for teams like Mona Shores, Muskegon, Montague and Oakridge, the possibility of being bounced from the playoffs without actually losing is difficult to process.

Sunday's announcement was extremely difficult for the defending champion Mona Shores Sailors, who were 9-0 heading into their regional title game against East Lansing.

The Sailors had two very close calls in the playoffs before the shutdown, sneaking by Forest Hills Central 28-25, then outlasting a tough Caledonia squad 43-35 in a district championship game.

Victories in those nail-biters told Coach Matt Koziak that his



Amari Crowley rushes the ball in Muskegon's district title game victory.
Photo/Tim Reilly

team could handle playoff pressure, and was ready to make another serious run.

"The kids have played so tough and have been so resilient," Koziak said. "You felt confident that they could win the close ones."

"The Associated Press had us ranked No. 1 in Division 2 all season, and that put extra pressure on the kids. We had a bullseye on our backs every week, and opponents brought their best games. But our guys just worked around that. They didn't always play perfect, but they always found a way to win."

While Koziak would obviously love to get a chance to finish the playoffs, he admits he has his doubts. If the games do resume, he said the Sailors will be there, but he's not convinced that will happen.

"I'm just struggling to picture how it's going to look, with the kids off for three full weeks with no practice," he said. "You want the kids to be able to have a chance to get back to the finals, but I am less optimistic about being able to finish."

Another team that is very hungry to finish the season is Montague, which is also 9-0 and has been ranked No. 1 in the state in Division 6 all season.

The Wildcats have cruised through the playoffs so far with easy wins over Hart, Clare, and then No. 2 ranked Muskegon Catholic, 36-7, in a district championship showdown on Nov. 13. They were scheduled to play Montrose at home for a regional title.



Mona Shores running back Elijah Johnson carries the ball against Caledonia in the Division 2 district finals. Photo/Eric Sturr

Montague Coach Pat Collins said the state's sudden announcement took him by surprise, and even though he was not with his players when it came, he knows they were upset.

"I know there were some tears shed," Collins said. "Any abrupt change in kids' lives is hard for them to adjust to."

Collins thinks there is a way for the season to resume – if people throughout the state wear masks and follow other health advisories, which could bring the number of infections down.

"I'm an optimist at heart," Collins said. "I feel like it could happen, if people do the right things. I think in most cases they have been, but

we will have to do better and try harder to get this to change."

Even if the season does not resume, Collins said he thinks his team has proven itself, and can be proud of its season.

"We were ranked No. 1 in Division 6 all year, and we have defended that ranking on a few different weeks, beating Whitehall and Clare, which were both undefeated, and then beating Muskegon Catholic, in a No. 1 vs. No. 2 game, at their place," Collins said. "The fashion in which we won that game, I don't know what else you could ask for."

Muskegon Coach Shane Fairfield is skeptical about the possibility of the season picking up again.

The Big Reds were 8-1 on the season, with their only loss coming to conference rival Mona Shores in Week 2. They posted easy playoff wins over Greenville and Cedar Springs, then downed Marquette to win their ninth straight district championship.

"I don't know how you take three weeks off with no contact and then have one week to prepare for a regional final," said Fairfield, whose team was scheduled to host East Grand Rapids in the regional



Montague QB No. 5 Drew Collins finds a lane in the Wildcats' district championship win over Muskegon Catholic. Photo/Tim Reilly

finals. "I don't know how that gets done. Your body has to be acclimated to this game."

"If they think (playing again) is a good idea, I'll support that and I'll be there. But right now our main focus should be on the health of humanity. We are just taking a positive out of winning eight games, and not trying to put false hope into our kids' heads."

Fairfield said he is thrilled with the way his players have responded to a very challenging season that almost never got started.

"I want to celebrate what the kids have accomplished and achieved, and not let that get lost," Fairfield said. "They went through a winter, spring and summer of the unknown, then to have them put together the product that they put together, I couldn't be any more proud of our guys."

