

Country Day repeats as Roundball Classic champ

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Detroit Country Day ripped through the competition at the annual Motor City Roundball Classic holiday basketball tournament like so much wrapping paper.

The ribbon on top, definitely worth saving, was the trophy presented to the Yellow Jackets Monday night, after a resounding 76-47 victory in the championship game against Canadian-based Father Henry Carr.

For the Yellow Jackets, 5-1 overall, the tournament title was the second in a row after being knocked out the previous four times.

"Last year was the first time after about five tries that we finally won it," laughed Country Day head coach Kurt Keener. "... But this is good. I talked to the kids before the game about how we had an opportunity to win a championship, to play for a trophy."

Keener said the Roundball Classic provides his independent team an opportunity to experience "some type of simulation of tournament atmosphere" to help prepare for the state postseason tournament.

As was the case Saturday against Windsor's Herman and Sunday against Cincinnati's Hughes Center, the Yellow Jackets followed the lead of junior guard Arntanar Nelson and senior center Ije Nwankwo. Both Nelson and Nwankwo made the All-Tournament team, with Nwankwo being selected the most valuable player of the tourney.

"I'm just real proud of him," said Keener about the 6-7 Nwankwo, who scored 22 points, pulled down 10 rebounds and blocked five Crusader shots. "I thought he was the dominant player in the tournament all week. He played three great games, he's our senior leader, he's one of the best players in the state and I think he came out on this stage and showed it."

Nelson scored 17 points and added five rebounds. Also pro-

ductive in the title game were senior guard Gerome Hunter and sophomore center Mark Coury, who each scored eight points.

Country Day led 42-28 at halftime, and quickly upped its lead to 48-28 on three-point plays by Hunter and Coury. But then the Crusaders fought back behind the aggressive play of junior center Theo Davis (10 points, 9 rebounds) with a 10-0 run.

One key to that stretch was a spate of fouls called against Country Day. Coury and Nwankwo each were whistled for their third foul of the game, with junior guard Brandon Bradford (6 points) receiving his fourth.

Then came an ankle injury sustained by Davis, the top player able to give Nwankwo a battle under the boards.

"The key was when Davis went down," Keener said. "They had nobody then who could guard Ije inside and so we kind of had our way. Then you look up and it's a 30-point game. But, to me, if No. 21 (Davis) doesn't go out we're in a real dogfight down the stretch."

Keener noted the defense turned in by Nelson against senior Crusader guard Antwi Atuahene (19 points, 7 rebounds), described by the Country Day coach as "maybe the best player in Canada. (Nelson) did a tremendous job. He (Atuahene) might have scored a lot of points, but he took a lot of shots to get them."

Country Day led 66-40 entering the fourth quarter, and then put the hammer down for both game and tournament. Nwankwo scored an inside basket and then thwarted a Henry Carr attempt with an emphatic block at the other end.

A triple by Nelson for the right center increased the Yellow Jackets' lead to 67-44 with 4:05 to play. Following that was a layup by freshman guard Omar Thomas (5 points) and an electrifying slam by Nwankwo to make it 72-45. Nwankwo brought the near-capacity crowd to its feet, almost simultaneously.

collecting an offensive rebound and throwing it through the rim.

SAGINAW 67, ST. MARY'S 60: Also in action at the Motor City Roundball Monday night was Orchard Lake St. Mary's, but the Eagles fell 67-60 to Saginaw in what was billed as a feature game.

"We weren't ready to start the game," said St. Mary's head coach George Porritt, referring to the first quarter, when the fast-breaking Trojans built a 23-10 lead.

That deficit snowballed to 39-22 at halftime, with much of the damage coming by way of triples launched by senior guard Herbert Warren and junior guard Teryn Miles. Warren hit six of nine three-point shots in the game, contributing to a game-high 32 points. Miles (11 points) made good on three of four triple tries.

But after intermission, the Eagles bounced back with a 21-10 surge in the third quarter to slice the once-commanding Trojan lead to 49-44. A try by senior forward John Andrews pulled St. Mary's closer, 52-49, with 6:20 remaining on the clock. But the Eagles could not come all the way back.

Porritt credited the second half surge to a better team effort, both offensively and defensively. But it was too little, too late, because whenever Saginaw needed a big basket, it usually made one.

