

SPORTS

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COMMENTARY

Getting a spark through the air

Mertz still confident in the passing game

Graham Mertz never has lacked confidence — at least in terms of outward appearances — during his three full seasons with the University of Wisconsin football program. That's true even though he hasn't come close to living up to the hype bestowed upon him before and after arriving as one of the gems in the Badgers' 2019 recruiting class, the long-awaited quarterback expected to help the program take the step to the next level.

He's gone from messiah to pariah in some fans' eyes, yet Mertz just seems to roll with the punches and keeps putting on a brave front in media settings. That conviction seems even stronger as he enters his third season as a starter, a campaign that may amount to a make-or-break four months for Mertz.

I noticed it in the spring when he was asked about UW's earlier flirtation with blue-chip transfer Caleb Williams, who ended up at Southern Cal. Mertz said he understood why the Badgers pursued Williams and wouldn't have gone anywhere even if Williams had done the unthinkable and chose UW. Mertz would have stayed and competed "like it's my team."

I noticed it in July at Big Ten media days in Indianapolis, where Mertz talked about how the game had slowed down for him. "It's like the feeling when you were playing on the playground when you were younger," he said, "and it's frickin' sick."

And I noticed it as UW was entering the final touches of training camp before beginning preparations for the season opener against Illinois State on Sept. 3. He didn't agree or disagree with that assessment and just kind of shrugged his shoulders before offering this as an explainer: "I'm ready to go," he said.

Mertz's final pass of the 2021 season was a beauty, a 30-yard strike to Chimere Dike on third-and-12 in the fourth quarter of the Las Vegas Bowl. That conversion extended a series that began at UW's own 3-yard line and ended with UW running 18 plays for 9 minutes, 57 seconds to run out the clock in a 20-13 win over Arizona State.

It was a highlight play in a season in which those type of moments — at least through the air — were few and far between. Mertz completed 59.5% of his passes and finished with more interceptions (11) than touchdowns (10). UW has run Paul Chryst's offense for 14 seasons — seven with him serving as an offensive coordinator, seven in charge of the program — and UW's team pass efficiency rating (120.73) was better than only the 2008 team (Remember: Dustin Sherer and Allan Evrjord in that span).

Chryst didn't spin his head in the sand and made significant changes to his offensive



JIM POLZIN



Mertz



Dike

COLLEGE FOOTBALL



L.E. BASKOW, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Wisconsin running back Braelon Allen, left, and head coach Paul Chryst, right, talk after defeating Arizona State in the Las Vegas Bowl on Dec. 30 at Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas.

Chasing the Buckeyes and rising the ranks

Challenge in Big Ten could come down to Wisconsin, Ohio State

ERIC OLSON
Associated Press

The Big Ten shook up college athletics this summer by announcing the additions of Southern California and UCLA in 2024 and negotiating a blockbuster multimedia rights deal.

When it comes to what's expected to happen on the football field, the narrative is the same as usual.

Everybody's chasing Ohio State.

Michigan and Iowa rose up to reach the 2021 Big Ten championship game, ending the Buckeyes' run of four straight conference titles. But coach Ryan Day appears to have fixed what ailed his team last year by hiring a new defensive coordinator, and he has playmakers everywhere on offense.

Now add the motivation derived from losing to Michigan for the first time since 2011.

"I'm excited about what this team is," Day said, "and I would kind of describe them as edgy



CARLOS OSORIO, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ohio State running back TreVeyon Henderson reacts after rushing for a touchdown against Michigan on Nov. 27 at Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor, Mich.

this offseason."

With quarterback C.J. Stroud, running back TreVeyon Henderson and receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba the top skill players, the Buckeyes should make a run at matching their



Stroud

nation-best game. 45.7 points per

ordinator in Jesse Minter. The Wolverines have experienced quarterbacks in Cade McNamara and J.J. McCarthy, a breakaway threat in Blake Corum and what coach Jim Harbaugh said could be his best group of receivers in his eight seasons.

Penn State has a known quantity in sixth-year quarterback Sean Clifford, but questions abound on the offensive line and on a defense now coordinated by Manny Diaz.

No. 15 Michigan State will be hard-pressed to duplicate its 11-win season with road games against Michigan and Penn State and a home cross-over game against Wisconsin.

No. 18 Wisconsin hasn't been to the Big Ten title game since 2019 but is the preseason favorite in the West for the third straight year and seventh time in the nine years of the East-West format.

The Badgers have a third-year starting quarterback in Graham Mertz, who's yet to match his recruiting hype, and a rising star in running back Braelon Allen. But the defense lost eight of its top 10 tacklers, and the Badgers must play Ohio State on the road.

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COMMENTARY

Falcons training partnership pays off

Central making gains in the weight room with EPTC this year

It's a beautiful Tuesday afternoon.

Sunny skies, a nice, cool fall breeze but enough summer humidity to hit up area community pools for a few final swims.

It doesn't necessarily feel like football season, and school still doesn't start for about two weeks, but there are plenty of storylines buzzing from opening weekend of the high school football season.

What really has me intrigued is what's happening about 15 miles west in Salem, or Salem Lakes, or Paddock Lake or whatever they're calling it these days at Central High School.

Ever since the winter, 40 to

50 athletes in the spring and 50 to 60 in the summer lived in the weight room at Central High School, thanks to help from the trainers at Evolve Performance Training Center (EPTC), and worked on not only basic lifting and running but also sports-specific training.

