

East defense rules

Turnovers hurt West in 42-14 defeat

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MARQUETTE - In most all-star games, no matter the sport, the offense takes center stage with defense seemingly just an afterthought.

Apparently, the East coaching staff and its players didn't get that memo at the Upper Peninsula Football All-Star Game played in the Superior Dome on Saturday afternoon.

With a little support from Garrett Pentecost of Marquette and Kenya Oas of Munising on offense, the East All-Stars' defense forced six turnovers in a 42-14 beatdown of the West.

Two of those - a fumble and an interception - were returned for touchdowns, reportedly the first turnovers returned for scores since the U.P. all-star game returned in 2008.

While the West certainly had talent, the East boasted some of the U.P.'s best in recently graduated seniors, such as Oas, Austin Young of Escanaba, and Pentecost and Redmen teammate Kasaim Koonnala.

The latter three were named award winner for the victors, Pentecost on offense, Koonnala on defense and Young for the character award.

"I really think Nick Benda should at least share this award," Koonnala said after he took advantage of a hook-and-ladder play by the West that went awry for a 12-yard fumble return for a TD in the first quarter.

Benda, from Westwood, pulled off a similar feat when he brought back an interception 56 yards to the end zone late in the third period.

East defenders put West quarterback Alex Herman of Iron Mountain on his heels all day, forcing him to the air for an un-Mountaineer-like 39 pass attempts. While he completed 21 of those, four became interceptions, several through the sheer will of the East's ball hawkers.

"I think I have a sore arm from all the throwing we've been doing this week," Herman said.

In fact, Superiorland players accounted for six of the game's eight turnovers, four of them in a span of 10 plays from scrimmage during the first half.

Koonnala's was the first and with teammate Mitchel Crothers' extra-point kick, tied the score 7-7.

The West lost the ball again two plays later, this time when Ishpeming's Jordan Windahl pounced on it at the West 10-yard-line on a bad handoff.

The East's golden opportunity went for naught as Alex VanWagner of L'Anse intercepted a pass in the end zone, but the West returned the favor when Brett Rushford of Newberry picked off a pass in the first minute of quarter No. 2.

Pentecost and Oas helped settle the East down after that, each accounting for a second-quarter TD to build a 21-7 halftime lead.

Oas, who alternated possessions at QB with Young, threw a 15-yard TD pass to his biggest target, Bobby Olsen of Menominee.

Pentecost, who got almost all his carries in the first half, finished with 133 yards rushing on 15 carries, including several with acrobatic leaping finishes and one that might make some start calling him the Yooper Barry Sanders.

Still attempting to break the 7-7 tie, Pentecost ran right almost to the sideline, tried to cut back left and decided that wouldn't work, stopped, then cut between two defenders straight up the sideline for a 27-yard TD, again with a last-second move as he reached the goal line.

"I was running right and I didn't see anything there," said the Wisconsin-Whitewater-bound Pentecost.

"Then. I turned around and two guys were sitting there, so I turned around again.

"The blockers stayed with the play and there was a hole right ahead. It was just instinct."

The East defense was far from done, as Dakota Eland of Menominee made another interception not long before halftime, Benda had his third-quarter pickoff return for a TD, and Ishpeming's Mike Hill intercepted another Herman pass midway through the fourth.

"I was hoping not to have to use the whole playbook trying to catch up, but you want to open things up in an all-star game," West head Doug Hodges of Baraga said.

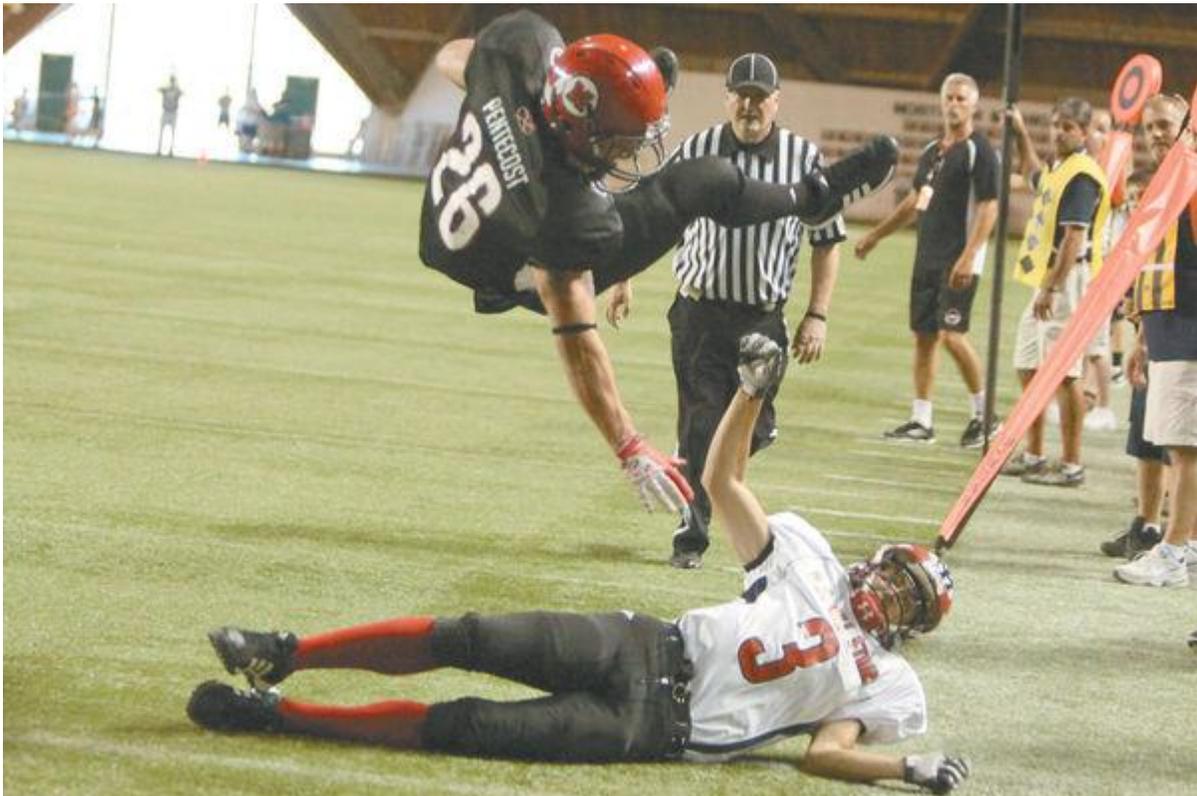
Hodges summed the feelings of numerous players and coaches about the experience.

"We have some very high quality kids," he said. "It was fun to be working with them all week. They had some really great athletes, and I know the Menominee coaches are the experts at high school football in the U.P."

The East team was led by newly-named Maroons head coach Joe Noha. Three of his assistants Saturday were fellow Menominee coaches Dave Buyarski, Dave Mathieu and Jamie Schomer, not to mention Bill Harrison, who led the Gwinn Modeltowners last season.

"When you see talent like this on the football field, you really have to appreciate it," Hodges said.

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The East's Garrett Pentecost of Marquette, 26, takes a hit in the first half of the U.P. Football All-Star Game from the West's Cody Whitens, 3, from North Central Saturday at the Superior Dome in Marquette. The East won, 42-14. (Journal photo by Matt Keiser)