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LUMBERJACKS ON FIRE!

With 19 wins in their last 22 games, the Lumberjacks have climbed from last place to first

By Steve Gunn
MuskegonSports.com

The victories have been coming in big bunches for the Muskegon Lumberjacks over the past two months.

They had eight wins in a row heading into their home games against the Youngstown Phantoms on Jan. 21-22. They had won 10 straight home games and had 18 victories in 21 games.



The Jacks' incredible hot streak, dating back to mid-November, has produced an amazing turnaround that virtually nobody in Muskegon or throughout the United States Hockey League saw coming.

The Lumberjacks started the season with a miserable 2-7-3 record and were stuck in last place, miles from the top of the standings or even playoff contention. Suddenly, after

beating Youngstown 4-0 on Jan. 22, they found themselves with a 21-10-4 record, good for a tie for first place in the USHL's Eastern Conference.

This could turn out to be the best Lumberjacks team ever, one that has a real chance to win the first Clark Cup championship in the history of the franchise.

There's a bigger story to tell, as well.

A 2-1 overtime victory over Green Bay on Jan. 16 gave the Lumberjacks exactly 350 wins in franchise history. Their overall mark over 12 seasons is now 351-270-66 since 2010-11.

The team reached that milestone number much faster than they probably would have if head coach Mike Hamilton had not come to town.

In 3 ½ seasons behind the Lumberjacks' bench, Hamilton produced 116 regular season wins as of Jan. 16, which is very close to a full one-third of the total wins.

Hamilton's tenure has produced the best era in Lumberjacks history, hands down.

The coach started out hot in his first season, 2018-19, when the Lumberjacks posted a 41-17-3 record and won their first conference title in team history. The next year, with a young roster, they went 21-23-5 before the season was shut down due to the outbreak of COVID.

Last season the Jacks were back to their winning ways, going 34-16-4 and finishing second in the conference behind Chicago.

This season they had 21 more wins by mid-January, despite their horrible start, and there should be a lot more victories before the season is over.

'I love pushing'

So how does the current coaching staff thrive where others have fallen short?

Hamilton says it's been about selling Muskegon and the Lumberjacks organization to many of the top young players in North America and Europe, often through their agents. The coaches have worked hard to promote Muskegon as a city, Mercy Health Arena as an excellent training facility, and the coaching staff as one that specializes in preparing young players for college hockey.

"It's about selling the brand, selling the city and selling the facilities," Hamilton said. "Our staff here takes pride in all of that. I do believe a lot of

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COVER STORY: The Muskegon Lumberjacks shot up from last to first place in two short months

our success was set up by (former general manager) John Vanbiesbrouck and (former coaches) Todd Krygier and John LaFontaine. They got the organization through the dog days when some guys didn't want to come here, and we've continued to raise the bar. Our goal has been to make it a destination where kids want to play.

"You talk to agents and players, and they will tell you there are programs that do a little more for players, from the amount of ice time available to them and how much the coaches push player development. We are one of those organizations that constantly come up in those conversations."

Another key is Hamilton's coaching style, which is intense and driven by results.

When the Jacks struggle in certain areas, Hamilton addresses it directly. A good example came earlier this season, when the team was being called for too many penalties at crucial times in several games.

Hamilton implemented a "penalty court," where the coaches and players review each infraction to determine if it was necessary, or a foolish penalty that hurt the team. If the penalty is determined to be a bad one, the entire team does extra hard skating as punishment.

"This is the first year I've done this," the coach said in November. "Each team is different. Some teams need this type of leadership. One of the things about this team is you have to make sure you are holding them accountable. The penalties have been happening too often. We've got to be smarter about who and when and where and how the refs are calling the game."

Hamilton says being tough is necessary to produce wins and help the players prepare for their future challenges,

"I love pushing, I love seeing things done to perfection," Hamilton said. "Our guys are always being challenged in terms of how they are doing things and how they can do them better. It takes some guys a while to get there. They may come in and think I'm too much for them at first, but as time goes by they recognize that we're preparing them for greatness."

Pieces falling into place

The Jacks' coaching staff kept pushing the players hard earlier this season when things weren't going well, and the team eventually responded.

The Jacks were scoring very few goals in the early weeks of the season, and many were wondering if any of the forwards would step up to be big point producers.

