

Santilli Leads West Team in U.P. All-Star Grid Clash

CRYSTAL FALLS—So you thought the 2007 high school football season ended on Thanksgiving Friday at Ford Field in Detroit, when Forest Park lifted the state championship trophy?

Not this year. The seniors who earned All-U.P. status during the 2007 season get one final chance to show their skills this Saturday, June 28, at the U.P. Football All-Star Game—the first such game to be played in over half a century.

The game will be played at the Superior Dome in Marquette starting at 2 p.m. Central Time. It is being organized by Xcel Sports Training of Madison, with help from a number of sponsors.

Iron County will be well represented at the event. Seven county players will play on the West team: five from Division 8 state champion Forest Park and two from West Iron County.

The Trojans on the team are running back Kyle LaVacque, defensive ends Erik Peterson and Kyle Roberts, linebacker Tim Wheeler and punter Calix Sholander.

West Iron's entries on the team are defensive end Jake Dobson and defensive back Jamie Mattson. All will be wearing the West team's uniforms—white with red numbers/trim and black pants. Players will wear helmets from their own school.

Guiding the West team will be half a dozen coaches, led by Forest Park Head Coach Bill Santilli and Assistant Coach Dave Graff. For some coaches, finding time to coach an all-star team is no problem since school is out. But for those not employed by schools—like Santilli and Graff—it's one more responsibility.

"It's like preparing for August, only it's June," said Santilli. Both Forest Park coaches are taking a week off their jobs—Santilli with the state DOT; Graff with the city of Crystal Falls—to join the West players Monday.

Players and coaches will be housed at Northern Michigan University. Check-in was Monday, and a media day was scheduled Tuesday evening.

An all-star reception is scheduled for 6 p.m. Central Time on Thursday, June 26, at the Bottum University Center on the NMU campus, with former NFL coach Steve Mariucci as the guest speaker. Tickets, \$40 each, are available to the public.

The U.P. All-Star players will take part in a youth football camp on June 27 at the dome, starting at 6 p.m. Central Time.

Saturday will be busy, starting with a recruiting combine for any high school-age player at 8 a.m. Central Time at the Dome. A dance clinic for elementary girls will be held at the same time by the Marquette High School Dance Team.

A pre-game tailgate party starts at 11 a.m. Central Time in the Beacon House parking lot (across the street from the Superior Dome). The Dome's doors open at 1 p.m. Central Time, with kickoff scheduled for 2. Xcel officials say they expect around 5,000 fans to attend.

A U.P. all-star football game was played between 1946 and 1951, and then it ended for unknown reasons. The state high school football coaches association has held a statewide all-star game for years. Both Santilli and Graff were part of the coaching staff at the 2006 game, played at Michigan State.

But the state game usually has only a couple U.P. players—just one this year. It's going to be different at Marquette. The players are a lot more familiar, and so is the rest of the West coaching staff: Scott Boddy of Iron Mountain, Andy Crouch and Jamie Koskela of Lake Linden-Hubbell and Mark Leaf of L'Anse.

“Just this past season, during the playoff run, we were opponents with Lake Linden and L'Anse,” Santilli noted. “Now we will be all working together. The relationship we have is outstanding. Our friendship carries off the field with all the coaches we come across.

“It will be a nice experience for all of us, to get together and work with some of the best football players in the U.P.”

Santilli met the West team for the first time on Monday, and several practices will be held in the next few days. One factor is that while some of the players plan to compete for college rosters this fall, most do not expect to play competitive football in college.

“I think that's going to be a big challenge,” said the Trojans' coach, who sent a letter to the players in March, congratulating them on being chosen to the team—and also noting they are expected to be in shape to play one more game.

It's also going to be a lot different than basketball, where all-star teams can show up the day before the game to work on plays. “With football, you have plays. Your linemen have to remember them, and your defense as well. You have to understand the rules of the game they want us to play.”

Besides being physically ready to play a game, the players also have to be ready mentally.

It's a challenge for the coaches, too—working with many players for the first time. Santilli has coached some of them and has seen others in games against FP. Others have been seen only in camps or are known mainly by reputation—all players on both teams earned All-Conference and/or All-U.P. honors.

So when the players start practicing, coaches will be watching the drills closely. Coaches can assign players to different positions, “to come up with the best position for them to fit our team needs. That is going to be one of the challenges.”

Another priority is making sure each player gets his chance to show his stuff. Santilli quoted Todd Goldbeck of Xcel, which is organizing the event: “He said each player is going to be there with family and friends watching, and he wants it so everyone has a good time.”

After All-Star weekend, Santilli returns to work and gets ready for the usual run-up to the new season. “The Wop-Swede game—Bass Festival. Then, Iron County Football Camp. Then, it's going to be the rules meeting, and the season's going to start!”

Practice begins on Aug. 11. The first game is Aug. 28.

“That's the reality of the whole thing,” said Santilli. “Where did the summer go?”