



**HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS SCENE**  
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555 E Downie St  
Alma, MI 48801  
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- **Publisher**  
Randy Miniard  
randy@highschoolsportsscene.com  
517-202-1808
- **High School Liaison**  
Paul Hornak  
p1hornak@gmail.com  
989-331-1168
- **Editorial**  
John Raffel  
john.raffel@gmail.com  
616-894-2936
- Butch Harmon  
616-655-9058
- Dave Cook
- Scott Keyes  
racinitnews@yahoo.com  
989-890-4036
- **Photographers**  
Skip Traynor, Dana McCann,  
Eric Sawatzki, Marvin Hall,  
Jaymee Beard, Lynn Munger,  
John Raffel, Jason Barden,  
James Traylor, Yoland Hayward,  
Lizzy Neal, Rachel Rosales,  
Kyle Curtis, Bailey Miniard,  
Rylee Turner, Joe Vozar

Vol. 15, Issue 153 - August, 2023

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## COACHES:

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### PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Hello sports fans, it's another great day here at High School Sports Scene Magazine.

And are you ready for some football!!!!!!

Where did the summer go????

It seems like just yesterday we were wrapping up the spring sports season and all of a sudden, the crack of the pads and the shrieks of the whistles can be heard on football fields all across Mid-Michigan.

Football is here again even though it's still plenty hot out.

And what a football season will we have in store!!!!

2022 was a great year for high school football around the state and 2023 promises to be just as entertaining.

Starting with the big schools, Rockford, Mt. Pleasant, Saginaw Heritage, DeWitt and Haslett look to have some impressive teams. Week one in fact kicks off with some outstanding matchups with Saginaw Heritage taking on Mt. Pleasant in a game that will sure to have plenty of points. Another high-scoring matchup will take place when DeWitt collides with Haslett. A super-heavyweight matchup takes place along the Lake Michigan shoreline where Rockford brings a big and powerful team to Muskegon to face a uber-talented Muskegon team. What a way to kick off the season.

The big schools, however, don't have a monopoly on the talent. As usual, Ithaca has a solid football team poised for a big season. New Lothrop is primed to make a deep tournament run in Division 8 and Pewamo-Westphalia has a loaded squad. Freeland is against stocked with talent while Beal City will again be a force to be reckoned with in Division 8.

Last year was a special one at Gladwin as the Flying G's won a state title. Gladwin will again be a team to watch this season along with the team it outlasted in last year's title game, Frankenmuth, which is also looking to be strong again this season.

Eight-player football continues to grow and evolve. Merrill turned in a memorable season playing 8-player football last season and this fall the area will again be home to some outstanding 8-player team.

A big thank you to all our advertisers and sponsors, without you there would be no High School Sports Scene Magazine.

See you at the games!



Randy Miniard  
Publisher/Owner  
517-202-1808  
randy@highschoolsportsscene.com

# Senior Class To Lead The Way As Alma Looks To Return To Winning Ways

## David Cook Sports Scene

The senior class is being counted on to lead the way at Alma this season as the Panthers look to post a winning season after going 2-7 a year ago.

With several talented seniors leading the way, the Panthers will boast a balanced offense along with a solid defense as they again navigate a rugged conference and non-conference schedule.

On offense, the Panthers can strike through the air or on the ground. Senior wide receiver Cade Sutherland is back after a big junior season. A three-sport athlete with college potential in all three sports, Sutherland is an athletic wide receiver.

Senior running back Cole O'Boyle is back after missing last season with an injury. A standout as a sophomore, a healthy O'Boyle gives Alma a dangerous running threat.

Taking over at quarterback is senior Jacoby Dunlap. A three-sport athlete who was a state high

jump champion as a junior, Dunlap started the final game of the season last fall. Still developing as a quarterback, Dunlap is primed for a breakout season.

Senior Nick Batista is moving in at tight end after starting along the offensive line last year. Batista is a solid blocker with good ball skills who is also a team leader.

Although small in number, the junior class has some talented players. Brighton Conn and Caylibe Thompson are a pair of players who started last season and will play along the offensive line and at inside linebacker on defense. Junior Alex Reyes is also a returning starter at cornerback on defense. Junior Cooper Couch came out for the team after the start of last season and made an impact. Couch has shown plenty of improvement and will play at safety on defense and at wide receiver on offense.

Several seniors will also see playing time on both the offensive and defensive lines. Landon Barnard, Caleb Calhoun and

Sanjago Rodriguez return in the trenches along with senior lineman Lucas Lott who missed last season due to injury.

A pair of senior newcomers will also contribute this season. Jackson Ward will play offensive line and inside linebacker while Ashton Wilkins will be a running back and inside linebacker.

A trio of sophomores will also be in the mix. Noah Koutz will play tight end and defensive line, Kias Martin will be at wide receiver and defensive back and Gavin McConnell will be at wide receiver and defensive back.

"I'm happy with the progress we are making," said Alma coach John Mimranek. "From day to day we have been getting better. I am concerned with our overall numbers. We have a small varsity squad this season. We have 12 seniors and our junior class only has eight players. Our numbers in the sophomore and freshman classes are more typical. Staying healthy will be a big part of our season."



The Alma football team will be counting on the senior class to lead the way this season.

# Coach Hessbrook Returns To Ithaca Sidelines With Heavyheart

## Sports Scene

A familiar face will be back patrolling the sidelines this season for the Ithaca football team.

Terry Hessbrook, who guided the Yellowjackets to a 177-25 record in 17 seasons as head coach will be back this season as an offensive assistant this season helping his nephew head coach Jordan Hessbrook, while in the process molding young minds.

The field is where Terry Hessbrook finds solace these days.

After the whirlwind heartache the Hessbrooks have experienced over the past six months since the sudden and tragic death of Brady Hessbrook in January, Terry

Hessbrook is hoping he can find peace of mind being more active on the sidelines in 2023.

"Taking it day by day is really all you can do," Terry Hessbrook said. "I'm going to be helping out on offense and helping out Jordan the best I can. I really needed to get back out there. It won't be the same. We are all hurting. The hurt and pain is felt every day."

Since walking away three seasons ago and giving the reins to Jordan Hessbrook, Terry has watched the program from afar. He expects this season to be a turning point.

Last season Ithaca went 10-2 overall and won the conference

title via a 4-0 record in conference. They advanced to the Division 7 regional round of the playoffs before losing to top-ranked Traverse City St. Francis.

"We have a lot of players who gained a lot of experience last year," Ithaca head coach Jordan Hessbrook told the Mt. Pleasant Morning Sun. "We have decent size and kids who can move. We're focused on improving and we'll see where it takes us."

The Jackets return five or six players on both sides of the ball. Junior Jackson Conn will take over at quarterback this season, replacing star Bronson Bupp who is playing collegiately at Alma College.

"Jackson knows all about the tradition at quarterback at Ithaca," Terry Hessbrook said. "Everyday is a work in progress for him."

Senior running back Noah Risner also returns for his third year as does fellow back Nathan Mikesell. Both had solid seasons one season ago.

On the outside wide outs Owen Mikula, Ryley White, Joe Dawe, Kaleb Hallock and Parker Wood all return too, giving the offense plenty of playmakers to pick and choose from. Linemen Brandon Pass, Broden Peska and Nick Mikesell will lead the way up front while Lloyd Stoneman has shown well in preseason camp.



Terry Hessbrook returns to the sidelines after a three-year hiatus.

Ithaca opens its season with three road games before returning home Sept. 15 against rival St. Louis.



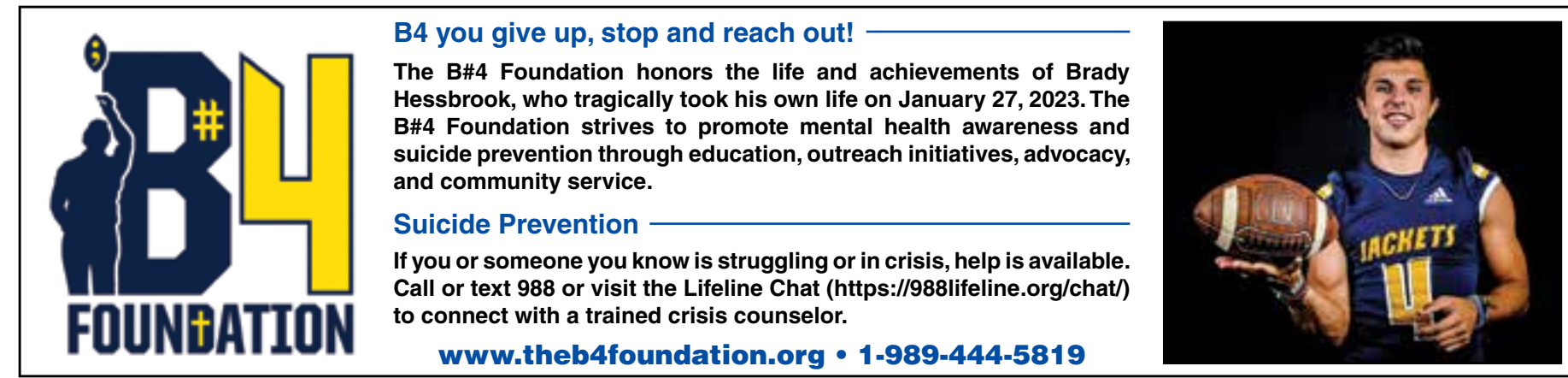
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The B#4 Foundation honors the life and achievements of Brady Hessbrook, who tragically took his own life on January 27, 2023. The B#4 Foundation strives to promote mental health awareness and suicide prevention through education, outreach initiatives, advocacy, and community service.

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# DeWitt Football Team Reloading To Keep Winning Tradition Going

## Butch Harmon Sports Scene

The DeWitt football team has set the bar high in recent years and expectations will again be set high this season as a young and talented group of players are set to forge their legacy this season.

DeWitt reached the Division 3 state semifinals last season for the fifth year in a row last season. The Panthers ended up with nine wins, the first time in the past seven seasons they didn't reach double-digits in wins.