Through the first dozen games the Jacks were only averaging three goals per game, which was not producing many wins.

Then it soon became apparent that lots of guys could score, and the Jacks have as much or more offensive depth as any team in the league. Since those first 12 games, the team is averaging 4.6 goals per contest and is third in the league in overall goal scoring.

Muskegon currently has five players with double-digit goals this season – forwards Phil Tresca (19), Joey Larson (18), Quinn Hutson (17), Jake Braccini (15) and Ben Strinden (14). Two other players, Jacob Guevin and team captain Jack Williams, have huge assist totals, with 27 and 24, respectively.

The scoring bug has spread to younger players, like 17-year-old rookie Jake Richard, who had no goals in the first two months of the season. He finally scored on Dec. 11 in Chicago and has buried the puck six more times since then.

"From a five-on-five standpoint, we have as much scoring depth as any team you're going to find in the league," Hamilton said.

The scoring and sound defensive play started falling into place following some early personnel changes, according to Hamilton.

The Jacks opened the season with Jan Skorpik, a part-time starting goalie last season, as the everyday No. 1 netminder, but he struggled in early games and was released.

To replace him, the team acquired two talented and experienced Russian goalies – Platon Zadorozhnyy and Aleksander Kuleshov – who both had to gain releases from teams in their native country to come to Muskegon.

Both have played well, particularly the very athletic Zadorozhnyy, who is currently 12th in the league among goalies with a 9-4 record and a sparkling 3.11 goals against average.

"We have to tip our caps to Steve Lowe (the Jacks' president of hockey operations) and Jim McGroarty (general manager) for going out and finding two world-class goalies," Hamilton said. "We were struggling a bit in net and we went through some tough stretches, then those guys came in and gave us the confidence that we could win hockey games."

Winning in lots of different ways

With solid play in all areas, the Lumberjacks have been piling up the wins in lots of different ways.

They can bury people with their offensive depth. The best example came on Jan. 7 in Madison, when 10 different Lumberjacks scored in a 10-6 victory over the Capitols. Six different Madison players scored, as well, making it a 16-goal game with 16 different scorers!

The Jacks can also win when opponents get very physical and try to take them out of their skill game. That happened on Dec. 5, when the Cedar Rapids Roughriders, the most penalized team in the league, came to town and put on a fight-fest with the Lumberjacks.

The teams combined for a total of 156 penalty minutes in that game, including 72 for the Roughriders alone in the second period. The second period also saw an old school brawl with three fights happening at the same time. Despite the rough stuff, the Lumberjacks broke a 1-1 tie in the third period when Tresca scored a rare natural hat trick (three goals in a row) and walked away with a 5-2 victory.

"We were getting pushed around a little bit, and the guys had to step



Coach Mike Hamilton



Lumberjacks captain Jack Williams. Photos/Tonya Pardon

up for themselves and their teammates," Hamilton said. "We don't have many pure fighters, but when it came time they stepped up and stood their ground. For us to go through that and still figure out how to win was great."

The Jacks can also rally and win when they've fallen far behind. That happened on Jan. 22 in front of a big crowd at Mercy Health Arena, when Muskegon trailed Green Bay 3-0 early in the second period. David Hy-movitch, Braccini and Williams all scored to tie the game, when Williams found the net in overtime to give the Jacks a thrilling 4-3 win.

Hamilton stresses that there's a long way to go.

"Until about two weeks ago I hadn't even looked at the standings," the coach said. "We're not there yet. We have details to address and things to clean up before we worry about being the No. 1 team."

The 2020-21 season was a difficult one for the Muskegon boys basketball team, which failed to win a conference or district title for the first time in years. But most of the players returned from the COVID-cursed season, they learned a lot from their struggles, and....

THE BIG REDS ARE BACK!

Every season, Muskegon boys basketball coach Keith Guy talks openly about the possibility of winning a state championship.

He can do that, because year in and year out, his Big Reds are always at least very good, and capable of playing with the best teams in Michigan on any given night.

Of course the Big Reds don't bring home state trophies every year. They've only done that once during the Guy era, in the magical season of 2013-14, when they posted an amazing 28-0 record and blew everyone out of the water, including Bloomfield Hills 91-67 in the finals.

But when you maintain a winning tradition, a lot of other championships come your way, like conference and district titles, which are by no means easy to earn.

