

SOMETHING IN THE AIR

It's late Autumn in Michigan, and for hundreds of communities throughout the state, the weekends bring a mixture of renewed hope, civic pride, loud cheers, quiet tears, dinner debates and scrapbooks full of memories as the MHSAA Football Playoffs unfold toward this weekend's Final feast



It was a brisk, clear night, windless under a Halloween Eve's quartermoon. As the teams went through their pregame drills, there was loud, rhythmic clapping among the Philadelphia visitors in the bleachers. The Ackerman band broke into a march tune. "The brass section is flat tonight," Professor Sansing said; then, absorbing the Friday night high school pageantry which had become habit to me, he added: "This may be the last athletic purity in America." – "The Courting of Marcus Dupree," by Willie Morris. Copyright 1992 by Willie Morris. Book first published in 1983 by Doubleday & Co., Inc.

Hamburgers sizzle on the grill. Hot Dogs, normally warmed to perfection in the concession stand, have taken up temporary residence nearby the burgers on this occasion, as the booster club tries to keep up with demand. On a normal Friday night at Lowell, the group will serve 700 to 800 burgers. But this is not a normal night.

This is Playoff time and tonight's District Final opponent is Hudsonville. Twice beaten during the regular season, the eighth-ranked Eagles are not to be taken lightly, but then neither are the Red Arrows. Lowell is the defending MHSAA Division 3 champ, and has lost but once. It came earlier in the season by a mere four points, to an East Grand Rapids squad that would end the regular season undefeated.

However, this season's ranking and records do not matter this evening. Rather, everything is about tonight. For many in Lowell, tonight is about payback. The Arrow Nation has been waiting since 2003 for this chance. Hudsonville knocked off the local squad in the third round of the Playoffs that season, 57-56 in a double overtime thriller. It's time to even the score.

Tonight is high school football at its finest, and Red Arrow Stadium is the land of hope and dreams.

Forty-five minutes before game time and, except for a small spot on the Lowell side, the stands are packed. This exception is the student section, as a number of the latest inductees to the Arrow Nation are milling about, preserving energy, as they wait for the kickoff. They are standing, as they will for the entire contest. Once the game begins, they will be a piston of perpetual motion, bouncing up and down, cheering on the offense, and then the defense until a winner has been determined. Older fans know that selecting a seat in the vicinity means that they too will be on their feet for much of the game, that is if they want to see the action. Accordingly, they are the last seats filled.

In the distant corners of the field, the star players of tomorrow practice their skills and their swagger, tossing aerial after aerial to their makeshift teammates. Dressed in t-shirts and sweatshirts on this unseasonably warm Friday night, they draw up plays on the face of a football, then improvise when the plan falls through.

The cheerleading squad, meanwhile, has just completed its pregame shoot with one of the local television stations. Now the squad has congregated near the student section, to stretch and warm up prior to the game. A senior cheerleader, Sheila Walling, stands off to the side propped up by crutches. A weight room accident on the Wednesday before the game has knocked her from full participation tonight and, just like any football player might be, Shelia is unhappy about her reduced role. Both she and her teammates understand the significance of the game at hand.

"They beat us in double overtime in 2003", pipes up a teammate, "so we have to beat them tonight."

"I was just a sophomore then," notes Walling.

On the other side of the field, the "Super Fans" from Hudsonville hang signs and organize their props. They have been anointed to lead their fellow classmates tonight. They are Grant Burke, Jake Brandt, Darin Bouws, Dylan Adams and Steve Meade

– five seniors hand chosen to succeed last year's Super Fans. That group of five seniors was chosen by their predecessors, and so on and so on. The tasks at hand include maintenance of the Drew Bolhuis interception count sign, staffing for the push-up board, the unfurling of the mammoth Hudsonville flag...all designed to whip the assembled mass of students into a frenzy.

The demand for concessions continues. It's reported that the group expects to serve 1,500 burgers tonight, and believes it will be sold out by the end of halftime as tonight's crowd numbers 6,000. And, they arrived hungry.

"It's a nice fundraiser for the boosters", says five-year grill veteran Al Miller as the fire flares. "You should have seen it when they opened the gates. We could not keep up!"

