

Coaches: Panthers are the pick

Frankfort seeks its first Northwest crown since 1998

BY MARK URBAN
Record-Eagle staff writer

TRAVERSE CITY — Winning may be a tradition at Frankfort.

But the Panthers haven't won a Northwest Conference title since 1998.

Still, Frankfort was picked as the league favorite by the conference coaches.

"It's been elusive," Frankfort coach Matt Stapleton said of the team's quest for a league crown. "There's been a lot of 4-1 years, but we haven't won the big daddy."

Frankfort's favored status was far from unanimous. Three other teams — Kingsley, defending league champion Suttons Bay and Glen Lake — each received at least one first-place vote

"It's a tough one," Glen Lake coach Aaron Heming said. "It's a fun one to be in, but you have your work cut out for you. You have to stay on top of it."

"There's a lot of teams that wouldn't want to be in it," Manton coach Jim Smart added. "It'll be pretty challenging."

One of the reasons **FRANKFORT** is favored is its talented backfield that returns.

Frankfort is coming off a 10-2 season that ended with a last-second 32-28 loss to Beal City in the Division 8 regional finals.

Leading the Panthers' backfield is senior running back Greg Walton, who ran for 2,011 yards and 30 touchdowns in 2003. He set records for most yards in a season and a game last season.

Walton has around 3,450 yards for his career and could run down Frankfort's all-time rushing mark this season.

Despite all his accolades though, Stapleton said Walton isn't resting on what he's already done.

COACHES POLL

School (1st place votes)	Pts.
Frankfort (2)	31
Kingsley (2)	28
Suttons Bay (1)	26
Glen Lake (1)	22
Manton	13
Mesick	6

PLAYERS TO WATCH

- Greg Walton, RB, Frankfort
- J.C. Guillen, RB, Suttons Bay
- Brooks Bunbury, QB, Glen Lake
- Drew Wyse, FB, Kingsley
- Caleb Nickerson, QB, Kingsley

2003 STANDINGS

	Conference			Overall	
	W	L	GB	W	L
Suttons Bay	5	0	-	9	1
Frankfort	4	1	1	10	2
Glen Lake	3	2	2	5	4
Kingsley	2	3	3	7	4
Manton	1	4	4	1	8
Mesick	0	5	5	1	8

"He is the returning Player of the Year in Class D," Stapleton said. "That's quite an accomplishment. But for him, that was last year and this is this year.

"That's what I like about the kid."

Frankfort's other starting spot in the backfield is also back in the form of two players, senior Brady Lietaert and junior Kevin Nerg. Lietaert went down with a back injury last season and Nerg stepped right into his spot.

Senior quarterback Brad Nostrandt also returns to direct the Panthers' veer attack.

Up front Frankfort has returning starters in senior guards Dane Colby and A.J. Elliott, senior tackle Kurt Gilbert and junior center Aaron Murray.

"We did OK (on offense) last year," Stapleton said. "We got shutout by Suttons Bay, but we still had 300-plus yards on offense in our (playoff) loss to Beal City. We just didn't play any defense."

Seven starters are back on defense for the Panthers and most are familiar names.

Walton returns as a line-backer for Frankfort. Colby and Elliott are back as defensive ends as are Gilbert and Scott Rodal at the tackles.



Record-Eagle file photo

Frankfort's Greg Walton is coming off a 2,011-yard, 30-touchdown season.

Nostrandt returns to his safety position as does Nerg as a cornerback.

Frankfort has a talented senior class, a lot of which saw substantial action as sophomores.

Yet, according to Frankfort's standards, this group hasn't accomplished enough.

"They still have some unfinished goals," Stapleton said. "We didn't win the conference, we didn't win the region and we didn't win a state championship. And we thought we had the team to do that."

Frankfort toughened up its non-conference schedule this season with some bigger schools like White Cloud and Tawas.

"We have no weeks off this year," Stapleton said. "We wanted a tough schedule and we got it."

No Northwest Conference school has a tougher opening game than **KINGSLEY**, which hosts defending Division 7 state champion TC St. Francis.

Also among the non-confer-

ence tilts for the Stags are McBain and Clawson.

"Our schedule is the toughest we've had since I've been here," Kingsley coach Tim Wooer said.

Kingsley is coming off a 7-4 campaign and a playoff appearance in 2003. The Stags had to win their final three games of the regular season — beating Mesick, McBain and Rogers City — to qualify.

The Stags followed that up with a 36-22 victory over league rival Suttons Bay in the playoffs before bowing out with a 14-6 loss to Whittemore-Prescott in the district finals.

Wooer is hoping Kingsley's late run in 2003 carries over into 2004.

"I think that was a great experience for our kids," he said. "I thought we gained a great deal of confidence."

"Even though we had a lot of seniors, we were young last year. We started four sophomores and that was a good learning experience for them, to keep fighting when your back is against the wall."

Kingsley has a lot of experience returning in the backfield in junior fullback Drew Wyse, senior halfback Luke McManus and junior quarterback Caleb Nickerson.

Starters returning on the offensive line include senior tackle Ben Weber, senior guard Paul Bliss and senior center Scott Ostrander.

On defense, Wyse and Ostrander return as linebackers. McManus and junior Ken Sedlacek are back as the cornerbacks.

Kingsley's main task on defense is replacing its front four.

"That's a question mark," Wooer said. "We knew that was coming when we had four seniors starting there last year. We've got some kids that could fill the holes."

Filling in spots is the big task on both sides of the ball for Kingsley.

"As a whole we are very young," Wooer said. "We have nine seniors and 16 juniors, so

PLEASE SEE PAGE 14