



MEL preview: Bulldogs favored, but have big fight on their hands

By Paul Farmer | Fairfield Daily Republic | October 1, 2021

Heading into the start of Monticello Empire League play, the Vacaville High football team has the fourth-best overall record at 3-2, leading only Armijo (1-4) and Fairfield (0-4).

Does that mean the four-time MEL champion Bulldogs are the fourth-best team in the league? Not by a long shot.

What it does mean is Vacaville – and Vanden, which has finished second three straight years to the Bulldogs – have some company in the battle for the top spot.

Even before the MEL opener, Rodriguez (5-0) needs just one win for its first winning season since 2011 and likely two wins for its first playoff spot since . . . 2011.

It hasn't been as long since Will C. Wood (4-1) had a winning season or made the playoffs, going 7-4 with a first round loss in Carlos Meraz's final season as coach in 2018, but the Wildcats have been dominant in their four straight wins since dropping their season opener.

So what does it all mean? Will there be a new king of the hill in the MEL? Here's how things will shake out:

1. Vacaville (5-0): The Bulldogs have the fourth-best overall record in the MEL because they've played – by far – the toughest schedule. According to [maxpreps.com](https://www.maxpreps.com), Vacaville is ranked 81st in the state and the average ranking of its five opponents, who are a combined 13-13, is 177.8. For good measure, the Bulldogs are ranked 24th in Northern California, 12th in the Sac-Joaquin Section and sixth in SJS Division II.

On top of that, beating Vacaville is akin to climbing Mt. Everest for the other five current MEL members. Aside from Wood's 49-25 win over the Bulldogs in 2015 – when the Wildcats had their best season in school history and the orange and black went 5-5 for their first non-winning season since 1996 – no current MEL member has beaten Vacaville since Armijo in 2004.

Before 2015, Wood's most recent win over Vacaville was 1997. Fairfield's last win was 2001, Vanden's was 1967 and Rodriguez has never done it.

These aren't the 2015 Bulldogs and none of the other MEL members, as well as they're playing, are the best teams in their respective histories, as were the 2015 Wildcats.

Look for Vacaville to go 5-0 and extend its MEL winning streaks to 23 games and five championships.

2. Vanden (4-1): No one likes to lose, especially the week before the start of league play, but the Vikings, ranked 161st in the state, more than held their own in Saturday's 38-31 overtime loss to Rancho Cotate of Rohnert Park which is ranked 155th.

The Vikings' first five opponents went 12-12 and have an average state ranking of 313.4, which ranks second among MEL teams to Vacaville's 177.8. Vanden is ranked 25th in the Sac-Joaquin Section and third in SJS Division IV.

Will this be the year Vanden gets over the hump and wins its first MEL title? It will take the Vikings playing a perfect game against Vacaville – and not stumbling against Wood or Rodriguez along the way.

3. Rodriguez (3-2): The Mustangs are off to their best start ever, better than 2006 when they won the first league title in school history, better than 2007 when they won the Sac-Joaquin Section Division III title, and better than 2008 when first-year coach Myles King was quarterback and gave Rodriguez its most balanced offense ever.

The Mustangs have gotten off to their solid start, using big plays and the passing of QB Miles Meadows to put up 156 points, second only to Vanden's 201. They've also allowed just 45 points and have an MEL-best point differential of +111.

The only negative is strength of schedule. Their only opponent in the first five games with a winning record is American Canyon at 3-2, which is ranked 388th in the state. Northgate, which the Mustangs outlasted 29-21 last week, is 2-2 and ranked 343rd.

Rodriguez's first five opponents are a combined 6-18, worst among MEL teams, with an average state ranking of 585.6, which ranks fifth in the league.

The Mustangs, who are ranked 241st in the state, 41st in the Sac-Joaquin Section and 10th in SJS Division III, haven't played a team as talented as Vacaville or Vanden and possibly Wood, though American Canyon and Northgate have higher state rankings than the Wildcats' 394th.

Can the Mustangs run the table and win their first MEL title? Not likely, but expect them to put up a fight – and be highly entertaining – in every game.

4. Wood (2-3): In Jacob Wright's first season as coach the Wildcats have been a pleasant surprise and improved nearly every week. Their season-opening 39-0 loss to Pioneer of Woodland is a distant memory and they enter MEL play on a roll.

The problem is they enter MEL play against Vanden, which is steaming after last week's overtime loss to Rancho Cotate. Wood quarterback Baxter Ken Tilford is the most potent multi-purpose offensive threat in the league. The Wildcats will need him at the top of his game, and the defense to continue to step up in a big way, if they're to get past the Vikings, Mustangs and Bulldogs.

A concern is how much their schedule – which included Napa (ranked 656th), Chavez of Stockton (ranked 792nd) and College Park of Pleasant Hill (697th) – prepared them for MEL play. Probably because of that schedule, Wood is ranked just 394th in the state despite being 4-1. They're ranked 59th in the Sac-Joaquin Section and seventh in SJS Division IV.

Can the Wildcats win the first MEL title in their 32nd season of varsity play? It's unlikely, but with the versatile Tilford behind center and a solid defense, anything can happen. And Wood has been making things happen all season.

5. Armijo (1-4): It's scary to think about how good Armijo can be if it puts everything together. The passing combo of Eddie Concepcion to Dameion Regalado is the best, at least statistically, in the MEL.

The Royals' five nonleague opponents have the best won-loss record at 16-8 with Pioneer of Woodland (4-0) and Woodland (5-0) both undefeated, though the average state ranking of those five foes is just 483.4.

Armijo's lone win was a 12-0 victory over Mission of San Francisco, which is ranked 903rd. The Royals themselves are ranked 790th, 113th in the Sac-Joaquin Section and 22nd in SJS Division II.

Any hopes of ending what is likely the state's longest playoff drought – 83 years – likely ended with last week's one-point loss to Natomas. The Royals now would need to finish

second in the MEL – which would mean going 4-1 – as going 3-2 would have them end up under .500 and out of contention for an at-large berth.

6. Fairfield (0-5): The Falcons, ranked 985th in the state, 137th in the Sac-Joaquin Section and 23rd in SJS Division III, are in survival mode. The goal is to put a team on the field each of the next five weeks, be competitive as long as possible, score some points along the way and look forward to a larger and deeper squad next season.

Ending their school-record 23-game losing streak would be nice, but with the MEL as deep and talented as it is this season, it's not likely to happen.