

Daily Mining Gazette  
PO Box 368  
Houghton, MI 49931  
906-482-1500  
www.MiningGazette.com

## One more kickoff

Brandon Veale, DMG Sports Editor

### For 17 area football players, All-Star Game provides closure to prep career

HOUGHTON - The nature of the high school football schedule precludes happy endings.

Whether it is playoff elimination or falling short of the postseason entirely, very few athletes get to wrap up their careers the way they imagined.

However, the 17 area athletes participating in Saturday's U.P. Football All-Star Game get a chance to put the pads on one more time and finish their prep careers with a smile.

"I can't wait. One last time," Baraga's Tyler McGaha said.

This year's Copper Country contingent is slightly larger - there were 15 last year. A specific growth area is Houghton County, which will be represented by four Lake Linden-Hubbell Lakes (Logan Chadde, Ryan Gerbig, James Dube and David Koskela), two Calumet Copper Kings (Jake Bjorn and Brad Anderson), two Hancock Bulldogs (Josh Verran and Reece Anderson) and a Houghton Gremlin (Gabe Kallungi). There were only five Houghton County players last year, three of which were from Calumet.

McGaha and Mike Niemi will be representing the Baraga Vikings, while Dan Perrault and Alex Tarvainen will play from L'Anse.

Both Ontonagon County programs have a pair of players: Shane Johnson and Colin Ahlskog for Ewen-Trout Creek and Ryan Moreau and Kyle Pollard for Ontonagon.

The geographical orientation of the teams means traditional rivals now stand side-by-side.

For example, the LL-H quartet is joined by six players from Forest Park, which edged the Lakes for the Great Western Conference title, then eliminated them from the Division 8 playoffs in the second round.

"During the games, when it was the regular season, you hated everybody out there," Koskela said.

During practice sessions, which began Monday, the athletes get a chance to see up close how they measure up. However, competing with the U.P.'s best has its pitfalls.

"There's a few plays where you feel like you belong there, but you get leveled a couple of times too," Gerbig said.

The teams have been training both inside outside the Superior Dome, where the game will be played Saturday at 3 p.m.

The game will be the last one played on the Dome's original 18-year-old AstroTurf surface before it is replaced in advance of NMU's 2009 football season.

When the Dome opened in 1991, it was a highly-popular site for late-season and tournament football games, but now, many players are experiencing it for the first time, as well as the rug burns and hard sub-surface that goes with it.

"It's a lot different than normal grass," Dube said. "If you fall down, it's going to hurt."

Dube is an exception in this year's game. He plans to continue his football career at Saginaw Valley State.

Players had to raise several hundred dollars to participate, but have been rewarded with first-rate new equipment.

The four LL-H players worked as a team off the field, too, to raise the money.

"It's definitely something I don't take for granted," Chadde said.

However, the chance to play one more time created more than enough motivation for the players to get out and pound the pavement.

"It wasn't easy, but I'm glad the community was willing to support, give a helping hand, especially in these hard economic times," Tarvainen said. "Can't thank them enough."



Baraga's Mike Niemi poses for a picture at the U.P. Football All-Star Game media night Tuesday at the Superior Dome. Niemi will be playing in Saturday's game for the West Team, one of 17 area athletes participating in the second annual event. (Marquette Mining Journal photo by Julia Woehrer)