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The St. Bernard's baseball team dominated the opposition on the way to an NCS championship this year. Bryka DeMain/The Eureka Reporter

Best of the best

by Ray Hamill, 7/1/2007

Balance is alive and well in the Humboldt-Del Norte Conference.

For the second consecutive academic year, all 10 schools that predominantly make up the 25 different leagues within the conference won at least one pennant apiece.

And once again, it was the Arcata Tigers who paced the rest of the field, as they have done in each of the past three years, although this time the Eureka Loggers matched them in number of titles, with seven going to each school.

The Tigers, who won eight championships in each of the past two years, might be running out of space on their gymnasium wall and now have a total of 23 pennants in just three years, with the Loggers claiming 18 in that time.

Individually, the Tigers also have reason to celebrate this year, with junior standout Karen Pontoni getting the honor as The Eureka Reporter Big Five Girls Athlete of the Year.

Pontoni, a junior who was named co-MVP in soccer, also was an all-league selection in basketball and made an appearance at the prestigious Meet of Champions in Berkeley in track and field.

Pontoni edged out two other very worthy contenders for the honor, with close consideration going to sophomore Mallorie Franco of Fortuna and McKinleyville freshman Sage Romberg.

On the boys' side, McKinleyville's Nick Rasines gets the nod for our athlete of the year after a league MVP season in baseball in which he helped lead a young Panthers team to a share of the Big Five championship with Arcata and Eureka.

Rasines, who barely edged out Eureka's Greg Allen as our athlete of the year, will attempt to walk on at UCLA to play baseball next year. He was also was an all-league selection in basketball.

Among the Little Five schools, St. Bernard's standout Vince Ayala gets the nod for our boys athlete of the year, while South Fork's versatile Casey Murphy gets the honor on the girls side.

Ayala, who earns the award for the second straight year, is the only four-sport all-league selection on the North Coast, including an MVP season in basketball.

Ayala, one of the top golfers in the area, was also named all-league in football and baseball and was an integral piece of St. Bernard's championship teams in basketball and baseball, including an NCS crown in the latter.

The good news for local sports fans is that Ayala intends to remain close to home and is considering playing basketball at either Humboldt State or College of the Redwoods next year, with the latter reportedly the more likely choice because of immediate playing opportunities.

Ayala beat out a plethora of talented Little Five athletes to earn the athlete of the year honor, including two state wrestlers from Ferndale, Chris Hubbard and John Thurston.

Murphy, meanwhile, completed a standout career for the Cubs with all-league selections in soccer and in basketball, where she was a huge part of South Fork's three straight championships.

Murphy also had a big spring in track and field, qualifying for the Meet of Champions.

The South Fork senior beats out Southern Trinity's KayIn Parrott, an MVP selection in volleyball and an all-league selection in basketball, and St. Bernard's Michaela Redner, who earned all-league awards in volleyball and basketball.

Among the top prep teams of the year, St. Bernard's baseball overwhelmed everybody on the way to a section championship, while the Hoopa Valley girls also tasted postseason success in the form of a second straight section crown in softball.

The Arcata boys tennis team also completed a remarkable season by not losing a single set the entire regular season under the direction of coach Jason Maki, while the McKinleyville girls basketball team was probably the biggest surprise of the year, replacing several starters on the way to winning a Big Five and Dick Niclai crown.

Del Norte football also enjoyed its most successful season ever, taking the Big Five championship and reaching a section final for the first time ever under the direction of Lewis Nova, one of the best head coaches in any sport on the North Coast.

Also due some recognition is the Arcata girls soccer team, which continued its long run of dominance on the North Coast with another league title.

Among the top coaching performances, The Eureka Reporter Coach of the Year award goes to Eureka boys basketball's Duane Peterson.

Despite having to replace all five starters from the 2006 team, Peterson led his team to 20-plus wins for the third consecutive year and a memorable playoff run.

The ER coach of the year, athletes of the year and teams of the year are voted on by The Eureka Reporter sports staff.

To be considered, an athlete had to be a standout in at least two different sports.