

Salinas building on a clean slate

Free at last. No telling how many wins the Salinas High School football team will get this season, but none may be bigger than its May 29 victory.

That's the day the Cowboys received word that Central Coast Section representatives voted 10-0 to grant the football team playoff eligibility.

The Cowboys were facing the prospect of being ineligible for the playoffs for the third season in a row after the school was involved a series of violations — most notably eligibility issues caused by students filing false addresses.

But the Cowboys rode tall in the saddle last year at a time when the entire program was being scrutinized by just about every football fan in Monterey County.

Not only did they play a hard-hitting brand of football — their 4-6 record could have been just as easily 8-2 — but they made it through the season without a hint of sportsmanship trouble.

It was the true spirit of "Cowboy Up."

Game officials complimented the Cowboys' behavior after games, Salinas players often helped opposing players to their feet, and in games against rivals North Salinas and Alisal they

could be seen smiling and posing for pictures when it was over.

More than 110 players belonging to the three Salinas teams had a grade-point average of 3.0 or higher.

One more year of probation

Salinas is still on probation for one more year, but things seem finally to be returning to normal for the oldest school in Monterey County. (It was founded in 1882).

"A lot more adrenaline has been infused into our program," said Salinas coach Steve Goodbody. "It (the playoffs decision) gave everybody a boost."

Goodbody took over as coach last year, during the darkest days in the history of Salinas High football.

Playing to win was one thing, playing to steer clear of conflicts and controversy was another.

"The staff and players knew we were on the edge at all times," Goodbody said. "We ran the gamut of emotions. But you had to play hard football through the whistle."

With little or no room for late hits and mistakes, the Cowboys played clean, strong football.

"The kids did a perfect job," Goodbody said. "The seniors



SALINAS CALIFORNIAN FILE PHOTO/SCOTT MACDONALD

Salinas quarterback Michael Sisson (5) directs the huddle during last year's game against Pacific Grove.

understood what was at stake. Their legacy was that as a group they saved the program."

But the need to stay clean this year is probably just as great.

"Now that we have something to play for, we have to circle the wagons and make sure we continue to play the way we did last year," Goodbody said.

Even though Salinas is eligible for the playoffs, getting there may be a rough ride.

Michael Sisson, who threw for nearly 1,000 yards last year,

returns as quarterback.

But for one of the few times in recent history, Salinas doesn't return an established running back.

"It'll be a running back by committee," Goodbody said. "But we have a lot of guys who can stick it in the end zone."

Anthony Scholl, Daniel Rincon and Kainani Almeida all saw action last year carrying the ball and should get plenty of more chances this season.

The Cowboys also have no

Cowboys schedule

Aug. 31: Salinas 20, Scotts Valley 7
Sept. 7: Seaside, 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 14: At King City, 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 21: Mitty at Foothill College (Los Altos Hills), 7 p.m.
Sept. 28: Gilroy, 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 5: Palma, 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 13: At Alvarez, 2 p.m.
Oct. 19: Bye
Oct. 25: North Salinas at Salinas Sports Complex, 7:30 p.m.
Nov. 2: Hollister, 7:30 p.m.
Nov. 8: At Alisal, 7:30 p.m.

proven varsity receivers, but the potential comes in the form of 6-3, 190-pound Ryan Gregg; 5-10, 160-pound speedster Eric Garcia; and 6-foot, 210-pound second-team tight end Nick Magdelano.

Salinas may have one of the top linemen in the area in 6-4, 275-pound Ryan Baker, who's already attracting plenty of attention from four-year colleges.

In addition, Salinas linemen include 6-1, 195-pound Vaughn Soratos; 6-foot, 225-pound Ryan Soto; 5-9, 205-pound Eric Blake-man; and 5-8, 220-pound Francisco Pina.

"The support has been great," Goodbody said. "There have always been high expectations here. It's a storied program. Everyone knows 'The Pit.' The boosters and parents have been very supportive. Any program that has all that has high expectations."

North Salinas making no excuses

So what's the cause of all the excitement surrounding football at North Salinas High School?

Maybe it's because of the 45 players on the roster last year, more than half are returning.

And you probably can't tell by last year's 2-8 record, but several of those players at key positions distinguished themselves on the field, raising the hopes of the Viking faithful.

"We're a million times better than we were when I started here (three years ago) and definitely better than last year," North High coach Steve Zenk said.

It's been a slow and tedious rebuilding project at North Salinas, which seemingly has yet to recover from an agonizing 2003 playoff loss to Aptos.

Since then, the Vikings have won only one T-CAL game —

they ended a 13-game league losing streak last season —and five games overall.

Zenk has not only had to build a foundation on the field, but in the classroom as well.

Where once North High was plagued by academic ineligibilities, now it ranks as one of the best classroom teams in the Salinas area.

"I'm an educator first," he said. "And this year, I'll have enough players in case I have to bench anybody (for poor grades). We have quite a bit of depth."

From classwork to teamwork, Zenk hopes a hit-the-books approach will turn North Salinas into an honor roll-like program both on and off the field.

"When I got here, football didn't seem that important to a lot of kids," he said. "It's easy

Vikings schedule

Sept. 1: North Salinas 42, Branham (San Jose) 6
Sept. 7: Soquel, 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 14: Carmel, 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 21: At Seaside, 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 28: At Palma, 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 5: Alisal, 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 12: At Hollister, 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 19: Alvarez, 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 25: Salinas, 7:30 p.m.
Nov. 2: At Gilroy, 7:30 p.m.

for kids to make stupid excuses. Now, we don't accept excuses."

This group of juniors and seniors may not need excuses anyhow. Several were 7-0 as freshmen and 9-1 as junior varsity players.

The Vikings return nearly their entire offensive backfield. Michael Ramos, who threw for nearly 1,000 yards, along

with running backs Excalibur Holder, Devin Camel and Mark Ramos, give North High speed and experience.

The trio of running backs combined for more than 1,200 yards last year.

North High also returns its top two receivers in Victor Sapp, who averaged more than 30 yards per catch with 11 receptions, and Marcos Martinez.

The returning firepower should do wonders for a team that scored eight points or less in half of its games last year.

"The kids we have now expect to win," Zenk said. "We didn't have that the last two years."

In addition to bringing back seven players on offense, North High returns eight starters on defense.

Sapp, Mark Ramos, Martinez and Bobby Bautista fill out the defensive backfield, while Edwin Torres and Eddie Solis are returning linebackers.

North High also benefited by the transfer of junior Chris Robinson, a 6-3, 260-pounder from Orange County who will line up with 6-1, 320-pound Nick Martinez.

"I think we turned the corner during the second half of last year," Zenk said.

North High gave Alisal, Hollister, Gilroy and Salinas a battle in the second half of the year, giving reason for optimism.

"This year, I think we can get over the hump," Zenk said.

It'll be a test, considering there could be as many as seven playoff contenders on the Viking schedule.