This year's squad looks to have another high-powered offense. Leading the way is junior quarterback Elliott Lerner who passed for close to 1,000 yards last season and 10 touchdown passes. Joining Elliott in the backfield is a familiar face in brother Abram Lerner. Abram totaled over 900

rushing and receiving yards last season. Senior Rece Baker is another promising running back who made an impact last year along with fellow senior Robert Lilley.

The Panthers have a talented group of young receivers poised to step up. Sophomores Jadon Bender and Traverse Moore have game-breaking ability at wide receiver while sophomore Jacob Schorhaaer is a big-play performer at tight end. Jensen Ridley and Brandon Beckner add to the depth at wide receiver along with Trenden Bashore and Gavin Dusseau at tight end.

As usual, the Panthers are stocked with strong, physical blockers on both sides of the line. Senior linemen include Pierce Maxim, Donn Perry, Dom Ryan and Linkin Stine along with juniors Tyler Dusseau and Caden

Reynolds and sophomore Luke Nolen.

A total of five starters return to the Panther defense with plenty of talented players poised to step up and fill key roles. Robert Lillie will be a leader on the defensive side of the ball after recording 69 tackles last year while Rece Baker added 31 tackles and Elliott Lerner added 29 tackles.

As usual, the Panthers face a rugged schedule. DeWitt opens the season with games against Haslett and Mason. The Panthers will be looking to capture the league title after finishing in a tie for second place last season and will face major challenges from Holt, Grand Ledge, East Lansing and Waverly.

DeWitt coach Rob Zimmerman is entering his 24th season as coach of the Panthers and enters the season with a 243-51 record at DeWitt.



The DeWitt football team welcomes back several starters from last season including Elliott Lerner (3) and Robert Lillie (21).

# Veteran, Talented Mason Squad Primed For Another Big Season

## Butch Harmon Sports Scene

The Mason football team has been among the best in Mid-Michigan the past couple of seasons and this year's edition of the Bulldogs can be the best yet.

Mason has won a combined 22 games the past two seasons and have also reached the state semifinals in the Division 3 state playoffs. With eight starters returning on offense and nine starters back on defense, Mason is poised to add to that legacy this season.

"This is a very experienced team," said Mason coach Gary Houghton, but we face a very challenging schedule. We must take another step up."

Mason opens this season with non-league games against Holt and DeWitt before starting play in the rugged CAAC Red Division and then closes out the season with non-league games against Walled Lake Western and Fenton.

The Bulldogs, however, have plenty of talent to face the hurdles this season. Cason Carswell has developed into one of the top quarterbacks in the area and has drawn interest from schools such as Michigan State, Central Michigan and Eastern Michigan. Carswell has some talented targets to throw to in wide receivers Derek Badgley, Kaleb Parrish, Tyler Baker, Sam Corey and Cole Ries.

Mason can also pick up chunks of yardage with the ground game led by running back AJ Martel and

fullback Logan Doerr.

Paving the way for the offense is a talented and veteran offensive line. Nick Saade, Brennan Miller and Grant Gilchrist are returning veterans up front while Connor Osypczuk and Rory Wendt are newcomers up front that will contribute.

On the defensive side of the football the Bulldogs welcome back a wealth of starters. Grant Gilchrist and Sam Corey return along the defensive line. Kaleb Parrish, who has recruiting interest from Grand Valley State and Saginaw Valley State, leads a talented group of linebackers that include Derek Badgley, Logan Doerr and Wa Tyler Baker. The Bulldogs also have a veteran secondary led by Martel at free safety along with Cole Ries.



The Mason football team turned in a productive summer including winning the title at the Hope 7-on-7 tournament.

Several newcomers will also be making an impact this season including Caleb Vaughn at running back and linebacker along with Wyatt Ball and Ryan Greathouse at wide receiver and defensive back.

"We will have a balanced offensive attack," Houghton said. "We will also have a very experienced and aggressive defense. The key for us this year is to start fast and finish strong."

Along with going for a third

straight season with double digit wins, a number of Bulldogs are closing in on career school records. Carswell is approaching the record for passing while Martel is approaching the record for rushing. Kaleb Parrish is approaching the school record for receiving yards and currently holds the school career record for receiving touchdowns. On defense Tyler Baker is approaching the school career record for interceptions.

# Ovid-Elsie Will Be Extremely Competitive

## John Raffel Sports Scene

Ovid-Elsie football coach Travis Long likes to make one specific comment about his 2023 football team.

"We expect this group to compete every game," he said.

The Marauders last year finished second in the MMAC, had an 8-3 record and had a first-round playoff win against Almont and won a tough match 14-13 against New Lothrop during the season.

Key graduates included Kevin Ley, a four-year starter, offensive-defensive lineman and one of the top leaders of the program.

Clay Wittenberg, a three-year starter tight end-linebacker, was the leading tackler and receiver the past two seasons.

Logan Thompson, a four-year starter RB/SS, "is another great leader that will be missed; All-Conference performer on Offense."

Landon Stoneman is a three-year starter RB/LB who, Long said, "was a great linebacker for us the past few seasons. We are going to miss his ability to cause havoc in the opponent's offensive backfield."

Top players include Jamison Custer, a senior RB/DB who is an "offensive threat running and catching the football. He's a top returning ball carrier, and could be a top defensive back in our league," Long said.

Hunter Bates, a senior TE/DE, is moving to TE from LT a year ago. He should be one of the receiving threats downfield. His offensive line background has him ready to make the key block on the edge.

Tryce Tokar, junior QB/DB, is a dual-threat QB, "has potential to be the best in the league," Long said. "He's a tough, gritty performer on both sides of the ball."

Clayton Fruchey, is a junior RB/DB "who has great quickness and size," Long said. "He has the ability to make guys miss. Expect

Clayton to help carry the load in the offensive backfield."

Cohen Brown, senior RB/LB "will plug some gaps this fall," Long said. "He plays with great leverage and physicality. He is a vocal leader on both sides of the ball."

Braxton O'Bryant, a sophomore offensive-defensive lineman "played on varsity as a freshman. He has potential to be really special. He has great size and plays with an edge," Long said.

Dawson Taylor is a junior two-way lineman.

"A great off-season has propelled him into having a great fall camp," Long said. "He has a motor that doesn't stop, finishing blocks with a great first step," Long said.

Joe Bancroft, a junior offensive-defensive lineman, "is a leader, plain and simple," Long said. "He has great work ethic, and has looked really good in fall camp. Expect Joe to lead on both sides of the line."

Jake Bowen is junior offensive lineman-defensive end. "A great off-season has helped Jake move from his hand in the dirt to playing some defensive end," Long said. "He is strong, and physical with a good first step. Expect Jake to

anchor the right side of the line."

Carter Kelley is a senior running back-defensive back. "He was a real surprise contributor on last fall's team," Long said. "He has potential to carry the ball for us a lot this fall. Great quickness and burst. He will see action in the secondary too."

Cole Workman, a senior running back and defensive lineman, "pound for pound is our toughest player on the team. His wrestling background translates into a tremendous defensive lineman for us. Expect All-Conference type performance from Cole," Long said.

Long likes his team's potential.

"We expect this group to compete every game," he said. "We believe our culture will help us overcome any adversity that is thrown our way. Our team's strength this year looks to be our guys up front. We need to work on being more consistent with our energy, enthusiasm and finishing each play.

"The MMAC is strong this year just like previous years. New Lothrop, Durand, Montrose are as tough as they come. Chesaning is improving and Mt. Morris is



Tryce Tokar will lead the way for Ovid-Elsie's football team at quarterback.

always dangerous. We feel Ovid-Elsie fits right in with the top of our league. This should be a fun year. We have a great group of young men that enjoy each other and that will make our community proud to be a Marauder."

# Hemlock Aims For Winning Record In 2023

## John Raffel Sports Scene

Hemlock, under coach Adam Clark, is set to have a very competitive football season.

"We had a 1-8 season in 2022," he said. "Our highlight of the year was a victory in week 2 over Valley Lutheran and nearly upsetting Meridian in week 9.

"Liam Zastrow was an all-league performer for as at linebacker. Liam was a tough as nails kid that always gave all that he had, no matter of the circumstances. Luke McGregor was our anchor on the offensive and defensive line for two seasons. Never said a word, but just led our team by example

everyday."

Hemlock has several key players on its roster including senior tight end/inside linebacker Zack Seidel.

"If we are to rebound from last season Zach will be a big reason why," Seidel said. "His mental growth is apparent. We hope his physical status is as impressive as well once the games begin. All signs point to that being a yes."

Another standout is junior quarterback/outside linebacker Chad Brown.

"Chad is 6-6 and physically reminds me of Chargers quarterback Justin Herbert," Clark said. "Chad grew into the position and responsibilities of quarterback last season before suffering injuries toward the final third of the season. His physical stature and ability are the best I've had in 30 years

of coaching football. Chad is asking all the correct questions, indicating that he's seeing things differently than a year ago. He'll be very exciting to watch compete and continue his growth as an athlete."

Landon Zastrow is a junior who will play wide receiver, running back, free safety, kick returner and punter later.

"He has become our leader in peer guidance and also example set on the field," Clark said. "He has become special this past offseason and could be as explosive a player as we've had at Hemlock.

"We want to see this team compete at all times. No matter the opponent, Hemlock competes. We want to see these boys love what they're doing each day and build that genuine care and respect for one another that equates never giving up on one another. We will be strong in our offensive skill positions and defensive backfield. The quarterback

position is physically gifted."

Experience and depth on the offensive line is what Hemlock needs to work on, Clark said.

Clark hopes to be competitive in the conference.

"Hemlock is the smallest enrollment in our conference division," Clark said. "For us to compete well enough to be in contention, Hemlock must do everything the right way and better than our opponents while also remaining healthy. Bullock Creek returns an outstanding senior class, but Standish and Millington will also be right there."



Hemlock coach Adam Clark.



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# Shepherd Hoping For A Return To The Playoffs

## John Raffel Sports Scene

Irv Sigler brought a new coaching staff to Shepherd last season and the results were a trip to the playoffs.

"We had a lot of great things happen in 2022," Sigler said. "We played very well through a crucial stretch during the second part of the season and won five games in a row going into game nine. This was just enough to earn a spot in the playoffs, and we felt like that was a great accomplishment in the first year of a new coaching staff."

