

More parity possible in LMC

Coaches vary the pecking order behind St. Francis

BY JEFF PEEK
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TRAVERSE CITY — If the coaches' preseason poll is any indication, the defending Lake Michigan Conference football champions may have a few teams breathing down their necks this fall.

TRAVERSE CITY ST. FRANCIS, which went 14-0 and won a league title on its way to the Division 7 state championship last fall, garnered seven of eight first-place votes.

But coaches placed four different teams in the second spot, and one selected East Jordan as the conference favorite — and it wasn't the Red Devils' own coach, Kris Ernst, who gave them the vote.

Meanwhile, another LMC coach picked those same Devils to finish seventh. "There should be more parity in the league this season," said St. Francis coach Josh Sellers, who returns five players who covered nine starting positions. "I think having four playoff teams a year ago was a boost to our conference and how people view us.

"Several teams are improved this year." In addition to his own team, Sellers believes Boyne City, Grayling, East Jordan and Charlevoix could all make noise.

And unlike last year, when the title was decided in the final week — when St. Francis defeated Boyne — teams will find out quickly whether they're among the haves or the have nots.

Boyne opens the league portion of its schedule at St. Francis, then travels to Charlevoix. The Red Rayders open conference action at East Jordan.

"A lot of people will be watching what happens in week three," Sellers said. "That first game could set the

COACHES POLL

School (1st place votes)	Pts.
TC St. Francis (7)	63
Boyne City	51
Grayling	43
Charlevoix	38
East Jordan (1)	34
Kalkaska	29
Elk Rapids	15
Harbor Springs	15

PLAYERS TO WATCH

- Reed Ameel, HB/S, Boyne City
- Chad Biggar, RB/LB, TCSF
- Cody Crane, QB, Charlevoix
- Joe Hastings, QB, TCSF
- Tom Krause, QB, East Jordan

2003 STANDINGS

	Conference			Overall		
	W	L	GB	W	L	
TCSF	7	0	-	14	0	
Boyne City	6	1	1	8	2	
Grayling	5	2	2	8	3	
East Jordan	4	3	3	6	4	
Kalkaska	3	4	4	4	5	
Harbor Spr.	2	5	5	2	7	
Charlevoix	1	6	6	1	8	
Elk Rapids	0	7	7	1	8	

tone for the conference.

"Boyne lost a lot, but they also have a lot coming back. They're legit. And Grayling, East Jordan and Charlevoix all have some good talent returning.

"It should be interesting."

BOYNE CITY, which finished 8-2 and qualified for the playoffs last fall, has two of the top players in the league returning — Reed Ameel and Jordan Sweet.

Ameel is a 6-foot, 180-pound senior halfback-strong safety, while Sweet is a 5-11, 170-pound senior wing back-free safety.

Head coach Dave Hills said the key will be how well the Ramblers perform in the trenches.

"We have some good skill positions returning, but we're replacing a lot up front on both sides of the ball," Hills said. "That's a big concern for us."

Hills said Boyne won't have much chance to catch its breath the first four weeks. Prior to league showdowns in weeks three and four, the Ramblers open with non-con-



Record-Eagle file photo

Boyne City's Reed Ameel will be one of the top running backs in the Lake Michigan.

ference home games against Newberry and Rogers City.

"We'd better be ready to go early," Hills said.

Hills said he is glad to see St. Francis on the schedule during the first month of the season.

"You try to treat the St. Francis game like every other league game, but that's hard to do when it's at the end of the season," he said. "There's so much build up.

"It's a nice change to play (the Gladiators) early. We're excited. By week three we're usually playing pretty solid football."

GRAYLING, picked by coaches to finish third, hopes to build on last year's 8-3 season, which included the first playoff appearance — and playoff win — in school history.

If the Vikings return to the postseason, they'll have to do it with a new coach, Ben Brock, who was an assistant under Jason Mensing last fall. Mensing is now coaching at Owosso.

Key returnees for Grayling include junior quarterback Bob Starks (6-2, 210), who passed for 1,700 yards and 10 touchdowns a year ago, and senior wide receiver Gibson Tobin (5-10, 170), a team captain.

Also expected to play major roles for the Vikings are junior wide receiver Eli VanNuck (5-10, 170) and senior offensive lineman Travis Brush (6-0, 240) and Jason Strohpaul (6-0, 220).

CHARLEVOIX has an opportunity to make a jump in the standings following a disap-

pointing 1-8 season in 2003.

The Rayders have a stable of solid returning starters — senior quarterback Cody Crain (5-10, 175), senior wide receiver-defensive back Ben Bergmann (6-1, 160), junior tackle-linebacker Jeff Golovich (6-3, 185), senior wide receiver-defensive back Mitchell Klooster (6-1, 165) and senior guard-linebacker Jaimen Waha (5-8½, 180).

Charlevoix also hopes to reap the benefits of a junior varsity squad that has either won or tied for the league title two years in a row.

"We're not very big, but we have a lot of talent," said Rayders head coach Don Jess. "We should be much improved.