

Can Snowbirds be clipped?

Ski Valley teams will try to end hold of Gaylord St. Mary

BY DENNIS CHASE

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TRAVERSE CITY — Despite a 36-game winning streak in the Ski Valley Conference, Gaylord St. Mary is not the team to beat in 2004, according to league coaches.

That honor — or bull's-eye — belongs to Inland Lakes.

"That's OK," Bulldogs coach Jack Rowan said. "We have a good team. It's the best team I've had since I've been here.

"We have good kids. I've been pleased with what I've seen so far."

League coaches acknowledge that this should be a strong year with as many as five teams capable of reaching the playoffs.

The league expanded to nine teams this season with the addition of Forest Area. As a result, teams will only play one non-conference game — and all but one will open the season with a league game.

Forest Area opens with eight consecutive league encounters before closing with non-league Ashley.

The top contenders in the Ski Valley all return veteran quarterbacks — Phil Knapp at Johannesburg, Zach LaPointe at Bellaire, Mark Hutchinson at Inland Lakes and Ryan Smith at Gaylord St. Mary — which enhances their shot at a title. Smith stepped in for an injured Ray Burzynski late last season.

INLAND LAKES finished fourth in the league in 2003, a season in which Rowan missed the last four games with colon cancer.

"That was a real distraction (to the team)," he said.

The veteran coach had surgery and 18 weeks of chemotherapy, but feels fit for another season.

"I wouldn't recommend it as a weight loss program," he laughed.

COACHES POLL

School (1st place votes)	Pts.
Inland Lakes (4)	67
Bellaire (1)	61
Gaylord St. Mary (2)	60
Johannesburg (1)	49
Central Lake	36
Pellston	30
Onaway	29
Mancelona	20
Forest Area	8

8 of 9 coaches participated

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Zach LaPointe, QB/DB, Bellaire
 Brad Ewing, RB, Johannesburg
 Mark Hutchinson, QB, Inland Lakes
 Steve Sheneman, LB, Bellaire
 Cody Lawnichak, FB-DT, St. Mary

2003 STANDINGS

	Conference			Overall	
	W	L	GB	W	L
St. Mary	7	0	-	10	1
Joburg	6	1	1	7	3
Bellaire	5	2	2	7	3
Inland Lakes	4	3	3	5	4
Central Lake	3	4	4	4	5
Onaway	2	5	5	3	6
Pellston	1	6	6	1	8
Mancelona	0	7	7	0	9

Rowan saw a large senior class depart, but he still has a good crop of upperclassmen, supplemented by some talented juniors that went 9-0 at the JV level.

Hutchinson, a 6-foot-3 junior, will lead the attack. He completed 53 percent of his passes for more than 1,000 yards. He'll be joined in the backfield by Matt Kopke, Willie Webber and James Mullett. Webber rushed for more than 600 yards last season while the 6-3, 248-pound Kopke runs the 40 in 4.7, Rowan said.

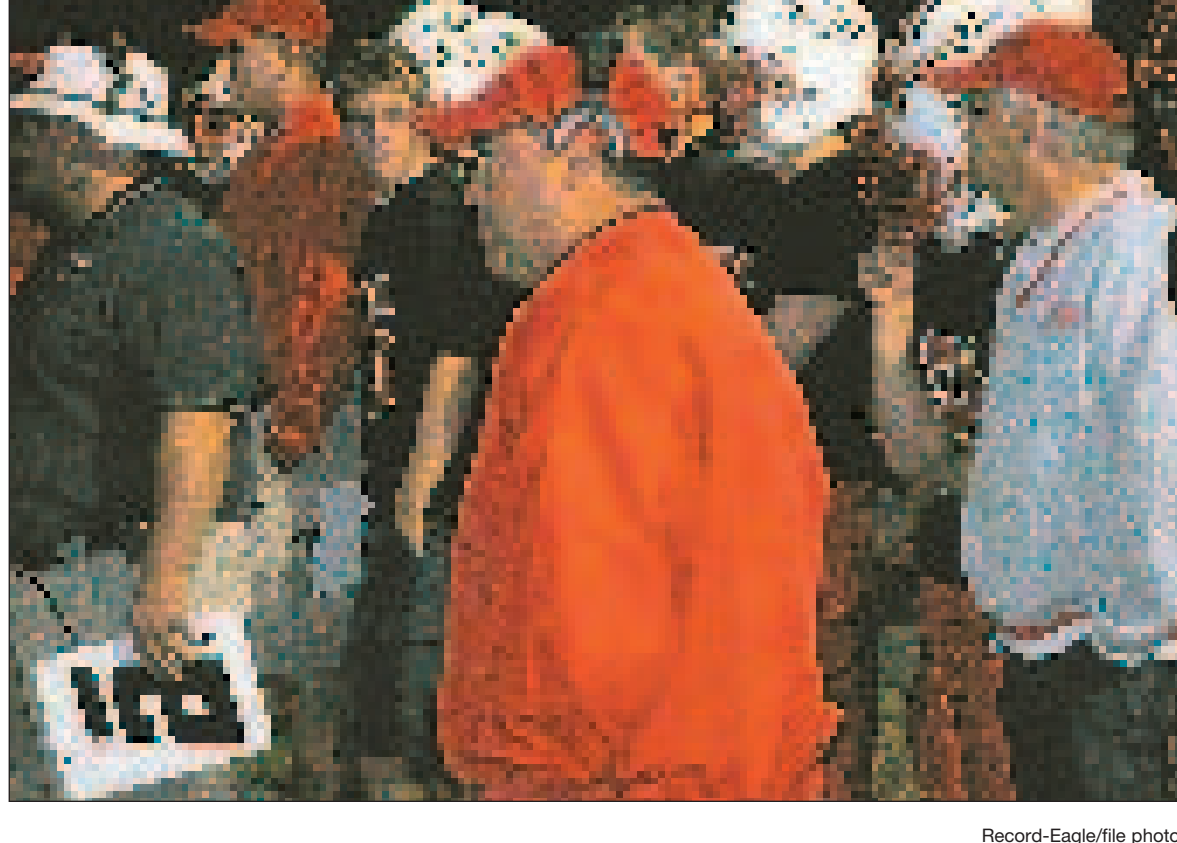
"He's (Kopke) agile and tough," Rowan said.

