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TOM MARKOWSKI'S TOP 20 HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL TEAMS

Tom Markowski/ The Detroit News

1. Farmington Hills Harrison (14-0 last season), Class A:

2. Rockford (11-2), A: The Rams came oh so close to reaching their sixth state final last season and loom as the favorite to win its fourth title. Seven starters return on defense, a large number for a Ralph Munger-coached team. Anthony DeDamos (LB) has college potential and Matt Boonstra (DL) will also see time at TE. K.C. Zenner had six interceptions from his safety position. Nate Schuiteman and Dylan Rodriguez are quick on the defensive line. Senior Mark LaPrairie (QB) threw for 2,099 yards and 22 TDs last season. Tackle Ben Braden (6-7, 319) committed to Michigan..

3. Detroit Catholic Central (9-3), A: Rarely does C.C. return so many starters (6 on offense, 5 on defense) as it does this season. The juniors from a year ago gained much experience but were stopped short of their goals. This year's team is led by lineman Matt Godin (6-7, 267). Defensively, C.C. returns its two safeties, Aaron Hess and Dave Racey, and both will be used as receivers. At QB will be Kyle Cooper, who, at 6-7, is C.C.'s tallest QB in at least 35 years.

4. Utica Eisenhower (10-2), A: Bob Lantzy, the school's only head coach, enters his 41st season and this is his best team since Eisenhower went to the Division 1 final in 2003. QB Joey Zerafa (6-0, 178) added 20 pounds and will be a more effective runner. Yousseff Bujaidar (WR) is a three-year starter. Daniel Venditti (WR/SB/RB/LB) and Alphonso Vultaggio (CB/WR/TB) have the potential to break a big play. David Curle (OT/DT) leads an experienced offensive line. With players like Dominic DiClemente (DE) and Joe Scrivano (LB) the defense is designed to be quick and active.

5. Canton (10-1), A: The Chiefs' high expectations were cut short by Plymouth in the second round last season. Kevin Buford (RB/DB) rushed for over 1,000 yards and he committed to Toledo. Junior tackles Cameron Dillard (6-3, 280) and Dan DeRosa (6-4, 250) will power the offensive line. Zac Merillat (LB) is dangerous on the fullback trap and Kyle Adams will get his first start at QB. Look for Ryan Jones to have a big year carrying the ball.

6. Lowell (11-3), A: Coach Noel Dean said there's a good mix of seniors and underclassmen on this team. With one of the state's top QBs in Dean's nephew, Gabe Dean, Lowell could well make a return trip to the Division 2 final. Josh Addington and Pierce Watson (DE) will get their share of carries in the backfield. Defensively Renn Osborn (SS/SB), Jake Stehely (LB) and Watson all started a year ago. Stehely's brother Garrett (C) and Jeff Houston (DB) started last season as freshmen.

7. East Grand Rapids (14-0), B: Five starters return on defense. But there are some questions on offense, where Travis Palmer and Gunnar Elder are vying for the QB spot. There's no question who will carry the ball and that's senior David Drummond, who rushed for 1,500 yards and 25 TDs. DeAndre Grady (WR/DB) has the ability to make plays on both sides. Defensively, Bill Waldron (DE) and Darrius Roberts (DT) are standouts.

8. Clarkston (7-3), A: Two years ago, the Wolves came within an eyelash of reaching its first state final. With a little luck this team could take that next step. Matt Dellinger (LB) and Zach Collins (LB) are the leaders of the defense. Travis Smith (DB) and Mike Schwartz return and are sure-handed receivers. Joe Doss (RB) is one of seven returning offensive starters. Mitch Baezinger returns at QB after suffering a torn hip flexor in the second game.

9. Plymouth (11-3), A: The Wildcats crept up and surprised just about everyone by reaching the Division 1 final. Underdogs no more, Plymouth has at least four seniors who are expected to play at the Division I level next fall. Tyler Goble (LB/OL) committed to Bowling Green. Dante Fox (RB/DL/S) and tackle Bobby Rich (6-6, 275) have been offered a scholarship by a number of Mid-American Conference schools. QB Shaun Austin (6-2, 195) has a strong, accurate arm. Dave Emminger (DB) is a shifty receiver.

10. Muskegon (8-4), A: The Big Reds are always formidable and this season is no different. Three starters return on offense but that's normal. Ramek Roundtree (OT) and Juwan Lewis (RB) are Division I recruits

return on offense but that's normal. Ramak Roundtree (OT) and Juwan Lewis (RB) are Division I recruits. Princeton Dunkin (QB) started in the playoffs and Ryan Williams (SB/DB) is a returning starter. Angela Corona (LB) was second on the team in tackles.

11. Grand Rapids Christian (7-4), A: Christian is the new power on the state's west side. Eight starters return on defense and seven on offense from a team that lost to East Grand Rapids, 49-48, in the playoffs. Kavon Frazier (RB/SS) committed to Central Michigan and Wes Johnson (DE) was offered a scholarship by Toledo and Akron. Sophomore receiver Drake Harris (6-4, 185) has been offered a basketball scholarship by Michigan State. Robert Cuba (DT) is a college prospect.

