

Gauchos-Vikings an Early Season Showdown

September 23, 2005

In a much-anticipated possible preview of the North Bay large-school championship football game, Montgomery will put its 15-game winning streak on the line Saturday at 1 p.m. when it entertains undefeated Casa Grande in an interleague contest.

The Gauchos enter the game as the favorites, despite losing twice to the Vikings last year -- 17-0 during the regular season and 23-10 in the Redwood Empire 3A championship game. They are a senior-laden team, ranked No. 8 in the Bay Area by Cal-Hi Sports, while Montgomery, which lost much of last-season's talented first team to graduation, is not ranked in the top 20.

Casa edged a strong Novato team 22-19 in its season-opener and crushed Maria Carrillo 34-0 last week. Montgomery struggled against Vintage of Napa, winning 24-14, but last Friday served notice by dominating a tough Sonoma team 21-6.

The key play against Sonoma proved to be Sterling Edwards' 21-yard fourth-down run on a fake punt, leading to a touchdown on the Vikings' opening possession. But what appeared to be a gutsy call from the sideline was not, said coach Jason Franci.

"Our punter was five minutes late for our walk-throughs on Friday afternoon," Franci said. "So we sat him down until the second half. We had a running back (Edwards) punting who had never punted before. So we had him run it."

Later in the first half, Sonoma connected on its biggest play of the game, a 26-yard completion from Ryan Blum to 6-foot-4, 205-pound tight end Casey Moll, who made a leaping

catch at the Vikings' 34-yard line. But 5-5 junior cornerback Derrick Martinez's jarring hit caused a fumble, and Montgomery recovered. On the next play, tailback Carl Seira broke free off right tackle and outran the Dragons' secondary for a 66-yard score.

"Martinez was in there because he started in place of the kid who was late, our punter, who also plays defensive back," Franci said.

Though last year's Vikings team was possibly the best in his 26-year Montgomery tenure, and despite not having lost a game since November 1993, Franci is realistic.

"We've progressed a little bit, but not as much as we'd like," he said. "We have to start throwing the ball a little better, and we can't go three and out -- their offense is just too good. I don't know if we can do it or not."

The game will be the first meeting between the two schools on Montgomery's new, high-tech artificial turf, known as Field Turf. The

surface is composed of 2 1/2-inch deep carpet fibers infused with silica and rubber, which is cryogenically frozen and crushed into tiny loose granules called crumb rubber.

Unlike first-generation artificial surfaces, Field Turf is said to allow a cutting player's cleats to release safely, much like natural grass. The field is not without hazards, however. Following the Vikings' win over Vintage, Seira's eye swelled shut for three days, ostensibly from a speck of the loose crumb rubber that had lodged in his eye, causing an infection.

Casa halfback Joe Trombetta is coming off a school-record 290-yard rushing performance against Maria Carrillo. Trombetta has now run for 4,161 yards, the most of any large-school back in Redwood Empire history. In three previous matchups against Montgomery, however, he has never had a 100-yard game.

"In the past," said Franci, "we've had quick linebackers who could run him down. We'll see."

A surprise addition to the Vikings' defensive front is 6-1, 275-pound junior transfer Tom Richerson, who lines up at tackle beside top run-stopper Dash Buntjer.

"He just showed up over the summer from Kentucky," said Franci. "That's what we call him, 'Kentucky,' or else 'Bluegrass.' "

Franci, who retired from teaching in June, said he spends his mornings walking the dog and sometimes taking a nap before heading to campus to conduct practice. On the field, his passion is as strong as ever.

"After all these years, I keep telling myself I'm going to be calmer," he said. "But I still get too excited."

NFL to Forestville: Michael Roan, former Big Ten star and Tennessee Titans tight end, has El Molino off to a fast start in his first season as a high school varsity head coach. The Lions opened by beating Santa Rosa 21-7,

and last Friday used a punishing ground attack to overwhelm Elsie Allen 49-12.

"It's the football I know," Roan said. "It's the way everyone used to play in the Big Ten before teams started spreading it out."

Roan was a high school first-team all-state football and basketball player in Iowa and led his basketball team to the 1989 state championship. He was all-Big Ten twice at Wisconsin, and played in the 1994 Rose Bowl, a victory over UCLA. He was the Oilers' fourth-round draft pick in 1995 and played six seasons in the National Football League.

"I want to say maybe I haven't been tested yet," Roan said. "So far it's been easy to call plays because our offensive line has been blocking tremendously and the backs are running hard. But I'm always looking for the kids to improve and be perfect. Our league (the SCL) is going to be very tough this year."

The Lions play at Piner on Saturday at 1 p.m. before hosting Sonoma next Friday night in the league opener for both teams.

Tonight's top North Bay football games:

-- Cardinal Newman at James Logan (of Union City), 7:30. Coach Paul Cronin's high-flying offense scored 35 points against national power Central Catholic (of Modesto) in a loss and 47 in a win over DeAnza. Logan (2-0), which lost to De La Salle in last season's 4A playoffs, may be too deep for the Cardinals.

-- Terra Linda at San Rafael, 7:30. The Trojans are 2-0 but untested. San Rafael is 1-1 but reeling from last week's 52-14 mauling by Novato.

-- Justin-Siena at Piedmont, 7. The undefeated Braves (2-0) have outscored their first two opponents 102-6. Piedmont (1-0-1) shut out Northgate and tied Encinal.

-- Rancho Cotate at Petaluma, 7:30. The eastside Petaluma team, Casa Grande, is

getting all the attention, but the Trojans are 2-0. Rancho (1-1) lost its opener to Napa but rebounded to beat Bethel of Vallejo.

-- Castlemont (of Oakland) at Healdsburg, 7:30. The Knights (0-2) play in the tough Oakland conference but have had trouble scoring. Surprising Healdsburg (2-0) put up 83 points in its first two games.

Other weekend games:

-- Tonight: Windsor at Elsie Allen, 7:30; Eureka at Ukiah, 7.

-- Saturday: Casa Grande at Montgomery, 1 p.m.; Sonoma at Maria Carrillo, 1 p.m.; El Molino at Piner, 1 p.m.; Analy at Santa Rosa, 7:30; Tamalpais at Marin Catholic, 2 p.m.; Redwood at Novato, 2 p.m.; Drake vs. San Marin (at San Rafael), 2 p.m.

-by Ted Gross

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