Oakridge coach Cary Harger also has his doubts about starting up again.

The Eagles finished the regular season with a 4-2 record, won pre-district playoff games against Chippewa Hills and Big Rapids, then beat Tri-County in the Nov. 13 district title game.

They were scheduled to play on the road against Grand Rapids Catholic for a regional title.

"It kind of has that feeling to it," Harger said, when asked if he thought the season might be over. "Looking at the other end of three weeks, it puts us back to practice on Dec. 9, which is a Wednesday. Are they expecting us to play a playoff game that weekend? Or would they give us time to acclimate again, this time in winter weather instead of summer weather?"

"Then the week after that would be the 18th, the week after that would be Christmas, and the week after that would be New Years. So it doesn't look good."

"It is frustrating. It was nice to get back to a district title, our team is healthy, and we've been playing up to our goal of improving every week. Looking at it positively, we had a good run."



Brenden Raymond celebrates an Oakridge TD in district finals against Tri-County. Photo/Jason Goorman

After a lot of quiet seasons, the Spring Lake football team, under fifth-year Coach Dan Start, has become a more consistent winner.

By Nate Thompson
LocalSportsJournal.com

Dan Start has been exposed to some pretty smart coaches throughout his football career, and paid close attention so he could learn as much as possible.



It started during Start's playing days at Grandville High School, where Coach Irv Sigler Jr. led the Bulldogs. Sigler Jr. grew up in a football household with his father, Irv Sr., a state champion coach who is generally considered the master of

the Wing-T offense in the state of Michigan.

After graduating from Grandville and Grand Valley State University, Start spent a few years teaching in Florida and became an offensive coordinator at high schools in Boynton Beach and Jupiter.

His offensive knowledge expanded from the Wing-T to the spread while in Florida, but more importantly, he continued to learn from outstanding head coaches on how to lead a program.

"The Xs and Os change and evolve over the years, but the biggest thing I tried to take away from all those coaches was not so much any style of offense or defense, but the way I wanted to run a program," Start said. "Just how to be a leader and how to motivate kids to get the most of their potential."

Five years ago he finally got the chance to apply all the knowledge he soaked up when he became the head coach at Spring Lake High School.

Despite winning just two games over his first two seasons, Start has started to turn the Spring Lake program into a steady winner, with playoff appearances in each of the last three seasons.

The Lakers finished 5-3 in the COVID-shortened 2020 season, which featured a four-game winning streak, the team's first playoff victory since 2001, and concluded with a tough overtime playoff loss to a very good Forest Hills Eastern squad.

The 2020 season did not start out particularly well for the Lakers, who lost their opener to Hudsonville Unity Christian 29-12, beat Coopersville 33-6, then lost a heartbreaker to Grand Rapids West Catholic, 14-12.

Things started to turn around in Week 4, when they played Allendale, won a 38-36 thriller, and showed everyone how explosive



STARTING TO GET GOOD

they could be.

The star of that contest was running back Steve Ready, a 6-foot, 205 pound senior who carried the ball 42 times for a remarkable 337 yards.

After that the Lakers strung together wins over Holland Christian, Fruitport, and Fremont, and put the state on notice that they are a team on the rise.

"That game (against Allendale), we started to figure out how to best utilize our talent, and we started to figure out we were better at certain things than others," Start said.

Ready was just one of the young student-athletes who began to seriously buy into Start's rebuilding efforts three years ago. Those efforts were focused on getting more kids into the program, and getting them into the weight room on a consistent basis.

"That was our focus the first few years," Start said. "We knew we needed to get more kids out, and more kids invested in getting bigger and stronger to compete with the type of kids we're seeing on our schedule"

The Lakers came to rely on Ready and other playmakers, including running back Christian Folkert, big-play receiver Derrick Paggeot, and quarterback Zach Mitchell, who took big strides completing a much higher percentage of passes this season.

