

All In This Together Now

17 All-Stars Bonding On Gridiron

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By Brandon Veale - DMG Sports Editor

MARQUETTE -Football can be a sport of long memories: who spiked whom, who delivered the big hit, who misbehaved at the bottom of a pile.

But Saturday's third annual U.P. Football All-Star Game is about making new memories, erasing the desire to settle old scores and get down to the essence of the game: 11 players, working together as one.

Lake Linden-Hubbell graduate Brandon Sundblad said that in the first practice session of the week, he mostly stuck with the three other Lakes on the West team, but as time has gone on, the guys have broken down barriers and are having a good time.

"We just made fun of all the games we played against each other and laughed about it. It's really kind of fun," Sundblad said.

Sundblad, the 2009 U.P. Class D Defensive Player of the Year, is one of 17 area players scheduled to participate in Saturday's game, which kicks off at 3 p.m. inside Northern Michigan University's Superior Dome.

In preparation for the event, the players have spared no physicality in practice.

"We've been hitting from day one, and it's just been awesome to put the pads back on and hit again." L'Anse's Parker Miller said. He described the experience as "all-around fun."

"We're not in high school anymore, so we put a lot behind us and play together as a team to beat the East side."

In addition to wiping away bad memories of clashes in the trenches, the event is a chance to tack a different and happy ending onto each player's prep career.

"It was rough after losing our game against Iron Mountain (in the Division 6 district final), and just getting one more chance to play football, it's really awesome. Hopefully I can end with a win for my football career," said Calumet's Blake Frantti.

LL-H head coach Andy Crouch has participated in the event each time since its re-establishment by Xcel Sports Training and said there has always been a great sense of camaraderie involved.

"One of the best things is just the people involved in it. Todd Goldbeck (Xcel's owner/president) and his company just do an incredible job organizing this."

The event isn't just a chance to establish bonds between the players but a chance for coaches to personally get to know the guys they have spent weeks game-planning against.

"I know who they are but I don't really know them," Crouch said.

As an assistant last year, Crouch drew up the hook-and-lateral play that led to the West's only touchdown. He would not divulge what might be up his sleeve this time around as West tries to take the lead in the all-time series, which stands at a game apiece.

"You will have to wait and see, but we have some weapons that we plan to use," he said.

In addition, the week is a reunion of sorts for the local coaching fraternity, which this year includes Crouch's right-hand man Jamie Koskela, Calumet coaches John Croze and Mike Ojala (plus former Calumet coach Scott Boddy) and L'Anse coach Mark Leaf.

The players and coaches have been involved in a series of off-the-field activities as well, including helping with a youth football clinic Thursday, an All-Star banquet tonight featuring former Kansas City Chiefs linebacker Mike Maslowski and skills competitions. The Copper Country has already claimed its first victory of the week, as Ontonagon's Mike Schmaus won the fastest man competition by running a 4.51-second 40-yard dash.

Unlike most of the U.P.'s finest, Sundblad will not be leaving the game behind after Saturday. In fact, he'll be back in the very same dome and on the same practice fields in just a few months as he begins a college football career at NMU.

"I really love the campus. I had orientation last week, and now this. Everything's getting more familiar and I can't wait to come down in the fall for more classes and stuff," he said.

But before he changes his blue-and-gold helmet for a green-and-gold one, this week is a chance for the best of a LL-H football class that accomplished many things to get together one last time.

"From a personal standpoint, it's pretty gratifying to get one more week to spend with these kids," Crouch said.



Lake Linden-Hubbell's Brandon Sundblad collides with Hancock's Andy Johnson as he crosses the goal line during an October 2009 game at Warner Field. Sundblad and Johnson will be teammates Saturday at the Superior Dome as West meets East in the U.P. Football All-Star Game. (DMG photo by Brandon Veale)

Fact Box

All the local players & coaches scheduled to participate in Saturday's 3rd annual U.P. Football All-Star Game:

Dennis Anderson - L'Anse
Parker Miller - L'Anse
Cody Doan - Ontonagon
Mike Schmaus - Ontonagon
Andy Johnson - Hancock
Davy Sproule - Houghton
Kelly Shanahan - Baraga
Matt Velmer - Baraga
Travis Ambuehl - LL-Hubbell
John Dube - LL-Hubbell
Jake Killian - LL-Hubbell
Brandon Sundblad - LL-Hubbell

Nels Anderson - Calumet
Blake Frantti - Calumet
Kevin Lasanen - Calumet
Ben Steber - Calumet
Nate Sturos - Calumet

Coaches:
Andy Crouch - LL-Hubbell
Jamie Koskela - LL-Hubbell
John Croze - Calumet
Mike Ojala - Calumet
Mark Leaf - L'Anse