Northwood says thanks to top CC trio

BY STEVE KOWALSKI
STAFF WRITER

Fraternities aside, Detroit Catholic Central graduates Dan Gusoff, Dan Liebau and Mike Grzywacz have followed a pretty similar path at Northwood University.

They were co-captains on the 1996 Northwood football team that finished 6-5 overall – the school's first winning season since 1984.

Liebau and Grzywacz, 1993 CC graduates and Livonia residents, were four-year starters on the offensive line. Gusoff, a 1992 CC graduate from Redford, was a two-year starter at defensive tackle after spending his first two years in a part-time role.

Each will earn their degrees in marketing next spring.

"They are three quality people from three quality families," Northwood coach Pat Riepma said. "They were great, great players in our program. They played awfully hard and helped us break through the barrier to getting our first winning season since 1984. It's a good starting point and we want to go forward from here."

How bad had it been at Northwood?

Gusoff remembers the really lean years, starting with his redshirt freshman year in 1992 when the Northmen were 0-9. By season's end, it was rare to find anyone in the stands but parents.

FOOTBALL

What about girlfriends?

"I'm not even sure they told people their boyfriends played football," Gusoff said. "When I first came here there were different clicks. There are still clicks, but when it comes time to play everyone's purpose is to win."

Gusoff, Liebau and Grzywacz played on state-champion teams at CC and usually think alike, except when it comes to the fraternity system.

Grzywacz is a member of Phi Delta Gheta while Gusoff is a Theta Gamma Epsilon. Liebau is independent.

"He comes to our parties anyway," Grzywacz said. "He's kind of like an honorary member."

And he doesn't pay dues. What a bargain.

Quick learners

Liebau, 6-foot-2, 250 pounds, was a bargain for the Northmen, starting since Day 1 of his freshman year. He made 31 consecutive starts until an ankle injury sidelined him the first game in '96. He played in the second and third games before assuming the starting job again in games 4-11.

Grzywacz, 6-3, 280, didn't start his first game as a freshman, but earned a start every game since. He finished with 41 consecutive starts.

Some players get their jerseys retired.

Riepma has another idea for remembering Liebau and Grzywacz, who wore No. 66 and 76, respectively.

"I told them whoever replaces them will have to wear their numbers," Riepma said. "I got so used to seeing 66 and 76."

Behind an offenisve front that also included Chris Wizynski, Keith Mathis and Tyrone Nelson, Northwood set a new school record with 3,042 yards rushing in 597 carries (5.1 yards per carry). Their average of 276.5 yards per game was fifth best in Division II nationally.

The Northmen won five of six during one stretch this season. The only interruption was a 40-24 loss to Ferris State University, a Division II power and playoff qualifier.

Comeback victories by Grand Valley State and Wayne State in the last two weeks prevented the Northmen from going 8-3 overall.

"We all wanted the same thing (on the offensive line) – nothing but our backs to run for 300-400 yards," Grzywacz said.

Liebau also played on Northwood's special teams, including kick-off coverage, which is odd for an offensive lineman.

"I stayed in tip-top shape and liked playing special teams because I feel I don't have too much weight to carry around," said Liebau, a second-team Midwest Intercollegiate Football Conference choice as a junior.

The players agreed Riepma has been the key to the program's turnaround.

"When we came in, things were in turmoil," Grzywacz said. "Coach Riepma explained it was not going to happen over night. As co-captains, we didn't want to be dictators, say 'This is what you've got to do.' We just stressed being on time, make sure you don't miss anything. Like the coaches said, 'It's a privilege to play college football. Don't screw it up.'"

Said Liebau: "Everyone started to have more heart and unity and wouldn't accept losing."

Blue collar worker

Gusoff, 5-11 and 255 pounds, had 67 tackles, including 29 solos as a fifth-year senior. He had two sacks and two tackles behind the line of scrimmage.

For his career, he finished with 212 total tackles, including 3 1/2 sacks and 12 for losses.

But the number he's most proud of is zero, which stands for the number of practices he missed.

Northwood defensive coordinator Bill Johnson, on staff with the Northmen since 1973, rates Gusoff among the most competitive he's coached.