Going into the 2020-21 season, the Big Reds had won nine straight conference titles, in both the O-K Black and their current O-K Green divisions. They had also won eight straight district titles, going back to Guy's first year on the bench.

That's why it was big news last season when those streaks came crashing down, in what was arguably Guy's most difficult season at Muskegon.

The Big Reds lost twice to Zeeland East and once to Reeths-Puffer in the regular season, so they did not repeat as conference champions. Then they lost to Grand Haven in the local Division 1 district championship game, so the district title streak ended, as well.

It took a perfect storm to bring the Muskegon basketball team back to earth. Last year's Big Reds were very young, after graduating nine seniors from the 2019-20 team, so there was a lot of learning to do. And there weren't many opportunities to learn, because the state was in the grip of a major COVID outbreak, making normal team-building activities difficult.

"We didn't bring home one trophy last year," Guy said. "I felt disappointed in that. The kids all worked hard, but they were young kids. We had graduated nine seniors from the year before, and those were all guys who played major roles on our team. So for us to go into a COVID season with a totally new group, without team camps, without the weight room or team bonding things, really hurt us.

"I don't think a lot of those new kids knew what they got themselves into playing varsity basketball for Muskegon. I warned them that everybody we played would be giving us their best shot, then they got in those games and realized coach was right."

In the midst of the disappointing results came a disturbing incident in late February of 2021, on a night when the Big Reds played and lost to Zeeland East. Guy had an argument with a referee, claimed he was pushed, and was extremely upset about the situation.

Assault charges were eventually filed against the ref, the case continues to work its way through court, and the incident left an added scar on an already challenging season, according to Guy.

"The sad part is that the kids were very upset by it. It upset me when I saw their faces in the locker room. I felt bad for my kids, and I felt bad for Zeeland East. They won the conference title that night, it was their night,

and it became about something else."

The nice part about bad seasons is that they eventually end and are hopefully followed by much better seasons – and that's certainly been the case at Muskegon this winter.

Nearly all of the players from last year's Big Reds squad – including all five starters – returned this season. They were not happy to be the group that allowed the conference and district title streaks to end, and they've been working extremely hard for months to make up for it.

So far that hard work is paying off in a very big way. The Big Reds recently improved their record to 8-0 on the season with a 74-29 victory over Mona Shores. Every one of their wins has been by double digits

While most good teams have a big scorer to two, Muskegon has a lot of them. Jordan Briggs currently leads in scoring with a 14.3 point per game average, followed by Anthony Sydnor (13.1), Maurice Sain (10.7) and Ethan Hill (10 points, 10 rebounds per game).

The vast improvement from last season is largely the result of last season, Guy said.

"They've gone through the wars, and now they're more experienced," Guy said. "They've been through a lot, good and bad, and it's made us better. Now they see how physical they've got to be, and they've been in the weight room and gotten stronger. They're better at taking care of the basketball."

The early success does not mean the Big Reds are a finished product, by any means. They still have their inconsistent moments, like in a recent game against conference foe Wyoming, when they trailed 30-29 at half-

time, prompting their demanding coach to bemoan their performance.

"I felt like we thought they'd roll over for us," Guy said. "They didn't and I was very disappointed in our effort, and I told them at halftime how disappointed I was."

The new and improved Big Reds showed up in the second half, however, scoring 31 points in the third quarter alone and steamrolling their way to an 82-59 victory.

After the second half, Coach Guy was back in optimism mode.

"The energy and defense picked up," the coach said. "We showed better effort and hustle in the second half. I think we're tough and we're deep. I think our potential is unlimited, and I think we can go as far as any team in the state."



Coach Keith Guy cheers on his team; at right, Jordan Briggs, the Big Reds' leading scorer, goes up for a bucket. Photos/Jeremy Clark.

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Whitehall state champion wrestler Ira Jenkins missed football season with an injury, but he's healthy and dominating again

Great skill, strength and good health are necessary to become a four-time All-State wrestler.

For Whitehall senior wrestler Ira Jenkins, the strength and skill part have always been unquestioned, but health became an enormous question in the summer of 2021.



In June, Jenkins suffered a torn UCL in his right elbow during an offseason wrestling tournament.

At first doctors weren't sure exactly sure how long Jenkins was going to be sidelined, but they expected him to be out until January at the earliest.

