

Former grid rivals pull together at Hillsdale

By M.B. DILLON

It's kind of like George Bush and Ronald Reagan joining forces on the Republican team at the end of the bitter battle for the presidential nomination.

On the football roster of Great Lakes Independent Athletic Conference champion Hillsdale College are sophomores Bill Eberhart, Dave Mehelas and Bill Kendro — players who were once at each other's throats on the football fields of opposing local high schools.

But Eberhart, a slotback from Birmingham Groves; Kendro, a tailback from Birmingham Seaholm; and Mehelas, a center from Birmingham Brother Rice, were together on one other team before graduating to Hillsdale — the 1978 Observer & Eccentric all-area football squad.

Eberhart, 5-foot-8 and 170 pounds, rushed for 1,080 yards and scored 15 touchdowns in his senior season.

Kendro, 5-9 and 175 pounds, gained 992 yards in 124 carries to polish off his high school football career.

And Mehelas, a 6-1, 215-pound offensive tackle for the Warriors, received an honorable mention on the all-area team.

AS FELLOW GLIAC champions, the trio's prowess remains evident. Mehelas and Eberhart received honorable mentions on All-Great Lakes conference team.

Named Hillsdale's "Most Valuable Offensive Back," Eberhart lettered for

the second year, and Mehelas for the first.

Kendro played backup tailback and saw some action on the special teams, returning four kickoffs for 87 yards.

Joining the same team kindled a bond of team spirit, friendship and respect among the former enemy gridgers.

"Kendro and I always played on opposing teams, and our schools and the media created a big rivalry," said Eberhart.

"I think we pictured each other negatively.

"Now that I'm playing with these guys I wish we could have played together in high school.

"But that was impossible then — we were all striving for the same thing."

"WE'RE ALL GOOD friends now," said Mehelas.

"In high school, teams supposedly

hate each other even though the players barely even know each other."

Kendro described the first days on Hillsdale's squad as "a little awkward."

"But as the season progressed," he continued, "we became a team."

"There's lots less rivalry now among the players. We don't have anyone in the backfield who's a real big star," said Kendro.

"Our defense held us together."

There's almost a tapestry of connections between the three.

Eberhart recalls Brother Rice coach Al Fracassa — a man who molded Mehelas' football mettle — befriending him a few years back.

"He helped me quite a bit," said Eberhart.

"Rice beat us in the playoffs, so I guess Fracassa knew who I was. I used to see him at my health club a lot."

"I remember him telling me that if I

ever needed help, he'd do anything he could for me."

IN THE LAST GAME of the high school regular season, Kendro and Eberhart met on the gridiron as undefeated archrivals Seaholm and Groves clashed in a bid to reach the playoffs.

"The game ended on a controversial play and we beat Seaholm," recalled Eberhart.

"I was on my way to the locker room and Bill was already on the bus. When he saw me, he jumped off, came up and congratulated me."

"I thought that was something else."

"It was really big of him and I respected him for it."

The way Kendro tells it, "we just talked after the game."

Kendro and Mehelas met long before Hillsdale — in a kitchen.

"We both worked at Oakland Hills,"

said Kendro. "He worked maintenance and I worked in the kitchen."

And Mehelas has memories of Eberhart.

"I remember playing Groves in the playoffs. I never tackled Eberhart, but I observed him from the sidelines."

"Give him an inch and he'd take a foot. That's the kind of back he was."

"And even when we had the victory locked up, you could tell that Bill unlike some of the others — was a good sportsman."

"After the game he shook everyone's hand. He showed a lot of class."

Eberhart on Mehelas: "I remembered him as a helluva football player, but I never really knew him."

"We've all become good friends and the relationship's growing even more."

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