



## Eaglets are no longer a secret

Orchard Lake – The mantra for varsity lacrosse at Orchard Lake St. Mary's this spring is to shut up and play. The Eaglets went all the way to the Michigan High School Athletic Association's Division II state finals a year ago, losing to the defending champs East Grand Rapids 13-12 in overtime, but a return to the state championship will only happen if St. Mary's can negotiate the school's toughest schedule in recent memory.

The Eaglets are expected to play the best teams from Illinois, Pennsylvania and Ohio, while competing in arguably Michigan's best varsity conference, the Catholic High School League.

St. Mary's will play their regular league schedule that includes defending state champions in Brother Rice, the Division I runner-up from the University of Detroit, while hosting Pittsburgh's Seneca Valley and Chicago's New Trier and Loyola Prep. The Eaglets will also play East Grand Rapids, Forest Hills Central, Forest Hills Eastern and Cranbrook.

"We aren't ducking anyone," said Greg Normand, who begins his third year at the helm of the the Eaglets. "I tried to schedule the toughest schedule possible because I wanted to make sure we're battled tested come playoff time. We might not sport a great record at the end of the regular season, but we will be ready."

Normand said the idea behind the tough schedule is simple.

"We want to get better," he said. "The only way you can win in June is to do the tough work in April and May. That said, it's really amazing who wants to play you once you make it to the state finals. We've kind of become popular with some teams."

And at the same time, there are teams ducking the talented Eaglets.

"Yes, there were some rivalry games that we lost this year because folks thought we might be good," Normand said. "But I have to tell you that really disappoints me because we've never really run the score up on folks, but it is what it is.....we'll have to play the schedule we have at the moment."

Normand said this year's team will be driven by offense, but will accomplish by defense.

"If we do what folks are saying, the defense will have to carry us down that road. We know we can score, and score a lot, but what we do on the defensive end of the field will make all the difference in the world," he said.

St. Mary's had a tough time stopping opponents in big games a year ago.

Last year, the Eaglets gave up more than 11 goals a game in 'important contests,' while holding opponents to less than six goals a game in less contested matchups. The coaching staff is hoping to put a dent in that stat.

Chris Brecht, St. Mary's associated head coach and the defensive coordinator, said his troops are a year older and a year wiser.

"We changed our defense a year ago to get faster.....now we're more experienced and I think that will be the difference," Brecht said.

The 27-year-old Brecht said his defensive stand will start in goal.

Cameron Schulze returns to the net as a fulltime goalie after sharing the spot a year ago with Adam Hatchard, who is now starting at Division III powerhouse Otterbein College. The 6-3 Schulze, who is getting looks from Ivy League school like Dartmouth, will have to be consistent if the Eaglets plan on a deep playoff run.

"Cam has all the ability in the world to be one of the best goalies in the state. He just has to learn to be patient and not let the odd soft goal get him down," Brecht said.

At close defense, St. Mary's will rely on two-year starter and senior Nick Gondek and second-year starter P.J. Walters.

Gondek, at 6-2, is the team's best offensive defenseman, and will draw the opponent's best attackman, while Walters just seems to get better and better with more experience. Walters

started his first game at defense a year ago after playing attack on the junior varsity team the year before.

“We have one of the best one-two defensive punch in the state. They can run, they know how to defend and both are ground ball machines,” Brecht said.

Brecht said Gondek and Walters, who both made all-state a year ago, will have to be consistent early to help the more in-experienced teammates along.

“We don’t know who will replace Steve Knoblock at the other long pole post, but right now Steve Gross and Arthur Wanzel are likely replacements,” he said.

Wanzel and Gross will also share the longstick middle posts.

Brecht said the defense should be set by the middle of the season.

On the other side of the ball, St. Mary’s should be set to scare any opponent who would like to press the Eaglets.

“As dangerous as we were a year ago, I really believe we’re better offensively and that’s a tough statement to make.....we’re really able to move the ball and we have a number of offensive weapons,” Normand said.

And first on the offensive list is returning All-American Ian Brambs, who will play his lacrosse at the next level at West Point.

Brambs, who collected 135 points a year ago, has already begun his assault on last year’s record. He opened this season with 11 points in a win over Farmington.

“We go as Ian goes,” Normand said. “He’s the best player in the state, hands down in my opinion, and we’ll go as far as he carries us on his back. I can’t say enough nice things about the young man.”

But several of the reasons for Brambs’ success are running mates Drake Chwalibog, Taylor Docking, Alex Houck, Drew Schupbach and Doug Boyd.

“I don’t know if this is as talented as the 2007 Brother Rice team offensively, but it’s the best offensive team I’ve been around. We have a bruising dodger in Drew Schupbach, a gunner in Doug Boyd, the best passer in the state in Ian and the two of the faster players in the state in Drake and Taylor.....what more could a coach ask for?,” Normand said.

St. Mary’s has few offensive weaknesses and they’ve added a number of assets to their budding offensive arsenal.

“We were successful with a basic offense a year ago that netted a whole lot of goals, but we needed to add a few more wrinkles to our offense to make those plotting style defenses a bit more concerned,” Normand said.

The Eaglets will use a ‘abbreviated’ 1-4-1 offensive scheme, but will add more set plays to the playbook.

Normand said St. Mary’s will also use the 2-3-1 set, but don’t get the idea they are interested in running a cutting, more pass oriented offense.

“We run motion, we play this game at top speed and we’re going to get a lot of shots.....we don’t always get good shots, but we’re going to get up and down the field and make you defend us.....if nothing else, we’re fun to watch I hope,” Normand said.

Normand calls it High Octane offense.

“Our slow down is three passes and a shot every five seconds.....but, hopefully this year, we find the net more often on less shots,” Normand said. “We weren’t very good a year ago at shooting the ball so I hope our practice shooting will result in the obvious.”

The Eaglets faceoff chores will go to sophomore Spencer McGinnis, who seems to get better every day.

“This is a player to watch.....he’s not exactly sure what to do with the ball right now, but come May, I’d stay out of his way,” Normand said.

The outlook for the Eaglets is simple, according to their coach.

“Shut up and play....we’ll worry about the stuff that matters when it matters....for now, we’ll just keep working hard and hope good things will happen,” Normand said.

The Eaglets were 18-5 a year ago and state runnerups in Division II.