The immediate impact was missing the entire football season. As a defensive standout in his junior year, he had to watch as his teammates won a share of the the West Michigan Conference championship and made the state playoffs.

After that disappointment, Jenkins didn't want to miss even a little bit of his final high school wrestling season. He rehabbed hard and got clearance to compete on Dec. 1, just on time for the start of the season.

"I'm lucky to even be getting a season right now," Jenkins said. "They were saying I'd be lucky to get back within a month before districts. But the recovery and everything went really good."

So far Jenkins, a defending Division 3 individual state champion, has not missed a beat on the wrestling mat. He is off to a great 31-0 start so far with 29 pins this season, and recently won his fourth straight individual championship at the Greater Muskegon Athletic Association City Wrestling Tournament.

It doesn't get much more impressive than that, which is why he is going to be wrestling on scholarship at the University of Michigan next year. Before then, however, he's going to try to win a second straight high school state title.



Ira Jenkins in the hospital with his parents following his surgery; at right, he gets ready to pin another opponent.

"I'm looking to do the same this year," said Jenkins, who won the 215-pound state title last year. "I got third (152-weight class) and fifth (171-weight class) my first two seasons. You just have to grow and develop by learning from your mistakes."

What's really impressive is that Jenkins has remained so successful as he advanced from being a middle-weight freshman to a heavyweight senior.

In the ninth grade he wrestled at 152 pounds. This season he's competing at 285 pounds, and routinely defeats much bigger guys, because he doesn't weigh nearly that much.

A jump in weight classes isn't abnormal for wrestlers, but you don't see many guys go from 152 to 285, according to Whitehall co-head wrestling coach Justin Zeerip.

"It's rare to see a kid stay in the same weight class for four years," the coach said. "But for him, it's been a big jump. I think he's done it because he puts so much time and effort into the weight room."

Despite setbacks, OV's Darius Williams kept a positive outlook, and his star is rising on the basketball court

While some athletes may have been deeply affected by the type of year that senior Darius Williams has had, the Orchard View standout has handled the disappointment just fine.

Williams was a member of the 2020-21 Orchard View basketball team that went 17-1 in the regular season and had high hopes for a long run in the state tournament. But those dreams were dashed when the Cardinals had to forfeit their first game of districts and end their season due to COVID.



Darius Williams

This fall Williams was expected to be a major star on the Orchard View varsity football team, but the Cardinals' season was cancelled due to a lack of participation, and Williams played varsity soccer instead.

Despite all of that, Williams keeps a positive attitude and remains focused on the next opportunity.

"I smiled through the pain," Williams said. "It gives me a lot of motivation because of how our season ended last year and then football."

"Then soccer didn't go too well, so I was ready to play basketball. I'm a happy person and I don't let people take that away from me, even when something is going bad."

The tough times ended for Williams with the coming of basketball season. The Cardinals needed a new primary scorer to replace departed All-Stater Ke'Ontae Barnes, and he has definitely filled the role.

Williams had some very big games in the early part of the season.. He had 30 points, 12

rebounds and 10 assists in a 55-49 win over Big Rapids, and 32 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists in a loss to Muskegon Heights.

In the most recent MuskegonSports.com basketball leader board, Williams was averaging 24.1 points, 6.7 rebounds, 7.9 assists and 3.7 steals per game.

"He's a coach's dream," said Orchard View head coach Nick Bronsema. "He can run an offense, and nobody can pressure him into doing what he doesn't want to do. He's a point guard who makes wise decisions and plays pretty fast, which is a hard combination. He's always under control, no matter the pace."

Williams admits when he's on the court, he's almost always thinking of the play ahead, which helps him in the moment.

"I'm really just visualizing plays before they happen," he said. "If I'm coming down the court, I'm visualizing the move in my head. If I'm open, I'll take the shot and hopefully it goes in."

While Williams is having a lot of individual success, the OV team is not quite as polished as last year's squad.

The Cardinals were 3-5 as of this writing, and have a lot of very young players in the starting lineup. They have shown flashes of being very good at times, without a lot of consistency.

Williams said he takes a lot of pride in working with the younger guys and helping them develop their skills.

"They're the reason I'm getting what I'm getting," he said. "They're knocking down shots and finding me when I'm open."



