



FLYING HIGH

Jillian Gandsey / Bemidji Pioneer

Bemidji's Isaiah Biehn (6) and Caden Bolte (24) celebrate after Biehn caught an interception in the second half against Alexandria on Friday at Chet Anderson Stadium.

'Big-time' finish keeps Bemidji on a red-hot roll

By Micah Friez
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Isaiah Biehn could sense momentum fading in the fourth quarter for the Bemidji High School football team. And he knew he needed to make a play.

After Alexandria cut its deficit to 27-13 and forced a three-and-out to get the ball back, a deep pass to Zach Gundberg looked destined for another big chunk of yardage. But then Biehn soared in for a game-changing play.

"We've been practicing that play all week," Biehn said.

"They've done it basically every game. I'm just trying to stay disciplined as a (defensive back) and stick to my man. When I saw it, I knew I was going to pick it right away."

The Lumberjacks recovered momentum, and then seized even more on a Colton Hinrichs interception one drive later, which was enough to preserve a 27-14 victory on Friday night at Chet Anderson Stadium.

"I thought our big-time players made big-time plays in big-time situations," BHS

head coach Bryan Stoffel said. "When we needed some momentum and we needed a play, it was our seniors tonight who made those plays. That's what you're looking for at this point in the season."

Biehn snagged two interceptions on the day, and the senior ballhawk now has at least one pick in four straight games.

"He's playing with a lot of confidence right now," Stoffel said. "He's allowing

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Lumberjack senior Colton Hinrichs (25) brings down Alexandria quarterback Chance Boyer (11) in Friday's game at Chet Anderson Stadium.

The Axe – and much more – up for grabs in Moorhead

By Micah Friez
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BEMIDJI — There will be no shortage of incentives in Moorhead on Wednesday night.

The Bemidji High School football team wraps up the regular season against one of its biggest rivals on the Spuds' home turf, and there will be as much on the line as ever come kickoff.

Most importantly, Section 8-5A's No. 1 seed will likely go to the victor.

Moorhead comes in at a perfect 5-0 and sits atop the Class 5A rankings with Monday's initial release of the QRF rankings on minnesota-scores.net. The Spuds also have the state's best scoring offense (44.6 points per game) and the best scoring defense (3.6 ppg) among 5A schools. The defense has pitched three shutouts, including against Rogers and Brainerd in their past two games.

The Lumberjacks, meanwhile, **MOORHEAD:** Page B2

are 4-1 and have lost only to No. 2-ranked Andover in the season opener. The BHS offense ranks 10th (31.0 ppg) and the defense ranks 5th (10.0 ppg) among all Class 5A teams.

Both Moorhead and Bemidji have clinched a top-two record within the section, no matter how Wednesday's regular season finale shakes out. The six-team section tournament will grant first-round byes to the top two seeds, while the high seed will host each game throughout the playoffs.

Not to be forgotten, however, is that a rivalry trophy — and the accompanying bragging rights — are also at stake. The Axe, which is still less than a decade old, has been in the Lumberjacks' possession just once. That came thanks to a 2018 regular season win, the program's first victory over the Spuds since 2012, but possession



The Lumberjacks run onto the field ahead of Friday's game against Alexandria at Chet Anderson Stadium.

MEN'S HOCKEY

Beavers picked 2nd in WCHA Preseason Media Poll

By Austin Monteith
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BLOOMINGTON — The Bemidji State men's hockey team was picked to finish second in the Western Collegiate Hockey Association Preseason Media Poll when it was released Monday. The Beavers were slotted behind only Minnesota State, the unanimous choice to repeat as regular-season champion for the fourth consecutive season.

Additionally, junior forward Owen Sillinger and sophomore defenseman Elias Rosén were selected to represent BSU on the Preseason Media All-WCHA Team.

