

Mentor Basketball Tournament Preview (by Shaun Spence)

Tournament basketball is here. After twelve weeks of fantastic regular season basketball, the coaching staff and players will turn their attention to the sectional/district tournament at Euclid. Mentor has done very well this decade at Euclid as they have won four district titles under head coach Bob Krizancic (look for his comments on the tournament at the bottom). The Cards are certainly one of the favorites to win the district title, which would be their fifth in eight seasons. Here are some things to expect in February and hopefully in March...

Sectional Preview

On Tuesday, February 19th Mentor (the No. 2 seed) will begin their tournament play against Eastlake North - a team that has yet to win a game this season. The Rangers' dismal season probably can't be over soon enough for coaches, players, parents, and fans. They need to get past this season, move on and hope for some improvement next year. Mentor should make quick work of the Rangers and I would expect to see the entire bench used in the first half alone. During the regular season contest, Mentor was up by as many as 50. This game could get ugly.

Collinwood awaits Mentor in the second round, which is the sectional final. Before the season started, I interviewed Coach K and he told me that one of his goals for this season was to get past the sectional tournament and into the districts. That was something the Cards were unable to do last season, but it should be an easy goal for this team to achieve. Mentor will be playing Collinwood at the Euclid tournament for the 5th time in the last seven years. The Cards lead 3-1 and look to improve to 4-1 against the Railroaders before things at Euclid get really tough.

While I'm not trying to say Mentor can just show up and watch North/Collinwood forfeit, I do believe neither team has a real chance at competing, let alone defeating Mentor. So let's just assume the Cards are headed to at least the district semifinal of the Euclid tournament. If the seeds hold up, their opponent will be the winner of St. Ignatius (3 seed) and Brush (6 seed).

District Semifinal Preview

The Wildcats (11-7) are a scrappy bunch and are led by senior twins Pat and Conor Sweeney. Longtime St. Ignatius coach Brian Becker has recently announced that this season would be his last. Becker led St. Ignatius to numerous district titles and the 2001 Division I state championship. St. Ignatius' only in-state losses have been against four teams (St. Edward twice, St. Xavier, Warren Harding, and Glenville) that have been ranked in the top 10 in Division I this season. If Mentor happens to play the Cats, one can be sure that the motivated St. Ignatius players don't want to see their longtime coach go down without cutting the nets one more time.

The other probable opponent for Mentor on the 28th will be the Brush Arcs. Super sophomore Nate Tait and senior Jamaal Watkins are both averaging over 20 points per game. Tait, one of the top point guards around, will be tough to stop for any team at Euclid. Mentor's guards have gone up against some of the best in the area (Riverside's Alex Sullivan, Shaker's Anthony Wells, VASJ's Nate Barns, etc.) - so they would be prepared for Tait. Brush is only 10-9, but they have had a very tough schedule filled with some of the best in Northeast Ohio (Garfield Heights,

Bedford, Euclid, etc.). If I had to pick a sleeper in this tournament, it would be the Arcs. They would be no pushover if they happen to meet Mentor in the district semifinal.

The Other Side of the Bracket

If Mentor is talented, motivated, and lucky (every team needs a little luck) enough to make it to March basketball, they will likely be awaited by tournament favorite Glenville. The Tarblooders are the top seed at the Euclid tournament and are on the other side of the bracket along with Riverside (No. 4 seed) and Madison (No. 5 seed). The top two teams in the Premier Athletic Conference will attempt to upset Glenville, but their chances are slim to none. The Tarblooders have had a very successful regular season so far and they are going to be very tough for any team, including Mentor, to knock them out.

Glenville (18-2) is led by veteran point guard Kendall Holt and senior post Rayshawn Goins, a transfer this season from Rhodes. Holt is a dynamic guard with seven double-doubles this season. It will be the 6-foot-6, 250-pound Goins (23.2 ppg and 12.8 rbg) that would give Mentor the most trouble. The Cards lack size (tallest starter is 6'3 and most teams try to exploit that. If Mentor happens to play Glenville in the district final, the game will likely be decided by the success of Goins and Mentor's ability to hit the three-ball.

How Far Can They Go?

That is the big question. Among their impressive 16 victories, the Cards have knocked off Euclid twice, Cleveland Heights, and VASJ. If Mentor plays with the kind of intensity and effort (along with solid three-point shooting) that they did in those games, I could easily see Mentor cutting down the nets at Euclid on March 1st. The play of sophomore point guard Jaron Crowe has been excellent. Leading scorers Joey Meyer and Scott Branchick will need to continue doing what they do best. Freshman guard Cole Krizancic and junior forward Ben Pike are looking more comfortable in their roles. Mentor will also need some valuable minutes from their bench, which include senior Daniel Hammonds and junior Mike Johanek.

Assuming Mentor continues to improve, forces more turnovers than they make, and shoots the three-ball at 40% or better, the sky is the limit. I heard a respected local sports writer claim that if Mentor shoots like they have in recent wins over Cleveland Heights and VASJ, a trip to the state tournament in Columbus is a real possibility.