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Photo by Tracy Dreslinski

Bloomfield Hills Andover coach Scott Sugg watches as his team sprints. The Barons take on Auburn Hills Avondale at 7 p.m. Aug. 28 at home in their season opener.

Rollover photo by Patricia O'Blenes

Birmingham Brother Rice junior quarterback Frankie Popp leads the Warriors' offense during the scrimmage Aug. 22 at Farmington Hills Harrison.

Bloomfield Hills Lahser

League: OAA Blue

Last season: 2-7

Offense

Key player: Drew Jackson, senior, quarterback.

Jackson is a welcome addition, according to coach Dan Loria. Jackson makes his way to the Knights after transferring from East Lansing High.

"He's very good. He has the potential to be one of the best that we've had," Loria said. "He has a strong arm and he's very accurate."

When the Knights aren't throwing the ball, it will more than likely be handed to senior tailback Kevin Gibson.

Defense

Key player: Jason Tikas, senior, linebacker.

Lahser returns six starters to the defense; four of them, including Tikas, are linebackers.

"I think we should be a very good team against the run," Loria said.

Special teams

Key player: Cody Henderson, junior, kicker.

Loria has a weapon in Henderson, who has been successful from 50 yards out.

"He has a terrific leg," the coach said. "It makes the kickoff team a whole lot better when you can put it in the end zone, and you're literally thinking points when you get inside the 40 (yard line)."



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Coach's outlook

Last year's campaign marked the first losing season since 2001. Loria said that fact is not lost on his squad.

"They worked hard each week last year and seven of the nine weeks they ended with a loss. That gives an empty feeling," Loria said. "I think that had a lot to do with the success we've had during the offseason."

Birmingham Seaholm

League: OAA White

Last season: 5-4

Offense

Key player: Mitch Kessel, senior, tight end.

The Maples have only two starters back, but they have a big one in Kessel. The tight end stands 6 feet 5 inches and weighs 260 pounds.

"I don't think anyone can single cover him," coach Chris Fahr said. "He has great hands, runs great routes, and it's a great luxury to have someone that you can give the ball to anytime you want."

Overall, Fahr said he's looking to spread his offense out a bit more this season.

"Everything is coming along very well," he said. "I know we're real young, but the kids picked it up fast and are playing hard."

Defense

Key player: Adam Fenton, senior, linebacker.

If Kessel is the go-to guy on offense, Fenton holds that spot for the defense at linebacker.

"He's made himself into an absolute tremendous football player," Fahr said. "His weight has gone up and his speed (time) has gone down. He really has no weaknesses in his game, only strengths. When you do that, you turn into a great player."

Special teams

Key player: Ryan Miner, senior, kicker.

If his practice boot of 52 yards with no wind is any indication, then Fahr has one of the best field goal kickers in the state in Miner.

"He's very accurate, has a strong leg and he's mentally strong," the coach said. "We're lucky to have him."

Coach's outlook

The Maples have been one win away from qualifying for the playoffs the past two seasons, and Fahr hopes to see that change for the better.

"Obviously, every year we want to win every football game we play," he said. "It's not always going to happen ... but if the defense can hold it down for the offense at the beginning of the year, we should win a good amount of ball games."

Birmingham Groves

League: OAA White

Last season: 2-7

Offense

Key player: Daniel Zamler, senior, guard.

With only two returning starters and a whole new offensive scheme, coach Brendan Flaherty knows it's going to take some time for his offense to click.

"It's a completely different deal," Flaherty said of the offense changing to a multiple formation look opposed to the Wing-T scheme last season.

Making the change is offensive coordinator Matt Turner.

“He’s completely changed the dynamics and face of the offense. With that, it takes time to execute and perfect it,” Flaherty said.

The coach is counting on Zamler, a captain and returning starter, to ease the transition.

“He has to make all the line calls. He’s a senior captain and two year starter. He’s the guy,” Flaherty said.

Defense

Key player: Ryan Best, senior, linebacker.

