

Seaside is one big happy family

The Seaside High football team has won more games — 32 — than any team in the 20-team tri-league area over the past three years.

More than Hollister — 26.

More than Palma — 27.

More than Pacific Grove — 29.

The Spartans have also played more games than any team in the Central Coast Section during the past three years, and there's only one way you can do that — go "Haka" in the playoffs.

The Haka, a tribal war dance and trademark of the Seaside football team — which performs the routine before every game — was one of the last things spectators saw the Spartans do last year, as the team celebrated its long-awaited section championship.

After beating Pacific Grove and receiving the team trophy in the Small School Division title game last December, the Spartans gathered in front of their fans and performed the Haka one last time.

It was a fitting way to end the greatest season in the history of Seaside football, which had lost the previous two title games in the final seconds.

The title-game triumph also made Seaside the first Monterey County team in five years to win 12 games in a single season.

It also put Seaside's three-year overall record at 32-7.



SALINAS CALIFORNIAN FILE PHOTO/SCOTT MACDONALD

Seaside players do the "Haka" after winning the Central Coast Section Small School Division championship last year over Pacific Grove.

"The only game we felt we probably should have lost in the last three years was against Palma (30-15)," said Seaside coach Al Avila.

The title, meanwhile, means Avila has come full circle as Seaside coach. In his first year in 1993 the Spartans were winless.

Which may help explain why Avila, who hinted strongly that last year might be his last as coach, decided to return.

"A lot of people seemed to think the only reason I was leaving was because our team might

not be as good, and I wouldn't want to be around a team that wasn't going to win," he said. "They forget I was here when we weren't winning, our numbers were down, and they were talking about dropping football."

Avila didn't field a winning team until his sixth year as coach. Seaside has had only two losing records in the past eight years and has reached the playoffs three years in a row and six times in the past nine years.

"We never talk about winning or losing," Avila said. "It's all

about the kids and how we can impact their lives."

For the record, his 14-year record at Seaside is 76-71-2. He was 9-40 in his first five years — 44-18 the past five.

Avila, however, seems more proud of the fact that he has created a family atmosphere at Seaside High where the team prays, hugs and unabashedly says how much they love each other.

"It's an unbelievable feeling," he said.

While Seaside may not have the impact players of last year,

Spartans schedule

- Sept. 7: At Salinas, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 14: At Sobrato, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 21: North Salinas, 7 p.m.
- Sept. 28: Oakland Technical, 7 p.m.
- Oct. 5: Tamalpais (Mill Valley), 7 p.m.
- Oct. 12: Pajaro Valley at Watsonville High, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 19: Monte Vista Christian, 7 p.m.
- Oct. 26: Watsonville, 7 p.m.
- Nov. 3: At North County, 2 p.m.
- Nov. 9: Monterey at MPC, 7:30 p.m.

the three-time defending MBL champions won't fall off the edge of the Earth, either.

Thirty of the 45 varsity players are underclassmen.

Dru Morales is expected to quarterback, with sophomore Alex Barajas ready if needed.

Seaside will field another strong running back crew with speedster Chris Nguyen, 210-pounder Kristian Pinkard and 225-pounder Chris Thomas.

Dioente Gordon will try to fill the gap left by two-time league MVP Michael Avila by returning kicks and lining up in a variety of positions on offense.

Six-four Elijah Knight will be the tight end.

The Spartans' most experienced linemen are 200-pound Aaron Smiley and 6-2, 280-pound Elbert Ojendis.

"Last year we had a target on our back," Avila said. "This year we have a bullseye to go with it."

Pajaro Valley moves into phase two of plan

Forget those scores of 50-0, 51-0, 65-6, 42-6, 45-6, 49-6 and 41-0.

The Pajaro Valley High School football team knew it was in for a shellacking, yet took its punishment with no complaints.

The Grizzlies courageously competed last year without a senior class and lived to play another year.

With a senior class now on board, along with an enrollment of about 1,700, the Watsonville school is ready to play football with the rest of the big boys.

"We referred to last year as Football 101," said Pajaro Valley coach Mike Palmer. "This is more of a soccer area, and a lot of our kids didn't understand the terminology or play football until high school."

Adding to the challenge of building a program from the bottom up is the fact that Pajaro Valley has no on-campus football field — and no plans to build one anytime soon.

"We practice on a softball field," Palmer said. "It's uneven, with no lights. But we have to make do with what we have."

He had much to be pleased about last year, and not just because the Grizzlies beat nearby St. Francis of Watsonville, 6-0, for their first varsity triumph in school history.

"Our main goal was to get better every day," Palmer said. "We tried to focus on that. We never focused on the other team or what they did. Our focus was on ourselves. It's a two-year project and we didn't want to waste a day or down."

Grizzlies schedule

- Sept. 1: Pajaro Valley 42, Harbor 9
- Sept. 7: At King City, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 15: St. Francis (at Watsonville High), 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 21: At Soledad, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 28: Gonzales (at Watsonville), 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 5: Bye
- Oct. 12: Seaside (at Watsonville), 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 20: At North County, 2 p.m.
- Oct. 26: Monte Vista Christian (at Watsonville), 7:30 p.m.
- Nov. 2: At Watsonville, 7:30 p.m.
- Nov. 10: At North County, 2 p.m.

He is taking the same approach this year.

"We're not thinking we're going to win the MBL title," Palmer said. "We want everyone to play the best they can and still get better."

The good news for Pajaro Valley is that nearly the entire team

returns, and not many schools can make that statement.

"We have 22 starters coming back," Palmer quipped.

The Grizzlies avoided any sort of serious injury despite being outmanned, undersized and inexperienced.

Anywhere from 40 to 45 players will suit up this year.

The Grizzlies threw the fewest passes in the tri-league area last year (about 70), and as result, their most productive players were the running backs.

Race Nelson led the group with 570 yards and eight touchdowns. He broke his arm during a football summer camp but was back in the gym a few days later.

"He's added 20 pounds of muscle," Palmer said.

Nelson will be joined in the

backfield again by Eric Banuelos (435 yards).

Richard Medina, who took every snap of every game last year, returns at quarterback.

He'll be backed up by 6-2 Chris Jackson, up from the JVs. "He's (Jackson) a prototypical quarterback — lanky with a real good arm," Palmer said.

The offensive line could be the strength of the team, according to Palmer.

"We have a couple of tackles that go 275 and 295, and our guards go about 250," he said.

All in all, Palmer seems content to be in charge of a program that appears to be progressing right on schedule.

"Any coach who is competitive, who can go home and know he has 30 kids who can play has to feel pretty good about what he's doing," he said.