

SKI

League teams trying to clip Snowbirds

FROM PAGE 15

Jeff Hebden brings back 16 seniors off that team with seven of the 11 starters on offense returning.

"These kids are hungry for another successful season," Hebden said.

Some of the key players were major contributors on the school's basketball team that reached the Class D semifinals.

The Eagles will be led offensively by quarterback Zach LaPointe. The 6-2 senior threw for 1,300 yards and 13 touchdowns. He also rushed for 200 yards and five more scores. This will be his third year as the starter.

"He could go down as one of the best quarterbacks ever here," Hebden said. "He's just an all-around good athlete — and smart."

LaPointe has three tall receivers to focus on — 6-3 Dustin Bicknell, 6-4 Brandon McClary and 6-3 Brad Mason. Bicknell had 16 receptions for six touchdowns and McClary 10 grabs for a 25-yard average a year ago.

In the backfield, Hebden can call on Dustin Mateling, who ran for close to 300 yards in just 30 carries. Luke Hocking, Eric Myas, John Pawson and Ben Belanger are vying for time, too. Belanger injured his leg last summer and missed most of the 2003 campaign. Steve Sheneman will replace Jim Folker at fullback.

Alex Nevarez, Brad Keiser, Nick Butler, Shawn Smith and James and Roger McQueen will hold down the line.

Defensively, the Eagles will be strong at linebacker with Sheneman and Pat Guy inside and Myas and Mateling outside. Sheneman led the team in tackles with 147 and earned honorable mention All-State.

Nevarez, Smith, Butler and Bicknell will play on the line. Mason and Hocking will play the corners with LaPointe and Belanger the safeties. Belanger had two interceptions in two games last fall.

"He has good quickness, good reactions," Hebden said. "He has a nose for the football."

Defense will be a key for the Eagles. In their three losses last season — including the playoffs — the Eagles surrendered 44 to Johannesburg, 41 to St. Mary and 50 to Frankfort.

CENTRAL LAKE coach Adam Grybauskas plans to open up his offense now that running back Brad Rogers has graduated.

The Trojans ran Rogers extensively the last two seasons. He finished his career with nearly 3,000 yards on the ground.

"The last couple of years we had outstanding backs and an inexperienced line," Grybauskas said. "This year it's just the opposite."

The Trojans, 4-5 a year ago, will open with a sophomore quarterback — Byron Patton. He was brought up to varsity for the final game last fall.

"He's a sophomore. He'll have his ups and downs," Grybauskas said. "But against Pellston (in last game) he threw for over 100 yards and three touchdowns. He showed he can play varsity football."

Patton will be throwing to a group of receivers that includes his cousin Brent, a sophomore tight end. Ben Ernst, Brandon Folsom, John Mulligan and Josh Moffitt will also be targets.

"With (Byron) Patton, we should have a good passing attack," Grybauskas said. "That's a big change for us. We've always been a run-oriented team. We're going to throw the ball around this year."

When the Trojans stick to the ground, they'll have another Rogers toting the ball — Cody, Brad's cousin. Spencer Hickman will get carries, too.

Central Lake boasts an experienced line with 6-5, 230-pound Spencer Burk

and 5-10, 260-pound Guy Foss at the tackles, Scott Dunson and Cody Mongar at the guards and Don Kirk at center. There's a possibility Mongar could move to tailback, Grybauskas said.

"He's a strong kid, very athletic," he said.

Mongar will key the defense from his inside linebacking slot. He led the team in tackles in 2003.

Kirk and Burk, who lost weight to improve his quickness, anchor the defensive line.

The Trojans open at Johannesburg.

"That's a tough one right off the bat," Grybauskas said.

ONAWAY is coming off a 3-6 campaign. Coach Tony Hoffmeyer expects improvement in 2004.

"We should be pretty decent," he said.

Hoffmeyer said if his team progresses, a playoff berth is not out of the question.

The Cardinals will be strong in the backfield with Harry Cleaver at quarterback and T.J. Hoffmeyer and Lonnie Splan at the running backs. Splan, a speedster, rushed for 585 yards last season.