"The greatest highlights of the season for me were seeing our players pull together and be determined to have great success as a team. Then the community gave us a sendoff parade for the playoffs when we went to Muskegon Oakridge and it was absolutely amazing. The community of Shepherd was extremely supportive the entire season."

Graduation took several outstanding players from the Bluejays.

"Maddox Woods and Jude Moeggenborg will be playing college football at Adrian this fall," Sigler said. "Both were captains for us and they made a conscious decision to utilize their leadership to make the entire program better. We also graduated Wes Pifer and Kordell Vogel, who made the incredibly unselfish move from RB to offensive line, and their play was key to our success. Brady McDonald surprised all of us with his tremendous effort

and high level play. Tate Ross played a huge role in all three phases, starting on offense, defense and handling our kicking and punting duties.

"Isaiah Riehl and Mitchell Walters had amazing senior year performances. Justin Flanner, Chris Weekley, Talon Denman, Kaleb Barton, Jamyson Burch, Hunter Johnson, Chase Bigelow, Hunter J Johnson, Gunner Utter all made tremendous contributions. This group of seniors had a tremendous work ethic, were selfless and represented our school and community in a positive manner."

Sigler has several outstanding players on the 2023 roster.

"Colton Dysinger is a returning year starter and excellent leader on our team," Sigler said. "He is a dynamic athlete, who also plays basketball. He played very well at corner and receiver last year. He will play a big role on both sides of the ball this year. He is a captain and tremendous role-model."

Ashton Luckhardt is a returning All-JPC and All-Region player. He had a dynamic sophomore season, and has had a great off-season. He ran track this spring to improve his speed, and will also play basketball. He is an excellent athlete and performer on game night. Much will be placed on his shoulders this season in regard to leadership, as he will be a captain. We are very excited to see his improvement after all the hard work."

John Schwarzkopf, Sigler added,

"is an extremely hard working young man, also ran track this spring. He is an outstanding student and leader in our school. He improved his strength in the weight room tremendously, will be a captain and a great leader for us this season."

Jalen Stalter-Brandenburger "had a very good junior season, and improved every week," Sigler said. "He had some outstanding performances at both running back and defensive back. He has a knack for big plays and is a great leader and role model. He brings a great deal to our team not only on the field, but also in the locker room. He is one of the hardest working kids in our program."

"Kaleb Griffin is a returning starter and will move from defensive back to linebacker this year. He is physical, tough and has a great attitude and demeanor. He played extremely well as a junior, and I'm very excited to see his growth this season."

Rex Lombard, Sigler said, "will play on both sides of the ball for us. He is a tight end on offense and a defensive lineman, and an excellent athlete and he played on our basketball team, and placed in the JPC meet in the discus. He worked very hard last season to make himself better, and his attitude and growth in the weight room have been outstanding."

"Ty Pifer is a returning starter on defense, He had a great finish to the season and improved tremendously," JJ Perez "is a returning starter, and will be an anchor on our offensive line," Sigler said. "Sawyer Willoughby, played a great deal on the defensive line last year. He is a hard working guy, and could have



The Shepherd football team moves to the Jack Pine Conference this season.

an excellent season.

"We graduated some outstanding players. We had a tremendous off-season with many of our guys. It will be a matter of getting comfortable playing great competition and executing at a high level. believe we have great 'parts and pieces' and a very good attitude. With returning starters mostly in the skill positions, we are excited about how these young men have grown and improved. With the second year in our program, everyone has a much better sense of comfort in knowing the coaching staff, what our expectations are, and the scheme we are playing."

Sigler added, "as with all teams, we need to understand that it is the success of the group that matters

most. We are a team first program, and we want all of our players to elevate the team goals first. The most successful teams will learn this fast, and it will show on the field come game night."

Shepherd plays in the Jack Pine Conference. "I think the success of Gladwin last season winning a state championship showed that this is a very strong conference with good depth," Sigler said. "4-to-5 teams qualified for the playoffs. In my opinion, until someone consistently unsettles Gladwin and Clare, these two programs are the class of the league. I think we can be consistent, competitive and put our team in position to contend should we play like we are capable."



Jack Fussman will be a key player for Beal City this season.

# Beal City In Line For Another Memorable Season

## John Raffel Sports Scene

Beal City football coach Brad Gross and his Aggies had a memorable season in 2022 and 2023 could be more of the same.

The Aggies were 10-1 last season. "The best moment was the Ravenna opener and coming back from 21-0 to win 22-21 on a last minute two-point conversion," Gross said. "Winning the

conference title and going undefeated in the regular season were also top moments from the 2022 season."

Some of the key graduates from last year were Kadin Straus (LB/OL), Carter Fussman (RB/DB), Ben Straus (DL) and Owen Kovacs (OL/DL).

"All were key parts to a great season," Gross said.

Key players this season are expected to be Cayden Smith (RB/

DB), Jack Fussman (QB/DB), Jamisen Lathem (RB/LB), Josh Wilson (TE/LB), Bennett Gilde (OL/LB) and Payton Butkovich (OL/DL).

"I expect all these seniors to have great seasons," he said. "All were on the 2021 state runner-up team and played huge roles."

Gross has high expectations for the team.

"I expect us to compete for a conference title and make a run in

the playoffs," he said. "The strength of this team will be our speed and athletic ability. "It's also an experienced group of seniors which is always a good thing to have returning. Our biggest area to work on will be the offensive line. We have some key positions to fill from last year."

"I think our conference is always tough no matter who you play. If we play as a team and stay healthy, I believe we will compete for the conference title."



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# Veteran Talent Returns As Corunna Gears Up For A Big Season

## David Cook Sports Scene

The Corunna football team has been on a roll the past few seasons and with plenty of talented players returning this year, the Cavaliers are primed to keep the good times rolling.

Corunna turned in an 8-3 record last season and reached the district title game. Nine starters are back on offense from last year's squad along with eight starters on defense.

On offense, the Cavalier return standout quarterback Wyatt Bower. Wyatt (6-2, 180), and his twin brother Tarick (6-2, 170), a wide receiver, who have both committed to Saginaw Valley State next season and provide the team with plenty of big-play ability with their speed and athleticism.

Corunna also returns running backs Jaden Edington (6-0, 205) and Parker Isham along with wide receiver Bryce Edington for what should be a productive and explosive offense.

The Cavaliers also have a veteran offensive line paving the way led by AJ Brieger (6-2, 220), Alan Mrva (6-2, 240), Austin Oginsky and Gavin Siddock.

Several Cavaliers start on both sides of the ball. The secondary is a strength of the defense with the return of Wyatt and Tarick Bower along with Bryce Edington. Jaden Edington and Isham return at linebacker. The defensive line looks strong with Brieger and Mrva back along with Evan Cody who will also see time along the offensive line.

Mixing in with the veterans are some talented newcomers. Junior



The Corunna football team put in plenty of work during the summer and is ready for a big season.

Kaden Cowdrey will see time at wide receiver and in the defensive backfield. Fellow junior Dayne Zeeman will play linebacker and tight end on offense while senior Brayden Andrejack is a receiver and kicker.

"We have a good group of returning players from last year's team," said Corunna coach Steve Herrick. "Several players have

played important snaps the last two years in our playoff games."

Corunna has a unique schedule this season with the first five games all on the road. Herrick is counting on the team's experience to overcome that challenge.

"We hope our experience will help us in the challenging, unique schedule we have this year," Herrick said. "We begin the season

with five consecutive road games. We are focused on preparing for a talented, hard-working Fowlerville team in week one. After that, we want to keep getting batter and building toward the post season and seeing what we are capable of doing. We have many players with speed that were on our state-champion track team this past spring."



Chippewa Hills football coach Mark PeLong addresses his team during a summer practice.

# Chippewa Hills Hopes To Contend For CSAA Title

## John Raffel Sports Scene

Chippewa Hills has only 21 players on the 2023 roster but only graduated two from a team which was 4-5 last year.

This is why Mark PeLong has

high hopes for this squad.

"We only need to replace two starters from last year," PeLong said. "Most of these kids all played both ways last year and we will again."

Returning all-conference and All-Region offensive and

defensive lineman Brock PeLong will be a big factor on both sides of the ball. All-conference quarterback Gage Saathoff returns to run the offense. Leading rushers Jon Koeopf and Austin Humphrey are also back.

Cooper Bohnam, Ross Kelsey and Nolan VanHorn will be key linemen. Tyler Geer will start at slot receiver and outside linebacker. Leading receiver Brayden Hunt will be back to spark the offense.

"We expect to be in the hunt for the league title and make the playoffs," PeLong said. "We have many returning starters from last season. I feel the conference is very competitive top to bottom and we will have to be at our best week in and week out to compete."

Overall, there are 65 players in the program grades 9 to 12.

"The number is up in the lower level," PeLong said. "But we're at 21 on the varsity!"

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## Fulton-Middleton Looking For Another Strong 8-Player Season

### John Raffel Sports Scene

Zach Baker is coaching an 8-player Fulton Middleton team which hopes to be a power in the Mid-State Athletic Conference.

The Pirates were 7-3 under Steve Clements last year and returned to the playoffs for the 23rd time in program history and the first time since 2017.

Eleven seniors graduated from the 2022-2023 football team.

"Bruce Thelen, Dezmond Blair and Jaden Podolak most notably are all looking to take a step at the next level and play collegiate football with Bruce Thelen being an All-State running back for the Fulton Pirates," Baker said.

For this season, top players are senior offensive and defensive lineman Tommy Thelen.

"A two-way starter last season for the 2022-2023 team, he is one of two returning starters from last year's team," Baker said. "He will

Tommy Thelen (68) hopes to help Fulton Middleton have a banner season.

be relied upon to lead the team on and off the field this fall."

Junior Tanner Villalobos is a junior running back-defensive back for the Pirates.

"He started last season on defense as a cornerback," Baker said. "Tanner is eager to follow in the footsteps that Bruce Thelen and Ryder Hetherington left, at the running back position. He knows that he is not expected to be Bruce Thelen. He is gifted in his own way and has a unique style of running."

Junior Peyton Reynolds is a quarterback/offensive lineman.

