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Tribe to take another shot at Lions in LIC finals

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LAWRENCEVILLE - Fully two weeks after it started, the Little Illini Conference basketball tournaments will come to a conclusion Saturday, with the top two seeds meeting for the title in both events.

Red Hill High School's girls basketball team will open the day against Marshall, at 10 a.m., in the third-place game. That will be followed by the third-place boys game between Flora and Cumberland and the girls title game between Flora and Cumberland, before Lawrenceville and Marshall are set to meet at 2:30 in the boys title tilt.

The tournament started on Jan. 24, and was slated to conclude Jan. 30. Foul weather intervened, and the consolation bracket was canceled. Finally, the semifinal games have been completed and things are set to finish Saturday, with 50-degree temperatures, to boot.

The Indians (15-5) cemented their berth in the finals with Wednesday's 47-26 semifinal win over visiting Flora. It was their eighth consecutive victory, dating to a 50-49 loss to Red Hill on Jan. 6.

Anything less than reaching the finals, says second-year coach Jason Green, would have been disappointing.

"We wanted to be in the championship game of this tournament, and I don't think we let anybody know any different," he said. "We felt like if we didn't make it there, it would have been a downer."

Again, Green stressed that progression is important. He notes that the Indians played in the fifth-place game at the season-opening Basketball Capital Classic, and claimed third-place in the Duster Thomas Hoops Classic at Pinckneyville over the Christmas Break.

"We're excited about this opportunity," he said. "We talk about progression every day. We've talked about it all season. We've made it to where we wanted to be."

Marshall (20-0) punched its ticket to the championship game last Friday, with a 75-46 win over Cumberland. The Lions blasted Oblong, 85-30, in a regular season game on Tuesday. Tonight, they host Edwards County.

Eleven of the Lions victories have been by 27 points or more. Two of those were games at Lawrenceville - an 82-53 decision in the Capital Classic on Nov. 27, and a 75-48 regular season win on Dec. 5. The second game was close throughout the first half, although the Lions rallied to take a 33-26 lead at the break.

"That game was a long time ago, but I think it may have been the turning point in our season," Marshall coach Tom Brannan said. "I think at halftime of that game was when our boys realized they had to play this way or that way. I think that was the point where they decided to play basketball, and play basketball right."

The Lions feature a trio of scoring threats in 6-4 senior Logan Eitel (17.0 ppg), 6-3 junior Taylor Duncan (16.0 ppg) and 6-4 senior Lucas Eitel (16.0 ppg). Other starters are usually 6-2 senior Trey Brashear (6.5 ppg) and 6-5 junior Dustin Morey (5.0 ppg). However, Brashear sustained an ankle injury during Tuesday's conquest of Oblong, and was on crutches as of Thursday afternoon. If he can't start, the Lions will turn to one of two 6-0 freshmen, Logan Cannady or Jacob Duncan.

"We'll have to play as hard as we can, and hope to contain their shooters," said Green. "It's going to take a defensive effort much like we had (Wednesday against Flora) to bother them. If we can keep them outside and they're making 3-pointers, there's not much we can do about it. But when you let them get inside, that's when you really get into trouble."

The Indians will likely counter with a lineup that includes 6-1 senior Zach Manley (9.1 ppg), 5-11 senior Ryan Klein (6.6 ppg), 5-11 senior Josh Potts (7.9 ppg), 6-2 senior Nathan Waldroup (11.5 ppg) and 6-6 junior Dane Kelly (9.6 ppg). Off the bench, the Indians turn to 6-5 junior Nick Potts, who is averaging 9.1 points a game.

"We wanted another shot at Marshall," Green said. "It'll be a good way to see where we stand. They're an excellent team. They haven't lost yet. We wouldn't mind being the team to change that."

Game notes: Saturday's game will be broadcast on Lawrenceville radio station WAKO, 103.1 FM ... Lawrenceville has a record of 15-7 in LIC Tournament games, since joining the league in 2001-2002 ... Saturday will mark the fourth time the Indians have played in the tournament championship game. LHS reached the finals in 2003 and fell to Marshall, 70-55. The Indians beat Flora for the title in 2005, 60-42, and Red Hill the following year, 64-60 ... Marshall is seeking its third consecutive title and 15th overall. The only time Marshall has won three straight was from 1971-73, the first three years of the tournament. The last team to win three in a row was Casey, which claimed the crown every year from 1991 through 1996 ... Green is 20-27 in his second season at LHS, while Brannan is 328-137 in his 17th season coaching the Lions.