

# 2007 season will be packed with memories

Welcome to high school football 2007.

It's got a tough act to follow.

A quick review of 2006 includes Seaside claiming its first section title in school history, Salinas High overcoming sportsmanship issues to become a member in good standing of the Central Coast Section, Alisal coming within minutes of stunning Palma in a regular-season game, then coming within seconds of winning its first playoff game in school history, and King City rallying from an 0-4 start to win six straight games to reach the playoffs.

Then there was Palma, closing the year with a grueling four-overtime loss in the playoffs to Palo Alto.

This year promises to have a season full of highlights as well.

By the time you finish reading our annual football edition, you should be something of an expert on the 20 teams that make up the three Salinas-area leagues.

Then again, teenagers being somewhat unpredictable, who knows what's going to happen this season?

Some questions to ponder:

■ How many yards and touchdowns will Carmel quarterback Kenny Johnston throw for?

■ How many yards will Greenfield's talented trio of running backs gain?

■ How will Salinas High react now that it's become eligible for the playoffs again?

■ Can anyone around here beat Palma?

■ Will Alvarez, Soledad and Gonzales turn things around?

■ Will the good times continue to roll at Alisal?

You're going to have to wait about 10 weeks for your answers.

At least this season should have something of a smooth launch.

This time, the county has no realignment issues to deal with — same schools in the same leagues.

There's only one new coach (Rich Burgan at Soledad).

And most everyone is now familiar with the state playoffs, which made it through their initial year with hardly a hitch.

So, are you ready for some football?

Here are five games you



won't want to miss:

■ **Sept. 7:** Seaside at Salinas: The Spartans make their first appearance since claiming the first Central Coast Section football title in school history — against a team eager to prove its program is back on track.

■ **Sept. 14:** Carmel at North Salinas (Sports Complex): The small-school Padres play their first game ever against a large-school T-CAL team, one that received plenty of hype during the summer.

■ **Sept. 28:** Pacific Grove at Greenfield: The Breakers will put their four-year unbeaten MTAL streak on the line in the league-opener against what may be the most improved team in the county.

■ **Oct. 12:** Alisal at Palma (Sports Complex): Once one of the biggest mis-matches of the year, this game has turned into a full-fledged rivalry.

■ **Oct. 26:** Palma at Gilroy: Expect this game to be for the T-CAL title.

## This year promises to have a season full of highlights as well.

Here are five players to watch:

■ **Carmel quarterback Kenny Johnston:** On his way to breaking every passing record in the county.

■ **Palma linebacker Chad Davis:** Could be the most heavily recruited player in the area.

■ **Greenfield running back Jesus Briseno:** Last year he rushed for 1,200 yards in barely half a season.

■ **Alisal running back David Alejo:** Can impact a game on offense and defense.

■ **Pacific Grove running back Ian Hesse:** Averaged more than 10 yards per carry as a sophomore and junior.

So there you have it.

The teams. The games. The players.

Enjoy.

## TRI-COUNTY ATHLETIC LEAGUE

# There's no starting over for the Trojans

For a while, it appeared the Alisal High football team was going to have to start all over.

Not a pleasant thought for a program that had labored through a 33-game losing streak from 1982-85, a 32-game winless stretch from 1998-2001 and needed 38 years to reach the Central Coast Section playoffs for the first time.

But not to worry.

Sunil Smith, rumored to be a strong candidate for the Hartnell College coaching vacancy last spring, returns to coach Alisal for a fifth season.

Coaches sometimes can be given too much credit for a winning team, but Smith's value probably can't be overstated.

Since his arrival four years ago, the image of Alisal football has gone from perennial loser to playoff contender.

"Within ourselves, we have a lot of confidence," Smith said. "The players we have truly expect to win. We're a scrappy and emotional group."

Smith has never had a losing record in his four years at Alisal.

Since his arrival, the Trojans are 23-15 overall in the regular season and have reached the playoffs three times.

Prior to Smith's arrival, Alisal won only two games in the previous four years and had just 25 wins in the prior nine years.

Other than a league title, about the only thing Alisal hasn't done under Smith is win a CCS playoff game.

Not that the Trojans haven't come close.

Perhaps no team in the playoffs last year suffered a more heartbreaking loss than Alisal, in an opening-round Large School game at Leland in San Jose.

Alisal led 28-7 at half, only to see Leland tie the score with six seconds to play in regulation and win it in double overtime.

"People ask me about that game all the time," Smith said. "It's hard to talk about. It's hard to watch. It was the toughest loss of my life. It took months to really get over it."

But in the spirit of Alisal present, Smith added, "We're going to learn from it. I expect



SALINAS CALIFORNIAN FILE PHOTO/RICHARD GREEN

David Alejo takes a hit from a Hollister defender on a punt return during a game last season.

### Trojans schedule

**Sept. 1:** Sacramento 22, Alisal 0  
**Sept. 7:** North County, 7:30 p.m.  
**Sept. 14:** At Gonzales, 7:30 p.m.  
**Sept. 21:** Woodside, 7:30 p.m.  
**Sept. 28:** Bye  
**Oct. 5:** North Salinas at Salinas Sports Complex, 7:30 p.m.  
**Oct. 12:** Palma at Salinas Sports Complex, 7:30 p.m.  
**Oct. 19:** Gilroy, 7:30 p.m.  
**Oct. 26:** Hollister, 7:30 p.m.  
**Nov. 3:** At Alvarez, 2 p.m.  
**Nov. 8:** Salinas, 7:30 p.m.

this team to do as well."

Alisal had one of the smallest rosters in the T-CAL — barely 30 players — but could have as many as 40 this year.

The Trojans have had some of the top running backs in the area in the past few years — Jason Taylor, David Carriedo and Jose Romero to name a few — and if the tradition is to continue, it may depend on David Alejo.

The 6-2, 190-pound Alejo was named co-Junior of the Year in the T-CAL in 2006.

A wide receiver and first-team defensive back, Alejo could show up anywhere and everywhere this season.

"David is such a special talent," Smith said. "We might

stick him at quarterback. He'll be involved all over the field."

Jordan Ramirez, who quarterbacked a solid Alisal JV team last year, is the favorite to open the season there at the varsity level.

Jesse Suarez-Lopez, whose older brother quarterbacked the Trojans last year, is pegged as a running back and cornerback.

"He's a leader on this team," Smith said.

Another brother connection — Jesus Romero, the younger brother of Jose, who rushed for more than 700 yards in both 2004 and 2005 — will share the backfield load.

Alisal returns 6-foot, 190-pound Angel Puga and 5-11, 260-pound Julio Martinez on defense.

Maybe the biggest compliment made to Alisal football is how it has become nearly as popular as the school's storied boys basketball program.

"When we're around the community, people ask how we're looking this year, what kind of team will we have," Smith said. "People are excited about Alisal football."