12. Lake Orion (13-1), A: The defending Division 1 champs return but a few starters but there's plenty of depth. The junior class was undefeated as sophomores (junior varsity). On defense, John Gall (LB) is a three-year starter and was the defensive MVP last season. Andrew Shefkalis (DL) led the team in sacks. On offense Sean Charette (QB) is back for his fourth season. Kevin Cronin (OL) and Robert Aiello (WR) are the other returners on offense.

13. Romeo (9-2), A: The Bulldogs feature a physical style of play — they've given up an average of 14 points over the last six seasons. Joe Bacci (LB/FB) epitomizes his team's style. At 6-2 and 225 pounds Bacci runs the 40 in 4.65 seconds and he committed to Central Michigan. The offensive line is Romeo's bread and butter and Dalton Binkowski (G), a college recruit, is the leader. Sam Brunner moves to TE from OT.

14. Orchard Lake St. Mary's (11-3), A: The Eaglets have a number of fine players, notably one of the state's best, James Ross (LB/TE). But they need to settle on a QB and senior Dan Clements might be the guy. Joey Eroyan (OT/LB) could be headed to the Ivy League next fall. David Talley (LB) has been offered a scholarship by a handful of Mid-American Conference schools. The backfield will be by committee — Spencer McInnis, Grant Niemiec and Keith Stonestreet (DB) — and all will get their chance.

15. Temperance Bedford (11-1), A: Coach Jeff Wood faces a big task as he must replace Jared Kujawa (QB), but Wood is confident Aaron Czesak, a senior who's been waiting his turn, will be more than a capable replacement. Four offensive linemen return. Tom Ferry (HB/DB) runs the 40 in 4.6 seconds and junior Jon Shepherd (HB) started the last nine games in Wood's flex bone offense. Brian Smith (MLB) and nose guard Austin Swick (5-9, 245), a three-year starter, are strong and quick.

16. Birmingham Brother Rice (6-4), A : If the Warriors can find a QB who can manage the offense, they will compete for the Division 2 title. Tackles Dylan Anderson (Central Michigan commit) and Alex Oles tip the scales at 270 to 275 pounds. Devin Church (Northern Illinois commit) and DeShaun Brown (DB) will get their share of carries. Linebackers Michael Bouchard and junior Jon Reschke, who has been offered a scholarship by Michigan State, return. The secondary is solid with the return of James Hendricks and Cody Ellwanger.

17. Zeeland East (11-1), A: The Chix had their best season, and return six starters on both sides. Slot receivers Brandon Jackson and Josh Snyder run the 40 in 4.6 seconds. Jordan Hills (6-3, 210) might be the best receiver. Casey VanHoof and Mike Luster could share the QB duties. Mike Greenlund is a tough LB and he's joined by Josiah Brown. Ross Ebels and Caleb Boetberg return in the secondary..

18. Detroit Cass Tech (12-1), A: The defense must carry Cass Tech early. No player hits harder than Royce Jenkins-Stone (LB/RB). Laron Taylor (LB) makes a good sidekick. The secondary is one of the state's best, led by Terry Richardson (WR), Will Rembert and Ruben Lile. The offense has questions. Evan Bisco (QB) will start his first game against Harrison (Aug. 27). Sophomore Johnny Miggins (RB) saw some playing time last season. Darryl Goldsmith (OL/DL) is one of the top linemen in Metro Detroit.

19. Holt (7-4), A: Much of Holt's success will depend upon the success junior Andrew Sabrosky (QB) has in his first year as a starter. The offensive line is strong with the return of tackle Ben Steward (6-7, 290), who committed to Bowling Green, and Sawyer McFadden (G). Evan Fischer (P) is one of the state's top kickers. Defensively, the Rams are led by Matt Zajac and Tobin Egger at LB and Jacob Zajac and Chris Morgan at safety.

20. Mount Pleasant (12-1), A: Three of the last four seasons the Oilers have been eliminated by East Grand Rapids in the playoffs, including 31-16 last year. Coach Jason McIntyre returns more than half his starters, including QB Ryan Elliott and top receiver Colton Odykirk. Trevor Wilson will switch from DE to LB and joins returning starters Spencer Moran (LB) and Eric Baumann (LB). Chris Sallee (OT) and Mitch Baxter (DT) are the top linemen.

Others to watch: Adrian (9-2), B; Brighton (6-4), A; Detroit Crockett (11-2), B; East Lansing (7-3), A; Fenton (8-4), A; Grand Haven (8-2), A; Grand Ledge (9-1), A; Holland West Ottawa (8-3), A; Macomb Dakota (9-3), A; Midland (7-3), A; Southfield (5-4), A; Utica Ford (7-4), A; Warren DeLaSalle (9-3), A; Wyandotte Roosevelt (10-1), A.

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Detroit Catholic Central is ranked No. 3 among Tom Markowski's preseason top 20 football teams in the state. (Ricardo Thomas/The Detroit News)

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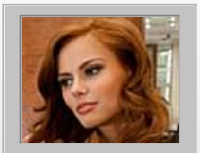

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