

Pratt leads Gaylord in repeat quest

All-league tailback moves under center

BY LANCE-MICHAEL CORREIA
Record-Eagle staff writer

In four years as head coach at **GAYLORD**, William Cleaver has guided the Blue Devils to four playoff berths and is aiming for a fifth.

He'll have to do it without All-Big North quarterback Calvin McNamara, one of the most potent offensive players in the state the past two seasons.

Stepping in will be senior Tom Pratt, who earned first team all-league recognition last year as a 1,000-yard tailback. Pratt will conduct an offense that relies primarily on a one-back shotgun formation.

"Our offensive package is pretty dynamic, pretty broad," Cleaver said. "Barring injuries, we'll use the one-back gun about 90 percent of the time because of what it does on defenses. With the threat of a running quarterback, it's like having a Donovan McNabb back there."

Three others return as starters on offense besides Pratt, including Ben Baragrey, a senior wideout who played his way onto the first team All-Big North squad a year ago at defensive back. Senior Carl Suedoff returns as a two-way performer at tackle, while Matt Rhinehart comes back at center after getting the nod at guard in 2002.

On defense, Brad Bush is back at inside linebacker, as is senior defensive back Tim Sundeck.

"Our forte on defense is probably stopping the ball in the run game," Cleaver said. "And on offense, we'll mix it up like we have in the past. It's not like we're some 400-yard

COACHES POLL

school (1st place votes)	Pts.
TC West (4)	57
Gaylord (2)	54
Alpena (1)	50
TC Central (1)	39
Cheboygan	29
Petoskey	24
Sault Ste. Marie	19
Cadillac	14

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Tom Pratt, Gaylord
Erik Burke, TC Central
Evan Brownie, Petoskey
Ben Van Zale, TC West
Keith Sterly, Petoskey

2002 STANDINGS

	Conference			Overall	
	W	L	GB	W	L
Gaylord	7	0	—	11	1
TC West	6	1	1	8	2
Alpena	5	2	2	5	4
Cheboygan	3	4	4	4	5
TC Central	3	4	4	3	6
Sault Ste. Marie	2	5	5	3	6
Petoskey	2	5	5	2	7
Cadillac	0	7	7	0	9

per game passing team."

There's a lot of optimism at **ALPENA**, where the Wildcats are coming off a 5-4 campaign, the school's best since 1980. With the junior varsity reeling off an undefeated run through their Big North schedule in 2002, and many of those players now playing varsity ball, head coach Jack Gebauer says his team may be ready to take up space in the league's top tier.

"We're getting better," said Gebauer, who is entering his fourth season at the helm. "This is probably the best team we've had since I've been here. The thing is to go out and play sound, fundamental football. We need to get that winning in our bloodstream."

The Wildcats may be without all-Big North running back Matt Cousineau, who blew out his knee last spring. His return is uncertain, meaning at least a

half-dozen backs — including senior Sawyer Plume, juniors Gabe Howard, C.J. MacKenzie, Shawn Smith and Chris Werth, and sophomore Nathan Gleason — will see duty along with starting QB Shane Pinger in Alpena's wing-T attack.

"Running the ball is the thing we probably do best," Gebauer said. "We'll just have to see who has the hot hand on any given night."

Up front, only tight ends Jordan Romel and Brent Evans return as starters, but the line averages just over 235 pounds. Gebauer says that's actually smaller than his recent teams.

"But we're stronger," he added. "We really didn't have a weight program as recently as a few years back. When I first got here, we had two guys who could bench press 300 (pounds). Now we have 13."

Gebauer says his defense is junior-dominated and relatively green. Junior free safety Chris Easton, and ends Romel and Evans, are expected to lead the unit.

"We're definitely young. I'm really looking forward to next year when most of these guys are seniors, but I think we can make progress this year as we go along and gain experience."

At **TRAVERSE CITY WEST**, the Titans hope to run down the competition.

West will look to keep the ball on the ground with power running from junior Ben Van Zale and speed from senior quarterback Tyler Perketta and junior wing Tony Gourlay.

But West coach Matt Prisk — who guided his team to the playoffs and a second-place finish in the Big North — knows the Titans have to be able to throw as well.

"Our strength is going to be our running game, no doubt about it," Prisk said. "But if you load the box with eight guys to stop Van Zale, Perketta, Gourlay and all those quick kids, then we're in single coverage."

Regardless of where West finishes in the conference, Prisk said he's looking forward to the 2003 campaign.

"It should be fun," he said after the first week of practice. "They're a bunch of great kids. We've had fun with them and they've had fun with us."

"They've worked hard in the offseason and they've worked hard so far this week."

"And they've experienced success at every level."

TRAVERSE CITY CENTRAL promises to run the ball a little more this season, head coach Kelly Clark's fourth as head coach.

"It'll be a more traditional pro-I set," explained Clark, whose teams have employed a more wide-open spread offense in recent seasons.

Senior Mattias Johnson, who saw extensive playing time as a junior, will direct the Trojans when they have the ball, while a host of running backs are expected to see carries, including fullbacks Jeff Fancy and Ben Amon, and tailbacks Greg Pinto and Fred Shier.

Senior Erik Burke, who played mostly at receiver last year, will also line up in the backfield, and should see plenty of action.

"He's going to get the ball," Clark said. "He'll probably line up wide sometimes, too."

Defensive back Josh Snyder, center Kyle Cluth and guard/fullback Zane Zebarth — all seniors — have been designated as captains for Central.

PETOSKEY has two of the top players in the Big North in senior fullback/linebacker Evan Brownie and senior two-way tackle Keith Sterly.

Brownie, a 6-foot-3, 220-pounder, verbally committed to Central Michigan.

"He's a great kid," said first year coach Kerry Van Ormond. "His work ethic is invaluable, and he's smart — he's even the senior class president. He's what every coach wants a player to be."

Sterly (6-5, 285), who Van Ormond calls a "strong, athletic kid," earned first team All-Big North honors in 2002, while Brownie landed on the second team.

Brownie, senior quarterback Casey McKinney, and running backs Matt Hewson, a junior, and senior Jordon Munson were named team captains.

Munson and Hewson also return as defensive starters at safety and cornerback, respectively, while linebackers Bill White and Dane Doctor also return to the starting lineup.



Record-Eagle/file photo

Tom Pratt (21) rushed for over 1,000 yards last season as a tailback, but will play QB in 2003.