

Sports & Recreation

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INSIDE:
Whalers hockey, D2
Bowling, D4

Page 1, Section D

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Experience was on side of Harrison

It was deja vu, thought Farmington Harrison senior Ricky Bryant, who had a flashback Friday afternoon to the state championship game of 1996.

Just as the Hawks did two years ago, they jumped out to a quick, 14-0 lead over Hudsonville in the Class A football final Friday afternoon at the Pontiac Silverdome on touchdown pass receptions by Bryant.

That's where he hoped the similarity between the two games ended. Things were going well for the Hawks, obviously, but Bryant knew, if the deja vu experience went any further, it would be bad news for him and his Harrison teammates.

The all-state wide receiver recalled catching a pass from quarterback Kevin Bambenek and turning it into a 72-yard touchdown for a 14-0 lead as a sophomore against Grandville.

He knew too well how that story ended, however. Grandville rallied from a 14-10 halftime deficit to defeat Harrison and win the title, 24-17.

"We were confident but we weren't thinking we had the game in the bag," Bryant said. "In the huddle, I said 'The same thing happened my sophomore year.' They kept that in mind."

"(Hudsonville) could have gotten the ball in the second half and scored again. That's what Grandville did. That game did cross my mind."

"I saw how the seniors took it that year. That was hard. They were crying, we were all crying. I didn't want that to happen to us. We worked so hard this year, and we deserved (to win the championship)."

Hawks led all way this time

There was no second-half comeback this time by the Eagles, however. There was no disappointment for the Hawks, who made coaching legend John Herrington the winningest coach in tournament history as far as state titles with nine.

The Hawks had a more comfortable halftime lead of 21-7 this year and finished off Hudsonville and a second straight 13-0 season with a 35-13 victory.

The Grandville game two years ago, as well as last year's 21-6 victory over Midland Dow in the state final, served as valuable learning experiences for this year's team. There's no substitute for experience, and the Hawks have lots of it.

When it comes to playing in state championship games at the Silverdome, nobody has experience like the Hawks, be it the Long Green Line, meaning the many players who've contributed to Harrison's great tradition spanning almost three decades now, or this year's team specifically.

"Tradition doesn't block and tackle once you're out there," Herrington said, looking at it from a little more practical standpoint in his post-game comments. "But five starters who played three years in the Silverdome didn't hurt at all."

Hawks often have the edge

There's a lot of work that goes into making the Harrison program the success it is, but there's an advantage if you play for Harrison. The Hawks going into a game thinking they'll win, which gives them a mental edge, and opponents are equally at a disadvantage.

"I expected it and everyone else expected it," Bryant said. "We just expect to win," senior lineman Brett Foster said. "We work so hard; we didn't expect anything less than victory."

Bryant and Foster are two of the five three-year starters who played in three consecutive state finals. The others are seniors Bryan McGhee, Mike Head and Joe Ghannam. All except Ghannam, the team's outstanding punter, are two-way players, too.

Please see O'MEARA, D3



Defense wins championships: Farmington Harrison junior Nick Hall (left) breaks up a pass intended for Hudsonville's Matt Reagan in the Class A championship game Friday at the Pontiac Silverdome. The Hawks won their second straight title and ninth overall.

Back-to-back

Hawks repeat as Class A football champs



Scoring strut: Ricky Bryant showed the crowd his after-touchdown moves, too.



Farmington Harrison is a nine-time state champion in high school football after beating Hudsonville in the Class A final Friday at the Silverdome, 35-13. It's the fourth title in six seasons for the Hawks.

BY DAN O'MEARA
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There was just no stopping the 1998 Farmington Harrison Hawks, not in the final game Friday, not once during the entire season.

Hudsonville was the last team to try and fail as the Hawks ended another undefeated campaign by winning their second straight Class A football title with a 35-13 victory over the Eagles at the Pontiac Silverdome.

It marked the fourth time Harrison has won back-to-back state championships — the other times being 1981-82, 1988-89 and 1993-94.

The Hawks finish 13-0 for the second year in a row, extending their winning streak to 20 games, and fifth time since 1988.

Harrison has now won nine state championships, improving its winning percentage in state-final games to .750 with a record 12 appearances.

