

TRI-COUNTY ATHLETIC LEAGUE

Alisal: Yo, T-CAL — Trojans ready to do it with hard work

And you thought Rocky had it rough. Just when Alisal football begins to establish itself as a force, it gets TKO'd by realignment.

After struggling for years Alisal was just beginning to raise its level of play when it was moved from the small-school Mission Trail Athletic League to be big-school Monterey Bay League in 1998.

The results were disastrous. It was three years before Alisal won another game.

And now, just as Alisal has become a CCS playoff contender it was moved from the MBL to the T-CAL, one of the elite leagues in the CCS.

Having gone from a MTAL lightweight to an MBL middleweight, the Trojans now advance to the heavy-weight division.

"In the long run I think it's going to be good," Alisal coach Sunil Smith said. "I like the opportunity to play some of the bigger schools and bigger teams."

Well, what do you expect from a coach who arrived at Alisal four years ago and one of the first things he did was put Palma on the schedule.

"You already know the respect the T-CAL gets around the CCS and you want to be part of that," Smith said.

But change comes at a key time for Alisal. For a school that had never reached the CCS playoffs, Smith has guided the Trojans to two postseason appearances in three years.

In essence, Alisal has gone from the laughingstock of local football to an inspiration for struggling programs everywhere.

"We're at the point now where we think we can compete with anybody,"

A TROJANS PRODUCTION

WATKINS WRAP: Alisal has what it takes to pass the T-CAL test.

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Selected showtimes

- Sept. 1: Beat Sacramento 54-14
- Sept. 9: At North County, 2
- Sept. 15: Gonzales, 7:30
- Sept. 22: At Woodside (San Carlos), 7:30
- Oct. 6: North Salinas, 7:30
- Oct. 13: Palma, 7:30
- Oct. 20: At Gilroy, 7:30
- Oct. 27: At Hollister, 7:30
- Nov. 3: Alvarez, 7:30
- Nov. 9: At Salinas, 7:30

Smith said. "And moving to the T-CAL was good motivation for us in the off-season. It made us work hard. Week in, week out there's going to be no break at all."

If there are concerns about Alisal, it may be the size of its roster. In a league where most teams have 50 or more players, the Trojans intend to suit up between 30-35.

But Smith and Alisal seem to thrive in the role of the underdog.

"We not only want to compete with teams like Hollister, Los Gatos and Palma, we want to beat them," Smith said. "We want to beat a top CCS team. It's a difficult task and tremendous challenge."

Six-foot-2, 225-pound linebacker Anthony Mose is a returning all-league and all-county performer who carries a 3.7 GPA with mostly college prep classes on his schedule.

Also back are four second-team all-leaguers — linebacker Alfonso Valdez and defensive backs Sammy Muniz, Juan Maldonado and Jason Taylor.

"Valdez is the heart and soul of this team," Smith said. "He does everything and the guys respect him."

Rene Ruvalcaba, who rushed for more than 200 yards in the final three games of the season, is part of a backfield that will include returner Clifford Woo and Taylor.

Andrew Suarez-Lopez, a senior who performed admirably in the playoff loss to Hollister, is the starting quarterback.

Following the loss to Hollister, Smith said he talked with Balers' coach Chris Cameron the following day for nearly two hours, picking his brain on just about everything related to football.

"I wanted to know everything he did in the off-season and all the work that goes into it," Smith said. "One thing I know is to beat teams like Palma and Hollister we're going to have to work as hard as them."

It worked for Rocky, it could work for the Trojans.

ALISAL HIGH SCHOOL FILM GROUP PRESENTS
AN TROJANS PRODUCTIONS FILM
STARRING ANTHONY MOSE WITH ALFONSO VALDEZ
DIRECTED BY SUNIL SMITH

League play starts Oct. 6!

Alvarez: A fresh beginning focuses on commitment

ALVAREZ HIGH SCHOOL FILM GROUP PRESENTS
AN EAGLE PRODUCTIONS FILM
STARRING JOEY MARTINEZ WITH ADRIAN ESTRADA
DIRECTED BY BOB RAWLES

League play starts Oct. 6!

