

Who's best in state? Hawks have case

By Dan O'Meara
staff writer

At the end of the 1988 season, there was some debate as to which football team was indeed the best in Michigan: Traverse City or Farmington Hills Harrison.

The Trojans won the Class A championship, and the honor of No. 1 overall usually goes to the team holding that title.

Harrison, however, would have received a lot of votes had a poll been taken. The Hawks boasted a prolific offense and dominated the Class B playoffs.

But that was mere speculation a year ago. Following another championship season in 1989, Harrison can actually make a case for itself.

The Hawks, who defeated DeWitt 28-27 and took home their second consecutive championship trophy, opened the season with a 34-18 victory over Saginaw Arthur Hill.

The Lumberjacks, in turn, were the only team to defeat the 1989 Class A winner, Muskegon. Arthur Hill edged the then-No. 1-ranked Big Red 22-21 a month later.

Muskegon shut out its next six opponents and allowed only 21 points in its last eight games. As for the Lumberjacks, they finished 7-2 and, had they not played Harrison, probably would have qualified for the Class A playoffs.

"I think (the 1989 team) ranks with the best," Harrison coach John Herrington said. "It's hard to say how we would have done against Muskegon. We definitely could have played with anybody. But that makes DeWitt one of the best teams in the state, too."

The victory over Arthur Hill, always among the best in Class A, was a foreshadowing of things to come for the Hawks. As defending champion, Harrison ranked No. 1 in every preseason poll, and starting the year with such an impressive win confirmed those expectations.

"I think it was the key to our whole season," Herrington said. "Playing up there before a huge crowd, against one of the best teams I think we've ever played, it gave us a lot of confidence. I felt then we had a chance to go all the way."

GRID TRADITION: The Hawks would certainly welcome a fifth state championship but, contrary to what was reported in Monday's Observer, it's four for now. Harrison has won four championships in five final appearances from 1981 through 1989.

The Hawks are second in number of state titles won, winning three in Class B (1981, 1988 and 1989) and one in Class A (1982). Only six-time winner Detroit DePortes has more championship trophies.

With its success in the playoffs, Harrison has carried the banner for the public schools, many of whom have called for separate playoffs for private schools.

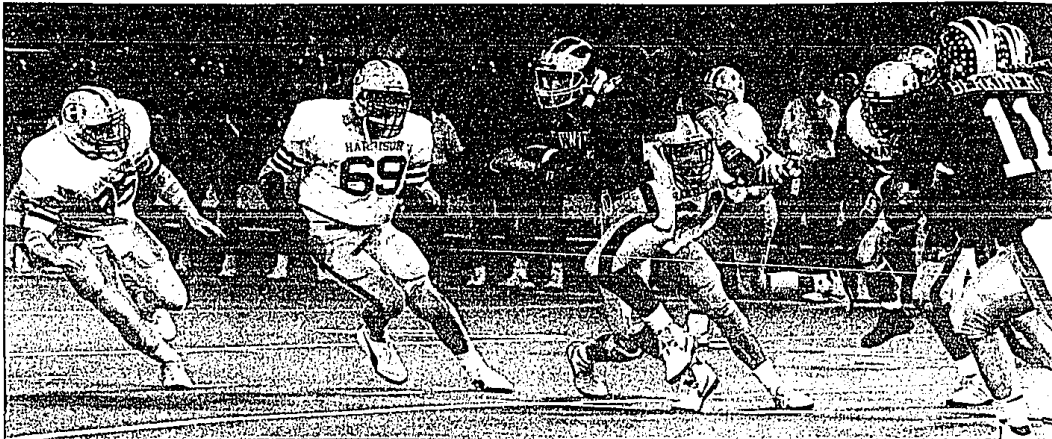
In the 14 years since the playoffs began, the Hawks have outdone such noted Class B parochial schools as Dearborn Divine Child, Jackson Lumen Christi and Muskegon Catholic Central.

