

# Glads seeking playoff redemption

◀Continued from Page 3

The historical implications of the setback, in contrast to the program's long-standing tradition of winning football, were not lost on Schram.

"I've been going (to Grand Traverse Area Catholic Schools) since preschool," said Schram, whose uncle played on the first-ever TC St. Francis football team. "My mother's side of the family are all big SF backers, and I grew up going to the games, thinking how I couldn't wait to get to play."

"I think those losses made us stronger deep down inside. I remember looking up at the scoreboard and saying 'I know we're better than that.'"

Heintz says he had similar deliberations.

"Those were just very disappointing losses," he said. "Both years, we really thought we were ready to go. As soon as that (Glen Lake) game ended, I think we were all already burning inside to get back at it this year."

The Glads began this year with a trip to Notre Dame, where they attended an 'excellence retreat' at the South Bend, Ind. university. They conditioned, bonded and even met Fighting Irish coach Tyrone Willingham.

The experience was intended as a springboard for a purported 'Return to Glory', and the results indicate that such a revival has been achieved, only inasmuch as the team reclaimed the conference championship with a perfect 6-0 league mark, won eight regular season contests and eliminated the Selection Sunday guesswork. But Heintz says that only one component of this season's themed quest has been satisfied.

"At the start of the season we talked about two team goals — winning the conference and winning states, like most teams do," he said. "We got the first one, and now it's a new game. It's like starting over and we have to turn our focus to (first round opponent) Mio and the playoffs."

Sellers says that the current core of seniors have been tempered in the fires of experience.

"That season when we lost to Kingsley in the first round, we had five or six sophomores playing important roles," he said. "And those kids are now the leaders on this team. They went from going to the (Silverdome) to those losses and these guys have had to live through that. They started to become leaders as juniors and have fully shouldered that load this year."

Heintz, Schram and the rest of the Gladiators will face a Mio squad on Saturday that won its first eight games this year before falling to Glen Lake in the final week of the regular season. While the team is still acclimating itself to their first round foe's offensive and defensive tendencies, the early reports say the Thunderbolts "have size, one big back and another who runs strong and breaks tackles, and a quarterback that is pretty quick," according to Sellers.

Perhaps the most important factor in Saturday's opener for the Glads — an ingredient missing from the last two playoff whitewashings — is home field advantage.

"Thirby Field is a special place to all of us," Schram said. "It's awesome to have the home crowd there at least on more time for the seniors, and this will be quite a weekend with two playoff games. I think all of Traverse City will be going to a football game this weekend."

With the regular season in the rear view mirror and a return to statewide prominence on the team's agenda, Heintz says this edition of the Gladiators has the right makeup to make a run at the ultimate prize.

"This year, I think the team has the right blend of guys," he said. "Some guys are vocal leaders, some guys lead by example, some just play. Everybody fills their role, and that's what's different this year."

## Titans in first-ever playoff game

◀Continued from Page 4

started in '75, and Saginaw Arthur Hill went 9-0 and didn't allow a point, but they wouldn't have made it. So we knew some adjustments had to be made.

"I think the current system is better for the game. More teams make it and more communities get excited about football, and

that's what it's all about."

TC West senior lineman Nick Gotts was 6 years old the last time a TC team other than St. Francis was in the playoffs.

"I'm proud that I can be part of the first West team to make it," Gotts said. "It makes me happy knowing that the community is excited. We feel like we're

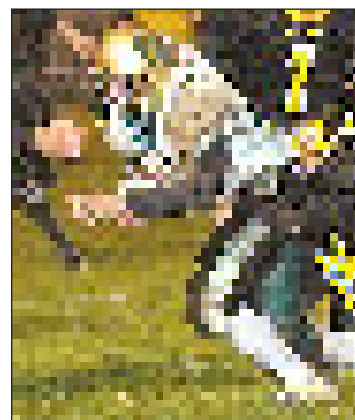
breaking ground."

Prisk said he is proud of both his team and his coaching staff — which also includes Dan Rosenburg, Darren Frechette, Lenny Brinson and Dan Bush — for the way they persevered through a turbulent off-season after a disappointing finish last fall.

"We're happy to be in the

position we're in," Prisk said. "With the exception of a few minutes against Gaylord (two weeks ago), we've answered everything thrown at us."

"We want to represent this town well," he said. "And I promise you, win or lose, we're going to play great football and get after it."