The national anthem blares from the speakers, and at 7 p.m. sharp, the thud of a foot hitting a football extends the 2005 season for two more teams for at least a couple more hours.

The next day, another pair of tradition-rich schools collide at Kehren Stadium in Muskegon, as the Crusaders from Muskegon Catholic Central host the Ravenna Bulldogs.

Prior to 1990, the teams had never faced each other on the gridiron, but that changed when a series of three classic Playoff contests turned these schools into fierce football rivals. The first was a four-overtime affair won by the Crusaders in 1990, followed by a Ravenna victory in 1994. The third was christened the Mud Bowl by the press when inches of snow turned the field to mud in 1995. A poor snap on a punt allowed MCC to emerge victorious.

In each case, the winner of the Playoff game went on to claim the MHSAA championship.

After those Playoff wars, the teams agreed to square off during the regular season starting in 1998. MCC won the first five meetings, with Ravenna grabbing wins in 2003 and 2004. Catholic earned another MHSAA title in 2000 and was runner-up in 2001. Ravenna added another crown in 2003.

The outcome of the 2003 and 2004 games, however, cost the Crusaders the chance to qualify for the Playoffs. When the announcement of the MCC 2005 schedule showed no Ravenna game (or games against perennial rivals Traverse City St. Francis or Grand Rapids parochial schools Catholic Central or West Catholic) there was some disappointment among local football fans.

But the pairings announced on MHSAA Selection Sunday provided a glimmer of hope. If both MCC and Ravenna got past Week 1, the rivalry would be renewed for another season. With missions accomplished, many at today's game believe the winner has a good shot at reaching the Finals at Ford Field.

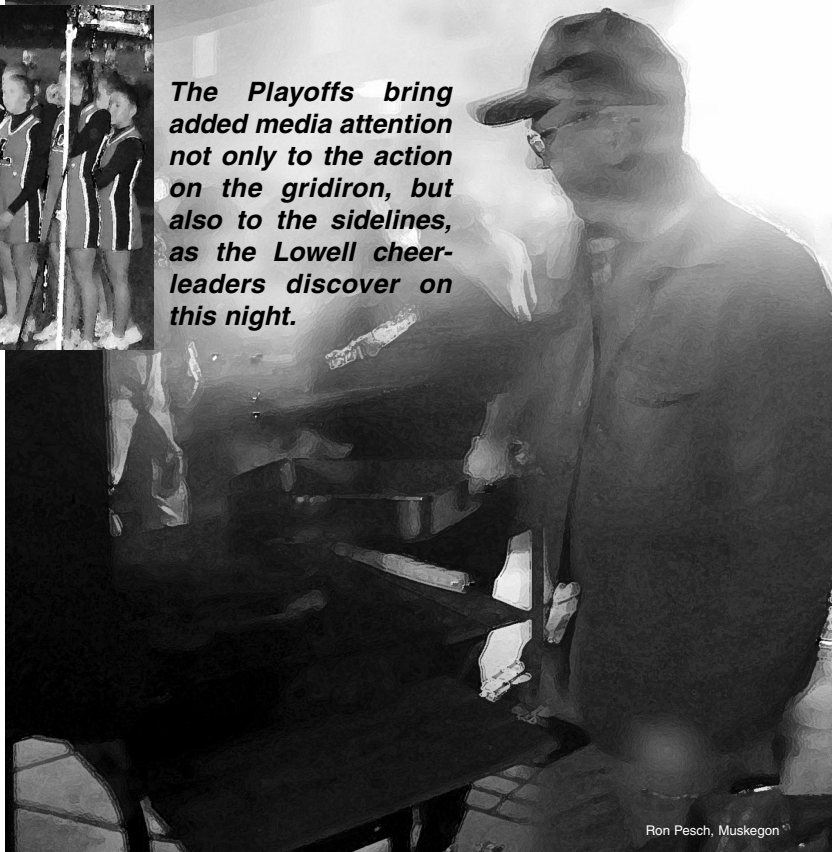
The crowd may be smaller in number than at a Division 1 contest, but certainly no less enthusiastic. The stands are packed on both sides of the field. An overflow of fans lines the fence that encloses the field. Parents, grandparents and lifetime fans, as well as a host of old school and current coaches and players can be spotted in the stands. Some, like Frank Garzelloni and

Muskegon Catholic Central's Crusader doesn't mind the overtime work provided by the MHSAA Playoffs.