"He spot started last season on both sides of the ball," Baker said. "He is a great leader, bleeds Blue and Gold. He will do whatever is asked of him by his coaches and teammates."

"This group of young men have shown to be a blue collar, hardworking team this summer. I expect that to carry over into the season. We hope to play sound, disciplined football,

with great enthusiasm and competitiveness. (Team strength will be) playing for one another, playing sound, fundamental football."

The team will need to work on "being comfortable in uncomfortable moments, and solidifying their identity week in and week out," Baker said.

Baker is not sure what to make of the league race.

"However, there is a lot of tradition and history in this league," he said. "In the early 2000s, Ashley was extremely tough. Prior to that St. Pats was very tough in the CMAC in the late 90s. Not too long ago, St. Pats were making long runs in the postseason in consecutive years. Sacred Heart is always known to be in the hunt at postseason time. Merrill just went to the Division 1 8 Man State Championship Game. It's a tough league. It will test us every week."

"We hope to be in the thick of things come October."



## Fowler Will Defend Its CMAC Crown

### John Raffel Sports Scene

Fowler football coach John Spicer had a team which last year won CMAC title and advanced to the regional finals. He wouldn't mind another season like that.

Defensive linemen Cooper Koenigsnecht and Dominic

Zach Halfman is expected to be among Fowler's top players.

Thelen, "did a great job plugging the middle," Spicer recalled.

Key players will be junior quarterback Jacob Halfman, senior slotback-linebacker Zach Halfman, senior wide receiver Carter Lance, junior wide receiver-defensive back Ben Kohagen, senior two-way linemen Evan Curtiss and Adyn

O'Rourke, senior halfback-linebacker Hudson Schlak, senior running back-defensive lineman Nolan Stump, senior linebacker Tristan Smith and junior two-way lineman Alex Halfman.

"We want to continue building on the things we did last year," Spicer said. "A strength

will be experience with our skill kids."

The team needs to work on offensive line play, Spicer said.

Fowler hopes to be a contender in the CMAC.

"Our league will be extremely tough with Pewamo Westphalia and Laingsburg being the favorites," Spicer said.

## New Lothrop Primed To Make An Impact In The State In Division 8

### Butch Harmon Sports Scene

The New Lothrop football team reached the Division 7 state semifinals last season and with some key players back from that squad the Hornets have the ingredients for another deep playoff run. One difference, however, is that New Lothrop will be making that run in Division 8.

New Lothrop fell to Traverse City St. Francis in last year's Division 7 state semifinals. This year, the Hornets begin the season against one of the top contenders in the state in Division 8 in Muskegon Catholic Central.

"I think our goal every year is to make it to week 10," said New Lothrop coach Clint Galvas. "Once you make the post season anything can happen. Of course, along the way to week 10 we hope to secure another league title. The top of the mountain for us is a state championship, but both the coaching staff and players realize we have a long way to go before talking about that. We will take it one game at a time and continue to focus on Muskegon Catholic Central in week one."

This year's team is built around some talented veteran leaders. Quarterback Jack Kulhanek is one of the top playmakers in the

state. A three-year starting quarterback, Kulhanek is a true dual-threat as he passed and rushed for over 1,000 yards

each last season on his way to earning all-state honors.

The Hornets also return a pair of standout linemen that will make an impact on both sides of the line. Slade Raleigh is a three-year starting offensive and defensive lineman who is also a team captain this season. Colton Symons is a three-year starter who plays offensive line and defensive end. A team captain, Symons led New Lothrop in tackles last season. Cole Niec also returns at running back and at linebacker on defense.

"We have some returning veteran leaders who have a lot of varsity experience," Galvas said. "I believe our leaders will help our

younger guys with the transition from junior-varsity football to varsity. I also believe our front seven on defense is very solid and should be able to keep us in games. Our dedication and commitment to success is always strong and again this year it has been no different."

The Hornets also welcome back junior Kaven Unangst. Unangst started at both slot receiver and defensive back last season and is looking to be a big part of what the team will be doing on both sides of the ball.

"The biggest thing for us every year is to stay healthy," Galvas said. "I think if we can stay healthy, we can compete with anyone in Division 8. We will have to continue to improve each week as we will be young in some key positions. I think we will be an entirely different team week 10 than we will week one."



New Lothrop returns several talented veterans along with some talented newcomers like Kaven Unangst.



## Talented Young Players Look To Carry On Improvement At St. Louis

### David Cook Sports Scene

The outlook is promising for the St. Louis football team this season as the young Sharks of last fall have grown and improved.

St. Louis had a roster with a large group of freshmen last season. Those freshmen are now experienced sophomores and are ready to take their game to the next level this season.

"I feel excited for the growth that the team has shown for the upcoming season," said St. Louis coach Julian Paksi. "We played a lot of freshmen last year, all

those freshmen are back stronger, adding them to a strong senior and junior class."

St. Louis returns some talented seniors led by Josh Dew and Nick Wirgaue who will play at wide receiver and defensive back.

"Josh has played almost every position on the field," Paksi said. "This year he is moving to a true tailback position. He is a Marshon Lynch style of runner who isn't scared to block."

Nick came on strong on defense at the end of the year. He runs some great routes and has great hands."

In the junior class, Justin Rodriguez is a player to watch at linebacker and the offensive line.

"Justin moved to linebacker this year," Paksi said. "He lived in the weight room this year and is even stronger."

Leading the sophomore class is a trio of talented players who will impact both sides of the ball. Michael Borie is a slot receiver on offense and linebacker on defense. Laythan Haworth brings good quickness to the running back position and is a rangy safety on defense. Xander Brock lines up along both the defensive and

offensive lines. A versatile player who is the Swiss army knife of the line, Broch started nine games at center last season.

"I like the unity of the team," Paksi said. "The competition for positions has been intense all year long. We have the most linemen that we have had in a long time. We also have depth at a lot of positions."

St. Louis finished the season strong last fall. After dropping their first six games, the Sharks reeled off three wins to end the season.

"We are a young team but we are hungry," Paksi said. "We ended the year winning three in a row and we have momentum. It should be an exciting team to watch this year. We have to live and play our 'Lets Eat' values."

The St. Louis Sharks are looking to carry over the momentum of a three-game winning streak at the end of last season.

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Braylon Isom, Saginaw Heritage

# Sports Scene's AREA PLAYERS TO WATCH

By Butch Harmon And Davis Cook

## Class of 2024

- 1) Andrew Dennis, 6-5, 275, OL, Mt. Pleasant: One of the premier offensive line prospects in the Midwest, Dennis will play his college football at Michigan State.
- 2) Braylon Isom, 6-3, 195, WR, Saginaw Heritage: Among the top receivers in the state, Isom will play in college at Miami (Ohio).
- 3) Logan Borodychuk, 6-4, 205, QB, Mt. Pleasant: A talented dual-threat quarterback, Borodychuk will play his college football close to home at Central Michigan.
- 4) Sam Talaga, 6-3, 230, OLB, Freeland: A physical and athletic defender, Talaga is also a standout in the classroom and will play college football at Harvard in the Ivy League.
- 5) Javon Thomas, 6-4, 255, DL, East Lansing: An athletic defensive lineman who provides impact plays, Thomas will play in an Eastern Michigan University recruit.
- 6) Nakai Amachree, 5-11, 185, RB, Haslett: Amachree is a threat to take it to the house anytime he touches the football. Will play in college at Bowling Green of the MAC.
- 7) Monte Keener, 6-6, 216, TE, Linden: The senior class in Michigan is stocked with quality tight ends including Keener who will play in the Big Ten at Rutgers.

- 8) Carter Herriman, 6-2, 220, LB, Davison: A big, physical linebacker, Herriman anchors a solid Davison defense and will play in college at Miami (Ohio).
- 9) Alex McPhee, 6-5, 290, OL, Rockford: The Rams are loaded again and this big, physical lineman is one of the standouts at Rockford this season.
- 10) Ty Robertson, 6-3, 230, RB/OLB, Saginaw Heritage: The Hawks will score plenty of points this season and this Saginaw Valley State recruit is a big part of the offense.



Nakai Amachree, Haslett

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- 11) Wyatt Bower, 6-2, 180, DB/QB, Corunna
- 12) Tarick Bower, 6-2, 170, DB/WR, Corunna
- 13) Evan Curtiss, 6-4 ½, 260, TE/DE, Fowler
- 14) AJ Martel, 5-9, 175, RB, Mason
- 15) Jaden Eddington, 6-0, 205, RB/LB, Corunna
- 16) Preston Otter, 6-3, 185, QB, Saginaw Nouvel
- 17) Jalen Brown, 5-9, 170, RB, Midland
- 18) Kaleb Parrish, 6-5, 210, LB, Mason
- 19) Colin Main, 6-3, 212, OLB, Frankenmuth
- 20) Louis Bosscher, 6-1, 185, DB, Rockford
- 21) Mason Nickel, 6-2, 255, DL, Midland Dow
- 22) Ryan Ahern, 6-0, 205, RB, Rockford
- 23) Tyler Dosh, 6-0, 230, DE, Davison
- 24) Jahi Wood, 5-9, 180, RB, Lansing Waverly
- 25) Tristen Elizalde, 6-0, 185, WR, Saginaw Nouvel
- 26) Jason Casey, 6-1, 275, DL, Midland Dow
- 27) Lucas Bassham, 6-2 ½, 200, DE, Rockford
- 28) Linkin Stine, 5-10, 245, OL/DL, DeWitt
- 29) Will Soulliere, 6-0, 165, PK, Frankenmuth
- 30) Nicholas Saade, 6-4, 295, OL, Mason
- 31) Noah Dunckel, 6-0, 205, RB/P, Williamston
- 32) Logan Klein, 6-3, 260, OL, Gladwin
- 33) Jamarion Harris, 6-2, 195, LB, Bay City Central
- 34) Merrick Hocking, 5-9, 220, LB, Midland
- 35) Justice Dungey, 6-5, 250, DE/OL, Lansing Waverly
- 36) Brandon Pass, OL, Ithaca
- 37) Aiden Groenburg, 6-0, 275, Lansing Everett
- 38) Jake PUNCHES, 6-1, 235, DL/OL, Clare
- 39) Cole Ries, 6-0, 160, DB, Mason
- 40) Caleb Fisher, 6-2, 285, OL, Haslett
- 41) Daniel Duley, 6-4, 185, DB/WR, Freeland
- 42) Drake Irwin, 6-3, 185, QB, Rockford
- 43) Alex Winter, 6-2, 250, OL, Lowell
- 44) Nate McMillan, 6-0, 285, DL, Frankenmuth
- 45) Dominic Ryan, 5-10, 245, DT, DeWitt
- 46) Luke Chambers, 5-11, 230, DL, Williamston
- 47) Jack Kulhanek, 6-2, 190, QB, New Lothrop
- 48) Gavin Nurenberg, 5-10, 225, LB, Pewamo-Westphalia
- 49) Zach DeLeeuw, 6-4, 280, OL, Freeland
- 50) Logan Allen, 6-1, 260, OL, Grand Ledge
- 51) Trevor Spitzley, 6-4, 240, OL, Pewamo-Westphalia
- 52) Aidan Halliday, 6-2, 225, LB, Mt. Pleasant Sacred Heart
- 53) Dakobe White, 5-11, 150, WR, Ewart
- 54) Aidan Robinson, 5-9, 170, RB, Bay City Western
- 55) Josh Wilson, 6-2, 200, LB, Beal City
- 56) Isaac Casey, 6-2, 235, TE, Belding
- 57) Preston Wallace, 6-1, 175, QB, Ewart
- 58) Mason Kirm, 6-3, 265, OL, Rockford
- 59) Mac Fourman, 6-1, 165, DB, Grand Ledge
- 60) Brennan Miller, 6-3, 325, OL, Mason
- 61) Ty Fournier, 5-8, 160, RB, Freeland
- 62) Jack Fussman, 6-1, 180, QB, Beal City

