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By: Kurt Mensching
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No Doubt: All-Star Game A Success

MARQUETTE - There was no doubt in Matt Cowling's mind his team was going to win the first Upper Peninsula Football All-Star Game in 57 years.

By the end of the first half, there were probably few doubts in the minds of spectators, either.

The West rode a 24-point halftime lead to a 38-14 victory over the East at the Superior Dome in Marquette.

"Oh, we knew," Cowling said. "We were going so hard all week. Playing for (West and Forest Park coach Bill) Santilli any day, I'd say we're going to come out and win. That guy is awesome. I have so much respect for him as a coach. All these coaches were just working us so hard."

Cowling, a star defensive lineman from L'Anse, will take his football game to Michigan Tech this fall.

"It's always a super feeling to win the first one," Santilli said. "Before we came out, all of the coaches emphasized to the players, 'This is something you're never going to forget. And it might be a happy moment now, but it's going to be even happier in 20 years from now.'"

It became clear early on the game was a mismatch.

Featuring a combined 11 players from Division 5 defending State Champion Menominee and Division 8 State Champion Forest Park, the West team smothered the East on defense and ran it over on offense. The final unofficial yardage gave the West a narrower 311-227 advantage, although many of the East's yards came on a few plays late in the second half.

"This whole group put together made for a very good mix," Santilli said.

He said the players bought into what was asked of them.

Even though some came into the game recognized for their offensive or defensive prowess, they played wherever Santilli and his coaching staff put them.

"Coach (Dave) Graff" - who assists Santilli at Forest Park - "did what he does best," Santilli said. "He took eight linebackers and narrowed them down to four, and put them on the defensive side where they were going to be the best fit. I think by the defensive showing today, he did a great job."

It started early when the East fumbled a punt during an attempted fair catch, which soon led to a 3-yard run to the end zone by Menominee's Ethan Shaver.

Shaver, who is also heading to Tech to play football, finished his day with just six yards on the ground on six attempts, but a combined 113 through the air. He completed a 28-yard pass and caught two receptions for 85 yards.

After the East went three-and-out, Nick Koskiniemi, of Calumet, booted a 25-yard field goal for a 10-0 lead.

Showing the difference in the air as well, the West also picked off a pair of East passes in the second quarter. Dan Sjoquist of Calumet and Ryan Pepin of Iron Mountain came up the interceptions.

Calumet quarterback Emmett Bjorn, who was named the West's offensive MVP following the game, threw an 11-yard touchdown pass to Ryan Perocheschi of Norway and a 22 yarder to Shaver for the 24-0 lead heading into the locker room.

Bjorn passed for 133 yards, connecting on 12 of 15.

In the second half, Marcus Dunbar and Josh Droese picked up rushing touchdowns for the West. Droese had an impressive gallop up the left side for a 68-yard touchdown.

Droese will play for NMU this fall.

The East picked up a pair of rushing touchdowns, including a 1 yarder by Casey Hares of Ishpeming, who will play football for NMU next fall, and Pete Formolo of Sault Ste. Marie.

Both were plunges up the middle for about 1 yard.

Another NMU recruit, Cody Kangas of Manistique led the East in yardage with 69 on the ground and 58 through the air. He won the offensive MVP award for the East.

"It was the team," Kangas said. "Lineman, in practice, they were awesome. For everybody to learn the plays in a week is amazing. The line today showed great heart and gave me plenty of time to throw. I couldn't ask for anything more. The players helped with everything. I shouldn't be the offensive MVP, it should be the team."

Also for the East, Negaunee's Chad DeAngelo caught two passes for 46 yards.



The West team celebrates after winning the U.P. Football All-Star Game Saturday at the Superior Dome.
(Journal photo by Kurt Mensching)



The East team's Casey Hares, of Ishpeming, is tackled along the sidelines by the West's Pat Hampston, of Bessemer, in the first half of the U.P. Football All-Star Game, Saturday, at the Superior Dome in Marquette.
(Journal photo by Kurt Mensching)