Mullett's even faster, the coach added. He's been timed at 4.6.

Mike Bunker, Tyler Jacobs, Ezra Coe, R.J. Morgan and Andy Phillips will be on the line. Bunker is 6-2, 268 pounds; Jacobs 6-3, 225; Coe 6-1, 220; and Morgan 6-2, 235.

John Lochinski and Dan August will be the ends.

On defense, Rowan is expecting California transfer Lorenzo Espinosa to make an immediate impact, although



Record-Eagle/file photo

Bellaire coach Jeff Hebden, center, hopes his Eagles are in the thick of the Ski Valley.

the 6-3, 200-pound linebacker suffered a concussion in a scrimmage last week. Shayne Cischke will fill in until Espinosa returns.

Bunker, Coe, Jacobs, August and Preston Dunn will anchor the line. Pat McMullen will play linebacker. Mullett, Webber and Eric Grossman will play in the secondary.

Rowan has one of the most experienced staffs in the north. It includes a couple of former head coaches — Mike Kanitz and Gary Shanley.

GAYLORD ST. MARY, which has won five consecutive league titles, is by no means ready to relinquish its place atop the standings, though.

The Snowbirds finished 10-1 last season, losing in the district finals to Bark River.

"It looks like we'll have another strong team," coach Rod Bragg said. "We return 10 seniors and we also have eight juniors who had an extended season."

But the Snowbirds suffered some major hits via graduation. Among those who departed — All Staters Troy Blasius and Chris Tholl.

"Our kids will have to rise to the challenge," Bragg said.

"We did lose a lot."

Ryan Smith, who took over when Ray Burzynski was injured in the eighth week, will direct the offense.

"He's a quick, strong, smart player," Bragg said. "He throws the ball well and makes good decisions with the option."

Fullback Cody Lawnichak, a two-year starter, will be a workhorse in the backfield. He's a 240-pound load to tackle.

"He's faster, stronger and more determined," Bragg said.

Juniors Joey Cuca and Mike Smith — Ryan's brother — will take over for Blasius and Tholl in the backfield. Blasius rushed for about 1,200 yards in 2003. Cuca is the younger brother of James Cuca, the team's second-leading tackler last season and current JV assistant.

Tackle Dan Borowiak and guard Russ Thomas anchor the line. Borowiak is 6-2, 244. Thomas weighs in at 240.

"Dan and Russ spent numerous hours together this past

year in the weight room," Bragg said. "They'll tilt the field toward their side."

Mike Prusakiewicz and Kevin Spyhalski will contribute at tight end.

Defensively, Borowiak, Thomas, Lawnichak and Spyhalski give the Snowbirds a big Division 8 front. Caleb Marquard will play defensive end-linebacker.

Cuca and Mike Smith will start at linebacker.

Ryan Smith, Prusakiewicz, Steve Burroughs and Spencer Smith key the secondary.

"I feel our defensive unit will be the better side of the ball, but not by much, and only because our kids love defense so much," Bragg said. "Our defense will be fast and aggressive. We should be able to create turnovers and put our offense in favorable positions."

St. Mary's allowed just seven points a game last season.

With only 18 players on the roster, depth could be a problem.

"All 18 must contribute if we

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