## Class of 2025

- 1) Cason Carswell, 6-3, 165, QB, Mason
- 2) Ethan Kraatz, 6-4 ½, 280, OL, Saginaw Heritage
- 3) Zane Panchula, 6-5, 283, OL, Rockford
- 4) Jace Clarizio, 6-0, 190, RB, East Lansing
- 5) AJ Hill, 5-10, 175, RB, Davison
- 6) Max Stoecker, 6-2, 270, OL, Midland
- 7) Mason Chadwell, 6-0, 183, WR, Lansing Everett
- 8) Elliott Lerner, 5-11, 170, QB, DeWitt
- 9) Isaac Poot, 6-1, 190, DB, Rockford
- 10) Derrick Simmons, 6-3, 265, DL, Frankenmuth
- 11) Cayden Bell, 5-9, 210, FB/LB, Lansing Waverly
- 12) Jayden Lockhart, 6-4, 300, OL, Davison
- 13) Logan Doerr, 5-10, 195, FB/LB, Mason
- 14) Colton Klein, 5-9, 200, QB, Swan Valley
- 15) Gregory Myles, 6-3, 290, OL, Haslett
- 16) Tommy Stout, 6-2, 240, OL, East Lansing
- 17) Chad Brown, 6-6, 210, QB, Hemlock
- 18) Broden Peska, OL, Ithaca
- 19) R'Mon Terry, 6-2, 230, OL, Lansing Everett
- 20) Braylen Naves, 6-1, 175, WR, Davison
- 21) Preston Bohnet, 6-2, 185, DB, Grand Ledge
- 22) Abram Lerner, 5-11, 165, RB, DeWitt
- 23) Anthony Edwards, 6-0, 220, DL/OL, Lansing Catholic
- 24) Kharon Turnley, 6-0, 190, DE, Lansing Everett
- 25) Brayton Thelen, 5-10, 160, QB, Pewamo-Westphalia
- 26) Erik Lardie, 6-6, 200, QB, Haslett
- 27) Gavin Dusseau, 6-1, 210, LB/TE, DeWitt
- 28) Nizjai Davidson, 5-11, 190, RB, Lansing Everett
- 29) Case Johnson, 5-10, 190, RB, Greenville
- 30) Logan Zahn, 6-1, 190, WR, Swan Valley
- 31) Ashton Luckhardt, 5-7, 165, DB/WR, Shephard
- 32) Kaven Unangst, 5-10, 150, WR, New Lothrop

## Class of 2026

- 1) Ben Nichols, 6-5, 325, OL, Davison
- 2) Kory Amachree, 6-0, 195, RB, Haslett
- 3) Traverse Moore, 6-0, 180, WR, DeWitt
- 4) Jadon Bender, 5-10, 150, WR/DB, DeWitt
- 5) Tristan Comer, 6-6, 220, TE/DE, Freeland
- 6) Jacob Schorhaar, 6-3, 205, TE/DE, DeWitt
- 7) Javari Funches, 5-10, 180, LB, Lansing Everett
- 8) Emmett Leidi, 6-0, 278, DL, Lansing Everett
- 9) Luke Ahern, DB, Rockford
- 10) Cooper Parks, 5-8, 170, WR/DB, Grand Ledge
- 11) Brayden Daniels, QB, Rockford
- 12) Jaxson Dosh, 6-0, 165, QB, Davison
- 13) Jack Iakiri, 6-0, 220, OL/DL, Lowell
- 14) Hayden Hendrickson, 5-9, 145, RB, Eaton Rapids
- 15) Luke Nolan, 5-8, 220, DL, DeWitt



Ethan Mason, Saginaw Heritage

Ty Robertson, Saginaw Heritage



Bryce Underwood, Belleville. Bryce is the number one recruit in the country for class of 2025.

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# Belding Geared Up For Another Championship Season

## John Raffel Sports Scene

Belding football coach Monty Price is bidding for another championship season after the Redskins were 9-2, O-K Silver kings and district finalists last year.

Key players who graduated were Drew Donovan, Tyler Slocum, Brad Winsor, Owen Meinke, Bryce Flynn, Isai Badder, Drew Willmore, Trenton Dodd, Jakob Will, Keagen Deters and Koden McNeil.

Key players on the roster will be

seniors: Anthony Szubinski, Jack Ward, Isaac Casey, Levi Linebaugh, Lucas Waldron, Alex Sherman, Max McCarty, Hunter Bristow, Chayse Strouse, Arnold Cantu, Pablo Velasquez, Joseph Wood, Caden Castillo, Branden Kammers, Angel Medina, Hayden Halladay, Kaden Vanweerd and Maddox Smith.

Juniors are Spencer Waldron, Hunter Conrad, TJ Smith, Blake Peasley, Gaje Glavan,

Payton Deschaine, Riley Powers, Codey Manley, Gavin Andres, Dylan Vanweerd,

Trenton Boroff,

RJ Linebaugh, Caleb Fairfield, Chase Snyder and Mason Dodd.

Price said he expects this to be a team that will "compete and finish," and a main asset will be

strength and experience in the program.

"We always have to work on getting better every day."

As for the top teams in the conference, "any team can win it," Price said.

Belding coach Monty Price (second from right) hopes to contend for the OK Silver title.



# Ionia Ready To Have Another Winning Season

## John Raffel Sports Scene

Ionia football coach Chad Rhynard hopes to have the talent to enjoy another banner football season.

"Defeating Lansing Catholic in overtime for the first time since 1993 was a great moment for our program and our community," Rhynard said.

Some outstanding graduates left the program including offensive tackle Chris Smith, offensive tackle and defensive end Aiden Hart and wide receiver/safety Ethan Bowen

"All three of these were guys who embraced our philosophy of physical play and effort from whistle to whistle," Rhynard said.

Ionia coaches celebrated a special moment last season.

Top players should include Travis Tucker Jr (SR, QB/CB) "a gifted athlete who can take over games with his speed," Brennan Brownell (SR, RB/LB), a returning two year starter at linebacker, Tyson Brownell (Jr, RB/LB), "who has breakaway ability at running back; Aden Wenzel (SR, OT/DE), "who has the most returning experience on offensive line and defensive line, Henry Castle (Jr, TE/LB), "who is incredibly versatile on both sides of the ball for a big kid, and Carter Starks (Jr, TE/DE), "a great athlete for a bigger kid as well."

Rhynard added: "Our expectations are always the same, as we want to win every game we play in. The conference makes this very difficult, but there is enough talent to have a shot at winning enough to qualify for the playoffs."

Speed on both sides of the ball will be a team strength.

"We will be replacing all five offensive linemen this year," Rhynard this. "This will be incredibly difficult, especially early on."

The conference will not be easy for Ionia. "Portland and Lansing Catholic are two of the better programs in the area," he said. "Charlotte won eight games last year and is beginning to establish themselves as a top program in the conference as well. The addition of Lakewood and Olivet make the conference top to bottom incredibly competitive.

"It's difficult to say where our team could finish. Depending on the development of the offensive line, we could finish towards the top, as well as towards the bottom if they are unable to grow quickly."



# Lakewood Eyes CAAC Title Contention

## John Raffel Sports Scene

Matthew Markwart coached a Lakewood team which was 6-3 last season and he's anxious to see what the Vikings will be able to do this year.

Lakewood graduated many players from last year including Nathan Willette (QB, All State LB), David Smith (OL/DL), Walker

Kliffman (OL/LB), Montreal Reid (RB/DB), Reese Keeler (OL/DL), Ethan Weller (WR/DB) Austin Straub (TE) and Keefer Walkington (DB/WR).

"We graduated a group of fine young men that will be missed," Markwart said.

Top players this are Bryson Haight (QB) Marcus Courtney (RB/LB), Ethan Goodemoot (RB/DL)

Cole Anderson (RB/DL) Jayden Manhart (OL/DL), Brennan Lehman (TE/DL) Seth Willette (QB/DB) and Eli Jablonski (WR/DB) are a very strong group of underclassmen that are all a part, of a successful team.

Markwart expects the Vikes to be a team which will compete every week.

"Our leadership is strong and hard working group," he said. "We

graduated some key positions so just getting up to speed of the game will be a need."

Markwart expects the conference to be strong again this season.

"Front runners in our league are Portland, Lansing Catholic, Charlotte. We should be in the middle of the pack," Markwart said.

