

Staking A Claim: The Mythical Gridiron Champions

by Ron Pesch

To many football fans across the state, Art Gillespie is known as one of the fathers of the Michigan high school football playoffs. However, to his high school teammates, he is remembered as captain Art, leader of the 1943 Ann Arbor Pioneers - Class A state gridiron champions. The team, including head coach LeVerne "Kip" Taylor, gathered together this season to celebrate the 50th anniversary of their undefeated season.

They were not alone. Three teams claimed the state gridiron crown for 1943. This season also marks the 50th anniversary of state football titles for the Dearborn Fordson Tractors and the Grand Rapids Catholic Central Cougars.

Herein lies the difficulty with pre-1975 high school football championships in Michigan. Without a playoff system in place, a claim on the Michigan title was usually based on nothing more than an undefeated record against other state high schools. Undetermined by head-to-head competition, they were, in a word, mythical.

The deficiencies of the mythical championship system were quickly made apparent. High school football dates back to 1893 in the state of Michigan. As early as 1896, at least three teams - Detroit Central, Ann Arbor, and Grand Rapids - each claimed the mythical state championship.

In 1899, the State Athletic Committee (*a forerunner of the Michigan High School Athletic Association*) and the University of Michigan Athletic Association united to sponsor a gridiron playoff. Hosted by Michigan at Ferry Field, the championship game series produced seven state "playoff" champions between 1899 and 1905. It appears that minor squabbling between the two associations ended the series following the 1905 season.

With the demise of the playoffs, newspapers began to play a impor-

tant role in selecting the mythical gridiron champions. Once again an unbeaten and untied record against Michigan high schools was a requirement for a serious claim on the title. Sports writers would often rationalize a team's merit based on head-to-head competition and strength of schedule.

The problems of the pre-playoff system returned. In 1907, both Saginaw and Escanaba claimed the mythical state championship. Saginaw had been held to a 0-0 tie by Muskegon. Escanaba was unbeaten, yet its schedule of Upper Peninsula opponents was considered weak by the Lower Peninsula press. To settle the debate, Escanaba challenged Saginaw to a contest to determine the true champion. However, Saginaw refused play the U.P. squad and the debate was never settled.

Despite debates like this, newspapers from across the state were in relative consensus for much of the era. Ann Arbor put strong teams on the gridiron in 1908 and 1909, and were sole claimants of the title in those years. Detroit Central, undefeated from 1913-1916, claimed four uncontested state titles. Lansing Central, with a roster that included future college coaches Harry Kipke and John Gill, declared itself state champions during the war years, 1918 and 1919.

In the twenties, as interest in football began to spread, the state's wire services and major newspapers joined the fracas to pick a gridiron champion. Richard Remington, a game official known as "the Walter Camp of Michigan football," would sporadically name the team or teams he felt were representative of a state champion, among his annual all-state selections for the Detroit News.

As additional high schools sprouted in the state's growing urban areas, the issue of a football champion became more clouded. More and more teams laid claim to the mythical crown.

The Associated Press ran an article in 1925 naming three teams as tri-champions in Class A. Port Huron and Grand Rapids Union had posted unbeaten, unscored upon records during the fall, while Flint Central had also finished the year undefeated. Each squad, according to the article, held equal claim to the title.

This trend of multiple state titlists was addressed by the Associated Press near the end of the 1926 season. "Again there appears the possibility of a state high school championship shared by more than one team - a condition that prevailed last year and, which under the present system of mythical selection, probably will prevail frequently in the future.

"In basketball, under the guidance of the Michigan High School Athletic Association, a champion is chosen by tournament play. Last season, under the district, regional, and finals tournament plan, the championship was decided on the merits of actual play.

"It is possible that this same Michigan High School Athletic Association might devise a statewide plan by which schedules would be arranged with a view toward determining sectional champions, with late season games arranged to bring together winners in the various sections."

The existence of the structured schedules of leagues and conferences, as well as traditional late-season rivalries hampered any attempts at a "playoff" system. No action was taken by the MHSAA, and the list of schools claiming state titles continued to grow. Teams began to subdivide the honor, claiming, for example, the state's "Class C" crown. Rather than attempt to pick a mythical champion, some papers began to run a list of undefeated teams, regardless of classification.

