

Rice gets another chance in playoffs

BY MARTY BUDNER
STAFF WRITER

Birmingham Brother Rice has an unparalleled football playoff tradition.

The Warriors have won four state championships and have a 21-6 postseason record.

But with all that glorious history, Rice is in a playoff slump.

The Warriors have lost their last three state playoff games.

Rice lost to Eastern Lansing, 24-10, in the 1991 Class A state championship game. In 1993 and 1994, the Warriors went down humbly in one-point defeats in playoff games to Birmingham Seaholm (14-13) and Berkley (20-19), respectively.

Brother Rice hopes to end that skid in the tourney opener set for 1:30 p.m. Saturday at Grosse Pointe North High School.

Both teams enter the game with 8-1 overall records.

North, playing post-season football for the fourth time in school history, expects to give a strong showing with its power.

FOOTBALL

oriented offense that averaged nearly 30 points a game.

"We know we're going to have a game on our hands. The way things have been going for us we can't overlook the first (playoff game)," said Brother Rice coach Al Fracassa. "We sure would like to break out with a win in our first game."

"We certainly don't want to make Grosse Pointe North say this was the best game in the history of their school like we did for Seaholm and Berkley."

Grosse Pointe North lost its first playoff game last year to Royal Oak Kimball, 35-0. The Norsemens split two playoff games in their previous playoff appearances in 1988 and 1989.

North, which finished second in the Macomb Area Conference Blue Division to Warren Mott, enters the game with confidence and credentials.

"We feel good about the playoffs; we know Brother Rice has an outstanding team," said Frank Sumbera, head coach at North for 16 years. "As many people always say, the way to go through Brother Rice to win is through Brother Rice to win playing them right off the bat."

"We were in the playoffs last year with a 7-2 record, and we were a team of mostly juniors. Our skilled players are basically all seniors."

North is led by bullish tailback Leonard Harris and seasoned quarterback Steve Champine. Harris has rushed for 1,968 yards and scored 25 touchdowns while Champine, who has been the starting signal caller since the middle of his freshman season, runs the offense with skill.

"We're basically a running team," said Sumbera. "We have a good tailback like Brother Rice does. Leonard Harris is a good, quick, strong powerful runner. He has very strong legs."

Brother Rice hit a brick wall in

Sunday's Catholic League championship game against Catholic Central. The Shamrocks, playing for a state-playoff berth plus the league title, dominated the game and handed the Warriors the only loss of the season, 23-0.

Fracassa said his job this week is to get his Warriors thinking about North.

"I'm happy our season didn't end (against CC). You kind of have a chance to redeem yourself now," said Fracassa. "Catholic Central was superb against us. They maybe had a bit more incentive, knowing they would make the playoffs with a win."

"Now we have to erase that loss and get ready for a new season. We feel we're in a very strong region. There are a lot of good teams out there."

Brother Rice is led by senior Eric Marcy, who had a strong season in his first full year at quarterback. He has thrown for more than 1,200 yards, including nine touchdown passes.

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BY STEVE KOWALSKI
STAFF WRITER

Being new at school, probably the best way to make friends on the soccer team is to be a play-maker.

So it's no wonder Justin Coffey fit right in with his new team-mates at Troy after his family moved to the area out of the summer from Puerto Rico.

The nifty dribbler set up his biggest goal to date on Tuesday as the Colts beat Detroit Catholic Central, 1-0, in a Class A quarterfinal game played at Macomb Community College.

Junior midfielder Brian Larkin completed Coffey's centering pass to break a scoreless tie with 29:43 remaining in the second half. Larkin's shot from about 15 yards cleared the head of CC goalkeeper Matt Kessler, who didn't have much of a chance.

The lead stood after a goal by CC late in the game was nullified due to an off-sides call.

"He's a playmaker, with good vision, very unselfish," Troy coach Carlos Wheatley said of Coffey, a junior midfielder.

"When kids move in, you always

hear stuff from the mom or dad that he's the best player... But he's living up to the accolades that preceded him."

Coffey raced down the sideline with the ball and his top priority was finding an open teammate.

"I lifted my head and was lucky enough to get the ball to his feet and Larkin made a wonderful finish," said Coffey. "What's so special about this team is this is a real tight group of players and off the field and they've made it easier to adjust."

The Colts, 18-3-3 overall, will play in their first semifinal semi-final game at 7 p.m. Thursday at Grand Blanc. CC bowed out with its first regional title and a 13-7 record.

After an evenly-played 80 minutes of soccer, what it came down to was Troy's goal counted and CC's didn't.

The Shamrocks appeared to tie the score at 1-1, but a goal by senior midfielder Mike Martin with about 8:45 remaining was

disallowed because the referees ruled he was offside. Martin had scored on a rebound off a shot by teammate Casey Cook.

The referees indicated that three CC players were offside on Cook's initial shot, but it would have counted had it gone in.

Once Martin touched the ball after Sawyer made the save, the play was dead, according to referee Jim Charboneau. Sawyer was the only Troy player between Martin and the goal.

"If the first shot went in, it would have been OK," Charboneau explained. "But if a player in the offside positions seeks to gain advantage on a rebound off the goalkeeper or goalpost, the goal does not count."

CC coach Dan Oraucci didn't argue the call long.

"From where I stood, I couldn't tell," Oraucci said. "It's a little hard to see, but the one that didn't call offside was a day and the one they did went against us."

"But it was a great year and we set a new tradition here. I had excellent support this year from my coaches (Kevin Tuite and Aaron Brown). I'm disappointed, but we accomplished a

lot. There's a lot of pride on this team."

Tony Moucoulis, who had a good opportunity tipped over the crossbar by Sawyer with 16 minutes remaining, was one of eight Shamrocks playing their final high school game. Larry Schmid, Ryan Haight, Brad Winslow, Mike Graft, Martin, Mike Juarez and Brian Lindsey are the other seniors.

"They're a good team, good in the air, but what's hardest is when you know you're better than the team you lost to," Moucoulis. "If you look at the second half, we completely dominated and got unlucky. I'm not going to say the refs were right or wrong (on the offside call), but it's hard when that happens."

With Troy already ahead 1-0, Oraucci saved another potential goal as he cleared the ball and after it had gotten past Kessler, The Shamrocks wish someone would have been as alert on Larkin's goal.

"I basically came in unmarked," Larkin said. "I was surprised to see the ball with no man on me. Sometimes people slip through."

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