

Who will it be?

Western Lakes basketball outlook a tossup

By Brad Emons
and Chris McCosky
staff writers

The second year of the Western Lakes Activities Association (WLAA) boys basketball playoffs produced a surprise winner, Plymouth Canton, and a surprise finalist, Livonia Churchill.

"Plymouth Salem, the team with the best overall record last year in the two-division set-up, was knocked out by both teams — Canton during the regular season and Churchill in the playoffs. So it was no fluke to see those two teams in the finals.

The team with the best overall talent last season, Livonia Stevenson, never got it together. The Spartans are big and have experience again, but whether they come to play every night is another story.

Stevenson should be battling it out with Walled Lake Central and Salem for the Lakes Division crown, while the Western-Division appears to be a toss-up between Canton and Farmington Harrison. But don't count out Livonia Churchill, Walled Lake Western. Those teams seemed far behind.

Here is a pre-season look at the Observerland schools in the WLAA.

LIVONIA STEVENSON

The Spartans return a good nucleus of players, the top loss being leading scorer Tom Domako, a 6-foot-7 swingman who went on to Montana State.

Veteran coach George Van Wagoner hopes this year's team will play more like a team after last year's disappointing 16-6 overall record.

"We'll have better team play — both offensively and defensively," he said. The team's leading scorer last year was forward Bob Sluka, the team's top rebounder who also averaged 13 points per game en route to second team All-Observerland honors. Sluka is flanked on the front line by 6-4 senior center Vic Nettie and 6-4 senior forward Matt Burdiss, both showed flashes of promise last year.

The Spartans are pretty well set at guard with the return of seniors Ed Gilbert (6-0), Pete Huddy (5-9) and Pat Williams (6-0).

Depth will be provided by juniors Jim Kimble (6-1), Dan Palmisano (6-1), Dan Kraft (6-1), Joe Diglio (6-2), Clup Finnegan (6-0) and John Kuffel (5-9). "We'll run a one- and two-guard front with some pattern offense," said Van Wagoner, now in his 19th season. "We'll break when we can."

"We'll change defenses — use pressure whenever possible."

LIVONIA CHURCHILL

Fourth in the Western Division last season, Churchill (13-9) made a mad

dash to the WLAA playoff final before losing to Canton.

Four starters are gone, including Steve Judawick and John Grzybek, second and third team All-Observerland picks, respectively.

"It's a rebuilding year, even though looking at the league, there are no dominating players," said Churchill fifth-year coach Don Albertson. "We won't be able to post down by the low post. We'll fast break and press."

The lone returning starter is 6-0 forward Scott Hillie, a mid-year transfer who solidified the Chargers' lineup. In nine games he averaged 12.6 points and shot 47 percent from the floor.

But Hillie won't be available for the Chargers' first three games because he has been suspended for school disciplinary reasons.

"Hoping to pick up the slack in his absence is Mike Hermanson, a 6-4 senior and part-time starter last year. Albertson also said that 6-0 senior forward Mike Meehan will start.

The other spots are open with JV guard Andy Oliver and Mickey Katscher, both 5 feet, vying at guard.

Other possible starters include first-year leaper Ken Gendjar (6-0), junior Kevin Yost (6-0), senior Dave Andrus (6-1), and senior co-captain Mike Sedlitz (6-0). Also vying for time are Matt Ahearn, Ken Sliwka, Don Olds and Bentley transfer Jason Landry.

LIVONIA BENTLEY

Second-year coach Tom Niemi will see out the final basketball team ever to go through the doors of Bentley (the school will close in June).

Although the Bulldogs struggled through the regular season, they caught fire in post-season play, winning the Churchill District by upsetting Stevenson and reaching the regional final before losing to Detroit Henry Ford.

All five starters are gone from last year's 10-13 team, including 6-8 center Phil Graczyk, who averaged 16 points and 17 rebounds per game. Graczyk is now at Eastern Michigan.

Niemi, however, used 10 people most of the time with the second five all returning. They include seniors Sal Denilio, a 6-3 center; Pat Schneider, a 6-2 center; Brian Beltz, a 6-1 swingman; Dennis Patchett, a 6-0 swingman; and Steve Carli, a 5-9 point guard.

"We have a lot of inexperience," Niemi said. "This year rebounding could be a problem."

Niemi will adjust his style of play somewhat.

"We'll pressure more than in the past," he said. "We can't afford to play half-court basketball because we're not big. We've got to make our opportunities with defense. We'll have to be a scratching, claw-type team. We'll have

to work for everything we get."

The schedule makers did not do Bentley any favors. The Bulldogs open the season Friday at Dearborn Heights Robichaud, one of the top Class B teams in the state.