# Charlotte Expects To Be Strong Again

## John Raffel Sports Scene

It was quite a season for coach Mike Sparks and Charlotte a year ago.

How about 2023?

"We are coming off one of the best records in school history (9-2)," Sparks said. "However we finished second to Portland in the league standings and even though we defeated defending D4 state Champions Chelsea in the first round of the playoffs, we lost the next week in the District Finals to Hastings 23-13.

"We sent several players on to continue playing football collegiately," Sparks said. (Running back) Kaeden Maynard, wide receiver Fulton Reed will both play at Olivet College this fall and Matthew Utter will be walking on at Ferris State University after representing us in the MHSFCA All Star Game at Offensive/Defensive Line.

"The biggest loss will be two time All-State WR/RB Braden Hill who was awarded a scholarship to play at Saginaw Valley State University in the Fall. Brody Houck was the defensive captain of our team, and was second in school history in total tackles, so we will miss him as well."

The cupboard is not empty.

"We have several key players returning, led mostly with senior skill players, Ben Buzzard QB/WR/DB, Carson Berkompas (TE/DE/OLB) Cutler Brandt (RB/WR/DB/LB)," Sparks said. "We also return one senior and two junior starters in our offensive line; Senior Mattheu Hulsebos and Juniors Reid Blasius and Van Reed leading the way. While we will not

have a large roster, we expect to be very competitive. Cutler Brandt will lead the way defensively as he returns as our all time season record holder in total tackles, he is a very dynamic offensive weapon as well.

"The offense will be led by two returning quarterbacks senior Ben Buzzard who started the season undefeated last year, until he was injured in week five; his replacement Christian Powers will be a junior and led the team to five victories including the famed playoff victory against defending state champs Chelsea High school; Both of these young men excelled last season and we look for both of them to be even better this year. Carson Berkompas is a tremendous two-way player who will be a force at linebacker and tight end."

Sparks added: "Of course all of our success will be based on the performance of our offensive and defensive line, and returners Clark Aapala and Troy Huber who figure into the mix as well. The defense will be anchored by more seniors; returning interior linemen Jared Brown and Jayden Kill, and

senior linebackers Zac Lapoint, Aiden Johnson and Tyler Bidelman who will play alongside returning junior Linebacker Tim Bensinger.

"We expect to be very competitive this season; with the addition of two new teams in the conference (Olivet and Lakewood) and a new nonconference opponent (Three Rivers) we are very eager to get to work as we know that the road to a championship will not be easy. We know that we have to play well every week in order to compete, however we expect that we will do exactly that...we will not take any opponent lightly and expect that each of those same opponents will give us their best game respectively. If anything, last year's success has made us more of a target this year and we will be prepared for that each night."

As for the conference, "we hope to compete for a league championship, build on last years success and win a district title," Sparks said. "Once a team gets that far, anything can happen and so our ultimate goal is play for and win a state championship at Ford Field on Thanksgiving weekend. We believe that this year's team strengths will be defensive speed and offensive big play potential. We have worked very hard this offseason and hope that another strength of this team will be its team discipline. We are in the fifth year of our program and looking forward to showing everyone that we are committed to playing at a very high level.

"We must work together as a team and have the next man up mentality, we do not

have a very large roster so we will need to be in better condition than our opponents and must be able to overcome adversity that a long season holds. Staying healthy will also be a big key. We hope to contend with the powers in the conference. Portland is clearly the team to beat as they have one of their most talented teams in recent history but we believe that the White division is the most competitive it has ever been."

Sparks added: "Tonia is a very balanced football team that will compete every week, Lansing Catholic is a state power and looking to improve on a subpar conference finish last year. Lansing Sexton is poised to make the leap to playoff caliber opponent and are good enough to beat anyone they play. For us Eaton Rapids is the rivalry game and if wedon't play well against them they have all the things necessary to win the matchup. We also have Olivet and Lakewood joining the league and they figure to do well as they were the top two teams in their former league.

"We are more excited about this season than any in recent years and hope to show all the work the team has put in since the end of last season."



Charlotte coach Mike Sparks.

# Love Hopes To Rebuild Bridgeport Program

## John Raffel Sports Scene

Ryan Love takes over a Bridgeport program, which did have a player commit to Grand Valley State University.

"Zaylin Martin, Khalil Cliff, and Johnathon Jackson will all be missed from what I've seen of them

on film from last season," Love said. "Jayden Garza, a senior lineman, will have to be a leader for us on and off the field. I expect him to help us control the line of scrimmage on both sides of the ball.

"Elijah Bowes, a junior lineman, will play a similar role. Jamareon Jones, a junior

athlete, has made great strides in the summer and will need to make explosive plays to help us stay balanced. We approach things one

game at a time. Our first expectation is to play our best Week 1.

"We should have decent team speed and a balanced approach to our different opponents. We need to work on keeping focused on the task at hand and taking the season one practice at a time."

Bridgeport plays in the Tri-Valley Conference."

"Our league is very strong," Love said. "It's tough to name a favorite when so many teams have made

considerable, and recent playoff runs. This fits well with our team's day-day mantra."



The Bridgeport football team hopes to be contender this season.

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# Breckenridge Confident Of Another Huge Season

**John Raffel Sports Scene**

It was an outstanding 2022 season for the Breckenridge Huskies. It could be a humdinger in 2023. Isaac Gregory is the coach.

"We had a fun ride in 2022," he said. "With a final record of 8-3, our only losses came to a state finalist twice and a state semifinalist once. While we will always strive for more, I'm proud of what last year's team accomplished. It laid an outstanding foundation for us to build off of going forward.

"We graduated a stellar senior class. All-staters Collin Sitts, Ryan Wolfgang and Gabe Ramereiz are out and into the world. We also graduated

Camden and Aiden Smith, Aidan Chamberlin, Ondray Thornton, Maxx Eastman and Slayter Miller. It was a big senior class that was valued at every position group."

The talent is very impressive for this season.

"Jaxon Laubscher and Xzavior Garcia are back for one more ride this year," Gregory said. "Jaxon is a QB/DB, while Xzavior is an OL/DL. Andrew Zuniga (WR/DB) is also returning as a senior, along with Gabe Coyle (RB/LB). We add Gavin Long (RB/DB) to the roster, who rounds out our senior class with Cris Zuniga. We have a junior class that is low in numbers but high in upside, and will likely be calling on the talents of a couple of sophomores as well. We have lots of Swiss Army Knife type athletes

who just want to compete.

"All expectations go through our effort and preparation. I expect our group to show up and go to work, with a winning mentality and a competitive spirit. The chips will fall wherever they may, but the Huskies will bring their best when the lights come on this fall. I love the versatility that this particular group of athletes has. Game planning has been enjoyable with that in mind."

There's plenty the Huskies need to keep working on.

"There are never enough reps to be had in a day," Gregory said. "We have lots to learn in the 8-player game still, and we are trying to maximize every second of practice time. No stone is ever fully polished.

"Our league is tough from top to bottom. We have two teams that went to a state semifinal or farther last season, and three others that went to the district championships. We hope to be in the thick of things when October rolls around."



Jaxon Laubscher (10) could prove to be an elusive ball carrier for Breckenridge.

# Montabella Football Bids For Another Productive Season

**John Raffel Sports Scene**

Montabella enjoyed a productive football team last season and is looking for even more this fall.

Montabella 8-player football coach Tim Webb's team is coming off a season with a 5-4 record and playoff qualification. The Mustangs averaged 43 points per game on offense.

Rayce Sackett finished with 1,584 rushing yards and 15 touchdowns but has graduated along with Jon Row, a three-year starter and all-conference lineman.

Key players returning include quarterback Chase Burggren, a

four-year starter at quarterback, and returning captain.

"Chase suffered a season ending injury last year in week two," Webb said. "He had a great offseason and is healthy."

Offensive lineman and linebacker Andy Fuller is a three-year starter who was second team all conference. Two-way lineman Brady Carlson was first team all-conference center last season and will anchor the offensive line.

Austin Foster and Cooper Bolton were both all-league wide receivers and defensive backs. Last year, Foster was all-conference as a receiver and Bolton as a defensive back.



Montabella's seniors will play a key role for the football team.

"We have a great senior group," Webb said. "They are smart, athletic, and provide outstanding leadership. I expect us to be competitive in every game. We're pretty experienced, and will start many seniors on both sides of the ball.

"We aren't very big but we have decent team speed. We going to need to play smart and tough to overcome some of our limitations."

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# Meridian Wants To Be Playoff Team Again

**John Raffel Sports Scene**

Sanford Meridian football coach Mike Bilina said his team "exceeded expectations" in 2022 when it was 6-4 and lost to Millington in the playoffs.

He adds that quarterback-defensive back Brayden Riley "was one of the most dynamic players in the area. His ability to make plays made him a threat on both side of the ball."

Nickolas Metzger (WR/DB) has college athletic ability and size (6-3, 175).

"He missed three games last season due to injury, however he showed big play ability when he was healthy," Bilina said.

Jace Burns (QB/RB/DB) is a three-year starter.

"He will be the brains of the offense and defense, very intelligent player," Bilina said.

Chase Solano (OL/DL) is a returning senior who was the anchor of the defensive line in 2022.

Chase Thurlow (Center/DL) is anchor of the offensive line.

Dawson Kolka- (OL/DL) is "strong and physical," Bilina said.

Jaylen Fellows- (RB/LB)- 3 year starter very solid player

"We are playing a tougher schedule, Clare, Bullock Creek, Gladwin, Alpena to name a few," Bilina said. As a D7 team this year most of the teams we play are larger than



Key players for Sanford Meridian will include, from left to right... Jace Burns, Chase Solano, and Chase Thurlow.

us. That being said we are excited to compete at a high level. We look forward to the challenges this season will bring.

"We have a good group of seniors this year. They will need to use their maturity to help bring the young guys along. We have a lot of new faces on the team. It will be important to get them up to speed as quick as possible."

Bilina expects the Jack Pine to be among the most exciting conferences in the state.

"The Jack Pine is playing good football right now," Bilina said. "With Gladwin winning the 2022 Division 5 state title they are still the team to beat, however Clare has almost everyone back from last year's team. We should be competing to be behind those two teams. I think we could get as high as third in the league, however each week will be tough."