The defense has even less experience than the offense with only two returning starters.

But Flaherty expects Best to make an impact from his linebacker position, which he also manned last year.

“He has to make stuff happen for us,” Flaherty said.

Special teams

Key player: Nolan Procter, senior, kick returner.

When the Falcons’ defense does force the opposing offense off the field, Procter is the guy that’ll be returning punts.

“Even if he doesn’t break one but gets an extra 10 or 20 yards, that’s two first downs,” he said of the senior captain.

Coach’s outlook

Flaherty knows it may be tough in the early goings with a new offense and a lack of experience on both sides of the ball, but the coach expects a marked improvement from the past two years, where the Falcons were a combined 4-17.

“In my mind, we’re trying to right the ship,” he said. “We expect to have a winning record and get ourselves back on track to become a top-notch team in the OAA.”

Bloomfield Hills Andover

League: OAA Blue

Last year: 3-6

Offense

Key player: Tristan Mims, senior, running back.

The Barons return eight starters on offense, and the most explosive of them all may be Mims.

“We need to have the ball in his hands as much as possible,” coach Scott Sugg said.

Andover will get him the ball using multiple formations. Sugg said the offensive is ahead of where it was at this point last season because of all the experience it returns.

“We’ll be able to do more things with motion and that kind of stuff,” he said. “You don’t really get to that point with new guys until after the season starts.”

Defense

Key player: Omar Droubi, senior, defensive end.

Moving to end after playing linebacker last season, Droubi is one of seven returning starters. Sugg said he expects him to be a load for opposing linemen.

“We’re not going to play anyone that can handle him a whole game,” Sugg said of the 6-foot-2, 230-pounder. “He’s going to cause some problems.”

Special teams

Key player: Joe Wyzgoski, junior, punter.

After handling all the kicking duties last season, Wyzgoski will focus mostly on punting this year.

“That’s a huge part of the game if you have a punter that can kick an average of 40 yards instead of 20,” Sugg said.

Taking over the kickoff job is senior Curtis Beechum.

Sugg said both are competing to see who becomes the field goal specialist, and both are capable of handling the job.

“(They’ll) have the opportunity to kick at the next level somewhere,” Sugg said.

Coach’s outlook

“With the hand we were dealt last year, we pretty much played with all underclassmen,” Sugg said. “Now those 18 underclassmen are back and are seniors for the most part.

“I think we’ll do pretty well, but we have to go out on the field and do it.”

Birmingham Brother Rice

League: CHSL Central Division

Last season: 8-3, lost in Division 2 district final

Offense

Key player: Danny Henneghan, senior, running back.

Picking up the rushing duties vacated by Caulton Ray’s graduation and matriculation to Michigan State is Henneghan.

“He played defense last year and is a lacrosse player,” coach Al Fracassa said.

“When Caulton wasn’t in there, (Henneghan) got a few turns. He’s going to get a lot of turns this year.

“He’s a speed guy who has good running ability. He’s not a power back that is going to run over you, but he makes good decisions on where to run.”

Henneghan will be working behind a new line, with only two starters, senior tackles Jareth Glanda and Zack Cherocci, returning.

With the graduation of Andy Lentz, junior Frankie Popp takes over the quarterback duties.

Defense

Key player: Shamari Benton, senior, linebacker.

Senior captains Benton and Shaquille Benton join seniors Peter Plaskey (defensive line), Matt Maletzke (defensive line) and sophomore Jimmy Pickens (safety) back on defense.

Benton will be picking up the slack left behind by Paul Gyarmati, who after graduation walked on at the University of Michigan.

It is the second straight year Rice has had to replace a linebacker that moved on to the Big Ten, as Gyarmati filled in for current Penn State linebacker Chris Colasanti.

Special teams

Key player: Senior punter Alex Charles and senior kicker Ryan Kelly.

Charles and Kelly return to their positions after successful junior seasons and give Fracassa stability in the kicking game.