"I get very emotional when I talk about him," Johnson said. "If you had to choose a fox hole to jump into, it would be his. He's an honest, hard-working kid who brings his hard hat and lunch bucket to work.

"He was the kind of kid who you always thought someday, somebody would beat him out. But he wouldn't let anyone. He got everything out of his talent that was humanly possible. He's a great kid. I have a grandson named Danny and I'd tell Gus 'I've got two Danny Boys.'"

The turnaround was comparable to another school with the initials NU: Northwestern University.

"It erases the memories of the losing seasons, which is certainly what we were thinking about in the off-season and going through two-a-days," Gusoff said. "The main thing coach Riepma has done is he has players believing in themselves. I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to play."

Northwood is a small, private university located in Midland, about halfway between Saginaw and Mt. Pleasant. Trees line the campus and it's not uncommon to see deer roam.

"As you leave late at night, you see them out there," Riepma said. "I'd like to put a jersey on them, and make sure it's a Northwood jersey."

Now if he can only find more linemen like these three.

WHALERS UPDATE

Playing three games in three days is no fun for any hockey team, but the Detroit Whalers didn't mind too much when two of those turned into victories.

The Whalers, 2-4-1 over their previous seven games, needed the lift.

They opened the weekend slate by beating the London Knights 4-3 in London Friday. On Saturday, the Whalers returned home to Compuware Arena and disappointment, dropping a 4-3 decision to the Ottawa 67s.

But they rebounded quickly, routing the Erie Otters 7-2 Sunday.

Detroit improved to 11-16-2 (24 points), which is third in the Ontario Hockey League's West Division.

Steve Dumonski and Andrew Taylor both collected a goal and two assists to lead the Whalers in Sunday's win over Erie. Julian Smith and Jan Vodrazka added a goal and an assist apiece, with Randy Fitzgerald, Mark Cadotte and Chad Cavanagh each getting a goal.

Robert Esche made 27 stops to earn the win.

Saturday's game against Ottawa — which leads the East Division with an OHL-best 48 points — turned when Joel Trottier scored 3:55 into the last period to increase the 67s' lead to 4-2. Detroit's Smith narrowed the gap back to one with 10:44 remaining in the game, but the Whalers could not get the equalizer.

Smith also had assists on goals scored by Jesse Boulerice and Harold Druken. Cadotte added two assists, and Esche made 23 saves in the defeat.

Detroit plays at Windsor (7:30 p.m. tonight) before returning home to play Guelph (7:30 p.m. Saturday) and the Spitfires (6 p.m. Sunday).

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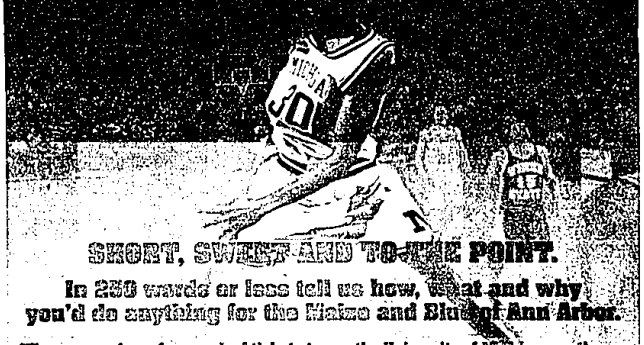

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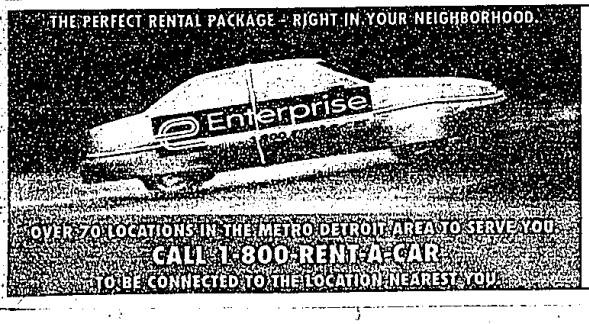

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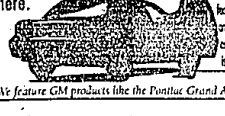

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