



Marshall, Robinson on collision course again this season?

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— High school basketball fans in east-central Illinois have probably already circled the date: Dec. 19, when two of the state's Class 2A powers convene at Robinson to play bigger schools from farther north. Junior varsity teams from Marshall and Robinson play first, but then the varsity Lions play Providence-St. Mel and the host Maroons face Morgan Park, two Chicago teams to be reckoned with.

The Marshall-Robinson meeting, when it occurs, might be even better — and could easily happen again in postseason play.

Coach Tom Brannan's Lions had to stage a monumental comeback last year to overhaul coach Bob Coffman's Maroons, maybe Marshall's toughest test until losing a semifinal game at Peoria and finishing third in the state.

Also competing at the Class 2A level are Casey and Paris, while Hutsonville-Palestine and Martinsville are in Class A competition. Here's a look at what those teams have to offer this winter.

- Casey — Brad Carrell played for Casey 10 years ago, when the Warriors topped the Tribune-Star prep poll for awhile, and he gets his first opportunity as head coach this season.

If the Warriors, 1-0 so far, are to become one of the best teams in the area again, or even better last season's 10-14 record, someone will have to replace the points scored in large bunches by Mitch Snyder a year ago.

Actually, Carrell says, that could be several someones.

"We want to play under control and realize that our strength is team play," he said earlier this week. "We need all eight or 10 guys playing well together."

Clinton Scott, a 6-foot-4 junior, averaged nearly 10 points per game last year and had 14 points and 13 rebounds Tuesday in the Casey opener. Other veterans back are 5-9 senior Riley Scales, 6-2 senior Kruz Kusterman, 5-11 senior Lucas McVey and 5-8 senior Chris Unzicker. Recent additions to the team who also played last year are 5-10 senior Kaleb Barnhart, 6-3 senior Seth Brewer and 5-9 senior Ryan Shull.

"The thing I've really liked is that [the Warriors] really work hard, and they haven't backed off anything we're trying to do," Carrell said. "The senior have stepped up and are being good leaders, and the underclassmen we have will turn this team back into a winning program."

- Hutsonville-Palestine — Travis Titsworth, another first-year coach, has his Tigers flying somewhere under the radar with a 5-0 record so far and some high hopes for the upcoming season.

Although Hutsonville-Palestine had just a 5-19 record a year ago, it started the season by winning the Central Illinois Thanksgiving Tourney hosted by Atwood-Hammond and Urbana University High.

Starters for the Tigers so far have been 6-1 senior Blake Callaway, a double-figure scorer a year ago; three more seniors in 5-9 Jenson Martin, 6-5 Jevon Pearse and 6-0 Luke Mehler; and 6-4 sophomore Austin Callahan.

All except Mehler, who didn't play last year, are returning veterans, as is 5-9 senior Jaryd Webster. Also contributing have been 6-5 junior Alex McDaniel and two 6-0 sophomores, Kasey Newlin and Jerry Wilson. Callahan and Martin each had 24 points Tuesday in a win over Martinsville.

"Our goal is to win a regional," Titsworth said this week. "Hutsonville never won one, and Palestine won one once, back in 1984. We'd also love to get 20 wins, and we'd like to compete for the [Little Illini] Conference.

"If you're going to set goals, you might as well set some that mean something."

Hutsonville-Palestine plays tonight at Casey.

- Marshall — The Lions, 32-1 a year ago, finally have their season opener tonight against Lawrenceville. Most of their players were members of the school's Class 2A Final Four team in football.

"It was just a great year [last winter]," said Brannan recently. "Everything came together, and everything you've talked about as a coach, the kids did."

Marshall has a few pieces available to make this season a good one too, starting with 6-3 senior Taylor Duncan and 6-6 senior Dustin Morey, the two returning starters, and 6-0 sophomores Logan Cannady and Jacob Duncan, who played regular minutes too.

Also winning letters were 6-1 senior Tyler Bishop, 6-4 senior Dalton Sanders, 6-2 senior Jake Tucker, 6-0 senior Austin Wetnight and 6-0 sophomore Jordan Grooms. Newcomers are 6-2 senior Nolan Schaeffer, 6-2 junior Andrew Davidson and 5-9 sophomore Andre Strohm.

"The young players are ready to step up," Brannan predicted. "They learned how to win ... and there are a lot of different ways to get a win."

The coach isn't kidding about that learning-how-to-win statement. That one loss gave the Marshall varsity more setbacks than either its junior varsity or freshman team had last year.

- Martinsville — Coach Kyle Shelton has one of the best players in the area in 6-1 senior Jared Higginbotham, who had 35 points and 17 rebounds in Tuesday's loss at Hutsonville and who is averaging well over 20 points and 10 rebounds a game so far.

The problem is, he can't keep that a secret for very long.

"We're hoping to be better [than last year's 7-20 team], and I think we can be," Shelton said recently. "But other players have to contribute to our cause. Teams key on Jared, because teams have learned he's very solid."

The Bluestreaks, 1-4 so far, have suffered three of their losses against teams that are either unbeaten or have just one loss.

Martinsville's other top returnees are 6-4 senior Josh Cribelar and 5-9 senior Bryant Washburn, with two sophomores — 5-7 Blaine Washburn and 6-3 Kyle Perisho — also making big contributions. Two more seniors, 6-1 Matt Sanders and 6-2 Ryne Davidson, complete the team's usual rotation.

Martinsville will be in the Little Okaw Valley Conference for the second year this winter after finishing 5-7 in league play last year. Arthur and Arcola look to be preseason favorites there, Shelton predicted.

- Paris — The Tigers lost nine seniors from a 17-12 team a year ago, but are off to a 4-2 start as they begin Apollo Conference play tonight at home against Charleston.

"We're a little short right now on experience," coach Terry Elston said recently, "but we're working hard.

"We've been in every game so far, and we look to improve as the year goes on."

Paris isn't short on much of anything but experience, and enjoys one of the area's taller front lines when 6-6 sophomore Josh Cary joins two returnees, 6-3 senior Zach Henn and 6-6 junior Josh Griffin, in the starting lineup.

Dalton Temples, a 6-2 junior, is the only returning starter, but the Tigers' junior varsity team last year was 15-3. Moving up from there have been 5-11 junior Cory Cunningham, currently starting at the point, plus 6-5 senior Aaron Peel, 6-3 senior Kody Waggoner and 5-10 junior Ethan Mason.

- Robinson — University of Illinois recruit Meyers Leonard might be the Apollo Conference's first 7-footer since Uwe Blab played for Effingham more than 30 years ago, and is obviously the first thing opponents think about when getting ready to face the Maroons.

He's not the only weapon in Robinson's arsenal, however.

Two other returning starters for Coffman's team are 6-1 seniors Derek Hannahs, the team's playmaker, and Ben Jones. Jones has led the Maroons in scoring in two of the first three games, including a 35-point outburst. Two other veterans are 5-10 senior Austin Siler and 6-4 Devan Dirks. Siler was a regular contributor to a 20-8 team, and Dirks might have been except for an injury that restricted him primarily to junior varsity play when he was available. Also in this year's mix are 6-1 senior Cody Chamblin, 6-0 senior Jimmy Stevens and 5-10 freshman Aaron Siler.

"We have high expectations every year, and we want to go as far in the postseason as possible," Coffman said recently. "We're still trying to make improvements and trying to work as hard as we can.

"We won the Apollo last year and we're looking to defend that title," continued the coach, whose team begins conference play tonight against Effingham. "Defense is our key; we've got ways to get the ball in the basket and score."

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