West RB Tony Gourlay

## Gaylord, St. Mary double town's playoff pleasure

◀Continued from Page 5

"I think now there's a feeling in the back of everyone's minds that, hey, this might be the year for one of our two teams. It's exciting to be in that situation, and have the community feel that way."

Gaylord boasts the longest regular-season win streak in northern Michigan at 20. The Blue Devils have put together back-to-back 9-0 regular seasons.

Playoff success, though, has eluded the Blue Devils.

Two years ago, in its first-ever playoff game, Gaylord lost at Fremont 35-28. A year ago, the Blue Devils dropped a 24-21 decision to Big North Conference rival Cadillac.

Expectations are higher now.

"The next big step for us would be to win a first-round game in the playoffs," Cleaver said. "We've never done that."

"They're (fans) starting to get used to us being in the playoffs. It's becoming an expectation. Now everybody is saying, 'Hey, you have to

win that first game, coach.' It always gets bigger as you go.

"It's funny," he added, "two years ago it was like the greatest thing when we made the playoffs. We just wanted to get in. Now, it's like we have to make a run."

Much like St. Mary.

After reaching the state finals in 1999, the Snowbirds advanced to the regional finals — three rounds into the playoffs — the last two years.

"We expect to be in the playoffs," said St. Mary senior lineman Bill Mason. "I think the guys at Gaylord (High School) feel like that, too."

St. Mary is one of the smallest schools in the state with an enrollment of 144 (boys and girls). Forty-two boys play football.

St. Mary, which has 17 regular season games in a row and 36 of 37, opens the playoffs Friday night by hosting Rapid River, a team it beat 30-6 in the district finals last year.

St. Mary had a tough season-opening win over Glen

### Gaylord results

Gaylord 21, Ogemaw Hts. 7  
Gaylord 48, Oscoda 0  
Gaylord 46, Cadillac 0  
Gaylord 45, Cheboygan 7  
Gaylord 28, Petoskey 21  
Gaylord 25, Alpena 0  
Gaylord 37, TC Central 6  
Gaylord 21, TC West 14  
Gaylord 48, Sault 6

### St. Mary results

St. Mary 26, Glen Lake 19  
St. Mary 48, Hillman 8  
St. Mary 42, Onaway 7  
St. Mary 2, Mancelona 0 (fft)  
St. Mary 38, Central Lake 0  
St. Mary 37, Pellston 0  
St. Mary 41, Inland Lakes 8  
St. Mary 47, Bellaire 0  
St. Mary 48, Johannesburg 0

Lake — avenging a loss last year — and then rolled, winning its next seven games (Mancelona forfeited) by an average score of 43-3.

Just how good is this team?

"I think we're a little bit better than we were last year," Bragg said. "We don't have the size we did in 1999 and 2000, but we've got more team speed. Our overall speed is fantastic. We get to

the edge so quick. And it's not just our backs and receivers.

"Our linemen are very fast. Bill Mason, who plays left guard and defensive tackle, ran the third leg on the 400-meter relay team that went to the state finals. He can move. We've got some other kids on the line like that, too."

Junior Troy Blasius leads the speedy backfield. He gained 1,063 in eight games.

But the intensity will be different this weekend.

"Once the playoffs start, it's like a different season," he said.

Mason said the Snowbirds will not overlook anyone — even a team they beat last year.

"If you go in thinking you're going to blow up the other team," he said, "you're going to be surprised. We totally don't want to do that. We take everyone seriously."

Bragg likes the fact his team has played its best in the big games — 38-0 against Central Lake, 41-8 against Inland Lakes and 48-0 against Johannesburg-

Lewiston. All three of those teams are in the playoffs.

Bragg credits Cleaver for laying the groundwork.

"Will's taught me what I know," he said. "I give a lot of credit to him. I'm carrying on what he started. We tweak it as we go."

Cleaver prefers to pass the credit around.

"I'm proud of what we've built (at both schools)," he said. "But it just doesn't come from me. I surround myself with great people — great coaches and great players. That makes a huge difference if you have success or not. We're fortunate to have so many quality coaches in our area to draw from."

Gaylord, which hosts Big Rapids on Saturday, is led by quarterback Cal McNamara, halfback Tom Pratt and line-backer Josh Hart.

The Blue Devils are the No. 1 seed in the district and already own a victory over the No. 2 seed Ogemaw Heights.

Gaylord has outscored its foes by an average score of 35.4-6.8.