



RICK SMITH/staff photographer

Getting serious about neighborhood basketball is Denny Janner of the Plymouth Rocks, shown stealing a rebound from the Northville Bandits.

Basketball jocks flock to winter courts

By Mary Rodrique
staff writer

To some it's a game. To others, an obsession.

Whether they fancy themselves Bill Laimbeer (A team material) or just an average Joe participating in a male rite of winter (B team stuff), they flock to school gyms every week to play their talents on the courts.

From Livonia to Rochester, recreational basketball leagues are revving up for a new season.

"Most of them are basketball junkies, especially the really good players," said Tom Willette, assistant director of the Plymouth Parks and Recreation department.

Willette, 30 and 6 foot 1, played on a B league team at Plymouth's Central Middle School last year and is ready to do it again. It's a division he classifies as more recreational, less cutthroat than Class A. Players are generally older and shorter, he says. "A lot of the guys in the A league played high school basketball — quite a few even played in the smaller colleges. They might be 6 foot 7 or 6 foot 8. Unless we shoot 80 percent of the time, we can't compete."

Seven teams in each division play each other twice, with the Class A winner going to a state tournament sponsored by the Michigan Department of Parks and Recreation in

spring and the Class B winner headed to an inner city competition.

WHILE THE MEN are mixing it up on the court, there is no women's recreational basketball league in Plymouth, or much women's basketball to be found anywhere else.

"We tried to offer a women's league four or five years ago," Willette said. "There just wasn't enough interest."

Queries to other city sports programs produced much the same response. A couple noted that women are more apt to choose volleyball as a recreational pastime.

Willette says of his teams, three are really, really good.

"Most of these guys play basketball in the school gym on Sundays; they work out during the week. We use a regulation size court. You have to be in good shape to play."

In Plymouth, the season consists of a 14-game schedule.

Teams pay a \$350 fee for the season. If it sounds expensive, Willette puts it in perspective.

"Figure 10 guys on a team, that's \$35 a piece. Divide that into 14 games and it costs about \$3 a week to do something you like."

MANY TEAMS get lounges or other businesses to sponsor them. Often, city recreation departments foot an additional \$75 fee for their top

teams to participate in the state championship — though team members pay for hotels and transportation to the tournament, which is usually in Flint.

High school and college ball are usually associated with gyms ripe with spectators and cheerleaders on the sidelines. Scratch that here.

"Toward the end of the season, you do get some (spectators) — maybe girlfriends or parents," Willette said. "No cheerleaders, though."

Livonia Parks and Recreation has four divisions — men A and B with eight teams each, a boys Class D with 12 teams (18 and under) and a girls Class D — eight teams (18 and under).

The girls league is very competitive," said Gary Gray, administrative assistant. "It's like the minor leagues. These players will be on next year's varsity teams in their schools."

The division is unique in that the teams are composed of actual school teams including Divine Child, Mercy, Ladywood, Churchill, Franklin, Stevenson and Novi. Non-Livonia teams pay higher participatory fees.

"They come in as school teams, no outsiders," Gray said. "The program is growing bigger and more competitive. It's like playing in a winter league. They're preparing for next season."

ALL LIVONIA teams start in Jan-

uary, when girls basketball season is over in the schools. Because boys basketball runs concurrently in the schools and playing in both leagues is prohibited, the city's boys league is more recreational.

Like Willette in Plymouth, Gray tried to run a women's basketball league in Livonia the past few years, to no avail.

"After college, girls don't seem to want to play basketball anymore."

David Boyer, Southfield parks and recreation director, encountered much the same situation there.

"We just never had success (with women's teams). There is a north-west league for women comprised of

players from several cities. They get together in Pontiac. Last year they had four teams, and this year they're hoping for six."

So why are men drawn to the sport?

"It's recreational. Most are ex-school players," Boyer said. "I think they just like to get out and enjoy the sport. It's something to carry over after softball season ends."

Southfield has three men's divisions playing on different week nights.

"They're really evenly balanced. There's no A, B or C ranking," Boyer said.

The city champ goes to the state

tournament and the runner up to the inter-city tournament, usually hosted by one of the participating area recreation departments.

Rochester Parks and Recreation has a Tuesday and Thursday night mens league. Those with an occasional urge to shoot a few hoops can pay \$1 on Wednesday night and participate in open gym basketball until 10 p.m. Rochester also has a youth league on Saturdays for grade-school and junior-high-age boys and girls. There's nothing for high school kids there.

Check with your community recreation department to see what's available.

Leagues are filling up fast

Unless you're already registered in a recreational basketball league, chances are slim of finding a place at this late date.

But many communities offer open gym. For a minimal charge, players get together for a pickup game of roundball on a regularly scheduled weeknight.

And a few places can still squeeze in players for regular league play.

The Livonia YMCA, on Stark Road north of the Jeffries Freeway, has openings for a second season mens league. And you don't have to be a

Livonia resident. Call Greg Ambrose at 261-3161.

Tom Willette runs the program for Plymouth/Canton. Residents of that school district should call him at 455-6620 for names and phone numbers of team coaches. That goes the same for Gary Gray, who operates the Livonia Parks and Recreation basketball league. Call him at 261-2260 for phone numbers of coaches.

Some communities don't provide basketball through their parks and recreation department. They include Redford Township and West Bloom-

field Township.

Others, like Farmington Hills, Westland, Southfield, Rochester, Troy and Birmingham are filled for the season.

Birmingham offers an open gym program Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 7:30-9:30 at West Maple Middle School. Beginning Jan. 16, there will be a Saturday morning open gym at Derby Middle School. Call 642-4010 for more information.

Registration is still open for a men's over 30 basketball league which begins Thursday, Jan. 7, in Garden City. Call 261-3491.