Lowell grillmaster Al Miller likely would not have seen much of the football game even without the barbecue smoke, as the demands for his culinary skills nearly doubled for this Playoff game.



The Playoffs bring added media attention not only to the action on the gridiron, but also to the sidelines, as the Lowell cheerleaders discover on this night.



Ray McLean who are seated near the 30 on the Ravenna side are simply looking for a game to watch on a beautiful autumn afternoon. Pete Kutches, one of only two head coaches in MHSAA history to win MHSAA football titles at two different schools, can be spotted on the Catholic side. He coached MCC to titles in 1980 and 1982, and Muskegon Reeths-Puffer to the crown in 1992. Now he's here to watch his grandsons, senior Pete Kutches and freshman Brian Johnson, who play for the Crusaders.

Cheerleaders swing and sway. The Crusader mascot patrols the sideline on the home side of the field. Impromptu football games are played in the south corners of the field. On one side, youth dressed in blue imitate their favorite players from Ravenna. On the Catholic side, kids from a variety of districts, some in Crusader green and gold, others in Big Red red or Sailor blue compete for playground glory. Behind the stands, pockets of middle school students congregate, seemingly oblivious to the fact that a football game is being played.

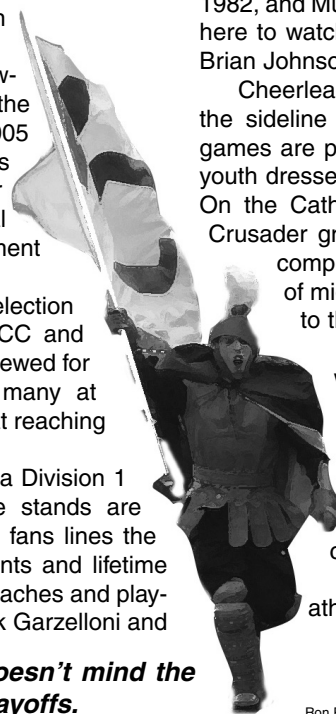
On Friday, it was Hudsonville who left little doubt on who was the superior squad.

This day, Muskegon Catholic is the better team.

The District trophy is awarded to the Crusaders, and Ravenna players gather for a final team meeting on the hallowed grounds of a stadium.

In other communities, the scene is being replicated. Only the colors and surroundings are different.

Professor Sansing is right. This may be the last athletic purity left in America.



– Ron Pesch
MHSAA Historian

Phase 1 began in the heat of an Aug. 8 morning on 620 fields around the state when football practice began for the 2005 season. 256 teams practiced again on Monday, Oct. 24, in pursuit of a trip to Ford Field for the MHSAA Finals. The rest turned in their uniforms.

For those 256 fortunate teams, it is obvious what inclusion in the Playoffs meant, but it also meant opportunities for so many more participants, less noticeable but every bit as instrumental to the MHSAA Football Playoff series.

With 128 games that first weekend came one more assignment for 640 game officials; another opportunity for marching bands and cheerleaders to perform; another week of preparation for grounds and maintenance crews; another push for booster clubs to generate necessary funds to support athletic programs.

And, in some special cases, a chance to rally around something so much more important than a game.

Trenton's season began with a highly publicized opener vs. Allen Park as part of an event called the Big Day Prep Showdown. What followed was a blowout by Allen Park; how Trenton responded is a credit to all involved.

"At the time, the players were adjusting to a new defensive coordinator, the loss of coaches due to budget cuts, and the knowledge that their new defensive coordinator has bile duct cancer," Athletic Director Doug Mentzer recalled.

Trenton went on to win eight straight games to earn a Playoff berth. Like 255 other schools, the Trojans found out their first-round opponent on Selection Sunday, but a much more significant event took place on Oct. 23 in Trenton.