Andrew Richards, the top receiver a year ago, also returns.

Andrew LaFave and Derick Peterman spearhead the line.

Peterman was the team's top tackler in 2003. He'll line up at middle linebacker.

Mark Miller, a 6-3, 240-pound junior, will anchor the line at nose guard.

Hoffmeyer and Splan lead the secondary. The Cardinals have 30 players out.

"That's a high number for us," Hoffmeyer said.

Onaway opens with St. Mary.

"That's a tough one right out of the chute," Hoffmeyer said.

PELLSTON will rely on a "strong senior class" in trying to improve on a 1-8 campaign.

"We have a lot of talent coming back," coach Bob Babcock said.

At the head of the class: athletic guard Tyler

Burkhart, a top high jumper in track; tackle Eric Darrow, a two-year starter on the line; center Seth Strong, a converted tackle; and quarterback Tim Babcock, a former running back who gained nearly 1,000 yards last season. Babcock is a four-year starter.

"He's our fastest kid," Bob Babcock said. "We run the veer so we want our best back, our best athlete, at that position (quarterback)."

The Hornets could add more speed if Mike Buhr, a sprinter on the track team, comes out.

Joining Babcock in the backfield will be Tom Lechowicz, Matt Mikus and Marty Dryer.

The Hornets will feature two tall bookend tight ends — 6-3 Trevor Green and 6-6 Eric Teysen.

Dale Smith and Jeremy Tieke will team with Burkhart, Darrow and Strong on the line.

"We have a lot of athletic ability," Babcock said. "We're going to open the veer up and see what we can do."

Strong will be the "heart of the defense." He's a linebacker. Mikus will play linebacker, too.

The coach expects his secondary to be strong with Babcock, Lechowicz and Burkhart forming the core.

Pellston will have a tough start, opening on the road at Bellaire and Johannesburg.

A familiar face has returned to the sidelines at **MANCELONA**. John Neumann is back as head coach after stepping down in 1996. Neumann was an assistant under Jerry Delling for a number of years, then was head coach for eight.

"It's been fun," Neumann said. "The enthusiasm is back."

Neumann will be trying to resurrect a program that's bottomed out. The Ironmen have not won a game the last two years.

In 2002, Mancelona called its season early, forfeiting five games, when injuries depleted an already thin roster.

Neumann now has 20 players on varsity and about 25

on JV.

"I'm happy with the numbers so far," he said. "David Derrer has done a good job (developing interest) with our Pop Warner program. The numbers are good down below."

Neumann will build his team around nine seniors — quarterback Jason Calo, backs Dillon Hudson and Tyler Jesska, end Jim Biehl and linemen Dave Emmendorfer, Seth Adams, Zack Zirkle, Dan Woirol and Mike Martinez.

"They'll be the heart of the team," Neumann said. "We'll sink or swim with those guys."

Neumann likes his team's attitude.

"I have a great bunch of kids," he said. "I don't know how good we will be, but the kids are hustling and they have good attitudes that makes it fun right there."

Neumann called the league "outstanding" this season. He said his goal is to be competitive.

FOREST AREA joins the Ski Valley for football after spending its first two seasons in the Mid-State. The Warriors are still looking for their first win.

Second-year coach Jeremy Wilkinson has 18 players out — there's no JV team — and he's expecting his squad to be "a lot better than last year."

Wilkinson will rely heavily on Ben Brown, Chris Orr and Tom Wyatt.

Brown, the team MVP as a sophomore, led the Warriors in rushing a year ago with around 600 yards. He was also an All-Conference linebacker and punter.

Orr is a linebacker, too, while Wyatt plays on the line. They also received all-conference mention in the Mid-State.

"The Ski Valley is a very competitive league," Wilkinson said. "We'll see how it goes. Our players have another year of experience and they're starting to grasp the concepts."

Wilkinson said his team benefited from an intense three-day mini-camp at school earlier this month that consisted of practices and meetings.