While some schools in the Southern Lakes Conference pay a stipend to a strength coach for their athletes, the Falcons don't have that luxury.

EPTC, which started in Kenosha and now has sites in Lake Geneva and Genoa City, has turned into the area's premier spot with athletes from all over southeastern Wisconsin benefitting.

Cole Berghorn, a 2022 graduate of Lake Geneva Badger High School, is now running over would-be tacklers in the Big Ten with Minnesota. Trainers also worked in the offseason with football players at Union Grove, Wilmot and Central, among others.

Another example is Jack Rose,



DAN TRUTTSCHER, KENOSHA NEWS FILE PHOTO

Central quarterback Brock Koeppel runs the football in a practice last season. The junior is back as the starting QB after an injury derailed the second half of his sophomore season.

or "Kenosha Kobe" as some call him, Bristol's own that is now pumping up shots for Division 1 University of Wisconsin-Green Bay basketball.

Central head coach Jared

Franz, a former longtime coach at Wilmot Union High School, is excited about his team's commitment, performance and

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Ramczyk

From C1

dedication after Friday night's 24-21 victory over Waukesha North.

The Falcons had to score 14 points in the fourth quarter to pull off the victory.

It was only the second time in the last 10 years or so a team from the Lakes beat a team from the Classic 8, which is often regarded as the best football conference in the state.

"We love their attitude and togetherness," Franz said about his team's performance Friday. "There was zero pouting or negativity when we were down."

"Keaton (Enright) played at 170 last year, now he's 210. He's an extreme example, but we have many guys who dedicated to training and got not only stronger but also bigger and faster. We have a lot to teach and fix. We are still only a couple years in our 'O' and 'D' systems. But we're on the right track for sure."

Franz added that Cory Englebert, EPTC's owner, and his staff made it fun for the players, and the guys enjoyed being there at 5:30 a.m. all winter and spring.

According to Franz, special teams was a big factor in the victory. There was a long field goal from Carter Klementzos, 41 yards, a thwarting of a North fake punt, and two times the Falcons pinned the Northstars inside their own 20-yard line on kickoffs by Kyle Martinez.

Plus, Enright, who has powered up his body and is carrying defenders this fall, decided to save his best for last, showing that his conditioning is already on point on Week 1.

Enright ripped off touchdown runs of 23 and 4 (the game-winner) yards in the fourth quarter. He added 4.5 tackles and 2.5 tackles for loss.

Franz added that defensive lineman Mason Wierzbicki had a huge game. Wierzbicki was a linebacker last year but has quickly become the team's best d-lineman, Franz says.

Down 21-10 in the fourth, Nick Argersinger's 25-yard punt return set up Enright's long scoring

run two plays later, then the ensuing kickoff was so good the Northstars were pinned at their own 17 yard line.

Franz cites this momentum swing as a key to the eventual win.

"When getting ready to interview I put together a 1-5-10 year plan laying out where I want this program to be long-term. I knew it was going to be a challenge (to turn this into a winning football program)," Franz added. "It's a great school whose enrollment is climbing due to growing communities but also open enrollment. Athletes are realizing we are putting together a program this is fun to be a part of and also expects to compete and win every week."

Along with Rose, Kenny Garth and Devin Griffin coming out for football two years ago, guys like Wyatt Anderson, Eli Gomez and Ian Witt are out for the team for the first time this fall after never playing football before.

Indian Trail brings the juice

Indian Trail head coach Paul Hoffman isn't a stranger to getting fired up.

In fact, I think just from meeting him once he seems like a guy that could convince just about anyone to run through a brick

wall. That came across on the field for the Hawks last Friday night at Jaskwich Stadium.

The Hawks racked up a whopping 348 rushing yards in a 56-20 thwapping of visiting Madison La Follette with only 31 carries, a stunning average of 11.2 yards per carry.

Trail had six rushing touchdowns, so it's possible Madison was a bit under-sized and overmatched. Very possible, actually.

It's nonconference, you play who you play, and a win is a win, man.

Especially when you score 49 unanswered points and 56 total.

Plus, quarterback LJ Dagen was 8-for-8 passing, a perfect night, for 92 yards and two touchdowns.

La Follette may have administered an "Ole!" defense, but what matters to Hoffman is that his guys played with the same tenacity he likes to convey every day at practice.

"Our team played hard and with a lot of juice," Hoffman said. "We're proud of their effort, but we still have a lot of work to do. We need to continue to get better every week."

Hoffman credited the first-team defense, which gave up zero points after Madison's 66-yard touchdown run to open the game.

Offensively, the Hawks were just "doing what we do," Hoffman says, which means explosive athletes making plays behind great blocking from the O-line and receivers.

Dagen, Sam Callow, Justice Lovelace and Vashawn Miner all put up 74 or more rushing yards, with three scores from Lovelace, two

from Callow and one from Dagen.

Dagen's 170 total yards and three combined TDs (2 pass, 1 rush) gave a glimpse of how special of an athlete he can be this fall.

"LJ is a multi-sport athlete who puts in the work for all his sports," Hoffman said. "He's a year older and stronger and benefitted

from the reps he got last year."

"He's a coachable kid who has the schematic awareness to apply to coaching. We're blessed to have an assortment of players like that."

Mike Ramczyk is a sports reporter for the Kenosha News.

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