Defensively, Spring Lake held opponents to 14 or fewer points four times this season. That success started with Folkert, Ready and sophomore Alex Lee as heat-seeking linebackers, but Start said the Lakers also got a lot of key plays from their defen

sive secondary, which included players like Jackson Core, RJ Lisman, Andrew VanWalde and Sam Sheridan.

"We're starting to see the fruits of our labor," Start said. "Through their hard work in the weight room, and coaches getting kids in the right spots, the players are really starting to shine."

The Lakers' first playoff victory since 2001 came on Oct. 30 in a 48-0 blowout victory over Fremont.

"The kids were really excited," Start said. "(A playoff win) was a goal we set three years ago and something this current group of seniors set their sights on."

The end of Spring Lake's 2020 season came a week later in an exciting but ultimately disappointing 28-21 overtime loss to Forest Hills Eastern in another district playoff game.

The game was tied 21-21 after regulation, Forest Hills Eastern scored a touchdown on its first overtime possession, and the Lakers threw an interception on theirs, ending the game.

Forest Hills Eastern went on to beat a very good Whitehall team in the district finals a week later.

Despite the disappointing loss, Start was upbeat about the positive trend in his program in recent years.

"It's great for the community and the kids," the coach said. "They've put so much work in and I'm just kind of here giving them direction. It's great to see these kids build the program, and they're the ones pushing it. I'm really proud of them."



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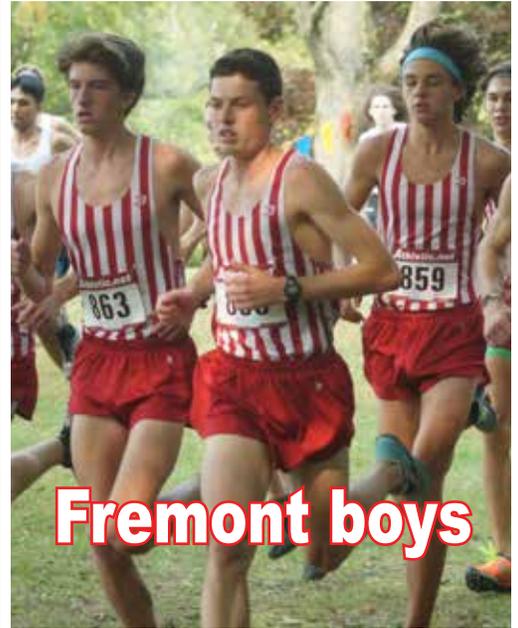
The Hart girls cross country team, the Fremont boys squad, and Western Michigan Christian's Abby VanderKooi did what they did last year - dominated their divisions at the state championship meet.



Hart girls



VanderKooi



Fremont boys

LocalSportsJournal.com

When the dust settled after the Nov. 6-7 high school cross country state finals at Michigan International Speedway, one thing was abundantly clear to everyone paying attention:

The lakeshore area – specifically the neighboring counties of Muskegon, Oceana and Newaygo – produces many of the best teams and individual runners in Michigan.

A quick look at the state championlist confirms that proud fact, because the area had two teams and two individuals win titles.

Western Michigan Christian junior Abby VanderKooi claimed her third consecutive state title, and broke the D3 state finals course record in the process.

The Hart girls cross country team won its fourth straight state title and the Fremont boys team won its second straight title.

Fremont senior Nathan Walker was the individual state champion in the Division 2 boys race.

The Hart boys team finished a close second in the Division 3 finals, and could have easily been the area's third team champion.

For WMC's VanderKooi, the state championship was the latest example of how she's been running away from the pack since she started high school.

VanderKooi finished with a Division 3 state finals record time of 17:12.47, which shattered the old record of 17:40.6, set by Hart's Adelyn Ackley in 2016. Her winning time was 43 seconds faster than second-place Alyson Enns of Hart.

