

Snowbirds look to soar again in SVC

St. Mary has won 29 straight league games

BY DENNIS CHASE

Record-Eagle staff writer

TRAVERSE CITY — Football coaches in the Ski Valley Conference are in near agreement when it comes to picking the favorite in this season's race. "Until someone beats Gaylord St. Mary, they're the team to beat," said Johannesburg-Lewiston coach Fred Davis, echoing the sentiments of his colleagues.

ST. MARY, which has won 29 consecutive league games and four successive titles, came within one play of adding a state championship to its list of accomplishments last season. Although the Snowbirds suffered some heavy graduation losses, particularly on the line, they return a cast capable of making some noise again in 2003.

"It looks we'll have another strong team," said coach Rod Bragg, whose squad was 13-1 a year ago. "We have a nice blend of size, strength and speed. Along with that, these kids are experienced winners. They know how to win."

Bragg returns 12 seniors, including halfback-safety Troy Blasius, quarterback-safety Ray Burzynski, linebacker-tight end James Cuca and linebacker-running back Chris Tholl.

Blasius had a breakout season in 2002, earning All-State honors after rushing for 1,638 yards and 29 touchdowns and intercepting 13 passes.

"He has incredible quickness and instincts," Bragg said. "It's like trying to catch a greased rabbit."

Burzynski directed the Snowbirds to the Division VIII finals last year.

"He has good size, speed and quickness," Bragg said. "His arm strength and accuracy were impressive this summer. He's also a big hitter at strong safety."

COACHES POLL

school (1st place votes)	Pts.
Gaylord St. Mary (7)	63
Inland Lakes	52
Bellaire (1)	42
Johannesburg-Lewiston	35
Onaway	35
Central Lake	30
Pellston	20
Mancelona	11

7 of 8 coaches participated

Players to watch

Troy Blasius, Gaylord St. Mary
Brad Rogers, Central Lake
Doug Maves, Inland Lakes
Chris Tholl, Gaylord St. Mary
James Cuca, Gaylord St. Mary

2002 STANDINGS

	Conference Overall				
	W	L	GB	W	L
Gaylord St. Mary	7	0	—	13	1
Central Lake	6	1	1	7	3
Inland Lakes	5	2	2	6	4
Onaway	4	3	3	4	5
Jo'burg	3	4	4	5	5
Pellston	2	5	5	4	5
Bellaire	1	6	6	2	7
Mancelona	0	7	7	0	9

Cuca and Tholl were the two leading tacklers last year — Cuca with 129 stops and Tholl with 128.

"Cuca has a nose for the ball and loves to hit," Bragg said. "Ditto for Tholl. They may be the two best Division VIII linebackers in the state."

Tholl will also play offense, splitting time with Blasius in the backfield. Junior Cody Lawnichak, a 240-pound fullback, made significant strides last year and is a load to bring down.

Opening the holes up front will be a line led by center Nick Saum and guard Aaron Sides.

Bragg said several players improved their speed and strength over the summer.

"Speed is our ally," he said. "We have eight players who run sub-5.0 in the 40."

That speed will especially be apparent on defense, he said.

"Our defense will be very fast and aggressive," he said. "This should create turnovers and put our offense in many favorable positions."

The Ski Valley put four teams

in the playoffs last year — Inland Lakes, Central Lake and Johannesburg also qualified.

INLAND LAKES made significant strides under coach Jack Rowan. The Bulldogs, who entered the year riding a 20-game losing streak, finished 6-4.

"I was really happy for our seniors," Rowan said. "They had never won a game until last year."

With 16 seniors on the roster, the Bulldogs are expected to contend for the league title and a playoff berth.

On offense, Rowan welcomes back one of the top backs in the league in Josh Vieu, who rushed for 620 yards. Vieu will have Mike Jeebe, a 6-3, 255-pound fullback, to help clear the way for him.

Sophomore Mark Hutchinson takes over at quarterback.

Hutchinson will have Zac LeJuene and Dan Whitman as his primary receivers. The 6-2, 185-pound LeJuene caught 27 passes a year ago.

Senior Doug Maves, a 6-2, 220-pound tackle, and Ezra Coe, a 6-1, 226-pound sophomore guard, spearhead a strong line.

"We started a weight program three years ago and it's paying dividends," Rowan said. "You ought to see some of these kids. They're chiseled. We used to get pushed around, but we're not going to get pushed around anymore."

Defensively, Maves and Coe will lead the charge from their linebacking spots. The line is big and includes 6-6, 355-pound Bill Shively and 6-1, 210-pound Josh Beaudry.

BELLAIRE will be a team to watch in 2003, according to league coaches. The Eagles were 2-7 last year, but return 11 veterans from that young team, plus they bring up a good crop of underclassmen from a strong JV squad.

That bodes well for coach Jeff Hebden.

"We have a more athletic team," Hebden said. "We're bigger and stronger on the line and we have depth at the skill posi-



Record-Eagle/
file photo

Snowbirds tailback Troy Blasius runs to daylight during a state semifinal game against Fowler last fall.

tions."

That's particularly evident at quarterback where Hebden has two signal-callers he can count on — juniors Zach LaPointe and Brad Mason. LaPointe started last year as a sophomore.

Sean Jody, Kevin Vliet and Jim Folker will lead a deep backfield. Jody rushed for nearly 500 yards last season. The 6-foot, 225-pound Folker played on the line last year.

"He's an outstanding athlete," Hebden said.

Josh VanderMeulen, Steve Sheneman, Brad Keiser and Alex Nevarez anchor the line. Juniors Brandon McClary, Dustin Bicknell, Dustin Maetling and Dave Holly are battling for jobs at wide receiver.

Defensively, the Eagles will be led by linebackers Sheneman and Folker.

JOHANNESBURG-LEWISTON started the 2002 campaign 4-1, then finished 5-5 after losing three key players to injuries. The Cardinals still reached the playoffs, losing to Coleman in the first round.

Coach Fred Davis has 17 players out.

"Of the 22 positions, we have 16 (starters) back," he said. "That's not bad."

The Cardinals, who run the wing-T, return backs Sean Hart and Casey Glazier, who rushed for about 650 and 500 yards, respectively, in 2002. Hart, Davis said, is the fastest player on a quick team.

Dale Tusek, Robert McLean, Ben Guild and Jeremy Campbell anchor a line that averages 207 pounds. Guild is the biggest at 6-

3, 260.

Sophomore Phil Knapp steps in at quarterback. He saw considerable action in the playoff game last year.

"Even though he's a sophomore, he's already played in a pressure game," Davis said.

Davis was pleased with his team's effort in a recent scrimmage with Pine River, Manton and Kalkaska.

Tusek and Glazier will lead the defense from their middle linebacking spots.

ONAWAY has the league's only new coach, Tony Hoffmeyer, a former assistant at the school.

The Cardinals suffered some major graduation losses.

Onaway, 4-5 a year ago, returns to two important cogs on offense — quarterback Taylor Beswick and fullback Randy Hoffmeyer. Guard Jake Arwood and wide receiver Bryan Leach are veterans, too.

Hoffmeyer has 26 players out, including a number of first-year players.

"We need to stay healthy physically and academically," he said.

CENTRAL LAKE has won 10 of its last 14 games, dating back to 2001, and the Trojans will try to build on that momentum in 2003.

Central Lake qualified for the playoffs last season en route to a 7-3 campaign.

"Our motto is not to be a one year wonder," Central Lake coach Adam Grybauskas said. "We want to build on last year. We want to build a tradition. We want to be consistently good. We don't want to be up one year, down the next."

PLEASE SEE PAGE 21