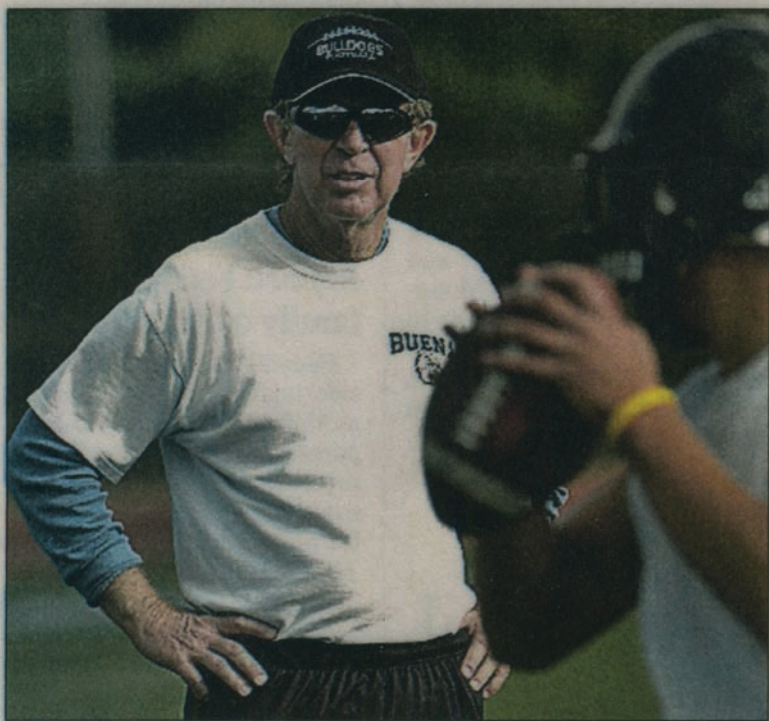


Clear frontrunner

St. Bonaventure enters the '08 season with lofty expectations and is the consensus favorite to capture another Channel League championship



Dana Rene Bowler / Star staff

Cliff Farrar, who coached the last 21 years at Nordhoff, begins his first season at Buena.

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Buena High football coach Cliff Farrar might be new to the Channel League, but it didn't take him very long to figure out the pecking order.

"Obviously, you've got to beat St. Bonaventure to win the league championship," Farrar said.

It's something that hasn't been done since St. Bonaventure entered the league in 2002 and has rarely been accomplished in the program's decade of dominance.

The Seraphs are 119-6 over the last nine years — the most victories of any program in the state — with nine straight league and seven section titles in that span.

They capped last season's 14-1 run with a Division III state championship, and return another talent-laden roster led by do-everything senior Patrick Hall.

While not conceding the title before the opening kickoff, opposing league coaches realize the real competitive chase could be for second place.

"Until somebody unseats them, St. Bonaventure is the favorite and they are the class of the league," Santa Barbara coach Will Gonzales said. "Then,

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Ventura turning to sophomore at QB

CHANNEL LEAGUE

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the rest is really up for grabs. It just depends on who can put it together and have their team playing well."

Coming off a state title, it might be hard for a program to muster the motivation for similar success.

But high expectations are nothing new at St. Bonaventure, and the Seraphs have already found incentive to fuel their fire.

The seniors are out to prove last season wasn't based solely on having running back Darrell Scott on the roster.

"A lot of teams get slap happy and don't work that hard," St. Bonaventure coach Todd Therrien said. "But these guys have responded in the offseason with even more intensity. This was the hardest off-season program we've ever had at this school and the senior leadership has been tremendous."

Therrien dealt with being the new head coach on the block last season, but that distinction belongs to Farrar this year. After 21 seasons at Nordhoff, Farrar takes over at Buena with a reputation of success.

"Buena is automatically improved by getting Cliff Farrar," Therrien said. "They will compete with the top teams in the league. I played against Cliff in high school and played for him in an All-Star game and I know what kind of expectations he has for a program. That is going to be a battle."

Although Farrar expects some growing pains installing his system, he's not allowing it as an excuse for effort. The Bulldogs will lean on tailback Mike Davis, tight end Tyler Perry and linebacker Kane Hobbs to keep them in the running.

"Our main goal is to get the players to buy into the program and be competitive



Chuck Kirman / Star staff

St. Bonaventure High's Dylan Davis talks with teammates during a recent practice.

and make the playoffs," Farrar said. "They are doing well learning things so far, and if the ball bounces the right way, you never know. That is why you play the game."

Across town, Ventura is putting its offense in young hands with sophomore quarterback Keihan Gibbs starting behind center. But Gibbs doesn't act his age in the huddle, says coach Brad Steward.

"He steps right in and takes charge, and when he speaks everyone listens," Steward said. "He is a leader out there, and we have high hopes for his leadership and athletic abilities."

After last season's 0-6 injury-plagued start, Steward isn't making any bold predictions about Ventura's chances this early.

"I was certain we were going to be good last year and then we were snake bit. It was one thing after another and we weren't very good," said Steward, whose team recovered to finish 4-1 in league and make the playoffs. "But the kids didn't pack it in and they learned some great lessons. Hopefully, that will help us this year."

Santa Barbara should pose a challenge

behind all-league senior quarterback John Uribe, tight end Bryson Lloyd and wide receiver Roberto Nelson. The Dons have also added a few transfers to bolster their depth.

"They lost some guys on defense, but they have a really potent offense," Therrien said. "They are going to compete and be good."

Dos Pueblos coach Jeff Uyesaka is excited about his backfield prospects and the potential of incoming free safety Brandon Tangle.

"Our team is not going to win any contest for size, but we've got kids who want to play for the love of the game and for their own town and their school," Uyesaka said. "They are average guys, but they are overachievers and work hard."

San Marcos finished 0-10 last season, but success at the lower levels has coach Dare Holdren thinking brighter days are ahead.

"We have a lot of talented guys coming up, and that is a pretty positive thing," he said. "We have a good attitude and the kids are working hard and we feel like we can win some games."

Although Therrien expects St. Bonaventure to defend its title, he doesn't expect it to be easy.

"The Channel League is much improved," he said. "There are good coaches in this league, and not only good X's and O's guys, but good motivators and good guys. I know they probably don't like me very much, but I have nothing but respect for them."

Regardless of the volatility in league relations, the standings are usually pretty stable.

"Now that St. Bonaventure is in our league, it's playing for second and then fighting for third," Uyesaka said. "I don't see that changing much this year."