In October of 1944, the Detroit Free Press presented an alternative. Beginning with the third week of the season, prep writer Truman Stacey

ranked the state's top ten teams. Weekly, Stacey updated the listing, shifting the teams based on opponent and outcome. Quickly, a pattern emerged. Entering the final week of the poll, Stacey had the teams ranked: 1. Muskegon; 2. Saginaw; and 3. Grand Rapids South. However, the order changed in the final week of the poll as Stacey awarded the mythical crown to Saginaw's 9-0 squad. The unbeaten 11 downed crosstown rival, Saginaw Arthur Hill, 13-6, in the season finale. Muskegon, which closed its eight-game season a week earlier with a 12-0 win over Muskegon Heights, had to settle for second. Grand Rapids South, undefeated in eight games, finished third. The order, according to Stacey, was based on strength of schedule.

"It was one of the ironic quirks of the schedules that the three powers did not meet," noted Stacey in his article on the final standings, "a circumstance which caused many fans and coaches to bemoan the lack of a method of deciding a champion similar to that employed during the basketball season." Despite Stacey's elaborate efforts, each team claimed a share of the mythical title. Nevertheless, a tradition was born.

The ranking of teams was continued by the Free Press' new prep writer, Hal Schram, in 1945. Schram's rankings evolved into a "statistical rating system" that assigned a point value to "any high school team in Michigan playing at least six Class A opponents."

Weekly, Schram (*later known to his followers as "The Swami"*) would calculate the state's top ranked team, and present the results to his readers.

The Associated Press released a Top Ten ranking at the end of the 1947 season but returned to listing undefeated squads until the fall of 1951. The wire service decided to return to the ring with a variation of the Top Ten by beginning a weekly ranking of the state's top twenty teams based on a survey of 17 sports editors in Michigan.

The final weeks of the season produced a battle between Muskegon and Grand Rapids Catholic Central for the top spot. In the eighth week of the season, a Muskegon victory over Southwestern Conference rival Kalamazoo Central vaulted the Big



Ann Arbor High claimed the mythical grid title in 1943, and the team recently celebrated its 50th anniversary. Shown are (front row, left to right): Bob Kritchmeier, Tom Lemble, Bob Hollway, LeVerne "Kip" Taylor, Art Gillespie, Hank Platt, George Black, Bill Hoelzer. Middle Row: Bill Flemming, Bud Phelps, Dan Eskin, Phil Hume, Bill Folske, Tom Kittle, Gene Devine. Back Row: Walter Koebnick, Jack Bauer, Harland Otto, Maynard Newton, Chuck Mann, Jack Scott, Nick Falcone, Floyd Greene.

Reds to the top of the poll. Victories in the final week by both squads left it up to the state's sports editors. By a slim two-vote margin, Muskegon finished the year as the AP state champs. Interestingly, Schram of the Free Press awarded the mythical crown to Grand Rapids Catholic Central.

Although the ratings had created excitement for the fans, the battle for No. 1 had also produced many critics. The Representative Council of the MHSAA, Muskegon head coach Harry Potter and Grand Rapids Catholic Central head coach Ted Sowle each denounced the polls.

Both coaches believed the weekly rankings overemphasized the importance of a game. Potter felt that the polls put "dangerous pressures" on athletes. Sowle called the rating system "vicious." George Manning, principal of Muskegon High School, noted "supporters of the team were going to the coach and urging him to increase the spread. Even the players themselves would go to the coaches and plead to be put back into the game to make the victory more impressive."

The controversy was enough to cause the Associated Press to discontinue the rankings. AP-sponsored lists of undefeated teams have been found for the 1952, 1953, and 1954 seasons, however, the teams are not ranked. Schram of the Free Press, as well as other members of the Detroit media,

refused to buckle to the pressure, and continued to rank the teams.

In the fall of 1955, the AP returned to the fracas. Based on a poll of the state's high school football writers and sportscasters, Ann Arbor was selected as the recipient of the mythical state championship. The Pioneers received 21 of the 26 first-place votes in the final balloting of the season. The criticism had died down, and the AP football poll became a fixture in the state of Michigan.

Between 1951 and 1958, the Associated Press ranked only Class A schools. Kalamazoo University High was selected as the Class B mythical state champion in 1959. The AP added a Class C-D ranking in 1962, before separating the classes into Class C and Class D rankings in 1967.

The Free Press has ranked Class B teams among its top ten sporadically since the 1944 season, Class C and D teams were not ranked consistently until 1975, the start of the current playoff system.

