

SPORTS

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DAN O'MEARA

First-week review for football teams

Now that we've put the foot back in football and had kickoff for a new high school season, here are some thoughts on the first week of games:

Farmington Hills Harrison and Birmingham Brother Rice (I'm told the new mailing address is Bloomfield Hills, but I just can't get used to that) clashed Saturday at the Silverdome.

Because of the history and strength of the two programs, this was a rivalry the first time they met in 1991.

While far from being on a par with the Boys Bowl, it has become somewhat of a classic, at least to the thinking, and this year's game was the best of the four.

Rice's 16-14 victory represents the closest score, and it was the most competitive game yet.

If a few things happened differently, Harrison could have won, and the outcome was in doubt until late in the fourth quarter.

That's a bit ironic since this seemed to be the least heralded (at least to start a season) of the Harrison teams that have played Rice.

But there's a larger irony in this series that intrigues me.

Rice has dominated by winning for the third straight year and owns a 3-1 lead. But that success is eclipsed by the fact Harrison has still won state championships the last two years. Both are Class A schools.

I was asked earlier this year about the Hawks having to play Rice again. The intimation was the Hawks were in trouble, again.

History favors Hawks

If you look at the record, I said, it's a can't-lose situation for Harrison, intending a tongue-in-cheek but nonetheless historically correct reply.

It's highly coincidental that every time Harrison has played Rice it has not lost another game that year and eventually won a state title.

The Hawks beat Rice 32-0 in '91, went 13-0 and captured the Class BB championship.

In the '93 regular-season finale, the Warriors smoked Harrison 35-0, but the Hawks won their next four in the playoffs and claimed the "A" crown.

Harrison opened with a 25-21 loss to Rice in '94 but went unbeaten in its next 12 games and repeated as state champs.

That bit of history was not lost on Warriors coach Al Fracassa after the game Saturday.

"It's an honor to beat Farmington Harrison," he said. "They're a great champion, and we humble ourselves while beating them."

Fracassa was reminded Rice has had that honor three straight years now.

"But they go to the (state) championship game, and we don't," he said. "If things go right this year, hopefully, this will pick our kids up, and we'll practice better in the next few weeks."

A playoff rematch was anticipated the last two years, but Rice was upset in the first round each time.

Again, I think it's reasonable to think it could happen this year, though it's too early to discuss seriously.

South Lyon and Detroit Chadeay are eager to play Harrison again, and teams like Berkley and Royal Oak Kimball lie ahead for Rice.

Silver lining in loss

To that end, however, Harrison can take heart in having played so well against the Warriors, and I think this bodes well for the Hawks this year.

On average, the Warriors are bigger, stronger, more talented every year. Despite their second-to-none tournament record, the Hawks feel like they're David taking on Goliath, and it looked that way the last two times.

Rice pushed Harrison around and handled them on the line in '93 and '94, but that didn't happen this year.

The Hawks, who are bigger but young up front, opened some nice holes for tailback Jason Oranger and stopped a potent rushing attack until late in the game.

A guy with a big job up front was Harrison senior Marcel Hightower. The 6-foot-6, 180-pound left guard had to block Rice's 6-4, 248-pound tackle Rocco Foggio.

Overall, I thought he did well and played it smart, using his body to screen his opponent instead of trying to go one-on-one.

And we all know Oranger is an outstanding back, but I was impressed with his play on defense, too, and think of him as a more complete player now.

He has a new position this year, going from deep halfback to cornerback near the line of scrimmage.

Though he's only 5-6 and 155 pounds, Oranger came up to make some tackles, take the legs from under a receiver and get in the way of a sweep long enough for help to arrive.

Coech John Harrington said in the pressroom. Jason isn't afraid at that position; he'll come up and hit. I believe it.

See O'MEARA, C6

Raiders boast top runner in Rajdl



BY NEAL ZIPPER
STAFF WRITER

The boys cross country teams in Farmington will feature some new faces since some longtime standouts have graduated.

Gone are such familiar names as North Farmington's Tom Stamboulis, Harrison's Todd Heney and Farmington's Tom May.

The loss of talent hasn't left North or Harrison scrambling for replacements, however, but the Falcons might be more affected by the loss of May.

Leading the city pack once again could be the Raiders, who return senior Brian Rajdl, one of the best runners in the Western Lakes Activities Association the last two years.

North Farmington

North Farmington was one of the WLAA's strong teams last season, ending 8-1 in dual meets, third at the conference meet and second at the regional.

Even though the Raiders lost leading runner Stamboulis, as well as Nigel Malik and Adel Ahmad, coach Paul Welch likes what he has coming back.