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RISERS STAR RYAN ZIETLOW - 'I DO LOVE SCORING GOALS, THAT'S FOR SURE'

Muskegon Risers soccer fans are quickly learning to appreciate Ryan Zietlow's offensive skills.

That's something new and refreshing for Zietlow, who has always had a knack for scoring goals, but hasn't always been appreciated for that skill.

In his senior season at Spring Lake High School in 2018, Zietlow produced 20 goals and 10 assists, and expected to get strong consideration for All-State status.

But much to his frustration, he wasn't deemed to be one of the better point producers in Michigan, and was snubbed when the All-State teams were announced.

Zietlow moved on to play for Davenport University in 2019 and had a great experience, but never really got the chance to use his offensive talents.

The coaches at Davenport took advantage of his diverse abilities and used him in many different positions,

but he was never relied on for his goal-scoring abilities. His best college season came in his junior year, when he totaled three goals and one assist for Davenport.

Zietlow graduated with his degree last spring and entered the work world. He recently started a job as a shipping coordinator for Fairlife Milk.

But the desire to play soccer still burned bright, so he accepted the chance to play semipro soccer last summer for the Grand Haven Admirals, and this winter for the Risers men's indoor team.

"I had no idea it was like this. I knew it was kind of a cool thing, but I didn't know there were strobe lights going off when you score with everyone screaming and yelling, and little kids coming up to you after the game. It's awesome." - Muskegon Risers star Ryan Zietlow, on the fun of playing arena soccer.

Risers Coach Ben Ritsema was very aware of Zietlow's offensive gifts and put him in a position to produce goals for the team.

He responded to the opportunity right away, scoring a three-goal hat trick in the Risers' season opener in Cincinnati, then following up with two goals in their second game in Chicago.

Zietlow went scoreless in the Risers' first home game of the season on Jan. 7, but made up for it the following night, finding the goal four times to lead Muskegon to a dramatic 11-10 victory over the Chicago Mustangs.

His fourth goal, which came with 2:15 left in regulation, turned out to be the game-winner for the Risers.

He leads the team with 10 goals so far this season, and has brought another weapon to a Risers lineup that already features a number of talented scorers.

His efforts have helped the Risers get off to a respectable 2-3 start in their first year of full competition in the Major Arena Soccer League 2.

Zietlow insists that that he's a team player first, and he definitely means it. He would be willing to play any position on the field to help the Risers win, just like he did for his college team.

"I look at soccer as a team sport," he said. "The most important thing is to get a win. There's nothing more fun than celebrating with your teammates, and I hate to lose."

But Zietlow also admits that it's fun to be scoring goals again, and helping the Risers win games in a more direct way.

"I do love scoring goals, that's for sure," he said. "I was always used to playing offense when I was growing up, and making the transition to defense and not scoring as many goals (in college) was a little weird, but I was capable of making that transition."

The amazing part about Zietlow's scoring outburst is that he's done it in very unfamiliar territory. He has spent his entire career playing traditional outdoor soccer, and the indoor version is brand new to him.

Indoor soccer is much different. It's played on small arena fields that are basically covered ice rinks. Instead of having 11 players per team on



Ryan Zietlow, who starred at Spring Lake High School and played at Davenport University before joining the Risers/ Photo/Jeremy Clark



Zietlow in action against Chicago, when he scored four goals, including the game winner for the Risers in the final minutes. Photo/Jeremy

Clark

the field, there are only five. The game is faster, more physical and has a lot more scoring. But like in hockey, players make frequent shift changes, and aren't on the field for more than a few minutes before a new group replaces them on the fly.

"Our coach always talks about shifts," he said. "It's pretty much like hockey, You bust your butt for a minute or a minute and a half, and for a newcomer that's one of the biggest learning factors, when to get on and off the field. In outdoor you play a lot longer."

Zietlow quickly learned to love the different style of play.

"I love it," he said. "It's so much fun. I have a blast out there. My teammates make it super fun, and the fans make it even better. They are right next to you, not hundreds of feet away. It's a cool atmosphere."

"I had no idea it was like this. I knew it was kind of a cool thing, but I didn't know there were strobe lights going off when you score with everyone screaming and yelling, and little kids coming up to you after the game. It's awesome."

Zietlow is playing semipro soccer simply for the love of the game. He says he has no ambition to pursue the sport in any professional capacity.

