



DAN O'MEARA

Football playoffs get serious now

So, you thought the high school football playoffs started three weeks ago, did you?

Technically, that's correct. Where No. 1-ranked and supposedly invincible Farmington Harrison is concerned, they start this week, however.

The Hawks breezed through the first three rounds, trouncing Fowlerville, Chelsea and Allen Park by a combined score of 133-13.

But now it gets serious: the quest for a 12th state championship gets a lot tougher, even for Harrison, which many people expected would win the Division 3 title again as long ago as last November.

Saginaw figures to be a much more formidable opponent than Harrison's first three. If it ends up Harrison routes Saginaw as it has virtually every other team, we might start really believing the great things everybody has been saying about Harrison.

The Trojans should be a true test for the Hawks. If they're not, I'll be greatly surprised and all the more impressed by the Hawks.

The state semifinal, set for 1 p.m. Saturday at Flint Atwood Stadium, pits the Western Lakes Activities Association champion against the Saginaw Valley Conference's best.

At one time, the SVC was considered the toughest league in the state. That was the 1950s through the early '70s. Then it was the Catholic League, which remains one of the best.

But the WLA began to earn that type of respect in the 1980s, too, due largely to Harrison's continued success. In recent years, Saginaw has helped to revive the SVC's reputation.

The Hawks have defeated three SVC schools — Saginaw Arthur Hill (1989), Midland (1993) and Midland Dow (1997) — in the past and now comes another challenge. That adds another aspect to this week's game and makes it all the more interesting.

Saturday also will be the first time the Hawks have played at Atwood Stadium since the memorable Ico Bowl of November, 1989.

Harrison played East Grand Rapids on a Friday night on the ice-covered artificial turf. The Hawks won the Class B semifinal game, 3-2, and the state title the next week over DeWitt.

Snow from the previous night stayed on the field and, when the temperature plunged in the early evening Friday, it created a coating of ice. More snow only made it worse.

The MHSAA quit scheduling semis for Friday night after that, and it stopped using Atwood as a playoff site. The turf, which was worn out and in bad condition, was replaced a few years ago.

Hopefully, we'll have another sunny Saturday. An afternoon game should help with the weather, and good turf for two fast teams should make for an excellent game.

Kudos for Farmington soccer
Congratulations are due the Farmington boys soccer team for finishing as the runner-up in the Division 2 state tournament.

The Falcons had a fine season despite a 1-0 loss to Grand Rapids Christian in the championship game.

I don't think we've heard the best of the Falcons either. They seem to be working their way to the top in a gradual manner.

Farmington was a semifinalist last year and a finalist this year. It's possible 2002 could see them crowned state champs finally.

At first glance, it might seem the Falcons missed their opportunities. Many thought last year was their time with a strong senior class.

The Falcons, who are 36-9-4 over the last two years, did what they did this year with largely a junior team. Farmington will miss 6-foot-4 senior Nate Meyer for his offensive skills and headers near the opposing goal and senior midfielder Nick Ramirez for his leadership and gritty play. But the Falcons return nine other starters, including leading scorer Matt Konopinski, and will have the talent to make another run at the championship next year.



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BRISLER

State-final action: Farmington junior Matt Okopy advances with the ball Saturday afternoon in the Division 2 state championship game against Grand Rapids Christian, which won the title, 1-0.

Falcons fall short in final, place 2nd in state tourney

BY DAN O'MEARA
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Farmington met its match Saturday in the Division 2 boys soccer final. The result was the Falcons also met with disappointment for the second straight year in the state tournament.

Grand Rapids Christian had a defense as good as Farmington's, and Max Siepling's goal was all the Falcons needed to claim a 1-0 victory in the championship game at Lowell High School.

The Falcons, who lost in overtime in the state semis last year, had averaged nearly five goals in six previous tournament games, but they were unable to crack the Eagles' defense.

"Our defense was just absolutely phenomenal again today," GRC coach Larry Knaesen said. (Goalkeeper) Joey (Westra) didn't have a lot of action. From the regional on, we shut down four outstanding teams.

"We didn't do anything different for this team. We stayed with the same defense that served us well all season."

Each team had its share of scoring chances, and there was a back-and-forth flow to the game. But the Eagles (20-4-1), who posted their 17th shutout of the

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season, had an overall edge as far as winning possession of the ball and carrying the game to the Falcons (18-4-2).

"It was a pretty even game for the most part," Farmington coach Luke Juncnj said. "They were solid, very athletic. (GRC) was probably the best athletic team we faced in the playoffs."

