



The action has been fast and furious on Saturdays at Ashland High School when the Ashland Youth Basketball instructional and developmental league tosses up its first jump balls of the day. Started just this year to provide Ashland-area cagers from third through sixth grades with more opportunities to learn and play, the league has quickly grown. (Contributed photo)

New league explodes in Ashland

BY PAUL BARNES
For the Ashland Daily Press

Youth basketball has taken off in the great white north this year, and it has been on full display at Ashland High School where a new league for players in third through sixth grades has exploded with participants.

Teams from not just Wisconsin but also the Upper Peninsula are flocking to get in on action that has taken through January and will resume on Saturday Feb. 18, concluding on Feb. 25. Numbers are already impressive and even surprising to Ashland Youth Basketball organizer Amanda Popovich. After all, the league is in just its first year and only began in January.

"We did not realize until the phone calls started coming in how much other schools were also looking for program expansions and wanted to be a part of what we were doing," said Popovich, who works with fellow organizers Patrick Jolma and Luke Korpela. "We said 'yes' to every phone call and it didn't take long before we had 13 school districts on our list for games and 47 teams wanting to come to Ashland. Word spread quickly that we had reserved the high school and field house facilities for Saturday games this winter and districts just kept coming forward, asking if they could play, too."

Popovich, Jolma and Korpela are parents of basketball players in the Ashland School District. The scores of athletes



The league now includes nearly 50 teams from as far away as Marinisco, Michigan, and more than 400 players, attracting an estimated 1,500 coaches, referees, families, friends and fans to the area for each league date. (Contributed photo)

plus others accompanying them may be demonstrating that the program can be an asset for the community, Popovich said.

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Northwoods players lead scoring ranks

By ASHLAND DAILY PRESS

There has been no shortage of offense among Bay-Area boys and girls basketball players this season.

Guards Tommy Zakovec, a senior from Mellen, has had two 60-plus-point outbursts in single games, both the highest in Wisconsin this year. Bayfield sophomore guard Quintin Bresette dropped 58 in a recent game against South Shore to deliver the state's third-highest output thus far. Both have added their names to the modern-day, all-time list of the 25 highest scoring individual boys efforts in WIAA history.

Zakovec and Bresette also rank No. 4 and No. 18 in the state in points per game this season, respectively, but they are not alone among top gun Bay-Area boys players. Ashland senior guard Xander Parduhn still hovers around 20 points per game, to rank among the top scorers in the Heart O' North Conference, and two of the north country's best leapers — Drummond junior Clayton Bjork and Bayfield senior Keith Bresette — have added above-the-rim excitement while scoring in buckets.

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Drummond junior Clayton Bjork is among several Northwoods players setting scoring marks this season. (Contributed photo by Eric Iversen)

COMMENTARY

Call the foul

It's getting late in the basketball season; conference championships will be won and lost, and teams will turn their eyes toward the madness that ends every season: Tourney Time. Which brings me to Wisconsin's high school basketball tournament, its five divisions based on enrollment, and the incredible advantage private schools enjoy among the small school divisions — WIAA D4 and WIAA D5 — in which all Bay-Area teams except the Ashland Oredockers compete.

Why do small, private schools have an unusual advantage? They recruit the best players based on the promise of greater scholastic prestige and the opportunity to play with a collection of better players.

I have complained about this before, true, and here I go again. To begin, review with me the appearance of private schools among the top-10 rankings in all five boys and girls WIAA divisions. Pay particular attention to the proliferation of private schools occupying top spots among the smallest schools. I'm not showing the actual school names because I don't want to grind on individual programs or coaches. They are, after all, playing by the rules as constructed.

WIAA largest school Division 1 boys: number of private schools ranked among top-10 — (0/10); girls — 0/10
D2 boys — 2/10; girls — 2/10
D3 boys — 3/10; girls — 1/10
D4 boys — 3/10; girls — 4/10
D5 boys — 6/10; girls — 4/10

You may notice the absence of ranked private schools among bigger divisions. Ummm ... yeah. Larger schools? Less advantage. The numbers at

the small-school level may not seem egregious but keep in mind that private schools make up less than 20% of all high schools in Wisconsin. As regionals and sectionals play out, small private schools harboring recruited talent naturally pummel their way onto the hallowed courts of the state tournament — at

the Kohl Center in Madison for the boys, and at the Resch Center in Green Bay for the girls.

Here's what recruiting would look like up here: Washburn snags the two best players from Bayfield, the two best players from Ashland including Xander Parduhn who averages 20 points per game in the Heart O' North Conference. Maybe even Tommy Zakovec from Mellen (two 60-point games this season) and Carter Lulich (preseason all-state pick for D5) from South Shore. Oh ... and Washburn maintains its current roster which is right now 13-3. All these ballers are then turned over to 1,000-victory coach Duane Gasperini. And the 'Guards remain in D4.

It sounds outrageous, right? But remarkably this still may not even compare. Imagine if your private school is in Green Bay? Milwaukee? Madison? The Fox River Valley? Eau Claire area? La Crosse?

Happily, this is a problem with a ready solution: take the total enrollment of each private school and multiply it by 1.5. It won't be perfect, but it will bump some into a higher division and thus curtail the dual benefit of being among the biggest schools in a respective small school division, while also being able to recruit for top athletes. Simple math, really: apply the multiplier, and play for real.

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PAUL BARNES

THIS WEEK IN SPORTS HISTORY



Although there is no record of a Bay-Area resident being part of any USA Olympic bobsled team — bobsledding, by the way, is an international sport that is still referred to by some as tobogganing — it's possible that on this unknown day and in this unrecorded year a mark of sorts was set. The five youngsters shown here, with four on board and one in tow, demonstrate

an impressive effort of cargo loading. This toboggan, as with others of similar design, is steered by lifting and twisting the front or by dragging one's foot in the snow. Based on hand and foot placement, and possible vision obstruction, it is likely the young athlete in front fell short in helping the team achieve its common goal of a strong, swift finish.

(Photo contributed by Ashland Historical Society Museum)