Rajdl returns as a strong No. 1 runner and should be one of the leading runners in the league and region. He also hopes to qualify for the state meet.

"He has high hopes for this season and has the talent," Welch said. "He also realizes he is the team leader and knows what he has to do in that role."

Senior Brian Kristall also returns with experience, as does junior Steve Chen, who finished strong last season. Sophomore John Berlan returns to action after sitting out last season with a stress fracture.

The battle is for the fifth spot on the squad. In the hunt are seniors Andrew Tomasin, Jeremy Crane and Ben Redmond, sophomore Andy Crane and freshman Andy Karl.

"We have a fairly good team that should be competitive," Welch said. "We lost Tom, who was a major front runner, but have a stronger second, third and fourth runner."

"The key will be if we get a fifth runner. If we don't, we won't do as well as last season. But if one of our runners steps up, we should do as well if not better."

Farmington Harrison

The surprise team in the area might be the Hawks, who finished 6-1 in dual meets and were seventh in the Oakland County meet.

Coach John Reed has a 17-man team, led by seven returning runners. Unfortunately for Reed, five of his top seven runners from last season graduated — Justin and Chad Koone, Todd Heney, Mike Bin and Adam Noe.

Harrison will be led by seniors Scott Oswald and Matt Haas and junior Ryan Moloney, who was named team captain.

"Scott was in the league's top 20 runners last season, and I expect him to be one of the top runners in the area — perhaps in the top 10 in the league," Reed said. "And Matt has improved; he's stronger and faster."



Brian Rajdl
N. Farmington senior

"But Ryan is by far the most improved runner on the team and should run close with Scott. His work ethic is terrific, and that's what made him become captain."

See PREVIEW, C4

Taking charge on the court



SHARON LEMMON/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Hawk leader: Harrison sophomore Amy Roble tries to outmaneuver Redford Union's Lauren Wright in a non-league basketball game Tuesday. Roble scored a game-high 19 points in the 69-31 win for the Hawks. See story on Page 2C.

School ADs revisit league merger issue



BRAD EMMONS

It must be the business climate of the 1990s.

In this era of mega-mergers, Disney buys out Capital Cities, Chase Manhattan and Chemical banks join forces, and could Time Warner's bid for Turner Broadcasting be far behind?

As fast as you can say Kirk Kerkorian, even our little old Western Lakes Activities Association is under pressure.

Principals from the 12-school WLAA will meet Monday for their monthly meeting. The talk will again resort to a leveraged buyout.

It seems the Kensington Valley Conference athletic directors and the ADs from the WLAA had more than a three-martini lunch when they met last June.

Something strong must have been mixed in those drinks because the mega-merger talks between the KVC and WLAA, considered dead at this time a year ago, appear to be alive and well.

After the merger talks subsided last year, a few ADs from the KVC privately turned, while others went to lengths to freeze out certain WLAA schools when it came to non-league scheduling.

Their aim was squarely directed at Dr. Kenneth

Watson, superintendent of the Livonia Public Schools, I presume.

Long holdout

Watson, and rightfully so, has reservations about the so-called Big Valley, a 10-school conglomerate which would stretch from Westland John Glenn to Howell.

Transportation costs appeared to be the biggest concern. Safety for spectators, especially high school-age students driving late at night in the dead of winter, on the icy back roads of Milford, was another concern.

And how many parents want to creep along I-96 during rush hour to make a 5:30 p.m. JV basketball start?

Watson stood his ground, but it didn't sit well with the KVC. It didn't even sit well with one school in his own league (you've heard of Northville).

It appears the ADs from WLAA pulled a Boris Yeltsin, kissing and making up with KVC guys.

Phrases such as "burying the hatchet" and "patching things up" have been tossed around like stock quotes.

It appears some WLAA ADs are in the sell mold right now, selling out their own principals for the sake of master scheduling.

The evidence falls right into Judge It's lap after

the WLAA ADs drafted a joint letter proposing that the merger talks resume.

We all know that the major reason that fuels these mega-league mergers is convenience for scheduling. Anyway, who cares about what the dents and fans think? We all want it to be a better educational experience, right?

The other driving force is aligning schools by performance level. The athletic programs that excel would all get together, the mediocre ones fall into another category, while the third division is for the Class A underachievers.

Although Farmington Hills Harrison has the best performance record in football during the past 20 years, its enrollment ranks the lowest under a KVC-WLAA consortium. That means Northville could duck out of Harrison's division and play somebody else, perhaps against teams with one hand tied behind their back.

My advice to the WLAA principals on Monday is watch for the big yellow sign — proceed with caution.

The "exclusion factor" is the biggest concern.

See EMMONS, C4