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By: Dennis Grall
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All-Star Football Game Gets Rousing Welcome

MARQUETTE - Al Sandona was not about to miss the resumption of the U.P. Football All-Star Game.

The former Northern Michigan University assistant football coach was intently watching warmups Saturday in the Superior Dome, relishing what the recent high school graduates were going through and what he missed.

An All-U.P. player at Iron Mountain, he graduated in 1952. The last of six all-star games was held in 1951.

"I'm glad it is back for the kids," said Sandona. "It is a great opportunity for them to end up their career in an all-star game. And it is a plus for those who go on to play in college."

Sandona said "I was really disappointed" when the all-star game ended before his senior year. "You work hard in high school to be able to compete at an all-star level," he said. "It is great they have an opportunity to do this and I hope it continues.

Dick Berlinski of Kingsford was standing with Sandona. He played football at Michigan State University, and like Sandona, belongs to the U.P. Sports Hall of Fame. He graduated from Kingsford in 1965.

"This is a great opportunity to showcase U.P. football players," said Berlinski, who was an outstanding running back. "It is recognition of a fine career the kids have had and to give the fans a great show. I never had a chance to watch many of these kids (in high school)."

Berlinski said playing on the artificial surface was also a bonus. He only played one game on fake grass, at the University of Wisconsin.

"It was unbelievably fast," he said.

East assistant coach Kevin Bellefeuille of North Central High School said the game was the perfect caper to a perfect week of practice in Marquette.

"The whole thing was first class," he said, indicating organizer Todd Goldbeck of Xcel Sports Training "did an excellent job" resurrecting and staging the event.

Bellefeuil served with head coach Jeff Olson, Jim Iwanicki and Scott Syrjala of Ishpeming, Paul and Kevin Jacobson and Kevin Bell of Negaunee.

He said the week of practice "validated some of the things we do and also refined some techniques. The coaches were very gracious to help me."

He said the East players bonded quickly, noting the players all lined up as co-captains for the coin toss. "We sit together, eat together. There are no egos. Nobody on that team is better than anybody else."

Fifteen members of the 42-man squad played for Class D schools - the West had 16 of 45 - but Bellefeuil said all the players fit in well.

"You see good athletes at every level," he said, noting the larger schools have better weight rooms and therefore likely have stronger players. "Our small schools have good athletes, too," he said.

Lineman Lance Gearhart of North Central said he was not overwhelmed by playing against big-school grads. "We all clicked right away, we were friends right off the bat," he said.

West, with 17 players from traditional big-school powers, won 38-14 and dominated the game.

"We knew it would be tough. We did the best we could," said Gearhart.

Running back Derek McCarty, who will play at St. Norbert College, gained 18 yards with a darting run on his lone carry. He said the week will be beneficial.

"It gives me confidence that I can do it," he said. "I learned that practice (at SNC) will be different and that everyone will be good. If you don't step up, someone will be there to pass you."

Goldbeck was pleased, and relieved, when the game ended. "It was very exciting to see kids and their families and friends celebrate a week of U.P. football," he said. "It was just the kind of atmosphere we wanted.

"Everything really went smooth, which is a credit to the kids and coaches. They are a great group of guys, with excellent character."



Joe Mileski of Gladstone uses his helmet as a seat Saturday as he takes a breather at the U.P. All-Star Football Game. (Daily Press photo by Dennis Grall)