

Two on the town

Devils, Snowbirds double Gaylord's playoff pleasure

By **DENNIS CHASE**

Record-Eagle sports editor

GAYLORD — One town. Two teams. Three consecutive years in the high school football playoffs for one, four for the other. Welcome to Gaylord, home of the unbeaten and state-ranked Division III Gaylord Blue Devils and Division VIII Gaylord St. Mary Snowbirds.

Welcome also to a town that has a contagious case of football fever.

"It doesn't matter where you go," said Mike Dunn, sports editor of the Gaylord Herald-Times. "If it's the bank, the restaurant, the grocery store, people are talking football. It's an exciting time around here."

No need to tell that to the coaches, St. Mary's Rod Bragg and Gaylord's Will Cleaver. They hear the buzz, they feel the excitement.

"This is great for our community," Bragg said. "Our community is nuts over football."

That's what happens when you have two powerhouses in

WHO: Big Rapids (6-3) vs. Gaylord (9-0)

WHAT: Div. III playoff opener

WHEN: Saturday, 1 p.m.

WHERE: Gaylord High School
UP NEXT: Winner of Fremont/Ogemaw Heights

WHO: Rapid River (6-3) vs. Gaylord St. Mary (9-0)

WHAT: Div. VIII playoff opener

WHEN: Friday, 7 p.m.

WHERE: Gaylord High School
UP NEXT: Winner of Posen/Rock Mid-Peninsula

town.

"This is fun," said Cleaver, a smile lighting up his face. "Everybody's excited. I've had people come up to me and say, 'Great job, coach.' And 'what about St. Mary?' Our community is taking a lot of pride in this."

Rightfully so. Not only is interest up, so is attendance. Fans often ring the field at Gaylord games.

"Without a doubt, our attendance is better than it has ever been," Cleaver said. "Our games are well-attended. We've had some of the best gates we've ever had. The town is

excited about coming to watch us play. Let's face it, everybody likes to be around a winner. That's contagious."

The coaches admit there's no secret to their programs success.

"There are some real quality athletes in our (school) systems right now," Bragg said. "I know what Will has over there, and we've certainly been blessed with good athletes here the last four years. That has a lot to do with it."

Cleaver agreed. "Absolutely," he said.

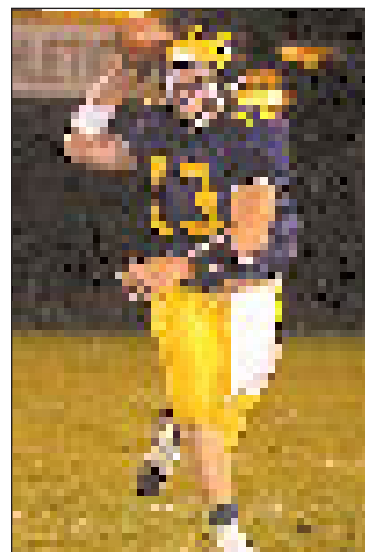
"They're the ones that play the game. We've had some great athletes come through our program. Not just one or two, but a whole bunch. The key is that they play as a team — in a team concept, a team atmosphere. That can make or break a team. If you have a group of guys who are great athletes, but don't play together, and don't play with the unity that's needed, you're not going to achieve success."

Cleaver has ties to both schools. He led St. Mary to the Division III state finals in 1999



Record-Eagle/file photos

Above, junior halfback Tom Pratt (21) leads the Blue Devils' rushing attack, while Calvin McNamara, at right, directs the Gaylord offense.



before accepting the job at Gaylord. Cleaver credits that 1999 trip to the Silverdome as a turning point in Gaylord.

"They (fans) got the fever when St. Mary went to the dome," he said. "That answered the questions: Can we ever do that? Can a group of kids from Gaylord go to the Silverdome?"

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