"On the same day the pairings were announced, our community held a fundraiser for Aaron Segedi, the defensive coordinator," Mentzer said. "The turnout was phenomenal and our team has become closer than ever. That night, players and coaches gathered at our coach's (Bob Czarnecki) house and celebrated with pizza and pop."

Trenton defeated Dearborn Heights Crestwood in the opening round before falling to Carleton Airport in the District Final. By that time, however, the team had already put a successful stamp on the season.

Tom Vincent and his officiating crew arrived at Greenville on Oct. 28 two hours prior to the Division 2 game between Traverse City Central and Greenville, not much earlier than the norm. Fans see the officials when they walk on the field, but the work begins long before kickoff, even for a veteran like Vincent, who has worked for 35 years, and has had Playoff assignments since 1991.

"We pregame to focus on the jobs that we have ahead of us," Vincent said. "Our crew had worked together long enough that

we're comfortable with positioning, so it's just reminding ourselves to stay focused, communicate with each other, and keep lines of communication open with the coaches. For the Playoffs, you notice a little more intensity, a little more excitement in the air when you get to the stadium."

He and his crew – umpire Don Walker, linesman Chris Becker, line judge Kevin VanderHulst and back judge-Jack Vulpetti – had 14 flags in a relatively routine contest won by Greenville.

For some schools, the Playoffs are planned for at the beginning of the year, such as **Traverse City St. Francis** (20 appearances), while others are experience the exhilaration for the first time, such as **Plymouth**, making the playoffs in just its second year of existence.

"We had so much happening, being a new school," said Plymouth coach Jay Blaylock. "Getting a great staff together, organizing a booster club, getting new weight equipment. We overcame a 2-7 record last year, and for our first senior class to make it to the playoffs is a credit to the kids. There were 4,000 people, a packed house, and it was loud."

The Wildcats also played one of the most exciting games in Week 1, dropping a 34-28 thriller to Detroit Cody in overtime.

St. Francis, while Playoff tested and seasoned, has different challenges presented by Selection Sunday.

"We share a field with Traverse City Central and West, so we wait in anticipation of the announcement on Selection Sunday as to who is playing where, then the scheduling of facilities begins," said Athletic Director Tom Hardy. "The first weekend of Playoffs is also the "Gladhander Auction," the major fundraiser for our school system, so it is difficult to plan a football game when 400 volunteers are working at the fundraiser. The game is broadcast in the gym that night, which is a nice touch for those attending and working at the auction who can't get to the game."

A little further north, above the Bridge, **Iron Mountain** also looks forward to the Playoffs each year.

Winners in 1993 and 2000, and finalist in 1996 and 1998, the school has made the Playoffs 16 times, and nine of the last 10 years.

"The expectations of making the Playoffs is high every year," said Athletic Director Tom Johnson. "The student body and townspeople support the football program very well."

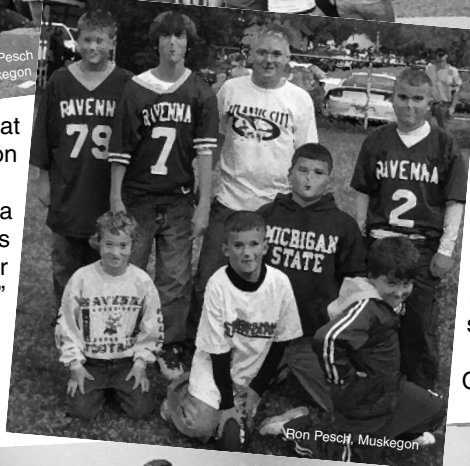
After a win over West Iron County to begin the Playoffs, the Mountaineers dropped a double overtime heartbreaker to Ironwood in the District Finals to end this year's run.



photo courtesy of Traverse City St. Francis



Ron Pesch, Muskegon



Ron Pesch, Muskegon



photo courtesy of Tom Vincent

From top: The Playoffs coincide with Traverse City St. Francis' annual "Gladhander" fundraiser, this year taking on a Route 66 theme; Muskegon Catholic Central players pause for a photo op following a recent game; future Ravenna gridders use a Playoff game for a little extra work of their own; umpire Don Walker pregames with his crew prior to a first-round game at Greenville.