

Gaylord expects to contend again

By JEFF PEEK
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TRaverse City — Gaylord lost a lot. Only six of 22 starters return to help the Blue Devils defend their Big North Conference football championship this fall.

But when two of those players — senior quarterback Calvin McNamara and junior running back Tom Pratt — are among the best in the league, it's easy to see why league coaches believe that Gaylord will challenge again.

"They have to be the front runners," said

TRaverse City WEST head coach Matt Prisk, whose team was voted the league favorite, just ahead of the Blue Devils. "You can talk all you want about the kids they lost, but they still have McNamara and Pratt. McNamara is a great leader and one heck of a good player. He proved that last year."

The 6-foot, 190-pound McNamara passed for over 1,700 yards and more than 20 touchdowns last season while leading GAYLORD to a perfect 9-0 regular season. The Blue Devils' captain was intercepted only twice during the regular season, both on Hail Mary passes.

"He has some abilities that you just can't coach," said Blue Devils head coach William Cleaver. "He has a gift from God, that's all there is to it."

Add another offensive weapon like Pratt (5-11, 195), who was Gaylord's leading scorer as a sophomore last season, senior wide receiver Jason Bowman (6-3, 180) and senior Josh Hart (6-0, 200), a three-year starter at fullback, and the Blue Devils have the potential to score some points. The question, Cleaver said, is how well and how quickly his revamped offensive line comes together.

"That's a very tough line to replace," Cleaver said of last year's unit. "Between the linemen and tight end, four of the six are playing college football now. That's pretty uncommon. It makes it pretty easy to go 9-0. A line like that makes you look pretty good."

"So we have to see what our offensive line and defense are going to do," he said. "Can they step up? That's the question mark."

Only two starters return on defense — Hart, who plays inside linebacker, and senior defensive back Kyle Myers (5-10, 175). Bowman also played part time in the secondary.

"You look at the teams in this league and I think it could be very close," Cleaver said. "There's no clear-cut favorite. There's more balance than ever before."

"You'd be hard-pressed to find somebody go 7-0 (in the league) this year." Prisk agrees.

"To go undefeated you'd have to play well and get some breaks, too," he said. "This league is about as even



BIG NORTH PREVIEW

COACHES POLL

school (1st place votes)	PTS
Traverse City West (6)	62
Gaylord (2)	58
Traverse City Central	42
Cheboygan	39
Cadillac	33
Sault Ste. Marie	23
Petoskey	19
Alpena	12

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Calvin McNamara, Gaylord
Nick Pinto, TC Central
Adam Blaskowski, Cheboygan
Tom Pratt, Gaylord
Phil Thiel, TC West

as you'll see."

Prisk's Titans were voted league favorites in the preseason coaches poll, receiving six first-place votes to Gaylord's two. While West has a favorable home schedule — the team will play six games at Thirlby Field/Harry Running Stadium (see story on page 3) — the Titans' league opener, Sept. 13 at Cheboygan, could be troublesome.

"That game worries me," Prisk said. "That's a tough place to play, plus they some good kids back. That will be a big game for us."

CHEBOYGAN is picked to finish fourth in the league behind TC CENTRAL, a team that fully expects to have its best season since Traverse City split into two high schools in 1996 (story on page 4).

The top returnee for the Chiefs, who finished 4-3 in the league and 4-5 overall last year, is senior running back Adam Blaskowski (5-6, 160), whose name seems to be on the tip of every Big North coach's tongue. Blaskowski rushed for more than 600 yards last year and has big-play potential.

"He typifies our backfield," said Cheboygan coach Jack Coon. "He's small, quick and tough."

Coon has 44 players on varsity, 25 of which are seniors.

"We lost a lot to graduation, plus a few to injuries and other things," Coon said. "I think our team speed is better overall — as good as it's been in awhile."

Coon's son, Ryan Coon (5-11, 150), will call signals for the Chiefs. The senior quarterback has some intangibles that other players don't have.

"He knows this offense better than any kid I've had here," Jack Coon said. "Of course, he's better. He grew up with it. We're of the same mind."

Key players for Cheboygan include senior captain Shane Barber, a 6-foot, 185-pound nose guard, as well as senior tight end/linebacker Matt Barr (6-1, 180) and senior inside linebacker/fullback Wade Canell (6-0, 170).

CADILLAC, picked fifth, is coming off a 7-4 season. The Vikings went 5-2 in the league (6-3 overall in the regular season) and rallied to upend Gaylord in the first round of the playoffs before being eliminated the following week.

