

Mustangs block Pats title path

By Brad Emons
staff writer

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest softball team of all?
Friday's state Class A semifinal showdown in East Lansing between Livonia and Portage Central, will settle the issue. It pits two teams who appear to be mirror images of each other.

The similarities are astonishing, and should make for a classic matchup.

• The two teams have similar records — Franklin is 24-3 and Portage is 28-5.

• When the final statewide Softball Coaches Association poll came out, Franklin was ranked No. 4 and Portage No. 5.

• Both teams rely on defense and wait for the other team to make the mistake.

• Both teams have outstanding pitchers — junior Tracy Letcia of Franklin and senior Val Searles of Portage. Neither, however, is a strikeout artist.

• Both teams can also come up with the big hit when they need it.

• Underclassmen play a vital role on both teams.

PORTAGE captured the Lansing Waverly regional last week with a 4-1 victory over Ann Arbor Huron followed by a 2-2 triumph over Grand Haven. "Consistency on defense has been the key," Portage coach Tom Monroe. "You have to have the defense to keep you in it."

Nicknamed the Mustangs, Portage Central finished second in the Big 8 Conference behind St. Joseph, which is a state semifinalist in Class B. "We lost twice to St. Joe and then lost a chance to gain a tie for the conference title when we lost our last game to Portage Northern," Monroe explained. "We lost two of our five games in one week because we got in a kind of rut with our hitting. But our defense was pretty solid despite the losses."

Searles, who has pitched for four years, became the No. 1 hurler this year after an all-star graduated. "Val has pretty good speed and challenges the hitters," Monroe said. "She's not a strikeout pitcher as such, but she throws a pretty good East Kentwood team. She's also an excellent fielder."

THE HEART of Portage's lineup consists of senior shortstop Tasha Westland, senior third baseman

softball

Cathy Gilmore and junior first baseman Jenny Nowling.

"It's well as a team this year," Monroe said. "If Portage has an edge, it's in 'final four' experience."

The Mustangs won the state crown in 1977 and reached the final four in 1978 and 1984, as well as 1985.

But the Mustangs may not have the enthusiasm of the Patriots, who are making their first final four appearance.

"Everybody is 100 percent behind us at school," said Franklin second-year coach Joe Epstein. "Before we went down to Gibraltar, there was a big sign on the door at school saying: 'Good luck, from the custodians.'"

"All the teachers are talking about it and everybody is excited."

Franklin has certainly proven itself over the season, winning the Livonia City Tournament, the Northwest Suburban League, district and regionals.

THE PATRIOTS also were impressive by the fact that they beat Livonia Stevenson pitcher Lisa Bokovoy, who had a career record of 52-9, three times this season and once last season.

But Epstein was convinced his team was for real even before the team's three encounters with Bokovoy.

"We had a scrimmage about the second week of the season with 10 teams at Waterford Mott," explained Epstein. "We played Mott (the state's No. 1-ranked team), Regina, Warren Cousino, Stevenson, Southfield-Lathrup and Flint Powers — all good clubs. I wasn't sorry we did that because we found out we were competitive, and we got a feel for all the different pitchers."

"It was a confidence builder because we held our own and saw that the other teams were winning, too."

Letcia, who pitched a pair of masterful four-hit shutouts Saturday in the regional, is taking things easy this week in practice.

"We're resting her as much as we can," Epstein said. "She's not even throwing batting practice. She's had some muscle-related pain in her arm."

There's no damage. She's just pitched a lot of innings this year (190)."

AS FAR AS getting the hitters prepared, Epstein said: "We're setting up the pitching machine as fast as we can."

Franklin is also working on defense, according to the Franklin coach.

"We spent the first 4½ weeks working and telling them what to do (on fundamentals) and now they're executing," he said. "We're not going to beat ourselves. The kids have the confidence."

Third base has been a question mark most of the season for Epstein, but he believes the issue has been settled.