Ron Pesch is the new historical writer for the MHSAA. Research on mythical state champions continues. If you know of a high school that has claimed a mythical football title in Class A that is not on this list, or any teams claiming state titles in Class B, C, or D, please drop Pesch a line at 1447 Henry Street, Muskegon, MI 49441.

The Mythical State Champs

Polls

(Code: Detroit Free Press-DFP;
Associated Press-AP; Consensus-C)

Class A

- 1944 Saginaw (DFP, 9-0)
- 1945 Muskegon Heights (DFP, 9-0)
- 1946 Lansing Sexton (DFP, 9-0)
- 1947 Flint Central (C, 9-0)
- 1948 Grand Rapids Union (DFP, 9-0)
- 1949 Grand Rapids Catholic Central (DFP, 9-0)
- 1950 Flint Northern (DFP, 9-0)
- 1951 Grand Rapids Catholic Central (DFP, 9-0)
- Muskegon (AP, 9-0)
- 1952 Ann Arbor (DFP, 8-0)
- 1953 Detroit Pershing (DFP, 9-0)
- 1954 Grosse Pointe (DFP, 8-0)
- 1955 Ann Arbor (C, 8-0)
- 1956 Flint Northern (C, 8-0)
- 1957 Midland (C, 8-0)
- 1958 Flint Central (DFP, 8-0-1)
- Bay City Central (AP, 8-0-1)
- 1959 Grand Rapids Catholic Central (C, 9-0)
- 1960 Detroit Denby (DFP, 9-0)
- Flint Northern (AP, 9-0)
- 1961 Lansing Sexton (DFP, 8-0)
- Bay City Handy (C, 8-0-1)
- 1962 Ann Arbor (C, 8-0)
- 1963 Detroit Denby (DFP, 9-0)
- Lansing Sexton (AP, 7-0-1)
- 1964 East Lansing (C, 8-0)
- 1965 Bay City Central (C, 9-0)
- 1966 Battle Creek Central (C, 9-0)
- 1967 Bay City Central (C, 9-0)
- 1968 Battle Creek Central (DFP, 9-0)
- Midland (AP, 9-0)
- 1969 Bay City Central (C, 9-0)
- 1970 North Farmington (C, 9-0)
- 1971 Muskegon (C, 9-0)
- 1972 Ferndale (DFP, 9-0)
- Bay City Central (AP, 9-0)
- 1973 Saginaw Arthur Hill (C, 9-0)
- 1974 Birmingham Brother Rice (C, 9-0)

NOTE: Research did not find an AP poll from 1944-46 and 1948-50. AP did not select a champion from 1952-54.

Class B

- 1944 Wayne Memorial (DFP, 9-0)
- 1945 Wayne Memorial (DFP, 9-0)
- 1946 Ypsilanti (DFP, 9-0)
- 1947 Ypsilanti (DFP, 8-0-1)
- 1948 Ypsilanti (DFP, 9-0)
- 1949 River Rouge (DFP, 8-0-1)
- 1950 Cadillac (DFP, 8-0)
- 1951 Niles (DFP, 8-0)
- 1952 Bad Axe (DFP, Record N/A)
- No AP poll found
- 1953 Ironwood (DFP, 8-0)
- 1954 Grand Haven (DFP, 6-1-1)
- 1955 East Grand Rapids (DFP, 8-0)
- 1956 Sault Ste. Marie (DFP, 9-0)
- 1957 Marshall (DFP, 8-1) 1958
- No polls found
- 1959 Manistique (DFP, 8-0)
- Kalamazoo University (AP, 8-0)
- 1960 Riverview (DFP, 8-0)

- Kalamazoo University (AP, 7-0-1)
- 1961 Detroit St. Ambrose (DFP, 8-0)
- Marysville (AP, 8-0)
- 1962 Detroit St. Ambrose (DFP, 9-0)
- Bad Axe (AP, 8-0)
- 1963 Hillsdale (DFP, 8-0)
- Ypsilanti Willow Run (AP, 9-0)
- 1964 Albion (AP, 8-0)
- 1965 Buchanan (DFP, 9-0)
- Jackson St. Johns (AP, 9-0)
- 1966 Saginaw Buena Vista (C, 9-0)
- 1967 Albion (DFP, 9-0)
- Saginaw Buena Vista (AP, 8-0)
- 1968 Riverview (C, 9-0)
- 1969 Sturgis (DFP, 9-0)
- Monroe Catholic Central (AP, 9-0)
- 1970 Grand Rapids Northview (C, 9-0)
- 1971 Kalamazoo Hackett (DFP, 9-0)
- Chelsea & Kalamazoo Hackett (AP, Tie, 9-0)
- 1972 Hillsdale (C, 9-0)
- 1973 Dearborn Divine Child (C, 9-0)
- 1974 Muskegon Catholic Central (C, 9-0)

NOTE: Research did not find an AP poll from 1944-58, and no Detroit Free Press poll in 1958. In 1964, the Detroit Free Press was on strike and did not publish a poll.