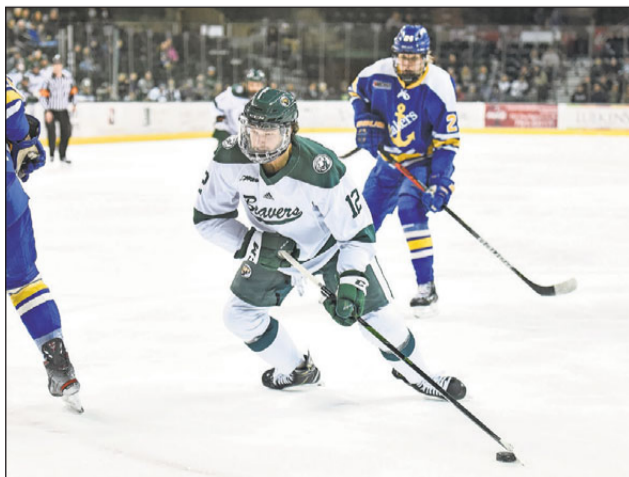
Sillinger picked up All-WCHA Second Team honors last season after

posting a career-high 34 points from 14 goals and 20 assists, tying Adam Brady for the team scoring lead.

Rosén was named to the All-WCHA Third Team and the All-Rookie Team in 2019-20 for his 24-point freshman campaign that saw the blueliner total five goals and 19 assists.

Sillinger and Rosén are the first Bemidji State duo to receive Preseason All-WCHA honors since Gerry Fitzgerald and Michael Bitzer prior to the 2017-18 season.

The top two teams in the poll are unchanged from the final 2019-20 WCHA standings as the Mavericks (100 points) and Beavers (89) were slotted at the top of the predicted finishing



Jillian Gandsey / Bemidji Pioneer

Bemidji State's Owen Sillinger (12) makes a drive for the Lake Superior State goal in a WCHA playoff game on March 6 at the Sanford Center.

order. MSU garnered all 10 first-place votes, and BSU received nine of 10 second-place votes.

Elsewhere, Bowling Green earned 76 points to take third, while

Northern Michigan edged Michigan Tech to get the nod for fourth by one point, 68-67. Lake Superior State (44), Alaska (40) and Ferris State (33) round out the

2020-21 WCHA Preseason Media Poll

Rank/Team (1st Place Votes)/Points

1. Minnesota State (10) 100
2. Bemidji State 89
3. Bowling Green 76
4. Northern Michigan 68
5. Michigan Tech 67
6. Lake Superior State 44
7. Alaska 40
8. Ferris State 33
9. Alaska Anchorage 21
10. Alabama Huntsville 12

Predicted order of finish. Based on a 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1 scale.

McKay was selected WCHA Preseason Media Player of the Year with 25 votes and accordingly secured a spot on the Preseason Media All-WCHA Team.

Northern Michigan junior forward Griffin Loughran took second in the player of the year voting with 21 votes and Sillinger third with five votes. Bemidji State goalie Zach Driscoll was among five others to receive votes, garnering two.

Joining McKay, Sillinger and Rosén on the All-WCHA team were Loughran and Bowling Green senior forward Connor Ford, as well as Ferris State sophomore defenseman Jake Willets.

top eight, while Alaska Anchorage (21) and Alabama Huntsville (12) were tabbed to finish ninth and 10th, respectively.

Minnesota State junior goalie Dryden

HOCKEY: Page B3

BRIEFS

Alabama takes over No. 1 spot in Top 25 poll

Alabama took over the No. 1 spot in the Associated Press Top 25 poll on Sunday, with Notre Dame rising to No. 2 after knocking off previously top-ranked Clemson.

The Crimson Tide (6-0) attained the top spot for a record-extending 13th consecutive season, receiving 59 of 62 first-place votes. It is the 92nd appearance at No. 1 for Alabama under coach Nick Saban and the 123rd in school history.

No. 3 Ohio State (3-0) maintained its place and received the other vote, with Clemson (7-1) and Texas A&M (5-1) rounding out the top five.

No. 6 Florida (4-1) climbed two spots after a 44-28 victory against Georgia (4-2), which fell seven slots to No. 12.

No. 7 Cincinnati (6-0) dropped one spot and No. 8 BYU (8-0) moved up one. No. 9 Miami (FL) (6-1) jumped two, while No. 10 Indiana (3-0) entered the top 10 for the first time since 1969 after beating Michigan for the first time in 33 years.

No. 11 Oregon (1-0) and No. 20 Southern California (1-0) are the only Pac-12 representatives in the poll following the league's opening weekend of play.

Unbeaten Coastal Carolina (7-0) and Marshall

(6-0) held steady at Nos. 15-16, respectively, with Liberty (7-0) rising three spots to No. 22 after a win against Virginia Tech.

Newcomers this week are Northwestern (3-0) debuting at No. 23 and Louisiana (6-1) returning to the poll at No. 25 after a three-week absence.