"It's very exciting," said VanderKooi, who is a student at WMC in Muskegon County but resides in Fremont, which is in Newaygo County. "I feel very blessed to have set the record. I'm thankful to God, my family, my coaches and my teammates, because I couldn't do this myself."

While she set a new record with a spectacular run, VanderKooi said didn't feel too great during the state final race.

"I struggled over the summer with injuries, and still do now," said the junior, who raced in Division 3 after winning Division 4 titles in 2018 and 2019. "I'm injured in my left hamstring area, and it's made it more difficult and painful. I'm very sore for a longer time than I should be. At the two mile mark I was burning and just about gave up because I was in so much pain."

Considering how strange 2020 has been for local high school



"I've just got great kids coming through the program. We start work in June and they buy into it. They get their miles in, so when the fall season starts, they're ready to go." - Hart Coach Terry Tatro, whose team won its fourth straight state championship.

athletes, VanderKooi is just thankful to have had the opportunity to compete.

"Even the fact that I got to race was kind of crazy," she said. "With COVID and everything, a lot of people didn't get the ability to run, so I'm very thankful."

On the team side of the Division 3 girls finals, the story was once again all about the Hart Pirates, who won their almost unbeliev-

able fourth straight state title.

Hart finished with 59 points, well ahead of second-place Ithaca, which totaled 114.

"To say the least it's very exciting," said Pirate head coach Terry Tatro about winning a fourth straight title. "Every title is different. The first one was really big, but they're all just as exciting. Winning this one was huge for us."

The Pirates were led by Alyson Enns, who finished second overall with a time of 18:05.97, and Savannah Ackley, who finished third with a time of 18:31.89.

Rounding out the Hart times were Audrianna Enns (fifth place, 18:43.25), Lynae Ackley (10th place, 19:15.04) and Lauren Vanderlaan (68th place, 21:02.51).

"I've just got great kids coming through the program," Tatro said about his athletes. "We start work in June and they buy into it. They get their miles in, so when the fall season starts, they're ready to go."

The Hart boys team took home second place in Division 3, totaling 116 points, just 13 points more than state champion St. Louis, which had 103.

Alex Enns led Hart with a time of 16:21.59, which was good for sixth place overall.

Spencer VanderZwagg finished 22nd overall for the Pirates with a time of 16:48.01 while Clayton Ackley finished 44th (17:06.29) and Wyatt Dean finished 45th overall (17:07.67).

One day earlier, the Fremont boys team dominated the competi-

tion in Division 2, taking home the state title with 61 points, well in front of second-place St. Johns, which had 126 points.

"It was a fantastic day," said Fremont head coach Cliff Somers. "It's been a fantastic season and the boys did everything we asked of them. These two years have just been a testament to the hard work the boys have put in over the last five or six years."

The Packers had a clean sweep, because their top runner Walker captured the individual state title by winning the Division 2 race with a time of 15:19.39.

"I'm feeling pretty good," Walker said. "Obviously these were my two main goals (team and individual state titles) coming into the season, and it feels really good to complete them."

Fremont's Conor Somers (16:02.55) finished in fifth place overall, while Ben Paige (16:31.55) finished in 18th place.

Rounding out the Fremont runners were Joshua Zerfas, who finished in 26th place with a time of 16:37.39; Adam Ward, who took 27th with a time of 16:38.57; and Brennan Schuler, who was 81st with a time of 17:18.54.

Other top area performers were Layla Martini of Kent City, who finished 11th in the Division 3 race with a time of 19:17.30; and Tatum Dykstra of Fruitport Calvary Christian, who finished 17th in the Division 4 race with a time of 20:42.98.

Ian Hill of Spring Lake took eighth place in Division 2 with a time of 16:05.96. In the Division 2 girls finals, Taylor Mater-Gerth of Fremont finished 19th with a time of 19:16.44.



Abby VanderKooi won her third-consecutive individual state cross county championship.



Nathan Walker, the fifth Fremont runner to win an individual state championship.