Head coach Jim Webb, in his fifth season at the helm, returns only two starters on offense and two on defense. Back are senior wide receiver Ryan Horrigan (6-0, 170) and senior



Record-Eagle file photo

Gaylord will rely heavily on quarterback Calvin McNamara and halfback Tom Pratt (21) as the Blue Devils strive to defend their 2001 Big North Conference championship.

2001 STANDINGS

school	BIG NORTH CONFERENCE			All	
	W	L	GB	W	L
Gaylord	7	0	—	9	1
Cadillac	5	2	2	7	4
Sault Ste. Marie	4	3	3	5	4
TC West	4	3	3	5	4
Cheboygan	4	3	3	4	5
TC Central	2	5	5	3	6
Alpena	1	6	6	1	8
Petoskey	1	6	6	1	8

tight end Jake Smith (6-4, 185), along with senior defensive lineman Joe Walker (5-9, 220) and senior middle linebacker Mark Bulger (5-10, 178).

Webb isn't worried that 18 of his positions will be filled by first-year starters.

"We have some kids who got some valuable playing time last year," he said. "They know what it takes to be successful and fill those holes."

Among those expected to start on offense are seniors Matt Kalisz (6-2, 170), who will move from back-up to starting quarterback, running back Adam Brown (5-10, 150) and wide receiver Tim Shankland (6-0, 155). Defensive starters include senior defensive back Josh McKinley (5-11, 155) and senior middle linebacker Tom Peterson (5-10, 187).

SAULT STE. MARIE has a new head coach, former defensive coordinator Greg Rambo, who was an assistant under Barry Pierson for four seasons. Rambo, who has also coached junior high and JV football, was actually the Soo's head coach for one season 17 years ago, in 1985.

"I'm enjoying it," said Rambo, 45. "I'm trying to build enthusiasm. I'm not like Barry (who was known for his intensity); his personality drove the team."

"I'm a little more laid back. The players can't count on the coach for their intensity. They have to look within themselves for that. I can get fired up, I'm just not that way all the time."

Rambo said 43 players came out for

the varsity squad this fall — "our best turnout in 20 years."

"We had 37 last year," he said. "But some years have been in the high 20s."

Rambo said the Blue Devils graduated most of their skill players, including their linebackers. The team's strength will be its linemen.

Strangely enough, the Soo will have two players named Matt Arnold playing side-by-side. Both are seniors, both are 5-11. Matt Arnold the guard weighs 240 pounds, bench presses 400 and is the Blue Devils' physical leader. Matt Arnold the center weighs 205.

Also back are senior right tackle Chris Pupek (6-4, 240), junior left guard Matt Deuman (6-1, 210), senior tight end Chris Brooks (6-2, 220) and senior all-conference defensive lineman Terry King (5-9, 240). Senior Travis Turner (6-3, 175) also returns to play wide receiver.

Senior Price McAllister (5-10, 170) will play quarterback in the Soo's wing-T offense.

Dave Farris, entering his 16th season as head coach at PETOSKEY, believes his team will be improved from its 1-6, 1-8 record from 2001.

Co-captain Nick Madrick, a 6-3, 190-pound senior with good speed, will direct the offense. Fellow captain P.J. Currey, a 6-foot, 222-pound senior will anchor the line.

Other key returnees for Petoskey are junior guard/outside linebacker Dane Doster (6-2, 191), junior tackle Keith Stely (6-5, 268) and junior line-

backer/tight end Evan Brownie (6-3, 202).

"We're looking for improvement," Farris said. "And I think we'll be better."

ALPENA, which like Petoskey was 1-6, 1-8 last fall, returns a quarterback with the perfect last name — Drew Tarkington, who head coach Jack Gebauer calls "Fran" after the former NFL signal-caller. Tarkington, a 6-foot, 185-pound senior, will also play some running back.

Other returnees expected to contribute for the Wildcats are senior wide receiver Cody Anderson (6-1, 180), junior running back Matt Coussineau (5-11, 200), senior linebacker/guard Josh Orbin (6-2, 190) and junior quarterback Shane Pinger (6-5, 200).

"We finally have some depth on our team," Gebauer said. "There's a little variety there."

Also expected to play key roles are senior running back/linebacker Chris Kaufman (5-11, 178), senior nose guard Kevin Boch (5-11, 288), senior offensive tackles Josh Bixley (6-7, 308) and Adam Kelsch (6-5, 303), and senior tight end Mike Wjoda (6-3, 195).

"When I took over three years ago I had a plan," said Gebauer, who coached college football in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois. "I really feel this year will be a big year for us. I'm not saying we're going to win the conference, but we'll be improved and we'll be in games."

"We have our strength built up, but attitude is the toughest thing to change."