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U.P. all-star football game planned

By DENNIS GRALL, Escanaba Daily Press

ESCANABA — Upper Peninsula football players will have an opportunity to play in a U.P. all-star game after their high school careers have ended.

Xcel Sports Training of Madison is making plans to hold the game June 28 at the Superior Dome in Marquette. The group has held recruiting combines for U.P. preps the past two years and will hold its third session as part of the all-star week.

“It is such a great experience for a high school athlete to get on a college campus and play in an event like this,” said Todd Goldbeck, who operates Xcel Sports Training and played football at Wisconsin-LaCrosse.

The Michigan High School Football Coaches Association conducts a state all-star game in East Lansing in late July, but only a couple of U.P. players are invited each year.

“The U.P. kids are so open to opportunities and I see a lot of them out there who are not exposed to those opportunities,” said Goldbeck. “Any way we can help out. We don’t want kids to miss it just because they live in the U.P.”

Goldbeck said two teams will be filled by selecting graduating seniors who earned All-U.P. or all-conference honors. He figures about 80 players would be invited, with U.P. high school coaches directing the teams.

“We would provide a jersey with their name and (football) pants,” said Goldbeck, noting players would be responsible to provide their own helmet, pads and shoes. They would also be required to pay a small fee — which can be recouped through fund-raisers — to help cover the costs, which include five nights lodging and meals in Northern Michigan University dorms.

“This would give a lot of guys an opportunity they definitely don’t get downstate,” said Goldbeck.

“It would be something exclusive to the U.P. and give them something to really grab onto and something to shoot for as a high school athlete.”

An all-star football game for U.P. players was held in the early 1950s. The U.P. Sports Hall of Fame holds an all-star basketball game each June — the 2008 entry will be held June 14 in Escanaba — at various U.P. schools. The UPSHF also held a hockey all-star game from 1996-99.

The UPSHF receives the proceeds from the basketball game for its scholarship fund for U.P. athletes. Goldbeck said his group is looking into giving the proceeds to a U.P. charity.

Goldbeck said the all-star idea blossomed several years ago when he was talking with his father-in-law, Matt Syrja of Gwinn. Syrja, now deceased, played in the all-star game more than 50 years ago.

Xcel Sports Training has held a combine for about 50 high school gridgers the past two years at the Superior Dome. The players are put through a variety of tests similar to the NFL Combine in Indianapolis.

Information is collected on each athlete at the combine and a packet is sent to every college football program in the country, Goldbeck said.

The 2008 combine will also be held June 28 and all players in attendance would receive free admission to the game.

Xcel Sports conducted 41 combines in 10 states last year, which are open to all high school students.

Those states all have all-star games, Goldbeck said, noting this is the firm's first venture into this event.

"The U.P. is that unique situation," said Goldbeck.

He said every U.P. coach will soon receive a packet providing details about the all-star game. He has received good response from coaches and players who have already been contacted.

"We have some real good football prospects in the U.P.," said Goldbeck. "They don't have as many (recruiting chances) as other places around the country."

For details, see www.xcelsportstraining.net or call Todd Goldbeck at 608-279-6960.