Michigan (1-2) fell out of the Top 25 after losing to the Hoosiers and is unranked for the first time since 2017. Boise State (2-1) dropped out after a 51-17 drubbing by BYU.

Nationals invite Biden to throw out first pitch

The Washington Nationals invited President-elect Joe Biden to throw out the ceremonial first pitch on Opening Day of the 2021 season.

"We're excited to continue the long-standing tradition of sitting Presidents throwing out the first pitch at the home of the national pastime in our nation's capital," the team announced Saturday night.

The "long-standing tradition" has been absent of late. President Donald Trump becomes only the second sitting chief executive to not throw out a first pitch on Opening Day at a Major League Baseball game since William Howard Taft began the tradition in 1910. Fellow one-term

President Jimmy Carter was the other.

The Nationals are scheduled to open the season at Nationals Park on April 1 against the New York Mets.

Nashville in the running for Raptors' temporary home

Nashville has joined the list of cities that could serve as a temporary home base for the Toronto Raptors, The Athletic reported.

The Raptors are expected to start the season playing outside of Canada because of travel restrictions amid the coronavirus pandemic. The Toronto Blue Jays played their home games in Buffalo, N.Y.

Other cities reportedly under consideration include Tampa and Kansas City, Mo.

The Athletic reported that Raptors officials visited Nashville earlier this week and toured Bridgestone Arena, where the Predators of the NHL play. The arena also frequently hosts Southeastern Conference basketball games and was scheduled to host the conference tournament when the pandemic forced the cancellation of the NCAA season in March.

The 2020-21 NBA season tentatively is set to begin Dec. 22.

—Field Level Media

The Bemidji Pioneer
LUMBERJACK ATHLETE OF THE WEEK



Will Falldorf

Senior, football

Will Falldorf had his best game of the season in Friday's 27-14 win over Alexandria. The senior running back had his first three-touchdown showcase of the year, which included an opening score from 53 yards out and short-yardage scampers of 7 and 5 yards into the end zone. Falldorf carried the ball 27 times and racked up 219 yards in all. The Bemidji State commit helped the Lumberjacks to their fourth consecutive win and has seven touchdowns in that span.

BEMIDJI

From Page B1

his athletic abilities to take over. He's a gifted kid, and you guys are starting to see it on Friday nights."

Behind Biehn and senior running back Will Falldorf, who rushed for 219 yards and three touchdowns on 27 carries, Bemidji improved to 4-1 and has clinched a top-two record within Section 8-5A. Postseason seedings are still to-be-determined, but the victory goes a long way in terms of securing a first-round bye as a top-two seed in the six-team section.

"We feel great," Stoffel said. "We were hoping to be in the position, to lock in a top-two seed in the section and to get a first-round bye in the playoffs."

Both offenses started out hot on Friday. First, Falldorf raced up the middle, untouched, for a 53-yard opening score. But Nolan Morical answered for the Cardinals (2-3) with a juke and a broken tackle for a smooth 10-yard TD rush.

Alexandria had a 7-6



Jillian Gandsey / Bemidji Pioneer

Bemidji senior Will Falldorf (20) runs for a 53-yard touchdown in the first half against Alexandria on Friday at Chet Anderson Stadium.

edge due to a missed BHS extra point, but the Jacks made up for it when Falldorf scored from seven yards out and Hinrichs added the 2-point conversion on an outside pitch.

Bemidji was marching again late in the second quarter, but Will Heydt recovered a fumble on the 12-yard line to seemingly stop the Lumberjacks in their tracks. Not to be undone, though, Biehn's instincts kicked in as he soared up for a deep interception on

the next play, setting up the BHS offense for redemption.

Brett Tharaldson and Jacob Kelly did the rest, as the former found the latter for a toe-tapping 14-yard touchdown pass in the closing seconds of the half.

"When our offense struggled, our defense backed them up," Biehn said. "Or the offense had a big play after (the defense) let up an 80-yard drive right off the bat. We fixed stuff, and it's awesome to see how each group

benefits."

Bemidji brought a 21-7 lead into the intermission, which grew to 27-7 on Falldorf's third touchdown. Meanwhile, after Alexandria's opening drive, the Lumberjack defense didn't allow another first down until the fourth quarter.

