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Tuesday, Nov. 30, 2010 Comments

3 SWC teams earn three holiday tournament titles

BY DEAN CRIDDLE - News-Democrat

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Perennially the top girls basketball league outside the Chicago suburbs, the Southwestern Conference put on a display of power and depth during the opening week of the 2010-11 season.

Erika McCaster led Belleville West to the championship at the Mount Zion Thanksgiving Classic and was named the MVP, while Edwardsville (Salem) and O'Fallon (Taylorville) also won championships as the SWC feasted on competition during the holiday weekend.

Nashville won its own Thanksgiving Tournament, and Central won the Pana Tournament championship.

West coach Clayton Fisher wasn't surprised by the success of local teams.

"Our conference is very good once again and I think that was proven this weekend with us winning at Mount Zion and Edwardsville and O'Fallon also winning tournaments," Fisher said. "Edwardsville is clearly the team to beat and I really feel like Granite City is a sleeper team. They are the best shooting team in the conference, bar none."

West (5-0) wasn't bad either as it edged Peoria Central (66-62) and Peoria Notre Dame (52-51) early in the week before crushing Decatur McArthur (73-45) on Saturday to clinch its win in the round-robin event.

McCaster, an Eastern Michigan University recruit, was as spectacular as ever, averaging over 19 points in the five games. But West also got exceptional play from junior forward Emily Becker and several key 3-point baskets from junior guard Diamond Enlow.

"Diamond basically has the green light to shoot the 3's when she's open and I thought Emily (Becker) just had a tremendous tournament for us on the boards and hitting key shots for us. This was a good test for us. Both (Peoria) Central and Notre Dame are going to win a lot of games," Fisher said. "We played well, but we left ourselves with a lot of room for improvement."

Salem Tournament

Edwardsville, ranked third in the preseason Class 4A state poll, played suffocating defense through much of the week at Salem, then beat always tough Highland 48-39 in the championship contest.

Senior Mary O'Keefe, who earlier this Fall announced she will attend Southern Indiana University, led the Tigers' attack with 17 points, while sophomore Emmonnie Henderson added 16 in the title game win.

But the Tigers, who allowed over 40 points just one time in their first four games, shut down tournament MVP Katie Hempen of Highland, holding the high-scoring guard scoreless.

"It was a good start," Tigers coach Lori Blade said. "There were some things we were happy with and we saw some things that we need to work on to get better. But defensively, I thought we did a good job. I thought (Caty) Ponce had a great tournament on defense."

Henderson and senior guard Cierra Gaines of Edwardsville were first-team all-tournament selections while O'Keefe was a second-team selection.

Taylorville Tournament

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Beaten in overtime by Hillsboro (51-49) in its opener, O'Fallon rebounded to win its final four games, including a 60-34 drubbing of the host school on Saturday, as it won the tournament championship.

Junior guard Taylor Klingelhoefler paced a balanced Panthers attack with 23 points, including a 13-of-13 effort from the foul line, while Kaitlin Kendall and Katie Roustio added 11 points each for O'Fallon.

Panthers coach Ryan Massey said his team picked up its level of play in the final, which was played before a large partisan Taylorville crowd.

"I don't think we played that well during the first four games of the tournament and I don't think anybody associated with our program would tell you we did either," Massey said. "But last night against Taylorville, we drilled them. We came out with good intensity and just took it to them.

"We're not a young team, we're a new team. Right now we're trying to figure out where everybody belongs and the girls are all learning their roles. Once we have it figured out, we could be a very good basketball team."

Klingelhoefler was the only Panther chosen to the all-tournament team, but the play of Kendall and Roustio also drew good reviews from Massey.

"I thought Kaitlin (Kendall) came out and played very well all week and Katie Roustio was a force inside. She had to average 10 points, 10 rebounds and five or six blocks every night," Massey said.

Pana Tournament

Like O'Fallon, the Central Cougars went into the home of one of the state's elite programs and came away with a title, edging Pana 42-38 in the final on Saturday.

Tournament MVP Shelby Kohrmann and Taylor Voss had 14 points each as the Cougars rallied in the second half to win and improve to 5-0.

Pana (4-1) led 20-16 at halftime, but the Cougars used a 15-9 spurt in the final quarter to post the win.

"I was definitely pleased at how we performed," said Central coach Nathan Rueter. "It was a good for our girls to be able to play a very good Pana team in that kind of environment this early in the season. To have a chance coming down the stretch to win the game was even better. Shelby (Kohrmann) had a very good tournament for us."

The 38 points scored by Pana was the most given by Central in its five tournament wins.

"For the most part I was very pleased with the defense," Rueter said. "Pana exposed some things on us and we'll work hard to improve."

Voss and senior Jena Hemann were chosen to the all-tournament team.

Nashville Tournament

Ranked third in the Class 2A state poll, Nashville completely shut down a much improved Okawville team in the final, blasting the Lady Rockets 38-10 on Saturday.

The Hornettes (5-0), did not give up more than 28 points in any of their four wins in tournament play.

"We did a pretty good job and for the most part I was pleased," said Nashville coach Wayne Harre. "We've still got a ways to go and the first couple of games, I thought we could have done a better job in getting better defensive position. But the last two games I thought we did a better job of that.

Seniors Jennifer Moeller and Jenna Morris led the way for Nashville. Both were chosen to the first team all-tournament squad.

Contact reporter Dean Criddle at dcriddle@bnd.com or 239-2661.

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