PLYMOUTH CANTON

The Chiefs enjoyed one of their finest campaigns, going 16-0 a year ago and winning the league championship.

But, four of the five starters off last year's team, including Mark Bennett and Gary Thomas, have graduated.

What's left are three solid players off the 1983-84 team and a host of promising newcomers.

"We are cautiously optimistic," said head coach Dave Van Wagoner, last year's Observerland Coach of the Year. "With only two players with experience back, it may take some time for us to jell."

But, if we can play an up-tempo game and hold our own on the glass, we will be right there battling for the Western Division title."

Jim Schlicker, a tremendous leaper, will be counted on to pick up the scoring slack. Kevin Hawkins, Canton's sixth man last year, is a strong inside player despite his 6-foot-1 frame.

Those two, along with senior guard Brent Stack, will captain the Chiefs.

Van Wagoner is high on junior point guard Joel Mies. Mies transferred in from Illinois and is solid playmaking guard. Another surprise has been Dave Knapp. An All-Area football player, Knapp is playing basketball for the first time since eighth grade, but Van Wagoner is considering him as a starting forward.

Like last year, Canton is small. But, also like last year, they are quick and aggressive. They will play a menacing defense and run the fastbreak as often as possible.

PLYMOUTH SALEM

The big news here, obviously, is that Fred Thomann is no longer the head coach.

Thomann resigned after taking the Rocks to a 20-4 season and a district championship last year.

Bob Brodie, a longtime assistant at Salero, will replace Thomann.

Salem, despite heavy graduation losses — notably Erich Hartnett, Rick Berberet and Jeff Arnold — should be as up among the WLAA leaders as usual.

Seniors Mike White (6-0 guard-forward), LeSean Haygood (6-5 post player) and Eric Sovine (5-11 guard) will trigger the Rock attack.

The Rocks are fast. They will run as much as possible. And, like the Salem teams of the past, they will center their game on tough defense.

"We will be competitive in both the division and league race, but I'm also a bit cautious because of our lack of varsity experience," Brodie said.

Newcomers expected to play key roles for Salem are Paul Makara (junior), Steve Potoczak (senior forward), Steve Sobditch (senior guard), Mike Hale (sophomore forward), Bryan Waldron (junior guard) and Bryan Karas (sophomore guard).

FARMINGTON HARRISON

Mike Teachman may have the most improved team in the league.

"The senior leadership is right," the eight-year veteran coach said. "If we come together as a team, we could be in the thick of the race for the Western Division."

The reason for his optimism is simple. Seniors John Miller (6-2 swing man) and Vince Enright (6-4 forward) return along with Mike Dempsey (6-0 senior center) and Ken Hixon (senior guard).



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Stevenson's top returnees are Matt Burdiss (far left) and Bob Sluka (far right). The two Spartans, standing 6-foot-4 and 6-foot-6 respectively, should form a formidable front line.

Teachman is also very high on junior point guard Ken George. George will replace the graduated Brian Hickey as the team's floor general. And Teachman says the junior has All-Area potential.

Others expected to contribute are George Sarevich (6-4 senior) and Will Lund (6-2 junior).

"Our goal is to play on Saturday, March 2, (WLAA league championship game)," Teachman said. "To do this we must stay injury free and cut down on turnovers."

FARMINGTON

The Falcons have struggled in recent years, but there are signs that they may be on the road to respectability.

Cage season unfolds Friday

Although there's still one week left in the girls basketball season, the boys campaign kicks off Friday night with a full slate of games. Among the featured attractions in and around Observerland are North Farmington at Farmington, Livonia Franklin at Plymouth Canton, Farmington at Redford Union and Clarkston at Redford Catholic Center. (See The Week Ahead for other games).

Livonia Bentley, meanwhile, may have the toughest season opener. The Bulldogs travel Friday to meet Dearborn Heights Robichaud, picked by many to win the state Class B championship.

Robichaud, 13-10 a year ago, returns four starters, including All-State candidate Jarvis Walker, a 6-foot-2 forward.

"We don't have any easy games on our schedule, but on the other hand, none of our opponents have a huge talent gap on us as in the past," Clough said. "Our lack of height will be a problem, but if we can compensate for it in quickness and solid defense, we will make our goal and possibly surpass it."

Clarenceville notes: Friday's home opener against Taylor Baptist Park will be "Community Appreciation Night." The JV game starts at 6 p.m. followed by the varsity game at 7:30 p.m.

The Clarenceville public is invited free of charge. The school's majorettes will be performing at halftime along with the pep band.

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