The Cardinals finally made things interesting early in the fourth, as Kristen Hoskins raced away for a 51-yard catch and run to bring

Alex within 27-14. The defense forced a three-and-out, giving the ball back to the Cardinals with 8 minutes, 50 seconds to play, but then Biehn elevated for his interception that turned the tides and provided some relief for a BHS team that suddenly needed it.

"When I make the play, it's a big play for all of us," Biehn said. "I'm proud of our guys for sticking in there when adversity hit."

After Hinrichs' ensuing pick, Bemidji offense ran out the clock over the final 3:56.

The win sets up a marquee regular season finale against Moorhead, the lone undefeated team in Section 8-5A. The top seed in the section may very well be up for grabs.

Kickoff is scheduled for 6 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 11, in Moorhead.

Bemidji 27, Alexandria 14
ALX 7 0 07-14
BHS 6 15 60-27

First quarter — BHS TD, Falldorf 53-yard rush (DeClusin PAT missed), 6-0 BHS; ALX TD, Morical 10-yard rush (Sansted PAT), 7-6 ALX.

Second quarter — BHS TD, Falldorf 7-yard rush (Hinrichs 2-pt. conversion), 14-7 BHS; BHS TD, Kelly 14-yard catch from Tharaldson (DeClusin PAT), 21-7 BHS.

Third quarter — BHS TD, Falldorf 5-yard rush (DeClusin PAT missed), 27-7 BHS.

Fourth quarter — ALX TD, Hoskins 51-yard catch from Steffenmeier (Sansted PAT), 27-14 BHS.

Micah Friez is a sports reporter for the Pioneer. Readers can reach him at (218) 333-9789.

MOORHEAD

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returned to Moorhead after a BHS loss in 2019.

The Spuds have owned the series of late, winning eight of the last 10 matchups. Although Bemidji won twice in 2018, Moorhead returned the favor with two victories in 2019 — including the Section 8-5A championship game. The Spuds also lead the all-time series 42-18.

Moorhead is even riding the high of national exposure, as quarterback Trey Feeney and wide receiver Jacqui Fitzpatrick earned the No. 4 spot on SportsCenter's Top 10 Plays on Friday night. The highlight came in a 48-0 win over Brainerd in which Fitzpatrick caught a goal-line fade and acrobatically got his hand in bounds before the rest of his body landed out of the end zone.

The Jacks will look to create some highlights of their own Wednesday night. Kickoff is scheduled for 6 p.m. and is the only game in the state featuring two top-10 teams from Class 5A.

Micah Friez is a sports reporter for the Pioneer. Readers can reach him at (218) 333-9789.

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Elliott wins at Phoenix to earn first Cup title

Field Level Media

Chase Elliott has spent the last several years being known primarily as NASCAR's most popular driver and the son of "Million Dollar" Bill Elliott.

But late on Sunday afternoon, the 24-year-old Elliott became known as something much better — the Cup Series' 2020 champion.

Elliott passed fellow Championship 4 driver Joey Logano for the lead with 43 laps to go, stayed up front the rest of the way and won the Season Finale 500 at Phoenix Raceway and the championship.

"This is unbelievable," he said, trying to catch his breath after getting out of his winning Chevrolet Camaro. "Oh my gosh. We did it. We did it. It's all I got to tell you. Unreal."

The champ found the racing Sunday easier than finding the right words to describe his feelings afterward.

"Last week was a huge win," he said of his must-win victory at the Martinsville, Va. short track. "A shot to come here and have a shot to race. It's unbelievable. Heck, I don't know, I don't even know. This is unreal."

"We peaked at the right time. And that's all you can ask for."

"I mean, NASCAR Cup Series champion. You kidding me? Unreal."

The championship comes

in the Hendrick Motorsports driver's fifth full season as a full-time driver in Cup.

And it comes as the result of an incredible drive which saw him having to drive up through the field after he was penalized when his car twice failed pre-race inspection.

The victory was his second straight, the 11th of his career and the fifth of the season.

The championship ties him with his father in that category as Bill Elliott won the 1988 title. It comes in just his first time in the Championship 4 round of the Playoffs.

He wound up leading a race-best 154 laps and beat runner-up Brad Keselowski of Team Penske to the finish line by 2.7 seconds.

Elliott said, yes, the pass on Logano for the lead was huge.

"I saw Joey was pretty loose there and I felt that I needed to get to him while I could," he said. "I knew I had been kind of tight on the longer runs and I knew he was probably going to get a little better."

Logano agreed.