"Patty Wixson is going to play third (defensively), but it's going to be hard to keep Terry Obey out of the batting order," said the Franklin coach. "They'll both play. We'll juggle the lineup around with the DH (designated hitter)."

The rest of the Franklin infield is set: sophomore Maria Vasselou at short, senior Carolyn Smith at second and senior Sue Panzi at first.

Harrison eyes Class A crown

Continued from Page 1

shall, they'll work out at Kalamazoo Central High School.

They play Jensen at 3 p.m. Friday at Woodward Field on the Kalamazoo College campus. The winner plays either Rochester or Bishop Gallagher at 5:30 p.m. Saturday around the corner at Western Michigan University's Hyams Field.

baseball

If Harrison wins Friday, the team will spend the night at a WMU dorm — most appropriately — Harrison Hall.

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'Wallyball' is picking up steam in collegiate league

They affectionately call it "Wallyball" in honor of team sponsor Walter's Appliance.

Winning is becoming a habit for this Livonia Collegiate Baseball League (LCBL) team, which is virtually locked in a dead heat for first place with last year's playoff champion Livonia Adray and regular season champ Redford Little Caesars.

In a double-header Sunday at Livonia's Ford Field, Walter's upped its season record to 6-1, sweeping the Angels.

And they did it without their manager, Mike Keller, who missed another day of "Wallyball" to attend a graduation party for his stepson.

Assistant coach Dick DeVries managed to hold the troops together and keep Walter's atop the league standings.

"I told Dick if we didn't win two he's fired," cracked Keller. "So I guess he came through."

Back-to-back triples by Ed Shepler and Steve Frellick in the sixth inning propelled Walter's to victory in the opener, 7-5.

John Stoltz and Chuck Morgan each collected two hits for the winners, while pitcher Dave Roberts, in relief, gained the win.

IN THE SECOND GAME, Doug Doyle struck out eight and scattered seven hits as Walter's won eight innings before besting the Angels, 2-1.

Bob Kopelac, in relief of starter Greg Somerville (ejected in the sixth inning), took the loss. He walked home Dave Donigan with bases loaded in bottom of the eighth for the winning run.

Dave Demay went three-for-four in a losing cause.

The win, however, was a costly one

for Walter's as starting right fielder Scott Hill fractured a knee while trying to hurdle over first base. He underwent surgery Monday at Oakwood Hospital and is expected to be out three to five months.

"That's really going to hurt us," Keller said. "I'm looking around for another outfielder right now."

Walter's also won a close game Friday at Ford Field, nipping Westland Federation, 2-1, as pitcher Bob Cox fanned six and allowed just three hits. The only run he allowed was a lead-off homer to start the game.

Mark Perdue pitched well in defeat, allowing only four hits and one walk. He fanned six.

Walter's scored the winning run in the sixth.

Mickey Katschur opened the inning with a walk, but was forced at second by Frellick. Gary Hall, who went three-for-three, then dropped down a bunt single, moving Frellick to third. Morgan's grounder then scored Frellick.

REDFORD CAESARS also won Sunday at Ford Field, beating Northville 4-2, as Dan Michaels tripled home the game-winning run in the sixth inning. Caesars is now 5-1 in league play.

Kevin Schwane, who went two-for-two, ignited a four-run sixth inning outburst with a two-run homer.

Pitcher Todd Wallace scattered eight hits to pick up the victory, besting Dan Zang, who allowed only one base hit until the fateful sixth.

On Friday, Caesars edged Westland Federation, 4-3, as Michaels won in relief of starter Don Fish.

Michaels also helped his own cause with a single and double. Mike Hodge contributed an RBI single.

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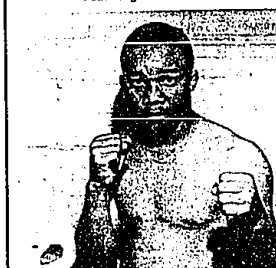
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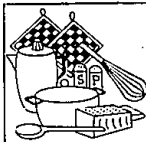
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