

Groves, RO Dondero are top contenders for MSAA crown

By MARTY BUDNER

Royal Oak Dondero's domination of the Metro-Suburban Activities Association (MSAA) football league ended last year.

Ever since the league was formed in 1972, Dondero, under coach Ivy Loftin, claimed every possible league crown. Its only blemish was when the Oaks tied for the championship the first year.

Things were different in 1977. Birmingham Groves fielded an offensive machine (second-highest scoring team in Oakland County), and tied for the league title with Southfield-Lathrup. The Chargers earned their way to a co-championship by beating a stubborn group from Athens in the last league game of the season.

Thus, Lathrup and Groves, which groomed 4-1 league records, finished one game ahead of Dondero and Bloomfield Hills Lahser.

But, after a one-year sabbatical, Dondero appears ready to reclaim its championship. On the other hand, Groves is more than prepared to defend its title. Southfield-Lathrup and Lahser are set to contend, with Troy Athens providing stiff competition and Rochester Adams on the upswing with a new coach.

Following is a brief preview of each MSAA team (in order of finish last year):

BIRMINGHAM GROVES

Groves scored 160 points in five MSAA games last year—almost double that of Southfield Lathrup, which was the second-best scoring team at 88.

However, the team lost a number of outstanding regulars on offense, including running back Les Garrett, who is now playing football at Western Michigan University.

"We lost eight people from our offense, but we have a lot of people back on defense, so we might be a little tougher there this year," said Groves' coach Bill Rankin. "Last year we had all the older players on offense, and it certainly showed."

"I think we have them all replaced—at least on paper. You just have to get the right blend of people," he said. "Dondero is going to be tough to beat. We have them in our league opener and it's going to be a backyard fight—one hell of a game."

Three experienced linemen are returning to the Falcon offense. Brian Plachta (6-3, 220) was an all-MSAA defensive end last year. Jeff Hill (6-2½, 220) will be at guard, and Stew Hixon (6-1½, 235) is a strong, two-way tackle.

Other important offensive members are senior co-captains Buddy Puscas and Bill Eberhart. Puscas started last year as an offensive end, but will quarterback the Groves offense this year. Eberhart (5-9, 175) had one of the school's best individual games last year when he accounted for all the team's points by scoring three touchdowns and three extra points against Bloomfield Hills Lahser.

Safety Tom Shelly (6-3, 180) will head the Falcon defense.

After opening its league season at Dondero, Groves will play Adams and Athens,

Lathrup and Lahser. Groves will close its season at home against city rival Seaholm.

Rankin, who has a 15-30 five-year career mark at Groves, is assisted by Bob Buck, Jim Johnston, Irv Horwitz and Bruce Hendershot.

SOUTHFIELD LATHRUP

Darrell Harper bowed out as Southfield-Lathrup football coach by tying for the MSAA crown. Harper, who is now the school's athletic director, will watch new coach Bob Marten lead the Chargers.

Overall, Lathrup finished with a 7-2 record last year, scoring 169 points and allowing 83 in nine games. This year one offensive starter and two defensive starters are returning.

"We are very optimistic about our season, and we hope to give a good account of ourselves this year," said Marten, who, along with Don Shonta, are the only returning coaches. "I believe Groves and Athens are the teams to beat, with Dondero and Lahser as sleepers."

Craig Rowley (6-3, 172) is the only starter back. Last year Rowley was an all-MSAA quarterback. He will be supported on offense by end Doug Cornwell, who performed well in Lathrup's final four games last season, halfback Tracy Silk, and linemen Bill Sheeran and Brian Pechenik.

Defensively, linebacker Paul Pyles (6-3, 187) will be the leader, along with Sheeran. Pechenik will play a defensive end, Kevin Hakala will be a safety, and the rest of the positions are up for grabs.

"Our schedule is one of the toughest in the area," said Marten. "We don't have a breather."

ROYAL OAK DONDERO

The only junior varsity games that the Oaks have lost in the past two seasons have been to Groves. This year's varsity matchup with the Falcons should be a thriller.

Dondero's top returning players are guard and defensive tackle Dave Glick (6-0, 190), fullback and linebacker Wade Gravlin (5-10, 165) and halfbacks Kurt Cleary (5-10, 160) and Chris Ray (5-10, 160). Nick Daws will handle a defensive end position, and Mark Combe (6-1, 175) will play a safety spot.

Ivy Loftin, the dean of MSAA coaches, has recorded an overall mark of 120-62-8 in 21 years. He will be assisted this year by Gary Bryce and Fred Fuhr.

BLOOMFIELD HILLS LAHSER

Lahser finished with a 4-5 overall record, 3-2 in the league last year.

The top returning players for coach Ted Guthard's Knights are senior co-captains Mike Stencel, an all-MSAA linebacker, and safety Rick Dauch. John Barto, a senior, will be the quarterback, and classmate Kurt Keegen will play defensive end.

Some other key players for the Knights this season will be Toby Smith, Tom Kraw-

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