# Swan Valley Could Be A TVC Contender

**John Raffel Sports Scene**

Coach Kevin Gavenda has a Swan Valley football team ready to have a huge season.

Swan Valley was 7-4 last year and improved each week. But the team graduated some outstanding personnel.

This includes Drew Kaeckmeister- 1st team all TVC defense and offense, all region tight end,

Payton Guilbeaux 1st Team

all TVC Defense and 1st team all region defense, and Kaidon Atchabowski 1st Team all TVC defense 1st Team all-state.

Key returning starters are senior two-way linemen Chase Fanning and Jack Ladouce; Joe Miller-SR, RB/LB; John Meyette, RB/S; Colton Klein, QB; Logan Zahn, WR/S and Cal DeLisle WR/CB.

"I expect this team to play well together and get better every week. We will be young but talented," Gavenda said. "Our

strengths will be our team speed and leadership from the kids.

"We are a young team so we will need to work on our discipline on the field and our understanding of the game."

Swan Valley hopes to be a contender in the TVC.

"I see the TVC Red being one of the toughest in the state again this year," he said. "Frankenmuth and Freeland at the top once again and I see our team right there in every game competing."



Joey Miller (9) and Chase Fanning (74) will be top players for Swan Valley.

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# Carrollton Wants To Return To Playoffs

## John Raffel Sports Scene

It looks like Carrollton's Nicholas Barton is going to have a possible playoff contender this fall. The Cavaliers had made the playoffs the previous three years but didn't qualify last year.

"2022 for us was a lot of things, but the main thing was change," Barton said. "First, the graduation of a lot of guys who made a huge impact for quite a few years. I then saw a change of the entire coaching staff. With that it brings new challenges. Getting to know players and players getting acclimated to new coaches. Coaches brought in a new system, culture and that takes time to get acclimated. Even though the win-loss wasn't what we had envisioned, we did have a successful year. Participation was up and the victory over Hemlock was the first since 2001."

The Cavs graduated several key players from the 2022 squad.

"Dre Gissendanner has been a fixture in our program since I believe his sophomore year," Barton said. "Dre had been playing running back but when we didn't have a QB, we asked Dre to step into it and he did without

hesitation. Dre is someone that can play any skill position and at a high level.

"Christian Garcia did a lot for our program. He was our center and a middle linebacker. He was the quarterback of our offensive line and for our defense. He was a guy that never missed anything. He was literally there everyday. Christian was everything you want in a football player. Hard worker and relentless."

"Lenton Patrick is a hard working young man," Barton said. "He is one of those players that will do anything you ask of him. He is hard nosed and tough. When Lenton got his opportunity to play running back, he ran with it. He was definitely a welcome surprise."

"It was awesome watching Javian Duran grow and develop as a football player. He hasn't been playing football that long and to watch where he started to where he finished was remarkable. He became one of our best receivers and rightfully so. He put a ton of work in and it paid off."

But Barton likes the running backs who are returning.

Elijah Jackson- Sr, RB/ DB. "We are expecting a big season for Eli," Barton said. "He missed his junior season due to a season ending injury in the scrimmage last year."

Johnny Brown- Jr, WR/ DB.

"Johnny Brown seen a lot of success in 2022," Barton said. "We expect him to build on that this year."

Kentae Longuemire- Sr, TE/ DE. "Kentae had a huge junior year on the defensive side," Barton said. "We are expecting the same outcome this year."

Bryce Dupis- Jr, OL/ DL- "We are expecting a huge year from Bryce," Barton said. "Bryce has put in a lot of time in the weightroom this off season and if you haven't heard of him, we believe you will this year."

Izaiah De La Cruz- Sr, OL/ LB- "As a big piece of the OL and LB, we are really going to rely on Izaiah for his leadership," Barton said.

Johnny Carter- Jr, Wr/ DB- "Johnny put a ton of work in this off season to perfect his craft. We believe all of his hard work will pay off this year."

Daryion Carter- Sr- WR/ DB- "Daryion is going to be a fixture in our defensive back field. He returns as a CB and has put a ton of work in this off season and we believe he will have a great year."

Hunter Rembish- FS/ WR- "Hunter switched positions last year and really adjusted well. We believe he will build on the experience from last year and have a huge year."

It will be an interesting season at Carrollton.

"Our expectations this year are high like everyone," Barton said.

"We have the potential of being really good this year, but our main focus is to go 1-0 in everything we do. Whether it's from play to play or the season as a whole. We want to focus on the right here, right now. Our strength this year is players wanting each other to be great. The team pushes each other in the weightroom and on the practice field. The "togetherness" has been outstanding and we hope that leads to success."

"We expected players to come out that didn't. We are working hard to increase participation but it is definitely something we have to work on. Our conference, like every year, is tough. Any of the teams can win it. Us, Millington, Standish Sterling, Bullock Creek and Hemlock. It is a very tough conference."

Da La Cruz anticipates having a fine season for Carrollton.

"I feel my strengths as a lineman is my physicality and my ability to know my opponent's first move," he said. "My strengths of being a linebacker is my IQ. I usually watch film on the opposing team and what they are going to bring on Fridays. I also believe my ability to shed blocks is a key, since I used



Izaiah De La Cruz will be a standout player for Carrollton.

to play defensive tackle and I'm used to it.

"I've been playing varsity for four years and started both ways three years. I've been voted honorable mention all-conference my sophomore and junior year and was voted honorable mention Saginaw Dream team my junior year. Our team goal this year is to make the playoffs. My goal is make All-state, hopefully make the Senior Bowl and finish the season with 110-plus tackles. Carrollton is going to be special this year and I am blessed to be a part of such a great organization. We have guys ready to get after it and we love the competition here."

# Coleman Poised To Be Force In Eight-Player Football

## John Raffel Sports Scene

Chad Klopff and his Coleman Comets are entering their second year of eight-man football and are ready to be a force again.

"2022 was our first season playing 8-man football, so it was a season of first for everyone," Klopff said. "Our first ever 8-man football victory came on Sept. 24 at home with a 64-12 win over Vestaburg. This was also the start of a rivalry trophy game with the Wolverines, as we play for the Tractor Trophy."

"Two weeks later we were able to play a very interesting 10:00 a.m. Saturday Homecoming game against Webberville which we won 28-8 for our second victory of the season. Our game against Sacred Heart Academy will go down as an 8-6 loss (not a typical 8-man score), but I still feel that our running back crossed the goal line to take the lead late in the fourth. The intensity of that game on both sides of the ball really jump started the wins in the weeks after that game."

Coleman graduated only four seniors.

"Ty Murray, Isaiah Biers, Shane Cole, and Dawson Haller will all be remembered for the group that helped lead the transition from 11 to 8-man football," Klopff said. "Ty Murray was a four year starter for us at corner."

Senior Vance Sysak is at quarterback.

"Vance was our starting quarterback as a junior for the first time," Klopff said. "He did a nice job of learning the 8-man game and settling down to the differences from the 11-man game. Vance will carry us with his arm and his legs this season. We look forward to a big year from him."

Senior Sam Bovee is a receiver/linebacker/corner.

"Sam will be called on to be one of our leaders on both offense and defense," Klopff said. "Sam will be one of our top targets at receiver, and his versatility on defense will be huge for us. He can play up front and has the strength and toughness to bang around with the

big boys, but he is also a very good coverage defender as well."

Senior Mason Tucker, is an offensive lineman/tight-end/defensive lineman.

"Mason will be a force on the line both ways this season," Klopff said. "He is coming off a really good off-season and his size and ability to move will be tough to handle."

Junior Jared DeVrieze is a running back/linebacker/safety.

"Jared will be a main feature in our offense this season," Klopff said. "We look for another good season from him again. Defensively, Jared is a space eater in coverage and will compete for the team leader in tackles again this season."

"Other players we have high expectations for are junior Collin Stockero (WR/CB), junior (Travis Murray (TE/LB), senior Carson DeJongh (OL/LB), sophomore 62 Dakota Lattimer OL/DL, and junior Zach MacPhee (center/DL) will all be looked at to step up and be key contributors this season among others."

Klopff expects to field a very competitive football team

"Last season we had no expectations as everything was fresh and new for us joining the 8-man game with a whole group

of new athletes starting," Klopff said. "This season, we have a much more veteran team that understands what to expect from this style of football. We are expecting to get to the level of play we found ourselves playing late in the season much sooner this year. We expect to compete week in and week out and give ourselves the chance to consistently win games."

"Our upperclassmen leadership will be a major strength for our team this season. This has been shown all summer from this group. We just need to become more comfortable with the 8-man game. It took most of last season to understand what we can and can't do in our offensive and defensive schemes. Now, we will need to continue to grow from last season."

Klopff hopes to have a contending team in the MSAC.

"In my opinion our conference top to bottom is one of the toughest in the state," he said. "There should not be many



Key players for Coleman will be Vance Sysak (10) and Jared DeVrieze (22).

easy moments all season long for any team. Coming off last year's run to the state finals, Merrill is the favorite in the conference until someone proves otherwise. Montabella, however, has a lot of returners and a lot of team speed with a group of athletes that could cause some problems for teams in the conference.

Being this is year two for us in 8-man, I am still not sure where we fall in the conference race at this time. I know we should be competitive and will fight week in and week out."

# Merrill Hoping To Keep Momentum From Last Season

## Sports Scene

Merrill High School had a season for the ages in 2022.

Merrill finished the 2022 regular season with a perfect record for the third time in team history, but the Vandals came up one game shy of claiming the state title.

That state runner-up team also set a school record for points scored with 560 in 12 games.

Now fast forward to 2023, the question that many Merrill faithful are asking is what can the Vandals do for encore.

That is a question that coach Christian Wiley has been getting often during the pre season Media Days and his answer is similar to what others are hearing around Merrill.

"We lost a lot of great players last season after our run to the state finals," Wiley said. "It's impossible to replace a group of seniors like we had. With that being said, a lot of people will be surprised how well we are reloading. We have a lot of talented players and they are coming together on the field."