"That shows, if you work hard and can establish a winning tradition, the kids want to play and improve," said Herrington, who is 166-40-1 in 20 years at Harrison. "The kids want to be part of a winning program."

Furthermore, the Hawks finished the decade of the 1980s with a record of 106-9.

"It will be difficult to improve on what happened in the '80s," Herrington said, "but we'll go out and do the best we can."

CLARIFICATION: On another matter, the Hawks were visitors in the state final three consecutive years (1987-89). Unlike the last two years in which Harrison was the only visiting team to win in the Silverdome, all four visitors, including Redford Catholic Central, Saginaw Nouvel and Beal City were losers in the 1987 championships.



DeWitt's all-state running back, Mike Cowdrey, is pursued by Joe George (35), Cres Gove (69), Chris Bucalos (64) and Mondel Hightower of Harrison. The Hawks were able to defense Cowdrey but couldn't

stop John Telford, who had a role in all three DeWitt touchdowns. Harrison, however, scored more points as Mill Coleman ran for two scores and passed for

another. The Hawks had a close call but extended their winning streak to 26 games with a 28-27 victory.



Mike Saputo (80) signals to members of Harrison's unbeaten 1988 team the Hawks are still No. 1.



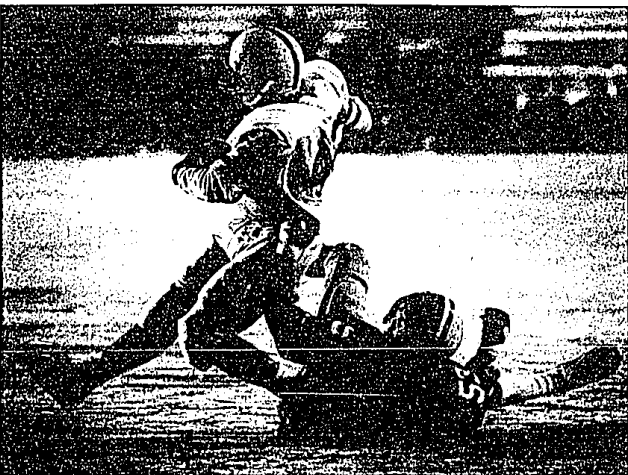
Mondel Hightower had to be helped from the field after suffering strained knee ligaments in the second half.



Mill Coleman tries to elude DeWitt defenders Jeff Shocks (22) and Tony Miller (50). In his high school finale, Coleman rushed for 89 yards and two touchdowns, and he passed for

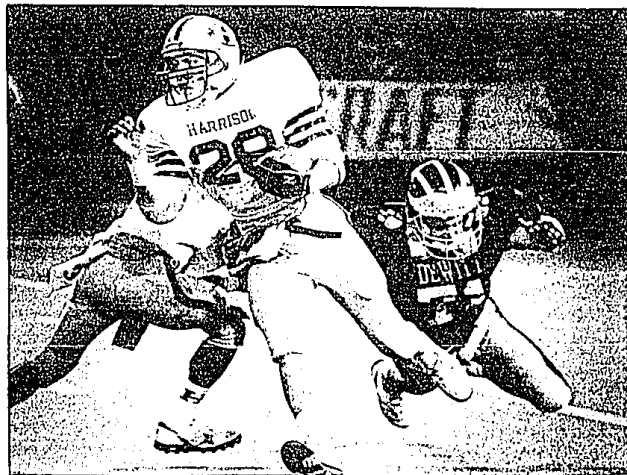
208 yards and one TD. Coleman set a Silverdome record when he passed for 238 yards in the 1988 title game.

Observer photos by Randy Borst



Matt Sperry, senior defensive end, gets a hold of East Grand Rapids back Zac Zertas and

holds on during the semifinal game, which was played on the icy turf in Altwod Stadium.



Scott Ratsoos dodges a potential tackler in Tom Walter (71). Ratsoos returned three kicks for 80

yards, including one of 26 yards that started the game-winning drive.