

**WESTMICHIGANOKSPORTS.COM & 96.1**  
**HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL WEST MICHIGAN AREA TOP TEN: Week #1**

**Bret Bakita**

**1. Rockford**

The Rams lost another great group of seniors from last season, but they always seem to reload with over 100 players on the roster...(32-3) the last 3 seasons!

**2. Muskegon**

Defending Division 2 state champions with multiple Div. I players on the roster, and QB - James Young transferring over from North Muskegon makes you wonder if the Big Reds are going to air it out more this season!

**3. Zeeland West**

(9-4) Last season with a lot of skill & speed returning! All 4 of their losses were by 8 points or less including a Div. 3 Semifinal loss to eventual state champion FHC (18-14) in a knock down drag out affair!

**4. Grandville**

I like the Dawgs to be the second-best team in the OK-Red this year behind Rockford....they have a ton of players returning, including one of the best RBs in the state in junior - Jayden "The Tank" Terry!

**5. GR Catholic Central**

Defending state champions again in Division 5, I feel that this year's Cougars' squad is going to be talented, but has some more question marks than year's GRCC will have a new young QB starting and Kellen Russell-Dixon is no longer in the backfield as he is off to play at GVSU!

**6. Muskegon Mona Shores**

New division in the OK-Green, but they will still have to battle their longtime rival Muskegon to win the conference. The good news for Sailors' fans is that they have one of the best and most experienced QBs in West Michigan to lead them is senior Jonathan Pittman - a 3-year varsity starter!

**7. Byron Center**

The Bulldogs are always tough under head coach Marc Cisco's leadership, and last year they proved that with big wins over eventual state champion - FHC on the road and Caledonia and East Kentwood out of the OK-Red. Landon Tungate, Luke Laska and Isaac Lee are all back as playmakers for the Bulldogs!

**8. South Christian**

Carson Vis is back at QB, and he is one of the most dynamic playmakers in West Michigan to watch! I know the Sailors lost some key players to graduation, like Jake Vermaas and Cam Vansolkema, who are both now playing at GVSU, but the Sailors always seem to find the next players to step up.

**9. Coopersville**

I think the team to beat in the new River Cities Alliance conference, but they will be challenged by Cedar Springs and Lowell. The Broncos are celebrating 100 years of Coopersville High School football this year....wait until you see the old black & white footage!

**10. Caledonia**

The Fighting Scots lost a lot with the graduation of 3-year varsity starters - Brock Townsend (CMU) and Derek Pennington, Jr. (WMU), but look for Cal to throw the ball all over the lot with returning starter at QB - Brody Betser, who has gotten a lot of college interest this year!

**Honorable Mention - Forest Hills Eastern** : The Hawks are my wild card to keep an eye on this year. They haven't won a conference or division title yet, but head coach Joe Schwander has had FHE in the playoffs 4 of the last 5 seasons! QB - Brendan Thompson is back after not playing last year to focus on his baseball career, and the lines are strong led by senior - Ace Simonson at 6'2 290!!

## **Jason Hutton**

### **1. Rockford**

Rams return 9 starters, more than normal, and have over 100 kids again. Rockford has won 31 straight regular season games.

### **2. Muskegon**

The Big Reds remind us it's not how you start, but how you finish, winning 12 in a row to take the division state championship after an 0-2 start in 2024. Adrian Rankin and Derekeo Speech are a tough tandem of inside linebackers.

### **3. Grandville**

Tank Terry leads 13 returning starters, the 2026 running back is poised for another huge year and what the Bulldogs have could pose a threat to Rockford's OK Red dominance.

### **4. Mona Shores**

The Sailors are loaded at the skill positions with 3-year varsity starter Jonathan Pittman at QB and junior Ike steward returning at RB.

### **5. Byron Center**

3 teams from the OK Green in the top 5, wow! The Bulldogs are experienced and talented at the skill positions too with senior QB Landon Tungate, senior RB Luke Laska, and senior WR Isaac Lee.

### **6. Caledonia**

The Fighting Scots have some holes to fill, but Brody Betser is back at QB with sophomore Lincoln Sento and senior Parker Little as returning targets.

### **7. Zeeland West**

The Dux battled injury last year and still reached the division 3 state semifinals. Trey Sloothaak really came on at RB as a junior and slides to QB for his senior season.

### **8. GR Catholic Central**

The Cougars won their 3rd division 5 state championship in the last 4 years in 2023 and have some key seniors to replace. CC has a solid core of LBs to lead the way in Derek Weiss, Collin Lott, and Dean Armock.

### **9. West Catholic**

Like CC, West graduated a ton of talented starters, but they do bring back 3 starters in but offensive line. The Falcons have guys that have been waiting their turn like junior QB Grady Augustan and RB/LB David Britenfeld.

### **10. Coopersville**

The Broncos are the favorite in the new Rivers Cities Alliance conference thanks to bringing back the likes of senior QB Beau Harris, RB/LB Bobby Lemieux, and senior RT JJ Hirdes.

## **Tom Kendra**

**1. Rockford** - Brent Cummings has a well-oiled machine that has the feel of a college program.

**2. Muskegon** - A lofty ranking for a team with just 2 returning offensive starters (both DI linemen), but the Big Reds have earned it with 9 state championship game appearances in the last 14 years.

**3. Grandville** - After some blockbuster non-league games to kick off the season, the top team in the O-K Red will be established right away when the Bulldogs visit Rockford on Sept. 13.

**4. Mona Shores** - The Sailors are a DC's nightmare with the power running of QB Jonathan Pittman (6-3, 210) and RB Ike Steward (5-11, 205), combined with Pittman's strong arm.

