

Upset-Minded Marian Ready for 4A Champion

By PETER TESTA

October 6, Joliet Catholic at Marian.

The size and color of the lettering or the boldness of the type are no different for this game than any of the 28 contests which annually comprise the Illini-8 schedule.

But followers of the conference's fortunes are aware that any time these names are paired off, the issue of which will eventually emerge with the league championship is usually on the line. When the Hilltoppers come to Chicago Heights Saturday, the situation is once again normal.

FOR ONE brief moment a couple of weeks ago, it appeared that this meeting would suffer an unaccustomed drop in status. At that time, Joliet Catholic had just completed a winless non-conference slate, falling to Mt. Carmel after being trounced by St. Laurence. There was no disgrace in either case, thought, since both squads are contenders in the rugged Chicago Catholic league.

The Spartans had little opportunity to luxuriate in someone else's troubles, because they were encountering problems of their own. Trying to stabilize themselves around a rash of preseason injuries proved to be a trying experience, as Marian split its first two games prior to the I-8 opener at Bolingbrook.

Another devastating mishap hit the Spartans when halfback Tim McGugan, who looked to be well on his way to sparkling season, incurred a broken ankle in two places. Marian quickly regrouped in spite of the critical setback, first trimming the Raiders, and then blanking Joliet East 15-0 last week, gaining its first home field triumph of the year.

Embarking on the round-robin conference agenda has also seemed to pump fresh life into the Hillmen. Coach Gordie Gillespie's aggregation, which averaged almost 30 points per outing in claiming its fourth consecutive Class 4A title last November, has been outdoing itself lately.

JOLIET WEST was buried under a 42-8 Hilltopper avalanche, and most recently, the same Bolingbrook team which dropped an eight-point decision to the Spartans finally caved in to Joliet Catholic by a 44-10 count.

"We've got to play a more consistent brand of football," expressed Marian coach Dave Mattio. It was back in 1976 (Mattio's first season as head coach) that the Spartans forged a three-way share of the league pennant by belting the Hilltoppers 16-6 on muddy Sarff Field.

Since that loss, Joliet Catholic has advanced through the remainder of its league games in that year, all of

1977 and 1978, and the opening two encounters of the current slate without falling in I-8 competition. Ending the extended streak could be the stepping stone Marian is looking for to catapult to the head of the class.

"I can honestly say that we have started to improve week to week," Mattio declared, "and we need to make the same kind of improvement this week."

THE FACT that the Spartans have notched one more win than Joliet Catholic thus far isn't lulling Mattio into any false sense of security. "Despite the won-loss record, they're a formidable opponent," warned Mattio. "In the long run, playing the teams they did (referring to the twin Class 5A powers) would appear to have helped them with their development."

One quality most successful squads possess is depth, and Marian is beginning to receive some pleasant surprises, off-setting the effects of its massive casualty list. "When we get banged up or someone has a bad day, the people who have been filling in are performing capably," Mattio pointed out.

"Mike Prior stepped in for (the injured) Joe Plomin and came up with back-to-back interceptions, then Mike Matchinis broke the big play (a 26-yard touchdown scamper on a quarterback roll-out) to more or less seal the victory," continued Mattio.

Junior halfback Tom Klupchak followed the pathways cleared for him by 205-poun guard Ed Ziltz to rush for 83 yards against the Kingsmen. In two I-8 games, Klupchak has been called on 48 times and has delivered 159 yards. Senior signal-caller Matchinis added 50- more ground yards as the Spartans averaged a healthy 4.4 yards per rush a week ago.

OPERATING from their familiar power-1 set, the Hilltoppers can grind out yardage with senior fullback John Querlo, who played tight end as a junior. Joliet Catholic's quarterback, Joe Fitzgerald, is a first-year starter like Matchinis, but the Hillmen have constructed a formidable passing threat.

"He's in the mod of Joliet Catholic quarterback," Mattio said, "he throws the ball well."

Middle linebacker Jamie Piazza and tackle Mark Meszaros are the standouts in the Hilltopper 6-1-4 defensive alignment. In compiling last year's 13-0 record, Joliet Catholic allowed just 38 points. However, the Spartans clicked for one score in Joliet before the Hillmen could clinch a 14-6 verdict.

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