"I don't know if there's a small college team that could beat them," Hudsonville coach Dave Duram said. "They have tremendous athletes — skilled, disciplined. Again,

I'd like to see a match-up with a small college, to see if anyone could beat them."

The Hawks, who finished the season averaging 40.77 points per game, wasted little time getting on the scoreboard.

Harrison set a state-finals record for quickest score when senior Ricky Bryant caught a 65-yard touchdown pass from senior Dave Pesci just 21 seconds into the game on the second play from scrimmage.

The old record also belonged Harrison, which needed only 23 seconds to score against Cheboygan in the 1991 Class BB final. Roy Granger scored that year on a 50-yard run.

The Hawks were definitely in control when they made it 14-0 late in the first quarter. Pesci passed to Andre Davis, Brian Nelson and Bryant for first downs on consecutive plays before tossing a 16-yard TD pass to Bryant.

"Believe it or not, our main priority was to stop the pass," Duram said. "We had only given up two rushing touchdowns all year and have played well against the run. I thought we'd get some pressure on them, but that quarterback is an amazing guy. We've seen good quarterbacks but no one that could

scramble and throw like that guy."

"I thought we did a fantastic job of preparing for them. In a couple instances, they beat us one-on-one."

Pesci tied a Class A finals record with three touchdown passes. Bryant set a Class A record with 146 yards receiving and tied another with six receptions.

"Ricky is one of the greatest athletes I've ever coached," Harrison coach John Herrington said. "He's a happy-go-lucky kid and who was fun to coach."

"If anybody scored on us, he'd return a kickoff or would catch pass. I expected him to come up big today and he did."

Harrison senior Joe Ghannam also tied a Class A record by converting all five of his extra-point attempts.

The Eagles (11-2) made it interesting for a while when they trimmed the Harrison lead in half following an interception by Matt Reagan.

Hudsonville had little real success moving the ball against a good Harrison defense that was focused on stopping tailback Nate Luurtsema, who had 99 yards of his team's 163 rushing total on 21 carries.

"He's a really good runner, and we had to gang tackle him," said Harrison senior outside linebacker Brett Foster, who had a couple violent collisions with Luurtsema when the latter tried to block Foster

Please see HAWKS, D3

Harrison QB caps successful year with record effort, 2nd state title

BY STEVE KOWALSKI
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Farmington Harrison senior quarterback Dave Pesci had every right to flash the No. 1 sign after a 35-13 win Friday over Hudsonville in the Class A state football championship at the Silverdome.

Around the house, however, Pesci might want to raise two fingers.

This was the second-straight championship for Harrison and Pesci, whose older brothers, Mike and Joe, played on one state champion each.

"They got one and I've got two now, so that's definitely for bragging rights," said Pesci, who tied a Class A final record with three touchdown passes — two to Ricky Bryant and one to Andre Davis.

"We still argue who had the better team, but I can always show them two rings. Maybe if they put their two together they can beat me."

Pesci, who was a backup behind starter Jared Hopkins last year, can't wait to order his second ring.

"Definitely, it means more this year, being a senior and a leader," he said.

Harrison coach John Herrington was asked in the press room after the game if there are anymore

Pescis or Bryants left for him to coach.

Ricky Bryant's older brother, Kevin, played on Harrison's state champion teams in 1993 and '94. Mike Pesci played on the 1991 Class BB state champion, and Joe Pesci was on the Class A champion in '93.

"That's it; I'm done," joked Herrington. "We've had two Bryants and five Pescis, counting uncles."

"I said before the first game this year Dave was one of the best quarterbacks in the state, and I haven't changed my mind. Some college will be very fortunate to get this kid."

"Dave is a great player; he's been right there all year. He has savvy and quick feet and showed today he can take a hit. He showed great poise under pressure and got the ball to his receivers."

Pesci completed 11 of 16 passes for 205 yards and also scrambled once for 17 yards, setting up his 1-yard dive in the third quarter that gave the Hawks a 35-7 lead with 3:25 left in the third quarter.

Pesci and Bryant stunned the crowd of 14,762, of which more than half came from Hudsonville, with a 65-yard touchdown pass on the second play from



Pressure player: Senior Dave Pesci passed for a record-tying three touchdowns Friday.

Please see PESCI, D3