"They hit some big triples," Porritt said. Proficiency from behind the three-point line was a big factor in the St. Mary's loss. The Eagles managed to score just two tries, out of 11 tries. Saginaw, on the other hand, hit on 10 of 22 three-point attempts.

There were some positives for St. Mary's, now 3-1 overall on the season. Senior forward John Andrews scored 21 points and registered 12 rebounds while senior forward DeWayne Watkins chipped in with 12 points and five boards.

Robert Jolley, a 6-6 sophomore forward, provided some spark for the Eagles, with nine points and six rebounds.

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Groves cagers have the ingredients for a serious run

BY JIM TOTH
STAFF WRITER

If you're unaware of their recent success, you're not alone. If you're unaware of their "legitimate" Mr. Basketball candidate, you're still not alone.

And if you're unaware of their one lofty goal that, for many game fans might seem out of reach, you're definitely not alone. The Birmingham Groves boys basketball team has plenty of positives bountiful in its favor as the 2002-03 season moves into full swing next Tuesday.

Head coach Bill Norton's squad stands 3-1 in the early going and is in position to continue a two-year streak that has seen the Falcons post back-to-back 17-win seasons.

"We've been on a pretty good run," assured Norton, now in his fifth decade of coaching. "We've been playing tougher competition the past few years. All this year we've moved up (into Oakland Activities Association Division I), too. It's a wonderful group of guys who are all getting the opportunity to contribute."

And contribute they are. Led by senior standout Vladimir Severova, or "Vova" to friends, family and teammates, the Falcons have the capability of playing various brands of basketball, not only against the top teams the OAA has to offer, but non-conference foes as well. Severova is a three-year starter for the Falcons and, according to Norton, "a very legitimate candidate for Mr. Basketball."

"He's as skilled as anybody in the state," Norton began. "He

has a competitive zeal about himself, is a very hard worker, an outstanding shooter and our best rebounder."

"He's our leader - a quiet leader, not our leader," Norton continued about the tri-captain, who has already committed to pursuing his basketball career at Wright State University. "The other guys look to him at the end of games and he usually doesn't disappoint."

The 6-6 1/2, 220-pound Severova tuned up for his final prep campaign by playing with some of the top high school players in Michigan on an under-17 summer team named The Family. The squad advanced all the way to the championship game where they emerged victorious.

"He played with some really talented guys - Ije Nwankwo (Detroit Country Day), John Andrews (Orchard Lake St. Mary's), (Groves teammate) Jordan Watson and played well," Norton said. "I know he scored 17 points and had 17 rebounds in the final."

A TEAM EFFORT

Any team's go-to guy can't do it alone and Severova certainly isn't alone.

The talented and explosive Watson, and streaky and highly-competitive Matt Osher, make up part of the starting line-up, as do senior Mike Salsiccioli and junior Patrick McNamara. "We try to keep freshmen on the freshman team, so these guys have played together for a long time," said Norton, who began his coaching career in 1962 at St. Mary's in Mount Clemens. "That freshman team

went 17-2, so they know how to win."

"We're giving a lot of people the opportunity to play," Norton went on. "Our seniors aren't tall - we will be tall in future years - but they're athletic and love basketball."

In addition to the contributions from the starters, Norton has also been pleased by the early-season play of seniors Matt Crosswell, Jarrett Smith, Steve Jacobites, Tom Downey, juniors Taylor Parks, Brandon Haddock, Ryan Macke, Trevor Hough and Raffi El-Chemmas and sophomores Jamal Hoze and Mark Mathews.

"We have high expectations this year as a group," Norton said. "They truly believe we have a chance at the Class A state championship. That's what makes this a wonderful group - they believe."

The same can be said for Norton, who also believes his squad is capable of some very special achievements after witnessing his share of quality teams.

Norton spent two stints in charge of the Birmingham Brother Rice program, once for 17 consecutive seasons and the other for four straight. He was highlighted by a Class A state championship won in 1974. He also spent one season as an assistant at Michigan State University before getting away from the profession for 13 years (1992-95).

"I just missed it," responded Norton when quizzed about his decision to re-enter the coaching field. "I'm very happy right now at Groves."

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