

HAC-II PREVIEW

Could this finally be the Wildcats' year?

By Michael Bullock
The Daily Item

Turned away repeatedly in its quest to win its first boys soccer championship of any kind — whether during regular-season play or as part of the District 4 playoff field — perhaps this will be the year that changes in Mifflinburg.

And while Dan Gehers' Wildcats will line up with experienced players at just about every position on the field, Mifflinburg's shift from the Heartland Conference's stiff Division I setting to Division II might be the deciding factor. Might be.

Particularly since Midd-West and Danville — both featuring junior-heavy lineups like Mifflinburg — carry championship hopes of their own. And especially since perennial hammer Lewisburg has relocated to HAC-I.

A Bloomsburg program just two seasons removed from the District 4 Class A championship game and a state playoff nod also may be in the hunt. Milton also made the move from HAC-I to HAC-II.

Regardless, plenty of positive waves are crashing in **Mifflinburg**.

"We're getting back to teams we haven't played for a few years," said Gehers, the ninth-year coach whose Wildcats (11-6-3 overall, 6-5-3 HAC-I) return 12 regulars from a club that last season advanced to the District 4-AA semifinals.

"Midd-West and Danville, we



Daily Item file photo

Dylan Gordon (No. 15) is part of a loaded junior class for Midd-West.

haven't seen them much on the playing field," Gehers continued. "We had a tough schedule last year, but I think this year it should be competitive between three or four teams."

Including Mifflinburg.

"I have many players who started as freshmen and now it's their junior year," Gehers added. "We've been making progress results-wise and in their performance. We're anxious to get started. I think this team is ready to win something."

Although defender Jaron Lee and forward Halen Mauer are two of the five seniors who appear on Mifflinburg's youthful roster, juniors Gabe DeFacis, Eli Yoder, Brahm Buoy and Brett King will form the nucleus of what should be a formidable attack.

Sparkling sophomore Ma-

son Novobilski fits snugly in there, too.

Defensively, Gehers' Wildcats also return juniors Tyler Bailey and Nolan Beck. That tandem and Lee will be counted on to provide cover for junior keeper Tom Lichtel, who takes over between the posts for now-departed all-star Ben Greb.

Suffering three of last season's four losses to Lewisburg, including one in the District 4-AA title game, Chris Sauer's **Midd-West Mustangs** (17-4, 13-3 HAC-II) have plenty of returning veterans yet continue to search for a consistent finisher.

While juniors Cole Sauer, Evan Liddington and Devan Leister form the midfield corps, senior Trevor Leitzel and juniors Hunter Gilbert and Wyatt Shawver will offer plenty of defensive support for talented

senior keeper Tyler Martin. senior keeper Tyler Martin. Packing juniors throughout the lineup, Brian Dressler's **Danville Ironmen** (11-8-1, 8-7-1 in HAC-II) have plenty of experienced youngsters ready to play and hoping to make an extended run through the District 4-AA playoffs.

Andrei Bucaliou and Holden Zakarian are headliners, but Danville's enviable midfield depth and strength hardly ends there, as Jacob Foster, Nick Nizinski and Nate Cole also return. Defender Nick Lapchak is the lone senior on the squad. Dressler will have 11 other juniors available as well.

First-year skipper Eric Yoder takes over at **Milton** (5-11-2, 2-11-1 HAC-I), where the Black Panthers are hoping to return to postseason play after missing out last season.

Seniors Ayden Yoder (defender) and Andrew Brink (midfielder), as well as junior goalkeeper Aidan Welch, last season received HAC-I all-star recognition and should offer a strong central presence for Eric Yoder's initial edition. Senior defender Brent Artley also brings plenty of experience to the Milton mix.

Juniors Cole Geiger and Tyler Leeser will see plenty of time up top — Leeser also will figure in Milton's defensive rotations — while junior Alex Yoder adds even more pop to the Black Panthers' midfield corps.

Although **Loyalsock** (3-15-1, 2-13-1 HAC-II) made a brief stay in last season's District 4-AA playoffs, perhaps another postseason run and higher HAC-II finish are in the cards for Peter Ruhl's second Lancers edition.

While seniors Matt Loeh, Brooks Durand, Austin Martin, Ilan Quintana and Andrew Czap form an experienced nucleus — and should get plenty of playing time — Ruhl expects quite a few youngsters to break into the 'Sock depth chart. **Bloomsburg** (8-11, 7-9 HAC-II), which bowed out of last season's District 4-AA playoffs in the opening round, returns senior defender Connor McCarthy and junior midfielder Kiernan Harmon. Both landed HAC-II all-star recognition last season.

■ Email comments to babybull60@hotmail.com. Follow Bullock on Twitter @thebull_p_n.