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Five starters out? No problem

With nearly half of its starting lineup out due to COVID concerns, and trailing by two goals, the Mona Shores soccer team defined determination in a thrilling victory.

LocalSportsJournal.com

You've heard stories everywhere this fall, about high school, college and pro sports teams having players test positive for COVID-19, and being forced to forfeit, or at least play very shorthanded.

That happened to the Mona Shores soccer team in October, just after they had won their program's first district championship since 2005, and were preparing to play in the regional semifinals.

The Sailors won their district title game on Wednesday, Oct. 21, and Coach Mike Apostle gave them the next day off from practice to celebrate and relax.

One player started feeling sick over the next few days, and on the following Sunday he tested positive for COVID-19.

Apostle had to watch film of the district title game, and ask a lot of questions, to figure out which of the infected players' teammates had been in close proximity to him.

It was finally determined that seven players, including five from the starting lineup, would not be allowed to play in the regional semifinal game against Holt at Grand Ledge High School on Tuesday, Oct. 27.

The five starters included two senior standouts – goalie Keegan DeKuiper and Ethan Brown. Considering the lost personnel, nobody gave the Sailors much of a chance to knock off Holt and keep their season alive.

Holt scored on a penalty kick about 15 minutes into the game, then added a second goal about 12 minutes later. Suddenly the Sailors were down 2-0, and in soccer that kind of a deficit usually proves fatal, particularly against a quality opponent in the state tournament.

But somebody forgot to tell the Sailors that.

Mona Shores' Aiden Anderson took a pass from teammate Alex Eckerman and found the net with about seven minutes left in the first half, and the score was 2-1 at halftime.

Then senior Hayden Yaros, Mona Shores' top scorer, took over in the second half. He scored a goal following a corner kick early in the second half, tying the game 2-2, then scored on a penalty kick about midway through the second half to give Mona Shores a stunning 3-2 lead.

There was some drama left, because Holt put the ball in the Mona Shores goal at the final buzzer, but the referees ruled that it did not go into the net on time, and the Sailors walked away with the upset victory.

The unlikely win, with so many key players out of the lineup, made Apostle one happy coach on the long bus ride back to Muskegon.



Hayden Yaros, the Sailors' leading scorer this season.

"In the years I've been the varsity coach, I don't know that we ever came back and won after being two goals down, and now we've done it twice this year," Apostle said minutes after the exciting win.

Apostle gave a great deal of credit to backup goalkeeper Tyler Ross, who had played sparingly in net throughout the season, but buckled down and kept Holt off the scoreboard after the two early goals.

Apostle also had a full appreciation for the irony of the situation.

If he hadn't given the team the day off from practice after the district championship game, everybody would have been around the infected player, and there may have been no regional game.

"If that hadn't happened, we probably would have been done," the coach said.

The comeback victory put an exclamation mark on what had already been a triumphant season for Mona Shores.

The Sailors opened districts with a 5-2 victory over Holland West Ottawa. Yaros scored twice while Eckerman, Abe Frye and Anderson had single tallies.

They followed that with a 1-0 overtime shootout win over Grand Rapids Union in the semifinals. The teams were scoreless through regulation and two 10 minute overtime periods, then the Sailors outscored Union 4-2 in the shootout.

That put the Sailors in the district championship game against Rockford. They were outshot 8-2 in the contest, which might have been bad news.

But only one shot got past a goalie, and it came from Yaros, who got the ball just past midfield and broke loose before deking out the Rockford goaltender 1-on-1 and scoring with just over three minutes gone in the second half. The final score was 1-0.

"I wanted to get the goal and put our team up," Yaros said. "I got the chance and was fortunate enough to find the back of the net."

After the comeback regional win over Holt, the Sailors advanced to the regional finals against powerful Traverse City West, with several players still missing from the lineup due to the COVID scare.