**5. Byron Center** - QB Landon Tungate highlights a slew of returners, as Byron Center will battle Muskegon and Mona Shores both in the O-K Green and the D2 playoffs.

**6. Caledonia** - The Scots are the lone D2 school in the O-K Red, but a QB like Brody Betser make them an intriguing dark horse pick in the league and the playoffs.

**7. Zeeland West** - Nobody wants to schedule Muskegon in a non-conference game, except John Shillito and the confident Dux, who roll into Hackley Stadium for an Aug. 30 opener.

**8. GR South Christian** - Senior QB Carson Vis is the most entertaining player in West Michigan, with his ability to throw and run and keep defenses guessing. The Sailors are motivated after a heartbreaking Finals loss.

**9. GR Catholic Central** - The Cougars will have plenty of new faces, but hard not to include a program which has won 4 state titles in the past 5 years.

**10. GR West Catholic** - West is motivated after a heartbreaking loss to bitter rival GRCC in a Regional instant classic. The two don't play in the regular season, but the winner of their inevitable playoff matchup will be favored to win it all in D5.

**Honorable Mention: GR Forest Hills Eastern** - The Hawks have the muscle up front necessary to battle West Catholic in the O-K White and then South Christian in the D4 playoffs.

## **Buck Geno**

**1. Rockford** - The Rams have not lost a regular season game since Week 8 of 2019, but that streak will be tested immediately in 2024 with games against Cass Tech, Muskegon, and Grandville to start the campaign. The strength of this squad is in the trenches on both sides of the ball with new starting QB Jayden Daniels taking the controls after getting some limited time last year interning under Drake Irwin (QB-Calvin Univ.).

**2. Muskegon** - The defending Division 2 state champions have a new QB in North Muskegon transfer James Young, who will be protected by a line anchored by two Division I commits: N'Kye Wynn & Jim Harris Jr. A difficult schedule 8-game schedule for the Big Reds leaves very little room for error as coach Shane Fairfield tries to take his squad to a 3<sup>rd</sup> straight state finals appearance.

**3. Byron Center** - 10-2 last season and they return their best skill player (Isaac Lee) and a 4-year varsity veteran (Landon Tungate) at the QB position. How fast their new pieces gel with the returning starters will determine how far they can go in a revamped OK-Green and the postseason gauntlet that resides in Division 2.

**4. GR West Catholic** - the Falcons have lost 2 games in 2 years under Landon Grove, their schedule includes 6 playoff teams from last season and Ohio power Cincinnati Elder in the season opener. A new cast at the skill positions will be well protected by an offensive line that averages 6'5", 280+ lbs as they navigate through a new OK-White division populated by 4 playoff teams from 2023.

**5. Muskegon Mona Shores** - 3-year starter & senior QB Jonathan Pittman leads an experienced Sailors squad into a challenging schedule featuring only 3 home games. Matt Koziak's team will still have to clear the hurdle of their neighborhood rivals at Muskegon HS to get a conference title - the Sailors have not defeated the Big Reds since 2020. The Sailors' exciting brand of football never disappoints, they project to light up the scoreboard.

**6. South Christian** - the Sailors are simultaneously rebuilding and gearing up for another long postseason run with senior QB Carson Vis looking at all new targets. Coach Danny Brown is looking to lead his team to their third straight Division 4 state title game - a tough road lies ahead with an ambitious schedule that includes 6 playoff teams from 2023. South Christian fans might need a program to keep track of all the new faces, but the results might look very familiar.

**7. Forest Hills Eastern** - The Hawks lost twice to South Christian last season, including in the district final. FHE has made the playoffs 4 out of the last 5 seasons and welcome back QB Brendan Thompson who did not play last season. This team's success will be decided by the play in the trenches with 2023 all-state performer Ace Simonson, Edem Denoo & Brayden Serba anchoring a strong unit.

**8. Grandville** - Junior RB Jayden "Tank" Terry returns for his 3<sup>rd</sup> varsity season running Eric Stiegel's Power-T offense. The Bulldogs return 11 of 22 starters from a squad who lost three games to two teams (Rockford & Davison) in 2023. The Dawgs need to find a solution on defense (30.2 pts against/game) to complement their ground attack in order to advance past the district round of the playoffs for the first time since 2016.

**9. Grand Rapids Catholic Central** - head coach Todd Kolster has his work cut out for him as he looks to fill the QB position from a pool of players that have no varsity snaps at that position. Replacing key components at almost every position group including offensive line (4 new starters) will be a difficult task that is compounded by a challenging schedule including teams like Lake Central (IN), Pontiac Notre Dame, and South Christian as non-conference foes.

**10. Caledonia** - the Scots lost several starters including Brock Townsend (RB-Central Michigan) and Derek Pennington Jr. (LB-Western Michigan), returning QB Brody Betser will be called upon to throw the football more than the Caledonia faithful have seen in recent vintage for the Scots to be successful in the always stout OK-Red division. Coach Derek Pennington will be developing an offensive line on the fly as a relatively young team with untested talent tries their hand at keeping their playoff streak alive.

**Honorable Mention - Coopersville** - A trendy pick as the team to beat in the new River Cities Alliance conference. Senior QB Beau Harris returns to a team who graduated 19 of 22 starters, but coach Ed Kaman has plenty of horses in the stable that should fill those gaps quickly. The Broncos celebrate 100 years of Coopersville High School football in 2024; a brand new video board at Meerman Stadium is only part of the planned festivities for the centennial season.