"Just didn't have enough speed at the right time," said Logano, who led 125 laps. "Nothing really went wrong. Our pit crew was on it. Our strategy got us out front there at the end. Just the 9 (Elliott) seemed like he lit off pretty good there and the last run he was able to go really fast. We got another vibration there



Patrick Breen / USA TODAY NETWORK

Chase Elliott celebrates winning the 2020 NASCAR Cup Series after winning the Season Finale 500 on Sunday, Nov. 8, at Phoenix Raceway.

toward the end of the run. We were close.

"It stings not winning. I'm not going to lie, it hurts. At the same time, we're stronger because we went through it."

Keselowski was feeling the sting, as well.

"I would have loved to have one of those late-race yellows like we saw in the Trucks race and Xfinity race," Keselowski said. "We were pretty good there but just didn't have the track position" to catch and pass the winner.

"Solid day. Wish we had one more spot."

Behind Elliott and Keselowski at the finish were the two other Championship 4 drivers — Logano of Team Penske and Denny Hamlin of Joe Gibbs Racing, in that order.

"Our overall car speed, we just didn't have enough," said Hamlin, a three-time Daytona 500 winner and 44-time race winner in Cup. But he is still looking for his first championship. "We just, as

an organization, have to get a little bit better. Especially on the short tracks.

"It was all I had. I was pushing for everything I had. Just didn't have quite enough today. We ended up fourth."

Still, Hamlin said he was not ready to hang his head. "Nobody's won more than we have the last two years. Daytona 500 two years in a row. Final four two years in a row. Pretty proud what this team's doing."

Logano and Keselowski were going for their second championships while Hamlin was attempting to win his first.

Elliott, who was to start on the pole, made overcoming the drive from the back of the pack look easy. He moved quickly forward and on Lap 27, he moved into the top 10.

Two star drivers were taking their final rides as full-time Cup drivers: seven-time champion Jimmie Johnson and fan favorite Clint Bowyer.

Johnson finished fifth while Bowyer was 14th.

BRIEFS

Maple Leafs great Meeker dies at 97

Toronto Maple Leafs great Howie Meeker, the 1946-47 Calder Trophy recipient and four-time Stanley Cup winner, died Sunday in British Columbia, four days after his 97th birthday.

Meeker was a three-time All-Star forward who registered 185 points (83 goals, 102 assists) in 346 NHL games with the Maple Leafs from the mid-1940s through the mid-1950s. He helped Toronto win the Stanley Cup in 1947, 1948, 1949 and 1951.

On Jan. 8, 1947, he scored five goals in a game against the Chicago Blackhawks.

After coaching the Maple Leafs for the 1956-57 season and briefly serving as Toronto's general manager, Meeker enjoyed a three-decade career in broadcasting with CBC and TSN.

He received the Foster Hewitt Memorial Award and was inducted to the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1998 for his work in broadcasting. Remembered fondly for his turn as an analyst on "Hockey Night in Canada," Meeker's signature phrases included "stop it right there" and "keep your stick on the ice."

Away from the ice, Meeker served in Canada's Parliament from 1951-53, ran hockey camps across Canada and the United States for many years, and supported the Special Olympics for nearly a half-century.

In 2010, he was named a Member of the Order of Canada and was inducted into the Ontario Sports Hall of Fame.

—Field Level Media

DJ, DeChambeau Masters co-favorites

Field Level Media

Prodigious length and the most recent major winner or the hottest player on the planet over the past five months?

Sportsbooks have installed Bryson DeChambeau and Dustin Johnson as the betting favorites entering Masters week.

DeChambeau has been the favorite ahead of August at most books since winning the U.S. Open in September. Johnson has been No. 2, and the top-ranked player in the world shrunk the gap with his runner-up finish at the Houston Open on Sunday.

They are co-favorites at BetRivers.com (+800) and PointsBet (+900), while FanDuel was offering DeChambeau at +900 and Johnson at +950 on Monday.

DeChambeau's best Masters finish was a tie for 21st four years ago.

Sixth in the official world golf rankings, he has played only once since his U.S. Open triumph.

DeChambeau tied for eighth at the Shriners Hospitals for Children Open, then retreated to his home in Dallas to work on the 48-inch driver he has been planning to debut at Augusta.

Johnson tied for second a shot behind Tiger Woods at last year's Masters. He returned from a bout with COVID-19 to finish second in Houston, where he shot 66-66-65 after an opening-round 72.