Merrill brings back only two starters returning on each side of the ball, but Wiley said this team has tons of depth, and he expects a variety of players to be difference-makers.

Wiley said he also believes his 2023 team will have an advantage heading into this season thanks to their playoff run a year ago.

"The fact that they got that experience, that they got some extra weeks of practice

in, the fact that they learned from upperclassmen that were really good that got us to the state finals, I think you can't replace that," Wiley said. "It's not just something you can all of a sudden have. I think the fact that they got to live through it and practice through it every day and see what it took to be good is to help pay off for these guys as well."

Jacob Kroll and Grant Vedrode are two players Wiley will rely on this season along with new quarterback Antonio Jimenez

"A lot of these guys played football all their lives," Kroll said. We have experience



The Merrill football team hand a season for the ages in 2022 recording 10 wins and scoring a school-record 560 points.

on this team. I think our defense and offense are still good. I think we'll have a good year."

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## David Cook and Butch Harmon Sports Scene

### Mt. Pleasant Primed For Big Season

Mt. Pleasant is coming off a big 9-2 season and while the Oilers graduated some key playmakers, plenty of talent returns for another big season.

Senior quarterback Logan Borodychuk is one of the finest quarterbacks in the state and is poised for a big final season before heading to Central Michigan University.

The Oilers have a stout offensive line in front of him anchored by senior tackle Andrew Dennis who is headed to Michigan State. The forward wall also includes Kal Kowallic (6-1, 220), Ed Molyneux (6-3, 230), Brennan Bunker (5-11, 230) and Trevor Combs (6-0, 190).

Caleb Neubecker (5-10, 180) returns at running back while on defense the secondary is paced by Tyler Hutchins and Johnny Rubio.

### Saginaw Heritage Poised For Another Exciting Season

Saginaw Heritage set school records on offense last season and another explosive season is in the cards this fall.

Heading the list of returnees is senior wide receiver Braydon Isom. One of the most productive players in the state, the Miami (Ohio) recruit is primed for a big final season. Senior quarterback Ethan Mason is also back. Mason completed 62% of his passes for close to 2,400 yards and 24 touchdown passes last season.

The Hawks also welcome back senior Ty Robertson (6-3, 225). Robertson is a punishing runner on offense and a light-out hitter on defense at linebacker. Senior offensive tackle Joshua Walker (6-3, 290) is a powerful blocker up front while junior tackle Ethan Kraatz (6-4, 280) is already getting offers from MAC schools. Senior wide receiver/defensive back Torrance Welch

is another talented returnee.

### Rockford Reloading For Run In D1

With plenty of big, powerful linemen leading the way, the Rockford Rams are poised for a big season as one of the premier teams in Division 1.

The Rams are led by a host of talented linemen led by senior tackle Alex McPhee (6-5, 290) along with standout junior Zane Panchula (6-5, 290) and senior Mason Kirm (6-3, 265). Senior Drake Irwin is looking to step in at quarterback while senior Ryan Ahern (6-0, 203) is a powerful running back.

The Rams are solid on defense with the return of Lucas Bassham (6-2, 200) at defensive end along with talented defensive backs Louis Bosscher and Isaac Poot.

### Portland Looking To Repeat In CAAC White

Defending CAAC White champion Portland is gearing up to defend its title. The Raiders have a strong senior class led by Caden Thelen (rb/db), Mark Meyers (ol/lb), Caleb Bower (db), Conner Kazamer (db), Reice Thelen (dl) and offensive lineman Danton Marowelli (6-4, 220).

The Raiders also return a strong core of talented juniors led by Chris Battley (wr) and running back Barrett Brennan along with Barrett Spitzley (ol) and Evan Gross (wr/db).

### East Lansing Poised To Contend In Caac Blue

East Lansing has been one of the teams to beat in the CAAC Blue the past several seasons and that will be the case again this season.

The Trojans, who have been known to produce outstanding running backs and receivers, have one of the top running backs in Mid-Michigan in junior Jace Clarizio (6-0, 190). A blend of speed and power, Clarizio is poised for a huge junior season. The Trojans also produce outstanding linemen and senior Javon Thomas (6-4, 255) is continuing that legacy before heading to Eastern Michigan



University next season. Junior offensive lineman Tommy Stout (6-2, 240) is another lineman to keep an eye on.

The Trojans have plenty more talented players in junior offensive linemen Juston Aljaari (6-2, 225) and senior lineman Lazaro Cabrera, wideout Charlie Baker, junior defensive lineman Jay Carnegie, defensive backs Jalen McFadden and BJ Windam and Noah Lopez who will play running back and linebacker.

### Grand Ledge Set To Defend CAAC Blue Title

Grand Ledge captured the CAAC Blue title last year and while the Comets suffered some key graduation losses, the cupboard is far from bare.

Junior Preston Bohnet (6-2, 185) is a talented player who earned all-conference honors last season. Bohnet heads up the defensive secondary at safety and is a standout wide receiver who could also end up at quarterback. Senior Logan Allen (6-1, 260) returns to pave the way up front while Mac Fourman is a standout at defensive back and also in the mix at running back. Norah McCartney and Denali Smith return at receiver and defense back along with senior Jameson Patten at quarterback, receiver and defensive back. Ryan Beattie and Jake Eberhard (6-4, 255) along with junior Jayxlon McAlister bring more size along the

lines. Keep an eye out for freshman running back Anthony Baker (6-1, 185) who has the potential to be something extra special.

### Haslett Looking To Challenge In CAAC Red

Led by one of the top running backs in Mid-Michigan, Haslett is poised to challenge Mason in the rugged CAAC Red.

Nakai Amachree, who is headed to Bowling Green in the MAC, is a dynamic runner with game-breaking ability. Nakai's brother Kory Amachree, a sophomore, is another big-play threat giving Haslett a dynamic one-two combination. At quarterback, junior Erik Lardie is a talented multi-sport athlete ready to showcase his passing skills. Paving the way for the offense is a big, talented offensive line led by seniors Caleb Fisher (6-2, 285) and Luke Armstrong (5-10, 230) and junior Greg Myles (6-3, 290).

### Williamston Among Challengers In CAAC Red

Look for Williamston to also provide Mason with a challenge in the CAAC Red. Senior Noah Dunckel is an outstanding talent at running back and defensive back and also an all-state punter. Ian Young and Max McCune will also be in the mix at receiver. Luke Chambers leads the way along the lines along with Sam Woodbury, Johnny Eifert, Aiden Friess and Ian Young.

# Saginaw's Braylon Isom Considered One Of Best Receivers In State

## Sports Scene

Saginaw Heritage's Braylon Isom is largely considered one of the best wide receivers in the entire state of Michigan for the Class of 2024.

And for good reason.

Isom enters his senior season with a chance to join some rare air.

After catching 59 balls for 1,428 yards and an eye-popping 18 touchdowns in 2022, he is on target to cement his place in the Michigan High School Athletic Association record book. With 2,220 career receiving yards, he sits within 1,541 of the state record. If he matches last year's reception total, he'll finish among the state's

all-time Top 10.

If Isom's off season was any indication how focused he is entering his senior year then Heritage fans can be in for a real treat this season.

Isom didn't play AAU hoops this summer, he committed to Miami of Ohio in April and even picked up playing golf as a way to relax and hang out with friends.

Now as the season approaches he is all business.

"He's one of the best wide receivers in the state of Michigan," Heritage coach Justin Thelen said.

"When you have all that size and the ability to jump over defenders good things

Saginaw's Braylon Isom will take his talents to Miami of Ohio next season.



# Freeland's Sam Talaga A Student Of The Game; Falcons Poised For Big Season

## Sports Scene

Freeland's Sam Talaga held 16 division one college offers which included CMU, Eastern Michigan and Western Michigan.

But when he visited Harvard back in April, and when the Crimson officially offered the three-star recruit, who played linebacker and quarterback for the Falcons last season he knew he found home for his collegiate career.

"It was an extremely tough process," Talaga said. "I knew there were a lot of factors that went into making my decision, but to be able to play the sport I love at a University such as Harvard it was too much to turn down. I can't wait to get there and get started."

However there is still unfinished business at Freeland that needs to get done this season.

Talaga is one of 13 seniors on the team this season. Freeland has four returning starters on offense and three on defense after an 8-3 season last year. The Falcons are aiming for a 16th straight playoff berth.

"We've got some young kids, but they're pretty talented," said Freeland coach Kevin Townsend, who is entering his 18th year as the Falcons head coach.

Talaga's role this season has changed as Townsend moved him from the quarterback position to running back in Freeland's T-Formation.

Leading the Falcons' offense is first-year starting quarterback Jake Metiva.

"Meticva is smart, a good leader, mobile, and an all-around good teammate," Townsend said.

Also lining up with Talaga in the

backfield is senior Ty Fournier and junior Brayden Petre. Talaga is also a three-year starter at linebacker. Fournier is a two-year starter at running back and four-year starter on defense.

"I think we are an extremely deep team this season and I am looking forward to being able settle into my new role on offense and have a big season for us," Talaga said.

Freeland opens its season with three tough road games to start the year against at Clare, Swan Valley and Essexville Garber. The Falcons will be happy to reach their first home game, which doesn't fall until Sept. 15. Freeland also visits Alma Sept. 22 and state runner-up Frankenmuth Oct. 6, while its other home date are Birch Run Sept. 29, Bay City John Glenn Oct. 13 and Crosswell-Lexington Oct. 20.

Freeland's Sam Talaga announced at the beginning of the summer he will play his college football at Harvard University.

happen. He is just so much fun to watch and coach. He's also physically mature for a 17-18-year old kid. He's powerful in the weight room, so he's going to show up at Miami, Ohio ready to play at that level. He's powerful and twitchy, so he can be pretty dynamic in how they use him."

Isom is excited about having the opportunity to play at the next level, but first things first his senior season is looming with the opportunity to make things happen on the field.

"We have looked forward to this season since our season ended last fall," Isom said. "Our last game ended on a horrible note, so we want to put that behind us and move forward. It's time to get the year started and we are excited for a big year."

The 6-foot-2, 195-pound Isom garnered first-team all-state honors from the Associated Press last fall and was named Sports Scene Magazine's Offensive Player of the Year in 2022.



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