"They had a deeper bench than we had, and that was the difference in the game. Their starting 11 was mostly seniors while we only started two. I thought that was a big advantage for them, because we had a much younger team."

Knaesen would sub four and five players at a time, and he rotated his troops regularly throughout the game.

"We bought into that philosophy six or seven years ago," he said. "It keeps fresh legs on the field, and it's certainly great for team morale."

"I had the same two forwards all 80 minutes, and they put fresh people in there every 10 minutes," Juncnj said. "That was an advantage for them."

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STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BRISLER

Heartache of defeat: Farmington's Matt Konopinski finds the loss hard to accept.

Harrison prepares for major test from Saginaw



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BRISLER

Top receiver: Agim Shabaz has 48 receptions for 1,255 yards.

BY DAN O'MEARA
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Maybe you think Farmington Harrison coach John Herrington has cried "wolf" too many times, building up the next football opponent only to see it quickly picked apart and destroyed by the Hawks.

But it's not just another Lou Holtz impersonation by Herrington when he talks about the team opposing Harrison this week in a Division 3 state semifinal game.

The Hawks face a serious challenge — undoubtedly their biggest of the season — when they have a first-time meeting with Saginaw High 1 p.m. Saturday at Flint Atwood Stadium.

"They're the most talented team we've seen," Herrington said, adding the Trojans can match Harrison's speed and have more size. "I think people will believe me this time."

Harrison (12-0) is a two-time defend-

ing champion in Division 3. The Hawks, ranked eighth nationally by Student Sports Magazine, have won four state titles in a row and 11 overall.

Saginaw (11-0) has emerged as a state power in recent years, winning the Division 2 championship in 1999 over Birmingham Brother Rice and reaching the semifinals last year.

"Last summer, when we looked at teams we thought would be in Division 3, we thought Saginaw would be a team we'd have to compete with somewhere down the line," Herrington said.

"We have guys who figure that stuff pretty closely. (Saginaw) coming into Division 3 made it the toughest in the state this year."

"They've scored a lot of points, too, and every team they beat in the playoffs was undefeated. They knocked out

PREP HOCKEY

Flyers begin season

BY RICHARD L. SHOOK
STAFF WRITER

There's a little bit of old but a lot more new for this year's edition of the Farmington Flyers.

Farmington returns just seven players from a team that went 10-12-3 last season and compiled a 5-8-3 record in the Western Lakes Activities Association.

In addition, the Flyers went through some coaching turmoil a year ago, with Mike Harris taking over early in the season for Glenn Breuhahn.

"This coaching staff picked the team this year," said Harris, the former coach at Livonia Stevenson. "This is our team, our kids."

"We look at it as an extension of our family. Last year's team was kind of adopted by the staff last year."

Among the seven returning players are four seniors: Matt

Lee, Brad Heraghty, Carl Maus and Devin Baker.

Lee and Heraghty are proven scorers, so the unified Farmington team should have good senior scoring and leadership. Also back are juniors Keith Hay, Nathan Pavach and Bret Ramsay.

With the Flyers carrying 21 players, that means 14 are new to the squad.

"I'm reluctant to give any of the new players' names," Harris said. "We have so many. We feel the same about each. They're quality kids with a lot of talent. I know they're going to help our team."

Included are two juniors who will be vying for the top goaltending position — Aaron Allor and R.J. Ulrich.

Also new are the Flyer uniforms. "We're really excited for many reasons," Harris said. "Included are the new look, new uniforms. They're a blend of the three schools' colors."

That should be interesting to view, given the rainbow assortment worn by Farmington, North Farmington and Farmington Harrison.

Harris will unveil his newcomers tonight in the team's first game against host Redford Unified in the opener of the Redford Unified Invitational at Redford Ice Arena. The game begins at 8 p.m.

Farmington has its first home game Wednesday, Nov. 21, when it hosts Birmingham United.

The home opener will be a bit of a tipoff as to next season's competition. Farmington will be switch-

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FOOTBALL

some of the top teams in Division 3."

One of the Saginaw players to watch is junior halfback Jerome Jackson, who rushed for 419 yards and six touchdowns last week against Birmingham Senohm.

"It should be a good matchup between him and (Harrison tailback) Marcus (Woods)," Herrington said. "They're probably the two best junior running backs in the state."

Through eight games, Jackson had 1,147 yards and 17 touchdowns on 99 carries. Senior halfback Charleston Hughes (6-2, 195) and senior quarterback Kirk Carruth (6-0, 205) are credible running threats, too.

"We have to get our people in position and pursue to the ball because of the strength of their runners," Herrington said. "Hughes is a very strong runner, and we can't concentrate on one guy. Carruth will fake to one and take

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