It marked Johnson's sixth consecutive top-six finish, including a win at The Northern Trust to kick off the FedEx Cup Playoffs, which he ultimately won. His Masters odds shortened from +1200 on Friday to +950 on Monday at FanDuel.

PointsBet is offering a prop bet with -10000

odds that either player will finish in the top 10, including ties.

Of course, most everyone in the 93-player field — Sergio Garcia had to withdraw Monday due to a positive COVID-19 test — is a legitimate threat to win the green jacket.

Spain's Jon Rahm was being offered at +1000 at BetRivers.com and PointsBet on Monday, while FanDuel listed the world No. 2 at +1100.

Justin Thomas is the fourth betting favorite at most sportsbooks, including +1200 at BetRivers and FanDuel and +1300 along with Rory McIlroy at PointsBet. BetRivers.com was also offering McIlroy at +1300, while FanDuel had him at +1400.

Not among the pre-tournament favorites is Woods, the reigning champion and five-time Masters winner.

Now ranked 33rd in the

world and without a top-30 finish in six events he has opened since the PGA Tour resumed in June, Woods missed the cut at the U.S. Open and tied for 72nd in his most recent start at the Zozo Championship.

Woods was being offered at +3300 by PointsBet on Monday with FanDuel and BetRivers both listing him at +4000. That left him outside of the top 10 betting favorites at all three books. Woods' odds lengthened significantly at FanDuel, where he was +3000 on Friday.

PointsBet was offering Woods at +260 to miss the cut, meaning a \$10 bet would return \$26 if Woods fails to reach the weekend. Meanwhile, FanDuel listed Woods at -375 to make the cut.

PointsBet also listed Woods at +750 to finish in the top 5, +320 to finish in the top 10 and +130



REUTERS/Brian Snyder
Dustin Johnson tees off on the third tee during a practice round Monday, Nov. 9, at Augusta National Golf Club.

to finish in the top 20.

There are 16 former champions in the field, half of whom qualify for the Champions tour. In a prop bet to finish highest among former winners at Augusta, two-time champion Bubba Watson was the favorite at +400, followed by Patrick Reed at +450, Adam Scott and Jordan Spieth at +650.

Watson was also the -175 favorite at PointsBet to be the top left-hander this week. Phil Mickelson, coming off a missed cut in Houston, was +185, followed by China's

20-year-old Yuxin Lin (+1100) and 2003 champion Mike Weir (+1400).

Meanwhile, Collin Morikawa was the favorite among the 26 first-time Masters participants.

The PGA Championship winner was being offered at +470 among players making their Augusta debuts, ahead of U.S. Open runner-up Matthew Wolff at +550, Scottie Scheffler at +650, Cameron Champ at +900 and Sungjae Im and Jason Kokrak at +1000.

SCOREBOARD

AREA SCHEDULE

TUESDAY, NOV. 10

Prep Volleyball
Sartell-St. Stephen at Bemidji, 7 p.m.

WEDNESDAY, NOV. 11

Prep Football
Bemidji at Moorhead, 6 p.m.

THURSDAY, NOV. 12

Prep Volleyball
Bemidji at Rocori, 7 p.m.

FRIDAY, NOV. 13

No events scheduled

SATURDAY, NOV. 14

Prep Volleyball
Sauk Rapids-Rice at Bemidji, 1:30 p.m.

PREP SPORTS

Football

Friday's Results

Bemidji 27, Alexandria 14
Blackduck 12, Park Christian 7
Hill City/Northland 30, North Central 28
WHA 43, Red Lake 8
Bagley at Pine River-Backus, canceled
Cass Lake-Bena at Warroad, canceled
Win-E-Mac at Clearbrook-Gorvick, canceled
Laporte at Fertile-Beltrami, postponed

HOCKEY

From Page B1

Michigan Tech forward Carson Bantle collected WCHA Pre-season Media Rookie of the Year honors with 16 votes, ahead of Minnesota State defenseman Akito Hirose's 14. Beaver forwards Lukas Sillinger and Aaron Myers garnered three votes apiece.

The media poll voting board was made up of one representative from each of the league's 10 markets.

Bemidji State, ranked No. 15 and 16 in the

national preseason polls, opens the season at home against No. 4/5 Minnesota State, Nov. 20-21.

Austin Monteith is the sports editor for the Pioneer. Readers can reach him at (218) 333-9787.