Something strange on your football field? Who you going to call? Something weird and it don't look good?

Who you going to call? Ghostbusters! To be sure there are plenty of ghosts the Eagles would like to rid themselves of after last season.

Nearly five months after being named the new coach of the Alvarez High football team Bob Rawles still is assessing the damage from last year.

"We're not starting from scratch," Rawles said. "We're starting from below scratch."

That's what happens when you're coach is fired in mid-season, the roster dips so low there are barely enough players to field a team and you're shut out six times in 10 games.

Rawles didn't waste any time establishing his game plan, and it was more than just football.

This year at Alvarez High, it's all about a commitment.

"The players had to make a physical commitment, academic commitment and social commitment," Rawles said.

The three-tiered plan isn't a quick-fix to any of the Alvarez problems, but at least it gives some direction to a program that was spinning out of control last year.

Here's the idea behind the "Total Commitment" plan:

■ **Physical commitment** — The off-season conditioning program attracted nearly 100 players, according to Rawles. "They had to make a physical commitment," he said.

■ **Academic commitment** — A study hall and tutorial program are virtually part of the

AN EAGLES PRODUCTION

WATKINS WRAP: Winning won't be easy, but a new coach brings a refreshing attitude to Alvarez. ☆☆☆

Selected showtimes

- Sept. 2: North County, 2
- Sept. 9: Watsonville, 2
- Sept. 15: At Live Oak, 7:30
- Sept. 22: At Gonzales, 7:30
- Sept. 29: At Hollister, 7:30
- Oct. 7: Gilroy, 2
- Oct. 13: At Salinas, 7:30
- Oct. 21: North Salinas, 2
- Nov. 3: At Alisal, 7:30
- Nov. 10: Palma, 2

playbook. "There was a culture here that said all you had to do was the bare minimum (2.0 PGA)," Rawles said. "We needed a brand new academic commitment."

■ **Social commitment** — Players must participate in fundraisers and show leadership skills.

"Every player must participate in four fundraisers," Rawles said. "They're (varsity) going to help the younger kids in the program. We want the senior class to establish a good relationship with the freshmen and sophomores."

Now that the plan is in place, the reclamation project can begin.

"We feel we're taking the right steps," Rawles said. "We may have to retrace a lot of those steps. But when this program is ready to take off we want to make sure we have a solid foundation in place."

It was only four years ago that Alvarez fielded a co-championship team that went 6-3-1 overall.

The Eagles have been unable to win more than three games in any season since.

They celebrated their 10th anniversary of football last year with the worst season in school history.

In 1996, the Eagles' first year of varsity football, they went 2-8. Last year, they went 1-9.

But this could be a fresh start for Alvarez, especially since they'll be able to

play home games on campus for the first time in three years.

The renovations to the new stadium, which included an artificial surface last year, have been complete.

There are grandstands on both sides of the field along with a new concession stand and restrooms. A new scoreboard is on the way.

The hardest part, however, is yet to come.

Alvarez has moved to the big-school T-CAL this year with a mostly inexperienced varsity roster of maybe 35 players.

"We're putting in a brand new system," Rawles, a 1987 graduate of Palma High, said. "And we're going to have a lot of players going both ways."

Adrian Estrada, who fared the best of nearly a half dozen quarterbacks used by Alvarez last year, is the starter this season.

Joey Alvarez, who led the Eagles in rushing with 343 yards, is one of the few returning backs.

One Alvarez running back transferred to North Salinas and another moved to San Jose.

J.C. Torres will help Alvarez pick up the slack.

Six-foot, 260-pound Omar Betencourt and 6-3, 260-pound Colton Wheeler are returning linemen.

"The Eagles are flying, we're just not soaring yet," Rawles said.

Gilroy: No marquee players but an enthusiastic cast

For years the stadium at Gilroy High School was something of a "Monster House" for opposing teams.

