

Defending turf and title

Big North champion TC West has seven games at Thirlby

BY MARK URBAN
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TRAVERSE CITY — So, you want the Big North Conference championship? That's fine.

Doing so will require two simple things: Going through Traverse City West and taking it from the Titans at Thirlby Field.

Coming off an 7-3 season and a second straight playoff appearance, TC West will play seven times at home this season, counting the regular-season finale 'at' TC Central.

"Our schedule is awesome," TC West coach Matt Prisk said. "You couldn't ask for a better schedule."

The Titans also have the perfect makeup to defend their home turf. Starters return at the front eight positions in the Titans' 4-4 defense.

"Our front eight are good," Prisk said.

The linebackers are a hard-hitting group with seniors Tony Gourlay and Daryl Martin on the outside and senior Ben VanZale and junior Eric Gordon on the inside.

Seniors Joe Stump, Nate Totten and Tom DeGroot were part of a rotation as the two starting defensive tackles while seniors Bryan Parshall and Kris Wood are back as the top defensive ends.

Senior Tom Kingdon also saw a lot of action as an end last season.

"There's some big boys," said senior safety Steve Damman. "We have some big linebackers and some big linemen. But it's a team, we all pitch in."

Manning the corners are senior Matt O'Connell and junior Ben Sleder with Damman as the safety. Damman started a couple of games last season while O'Connell saw a lot of action.

While the defensive sec-

2003 RESULTS

Grand Haven 33, TC West 20
Jackson 33, TC West 21
TC West 34, Cheboygan 16
TC West 38, Cadillac 6
TC West 56, Sault 0
TC West 31, Petoskey 0
TC West 30, Alpena 8
TC West 24, Gaylord 19
TC West 29, TC Central 21
Grandville 35, TC West 9*
* = playoffs

2004 SCHEDULE

Fri. Aug. 27 vs. Gr. Haven, 7
Thu. Sept. 2 at Jackson, 7:30
Sat. Sept. 11 vs. Marquette, 7
Fri. Sept. 17 vs. Cadillac, 7:30
Fri. Sept. 24 vs. Gaylord, 7:30
Fri. Oct. 1 vs. AA Huron (HC), 7:30
Fri. Oct. 8 at Petoskey, 7:30
Fri. Oct. 15 vs. Alpena, 7:30
Fri. Oct. 22 at TC Central, 7:30

ondary may not be the most experienced unit, getting to the last line of defense won't be easy.

"We have an inexperienced backfield, but with that front eight, teams will have to be able to throw on the run," Prisk said.

The smash-mouth style on defense is mirrored in the TC West offense. The Titans had 422 rushing attempts last season and passed the ball just 76 times.

But when a team runs the ball 84.7 percent of the time, the offensive philosophy is no secret.

"We worked very hard on our play-action (passing) game because teams know we want to run the football," Prisk said. "They'll put eight in the box every chance they get."

A big emphasis was placed on throwing the ball this off-season. TC West completed just 32.9 percent of its passes for one touchdown and six interceptions.

"We worked incredibly hard this summer," Prisk said. "We've been all over the state in passing camps.

"We threw against OK (Conference) teams, we threw against Valley teams and we went to the Northwood (University) passing camp and threw against Detroit schools.



Record-Eagle/John L. Russell

Traverse City West returns defensive starters in (front row, from left) Kris Wood, Nate Totten, Tom DeGroot, Joe Stump, Bryan Parshall and (back row, from left) Daryl Martin, Eric Gordon, Ben VanZale and Tony Gourlay. Flanking them are defensive coordinator Jerry Angers (back left) and head coach Matt Prisk (back right).

"We knew what we had to do this summer to shore it up."

Junior Tony Thompson, who took over as West's starting quarterback in Week 3, is back to run the offense.

The speedy Thompson ran the ball for 621 yards and nine touchdowns. But Thompson knows his passing numbers (17 for 53, 292 yards) must improve for the Titans to be at peak efficiency.

"We've gone to a ton of camps over the summer," Thompson said. "The arm strength has improved and the accuracy has improved."

Thompson is one of seven starters back on offense.

He'll have at his disposal a lot of experienced skill players including VanZale at full-back (963 yards, 18 touchdowns), Gourlay at tailback (293 yards, four TDs), O'Connell in the slot and senior tight end Eric Schultz.

Anchoring the offensive line is senior Mike Lemcool, a three-year starter at center.

Senior Steve Meteer is back

as one of the starting guards while senior Alex Brown steps into the other spot.

The two tackles are new and are both juniors in Jacob Stinson and Josh Haselton.

"The big question is the three up front that didn't start last year," Prisk said. "How quick can they mature? They have some pretty good backs back there and they need to take it personally."

The special teams are also filled with experienced players. Gourlay is back as the punter for the Titans while junior Brad Kroupa takes over the kicking duties.

With so much experience back — on both sides of the ball — expectations at TC West continue to expand.

That's just fine.

"The work ethic has been real good," Prisk said. "The nice thing about having so many returners back is they have the expectations.

Throughout the summer they've pulled together as a group of kids, which is what

you have to have.

"The bar is set high, no question about it. These kids know what they want to do and they know what it takes to get there."

"It makes us work that much harder so we can fulfill everyone's dreams," Damman said. "We want to run the table in the Big North, go to the playoffs and try to win states."

TC West opens its season against Grand Haven and then travels to Jackson. The Titans lost to both of those teams to start the 2003 campaign before reeling off seven straight victories in the Big North.

With Cheboygan and Sault Ste. Marie leaving the league, West added Ann Arbor Huron and Marquette to the schedule — both at Thirlby Field.

"We're playing stronger competition from last year to get us better prepared for teams we'll face in the playoffs," Prisk said. "The goal is still to win the conference, get in the playoffs and take it as long as we can."