But the Risers' league is a development league for the Major Arena Soccer League, which is fully professional. Teams in that league come looking for talent, and Zietlow could gain some notice.

"I guess if the opportunity presented itself I would take it into consideration," he said.

New Reeths-Puffer head football coach Cody Kater: GOING HIS OWN WAY

Cody Kater knows there's been a lot of gossip about the career decisions he's made over the past few winters.

He says he lets most of it roll off his back, but admits there's one type of criticism that really bothers him.

"The biggest thing I've heard that upsets me is the idea that I have no loyalty, that I just jump from job to job," he said.

Here's the bottom line: Kater, 30, is a young professional who was just married last summer and is just reaching the prime of his

career. He bounced around a bit while searching for a job that would allow him to meet the goals he set for himself – not what others set for him.

He had always been curious about football programs at larger high schools, and what it took to run one and be successful. He always wondered if he had the coaching skills to take over a struggling program and achieve the kind of success that he experienced as a player and assistant coach at Montague High School.

He also wanted a job that would allow him grow as an educator and make a difference in the lives of lots of students, not just football players or other athletes.

Kater found that at Reeths-Puffer, where he was named the new head varsity football coach in January, after a year of figuring out the path he wanted to follow.

One part of his job will be serving as a student advocate, with a responsibility to work with freshmen and other kids who are having a difficult time adjusting or have other troubles in their lives.

Kater says he's just as excited about that opportunity as he is about coaching the football team.

"That was a large part of it, the chance to work with at-risk youth," he said. "That's something I'm really looking forward to, to make sure they feel like they are cared for, and that they know they can do more than what they are doing. That's what we're here for.

"My mom was a mental health nurse for 30 years, so I understand how important that is, particularly for so many young people these days. This will give me a platform to make a difference."

Following his own path

Bouncing around from job to job is hardly unusual for young people, but Kater's circumstances were different. While he never made any sort of commitment, it was widely assumed that he would eventually take over as the head football coach at Montague when longtime coach Pat Collins moved on.

After all the success he had at his alma mater, it seemed like the likely scenario.

He was the amazing young quarterback who led Montague to its first two state championships in 2008 and 2009, under Coach Collins,

who was the Montague quarterback himself back in 1993 when the Wildcats made their first appearance in the state finals.

Kater returned to Montague after college, got a teaching job at Montague, and joined Collins' staff. He was the offensive coordinator for the 2020 Wildcat squad that won the school's third state title, with Coach Collins still in charge, and his son Drew Collins calling the signals at quarterback.

Both Collins departed the scene after that last state title. Drew graduated and went to Michigan Tech University, while Pat resigned and became the head football coach at Holland West Ottawa.

Not to worry, Wildcat fans thought, because the natural successor had been waiting in the wings for six years, and was going to take over the great program that he had a big hand in building.

But Kater had different ideas, much to the astonishment of just about everyone.



Cody Kater watches Montague All-State QB Drew Collins work out. Photo Andy Roberts/White Lake Beacon.

He was offered the Montague job but in the end decided it was time to go his own way and see what he could accomplish at a larger school, away from his hometown and loyal base of supporters.

Not long after saying no to Montague, Kater accepted the offensive coordinator position at Muskegon High School, where he would have worked under longtime coach Shane Fairfield.

Only a few weeks passed, however, before he announced that he would be moving to Georgia to become an assistant coach at Tift County Schools under former Lowell coach Noel Dean, who had recently accepted the head coaching position there.

At that point a lot of local fans assumed we had seen the last of Cody Kater.

But Kater had one more surprise up his sleeve. In early January, after only one season in Georgia, he was suddenly named the new coach at Reeths-Puffer, where the football program has been underperforming for several decades.

Now Kater will have his ideal professional situation, moving back to this area to be close to his family, testing himself at a bigger school that has a lot of football issues to resolve, and having

the ability to work with and help many students.

"My ultimate goal was to be at a larger school in West Michigan, where I could see my family still, but I could also get out of my comfort zone," he said. "Could I do it somewhere else? Instead of having that platform given to me, could I create the same type of winning culture elsewhere?"

Reviving the Rockets

If Kater really wanted to test his ability to build a winner from scratch, he picked the right school.

There was a time when R-P was a traditional area football power, and reached the top of the mountain by winning a state championship in 1992.

But the winning culture dried up over the last few decades, and a series of head coaches have been unable to spark the old fire.