Class C-D

(By the Associated Press)

- 1962 Galesburg-Augusta (8-0)
- 1963 Kalamazoo St. Augustine (9-0)
- 1964 Middleville (9-0)
- 1965 Middleville (9-0)
- 1966 Galesburg-Augusta (8-0)

Class C

(By the Associated Press)

- 1967 Galesburg-Augusta (9-0)
- 1968 Frankenmuth (9-0)
- 1969 Frankenmuth (9-0)
- 1970 Galesburg-Augusta (9-1)
- 1971 North Muskegon (8-0)
- 1972 Hudson (9-0)
- 1973 Hudson (9-0)
- 1974 Hudson (9-0)

Class D

(By the Associated Press)

- 1967 Bay City St. Joseph (9-0)
- 1968 DeTour (7-0-1)
- 1969 Cheboygan Catholic Central (8-0)
- 1970 Mt. Pleasant Sacred Heart (8-0-1)
- 1971 Mt. Pleasant Sacred Heart (9-0)
- 1972 Indian River-Inland Lakes (8-0)
- 1973 Traverse City St. Francis (8-1)
- 1974 Traverse City St. Francis (9-0)

Other Mythical

Champions: 1894-1950

- 1950 Flint Northern
- 1949 Grand Rapids Catholic Central

- 1948 Grand Rapids Union
- 1947 Flint Central and Muskegon Heights
- 1946 Lansing Sexton and Muskegon Heights
- 1945 Muskegon Heights
- 1944 Detroit Mackenzie, Grand Rapids South, Muskegon and Saginaw
- 1943 Ann Arbor, Dearborn Fordson and Grand Rapids Catholic Central
- 1942 Detroit Catholic Central, Flint Northern, Jackson, Muskegon and Wyandotte Roosevelt
- 1941 Detroit Cooley
- 1940 Flint Northern
- ✓1939 Flint Northern and Lansing Central
- 1938 Lansing Central
- ✓1937 Lansing Central and Muskegon
- ✓1936 Muskegon
- 1935 Muskegon Heights
- 1934 Lansing Eastern and Muskegon Heights
- 1933 Flint Northern, Lansing Eastern and Muskegon Heights
- 1932 Flint Central
- 1931 Grand Rapids Union and Lansing Central
- 1930 Flint Northern and Jackson
- 1929 Bay City Central and Benton Harbor
- 1928 Bay City Central and Muskegon
- 1927 Detroit Northwestern and Muskegon
- 1926 Muskegon
- 1925 Flint Central, Grand Rapids Union and Port Huron
- 1924 Flint Central and Grand Rapids South
- 1923 Ann Arbor and Muskegon
- 1922 Flint Central and Detroit Eastern
- 1921 Muskegon
- 1920 Muskegon
- 1919 Lansing Central
- 1918 Lansing Central
- 1917 Detroit Northwestern and Lansing Central
- 1916 Detroit Central
- 1915 Detroit Central
- 1914 Detroit Central
- 1913 Detroit Central
- 1912 Grand Rapids Central
- 1911 Bay City Eastern and Detroit Central
- 1910 Detroit Central
- 1909 Ann Arbor
- 1908 Ann Arbor
- 1907 Benton Harbor and Escanaba
- 1906 Benton Harbor*
- 1905 Ishpeming*
- 1904 Escanaba*
- 1903 Benton Harbor*
- 1902 Ishpeming*
- 1901 Ishpeming*
- 1900 Ishpeming*
- 1899 Pontiac
- 1898 Ann Arbor
- 1897 Ann Arbor and Detroit Central
- 1896 Ann Arbor, Detroit Central, and Grand Rapids Central
- 1895 Detroit Central
- 1894 Detroit Central

* Denotes football playoffs sponsored by the University of Michigan and the Michigan High School Athletic Committee (a forerunner of the present MHSAA). Games played in Ann Arbor on Thanksgiving weekend.