

# Groves in uncustomary role of defending title

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By JOHN BOZZO

Birmingham Groves is in an uncustomary position for the coming football season.

Instead of talking about having their best season in 20 years, the Falcons' talk is of improving on last fall's record.

Instead of aiming to unseat the league champion, the Falcons are defending the league title.

"Getting the co-championship was difficult," said Groves coach Bill Rankin. "Remaining there will be even more difficult."

Rankin is entering his sixth season as Groves head coach. Last fall was his best at Groves. It was also the best record ever posted at the school.

Groves finished with a 6-3 won-loss mark

through regular season play. The Falcons also tied for the Metro Suburban Activities Association championship with Southfield-Lathrup.

One year ago there were a slew of returning veterans to man Groves' offense, but only a few veteran defenders.

As a result, Groves had the second most potent offensive attack in Oakland County. Only Orchard Lake St. Mary's Class C state champion team scored more points.

THIS FALL, the situation is reversed.

"We'll have a strong defense," Rankin said. "We didn't have too many defensive people to replace. Offensively the proof is still in the pudding. On paper I have everyone replaced (all but three offensive starters graduated)."

Leading the returning players is two-way starter Stu Hixon. A 62, 240-pound senior, Hixon plays tackle offensively and defensively.

Geoff Hill, a 62, 220 senior, returns to offensive right guard. Hill was also a starting defensive tackle.

Bill Eberhart was the only one-way starter among the returning starters. A 5-9, 175-pound senior, Eberhart will be the starting left halfback for his third consecutive season. Last year Eberhart was an Observer & Eccentric All-Area team choice.

"Bill will be even better this year," Rankin said. "He's bigger, faster and has more confidence than last year." Although Buddy Pucias started on offense last year, he will be at a new position this fall. The 6-1, 190-pound

senior will be at quarterback. Pucias was a starting end and line backer last fall. He will continue his linebacking duties during the upcoming season.

Pucias played quarterback two years ago on the junior varsity team at Groves. That squad won the Metro Suburban Activities Association junior varsity title.

BOTH STARTING defensive ends are returning. Brian Plachta, a 6-3, 220-pound senior, and Mark Lunetta, a 5-10, 190-pound senior will man the defensive ends again. Plachta was named All-Metro Suburban Activities Association last year.

Tom MacKillop, a 5-7, 175-pound senior, is slated for the defensive backfield, as is John Noonan, a 6-0, 185-pound senior and 5-8, 165-pound senior Tom Lauterbach. Tom Shelly, 6-1, 180-pound senior, rounds out the defensive secondary at safety.

"We're not settled on another line backer," Rankin said. "We're waiting for our scrimmage Thursday at Howell. Farmington and Dearborn Riverside will also be there."

Four players are fighting for line backing duties. Those players are Noonan, John Mulholand, 5-9, 185-pound senior, Brad Watson, 6-0, 180-pound senior, and Lee Rollins, 5-10, 180-pound senior.

Two of the following three players will see duty at defensive tackle and nose guard: Sam Dobrotka, 6-0, 220-pound

senior; Mark Easton, 6-0, 205-pound senior; and Jeff Hill, 6-2, 220-pound senior.

Jim Labus, a 5-10, 175-pound senior, and Mark Menzner, a 5-9, 175-pound senior, and Doro-oka are all in the running for the offensive center job.

Darren Topouzian, 5-11, 190-pound senior, will probably start at left guard. Mike Evangelides, 6-2, 245-pound senior, will probably see duty at right tackle. Evangelides is the biggest player on the team.

Tom Poole, 6-0, 185-pound senior, will play left end. Lauterbach will play right halfback.

Groves opens with three tough games. The first night at 8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 8 the Falcons travel to Southfield. On Sept. 15 Groves plays host to Farmington. Then, Sept. 22 the Falcons travel to Royal Oak. Doro-oka for the first Metro Suburban Activities Association game.

"Doro-oka's got to be tough," Rankin said. "That's a good ball club. They were just hurt by injuries last year. Doro-oka had won every title in the history of the league until last year." Rankin expects the

whole Metro Suburban Activities Association to field tougher football teams this fall. In particular, he expects improved efforts from Labus and Troy Athens high schools.

"Our staff has got a lot of confidence in our athletes," Rankin said. "They're very capable young men. Several players want to go on

and play ball in college. All of them have pride. I honestly feel that they'll all go out and do the best they are capable of doing. If that occurs, we're going to be pretty doggone competitive."

"WE HAVE FINE kids here," Rankin said. "They are in condition, disciplined, smart on and off the field, excel-

lent athletes, skilled and like to hit."

Groves players have developed a spirit of togetherness over the past five years, Rankin said.

"I don't know quite what it is," Rankin said. "It's nothing you can put your finger on, but it's something that you need to win-and we've got it."

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