It was almost as if the stadium was alive and any team that strayed on its field would enter at its own risk.

Especially when it came time to trying to stop Gilroy running backs. Whether or not those dangers exist this season is open to debate.

The Justin Sweeney era is over at Gilroy High, much to the relief of defenses everywhere.

The Mustang tailback put together the greatest back-to-back seasons of any player in the history in any of the three area leagues.

His two-year regular-season totals were 3,214 yards and 35 touchdowns.

Combining his rushing and receiving yards for regular season and post-season Sweeney accounted for more than 4,000 yards.

It wasn't that long ago that another Gilroy tailback, Danny Gallo, scooted for more than 1,200 yards and 16 touchdowns — back in 2000.

T-CAL teams shouldn't worry this year, however, as there doesn't

A G. MUSTANGS PRODUCTION

WATKINS WRAP: Gilroy could be surprise team of T-CAL. ☆☆☆

Selected showtimes

- Sept. 1: Beat Burlingame 27-27
- Sept. 8: At Woodside, 7:30
- Sept. 15: At Oak Grove (San Jose), 7:30
- Sept. 22: At Serra (San Mateo), 7:30
- Sept. 29: Salinas, 7:30
- Oct. 7: At Alvarez, 2
- Oct. 20: Alisal, 7:30
- Oct. 27: At Palma (Sports Complex), 7:30
- Nov. 3: At North Salinas (Sports Complex), 7:30
- Nov. 9: Hollister, 7:30

appear to be another Sweeney or Gallo on the Gilroy horizon.

But that doesn't mean the Mustangs will be an easy opponent.

Gilroy has developed a consistently strong program — three playoff appearances in the last six years — and it brings in a new coach who took Santa Clara High to the CCS playoffs last year.

Rich Hammonds, a Hollister High graduate who spent four years there as an assistant coach, is one of three new coaches in the T-CAL.

"There has always been a lot of success at this school," Hammonds said.

Just because Gilroy doesn't have a marquee player in the backfield — at least, not yet — don't think it'll continue to attack from the ground.

"I prefer an offense that relies on everyone," Hammonds said.

Last year, his Santa Clara team used multiple running backs to rush for about 2,000 yards.

One of the few experienced running backs Gilroy returns is Paul Gonzales. He rushed for more than 200 yards on 37 carries, third best on the team.

Travis Reyes, one of the top JV running backs last year, will break into the varsity backfield this season.

Gilroy graduated both quarterbacks from last year, but returns senior Matt Hemeon, who might have been the starter last year but missed the season for undisclosed medical reasons.

Hemeon is the younger brother of Ben Hemeon, who quarterbacked Gilroy in 2002 and 2003.

His favorite target could be 6-4 basketball player Marshod Johnston.

The top returning Mustangs are second-team linebacker Vince Giacalone and second-team offensive lineman Carlos Estrada, a 6-2, 270-pounder.

Hammonds is already sold on 6-1, 260-pound lineman Jonathon Bobadilla.

"He's the best technical blocker I have ever coached," Hammonds said.

For the past five years, Gilroy has been a team that started fast and

faded down the stretch. Excluding 2002, its non-league mark from 2000 through last year is 13-3-1. But the Mustangs haven't had a winning league season in five years.

This year, Gilroy will be tested early and often.

The Mustangs' non-league schedule consists of four teams — Oak Grove, Serra, Burlingame and Woodside — that reached the playoffs last year.

Including league play, seven of Gilroy's 10 opponents this year were in the playoffs last season. It could have been eight had Salinas High not had to forfeit six wins and a tie.

"We want to get tested in pre-season," Hammonds said. "We're going to find out in a hurry what kind of team we are."

Playoff-ready is the guess here.

GILROY HIGH SCHOOL FILM GROUP PRESENTS
A G. MUSTANGS PRODUCTIONS FILM
STARRING VINCE GIACALONE WITH JONATHON BOBADILLA
DIRECTED BY RICH HAMMONDS