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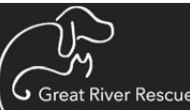
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Falling in line

Vikings' big men pave the way for Cook again

Dalvin Cook liked his odds instantly. He saw Kyle Rudolph stand up an opposing linebacker. He saw Riley Reiff push a defensive end completely out of the play,

creating a cavernous rushing lane. As Cook followed fullback C.J. Ham through that opening, he saw Ezra Cleveland come from his right and get through that same hole, then get upfield and take out a defensive back.

That was all Cook needed to see. The Vikings running back knew at that point that he'd have to go one-on-one with just one defender, who happened to be an overmatched defensive tackle diving at Cook's feet.

Piece of cake. Cook's feet churned through that lineman's hands, then he picked his head up and saw what he expected: Open field.

As he sprinted toward the end zone at the west end of U.S. Bank Stadium in the fourth quarter Sunday afternoon, Cook was going full throttle, fast enough to get a speeding ticket on many small-town roads. He went from 0 to 21 faster than Everson Griffen's jaw could hit the ground on the opposing sideline.

As Cook let off the gas and reached the back of the end zone, he turned to

see his entire offensive line barreling toward him — though not at the 21 mph velocity Cook reached on his 70-yard run that gave the Vikings a three-score lead en route to a 34-20 victory against Detroit.

He quickly grabbed the football and pointed at Ham, just as he did a week earlier with Cleveland, the Vikings' rookie right guard. And just as Cleveland did in a 28-22 victory against Green Bay at Lambeau Field, Ham took the ball and spiked it hard into the end zone turf.

As gratifying as the 369 rushing yards, 478 total yards and six touchdowns over the past two weeks are, there's no more gratifying feeling for Cook than seeing one of "his guys" throw the football into the turf.

"That's big," Cook said. "You talk about confidence and talking from last week. Those guys up front get to go home with a lot of confidence that we can run the football. That's what it's all about for me, giving those guys all that confidence."

The Vikings have known all season what they've wanted their winning formula to be. They've shown it twice in the past eight days: Run the football, take an early lead, use that success running the football to their advantage in the play-action passing game, and force their opponent to play catch-up.

It hadn't worked much through the first two months of the season. But a young and injury-riddled defense is showing signs of life. It forced Detroit into a three-and-out on the game's opening possession. Twice, it was backed up in



Vikings running back Dalvin Cook (33) runs the ball as Detroit Lions free safety Will Harris (25) tackles him during the fourth quarter at U.S. Bank Stadium.

its own red zone, only to force momentum-shifting interceptions — one by Eric Wilson, one by Eric Kendricks. Harrison Smith added an interception, too, as the Vikings doubled their total this season from three to six.

The Vikings' formula may not be as successful the rest of this season, or maybe it will be. They have eight games remaining to determine if this is sustainable or not. The NFL is a pass-happy league and the results have been more disastrous than effective when Minnesota's fate has rested on its QB's arm.

But whatever their record ends up, the Vikings are no longer a bad football team. For six weeks, they were a bad team with good players. Now some light bulbs are beginning to go on, none more noticeable than for a

group of guys who are at their best when they're not noticed: Cook's guys. His blockers, his protectors, his lumbering, high-fiving, ball-spiking partners.

From Reiff to Dakota Dozier to Garrett Bradbury to Cleveland to Brian O'Neill, Vikings fans (including the one writing this) have wanted more than one of those guys jettisoned at more than one point over the past two years. Even the Vikings weren't sure they wanted Reiff prior to the season, risking him walking away from the team with a take-less-money-or-leave ultimatum on the eve of the regular season.

But let's give credit where credit is due.

They're the ones paving the way for arguably the best running back in the NFL. Cook ran for 206 yards Sunday — his first 200-yard

game as a pro — and all he wanted to talk about was the guys who spiked the ball after his scores.

"Commend those guys for allowing me to hit some holes and have daylight," he said.

His biggest day as a pro — 252 total yards of offense — came in front of one of his childhood heroes, former Vikings running back Adrian Peterson, who ran for 29 yards on eight carries for the Lions.

"It means a lot to me; he's a guy who's done it before me," Cook said. "He was in the same shoes I'm in just a few years ago. Just to be playing on the same field with Adrian is a blessing. He's a living legend."

Jason Feldman covers the Vikings for Forum News Service. He can be reached at jfeldman@postbulletin.com

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