The Rockets were 3-6 last season and 2-5 in 2020. Their best seasons in the last two decades were 2007, when they went 6-4, and 2-13, when they were 7-3.

Rebuilding at R-P will extra be challenging because of the competition. The Rockets play in the O-K Green conference, along with state powerhouses like Muskegon, Mona Shores and Zeeland West, and against state champion head coaches like Fairfield, Matt Koziak and John Shillito.

Over the last three years the Rockets have been outscored 145-28 by Mona Shores and 142-28 by Muskegon., which shows just how far they have to go.

"Right now there is a gap between Muskegon and Mona Shores and Reeths-Puffer," Kater said. "We want to close that gap within the next two or three years and ultimately win the county. If we can do that we will be in good shape to compete statewide."

That might sound like a very ambitious plan for a young guy who has never been a head football coach before, but Kater does have a state championship pedigree as a player and coach.

As the quarterback at Montague, he led the Wildcats to a 13-1 record in 2008 a 41-20 victory over Leslie in the Division 6 state championship game. The next year he led the team to a 14-0 record and a 21-20 win over St. Mary Catholic in the state title game.

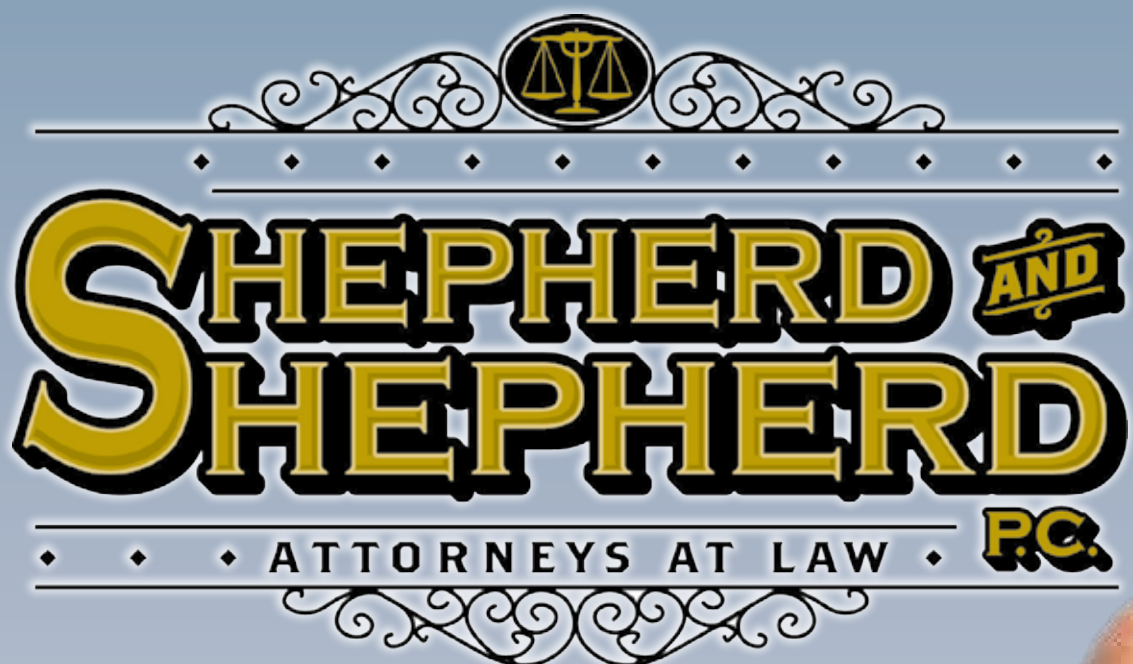
As the offensive coordinator at Montague, he helped lead the Wildcats to the state finals in 2018, the semifinals in 2019. and finally a state championship in the 2020 season.

His 2020 Montague offense piled up 574 points in only 12 games, for an impressive average of 47 points per game.

"There has to be a certain amount of dedication, a culture of going the extra mile," Kater said. "And there have to be a lot of high-character people involved. In my coaching career, it's always been the case that character drives the process, and the process drives the results.

"At a larger school, I think it will be important to have a staff that is really interested in player development and ensuring that their unit is stronger and improving.

"You can't have just one guy running everything. You need to build a staff that can take on larger loads while all being on the same page."



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