They ended up losing 5-1, but the defeat couldn't ruin what was an otherwise great season for Apostle and the players, particularly the eight seniors who had come through the school's soccer program together and finally played their best when their last chance came.

"They've gone through more than most," said Apostle about the seniors after the regional final loss. "They've learned all year. It's unbelievable what they've done, and they've done everything they could for this program."

Stunning Upset!

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

There's something very unpredictable about the Whitehall-Montague neighborhood rivalry, regardless of the sport or the circumstances.

One team might be having a great season with state championship aspirations, while the other might be experiencing an up-and-down year.

But when they go nose-to-nose, shocking outcomes sometimes occur.

That was certainly the case on Nov. 5, when the Whitehall volleyball team, which finished third in the West Michigan Conference this season, stunned Montague, the seventh-ranked team in the state, 3-1 in the Division 2 district championship match at Oakridge High School.

The set scores were 26-24, 20-25, 25-21 and 25-18.

Nobody would have guessed that the Vikings would get the best of the highly-touted Wildcats, who swept them 3-0 in their regular season matchup.

Even when Whitehall won the first set, most fans were probably thinking it was a nice start for the Vikings, but mighty Montague would take care of business as the match progressed.

The Wildcats did bounce back to win the second set, but the Vikings maintained their composure, played their best volleyball of the season, and rallied to win the third and fourth sets to claim the district championship trophy.

The victory was special for veteran Whitehall coach Ted Edsall, who is now in his 30th season with the program. He says his teams have won four or five district titles in his career, but he couldn't remember the last one off the top of his head.

"Our theme has been control what you can control – energy and effort – and nobody played harder than we did tonight," Edsall said. "When you have that mindset, something like this can happen. When we won that first game, I looked at my assistant and said we may have a special night

The underdog Whitehall volleyball team came out of nowhere and beat mighty Montague in a district championship match



tonight."

There were several stars for Whitehall, but none were bigger than junior Maggie Evans, who had an incredible game at the service line.

Her biggest moment of the night came in the fourth and final set, with the Vikings clinging to a 5-4 lead, and everyone expecting Montague to rally and reclaim control at any moment.

Evans served nine straight points, including three straight aces in the middle of the run, to give Whitehall a 14-5 lead that it never surrendered on its way to clinching the title.

Evans finished the night with eight aces, nine kills and 37 assists.

"It's never happened like that before," Evans said about her amazing service run. "I just took a couple breaths each time and just focused on getting it in. We came in just having fun, knowing it could be the seniors' last game, and we played for them."

There were other standouts for the Vikings as well, including senior Charlie Baker and sophomore Kaydence King, who had 11 kills apiece; junior Ryleigh Mott, who had 16 digs; and junior Mylee Boyd, who totaled five blocks.

But the victory was the result of a total effort by a team that had its ups and downs all year – especially after losing All-Stater Rayne

Thompson to injury just before the season began.

"Welcome to 2020," said Coach Edsall, whose team was 20-10 this season. "It has been a tough year, but we got rolling at the right time, and look what happened.

"When you play a team that legitimately has more talent, you have to serve and pass great, and I think we did that. This one was special. We were big underdogs, but I have never had a team play this hard."

The stunning loss was difficult for a Montague team that rolled to championships in the West Michigan Conference and Greater Muskegon Athletic Association City Tournament, and made no secret of its desire to compete for a state title.

The Wildcats were a bit handicapped, because their top player, senior Reilly Murphy, was limited to spot duty due to an ankle injury.

But they offered no excuses for the loss. After the final point, Montague Coach Shawn Bectel stood and applauded Whitehall's gutsy performance.

"They played their hearts out," Bectel said about the Vikings. "Sometimes you just have to take your hat off to the opponent. They played incredible. What can you do?"

"That's just this game. It's hard to stay on top every second," added Bectel, whose team finished the season with a 34-7 record. "It just wasn't our night. I tried everything I could, gave every speech I had."

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