“Those are two very important people in our program, and they’re good, I have to admit that,” Fracassa said. “I’m not going to hold anything back. The kicking, punting, extra points and field goals, those people are pretty good.”

Coach’s outlook

With all of the changes to the roster, Fracassa is focusing on getting his team physically ready before opening the season at 7 p.m. Aug. 30 at Oak Park High — home of Michigan State-bound tailback Edwin Baker.

“You’ve got to work like heck when you don’t have an easy schedule,” said Fracassa, whose team travels to Muskegon High for game No. 2 at 4 p.m. Sept. 6.

“We’re going to try and condition the heck out of them. These three weeks (of preseason practice) are important to get your kids physically ready. If you don’t have a physically fit team, they’re not going very far.”

Bloomfield Hills Cranbrook-Kingswood

League: Metro Conference

Last season: 3-6

Offense

Key player: Stephen Peck, senior, receiver.

The Cranes’ offense will have a new look in 2008 as it switches to the spread. Knowing this, coach Gary Gerson wasted little time in naming Peck his key guy.

“He’s started for three years now,” Gerson said. “He’s going to create some mismatches all over the field. That’s going to be key for our entire offense, finding mismatches anyway we can.”

Junior quarterback Mike Corey takes the reigns of the varsity offense for the first time in his career. On the junior varsity team last season, Corey threw for more than 1,500 yards and had a completion percentage near 70 percent.

Defense

Key player: David Dietz, senior, linebacker.

Dietz is one of the more aggressive backers on the Cranbrook defense, one of the main reasons Gerson named him as the unit’s key player.

“He’s really learning to master the position,” Gerson said. “That group is going to face some very good individual talent all season. Whoever we play against, shutting down their top guys will be key.”

Special teams:

Key player: Daniel DuComb, senior, kicker.

DuComb may have been named as the key player on special teams, but his contributions go well beyond that. He’ll also line up as one of the team’s receivers and at linebacker.

“He’s going to be very important on special teams, though,” Gerson explained. “We’re essentially starting over with these teams, and for him to be a fixture at the kicking position is a bonus for us.”

Coach’s outlook

Gerson wasn’t afraid to admit his disappointment in the past two seasons. At the same time, he had no fear in saying this season could be Cranbrook’s welcome back party.

“This is the year we get back on the success track,” he said. “We’re going to be a fun team to watch. We’ll run with a wide open offense, and we’re going to win some games.”

Beverly Hills Detroit Country Day

League: Independent

Last season: 11-3, lost in Division 4 state final

Offense

Key player: Bennie Fowler, senior, wide receiver.

Another year, another Division 1 recruit highlighting the Detroit Country Day offense.

After featuring the power running of Jonas Grey all the way to the 2007 Division 4 state final, the Yellowjackets hope to ride Michigan State-bound Fowler to similar results in 2008.

“He’s committed to Michigan State even though it’s his second year of football at the high school level,” coach Dan McLean said.

“He got hurt last year, and we were just figuring out how to use him. We line him up as a wide receiver, but with his ability we plan to use him in different places.”

Defense

Key players: Senior defensive lineman Tim McClean, senior linebacker Mose Hogan and senior defensive back Chris Jackson.

McClean, Hogan and Jackson give the Yellowjackets a captain in each unit of a defense that has numerous players returning from last year's state runner-up finish.

Special teams

Key player: Bennie Fowler, senior, returner.

Everything that makes Fowler dangerous at receiver applies to kick and punt returns, and just to make matters worse for opposing teams is fellow return man O'Neil Swanson.

Coach's outlook

With the departure of Grey, who signed with Notre Dame, and linebacker Kenny Demens, who moved on to the University of Michigan after graduation, the 18 seniors back from that squad are looking to make a name for themselves in 2008.

“It was a terrific experience with those guys,” McLean said. “But it's a new year, and we have to turn the page. Our history is our history, and we're proud of it, but this is the seniors' chance to put their stamp on it.”

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