

SPORTS & OUTDOORS

COMMENTARY

Competition finally gets real

One can follow the rules, or follow what's right. Sometimes one can do both. Sometimes one can't — which brings me to a decision members of the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association made April 26, by a vote of 265-115, to inject a measure of fairness into a sick system that has until now been exploited by a relatively small number of schools for a relatively long period of time.

Basically and at long last, the WIAA is tasking teams, starting in the 2024-2025 school year, to play for real. If you follow this column

you've heard me rant before about the unfair advantage that accompanies the recruitment of top talent by somewhat smaller and almost exclusively private high schools within Wisconsin's most dense population areas. This practice puts equally small, almost exclusively public high schools like those in the sparsely populated Bay Area at extreme competitive disadvantage. Every coach in Wisconsin knows it; understandably few speak of it except confidentially. I have no such reservations and this is my parting shot at the schools that have taken full advantage of a system that rewarded them to not play for real.

Details are available online, and I clearly applaud this competitive shift for balance. But when I survey the state championships claimed by small private schools over the past two decades? Given the professed mission statements of said schools? At minimum, I find it distasteful. Bad acting. Poor sportsmanship. Certainly ironic.

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PAUL BARNES

Benchmark battle goes to 'Dockers

BY PAUL BARNES
For the Ashland Daily Press

When the first kick was launched at Northland College's Ponzio Stadium in the May 1 soccer matchup between the visiting Washburn Castle Guards and host Ashland Oredockers, cold and steadily dropping temperatures belied the hotly contested battle commencing on the field.

And what a game it was for the first half, which ended with the WIAA D3's sixth-ranked and undefeated 'Dockers (5-0 in the Heart O'North Conference) clinging to a 1-0 lead. The second half fared better for Ashland, which added three goals to secure a 4-0 victory over the 'Guards (2-1-1 in the HON).

Despite rough conditions, both coaches said that few adjustments in play were necessary. Washburn Head Coach Lee Dennis noted also that the game was a good check-in for his team, and he welcomes the competitive challenge Ashland provides his 'Guards.

"We did not make too many in game changes," Dennis said. "Wet games make the ball move quicker on turf and can cause some unusual bounces. As northern Wisconsin girls, I do not really think the cold bothers them that much. We are looking to build on a couple aspects of our game to prepare for hopefully a deep playoff run.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY PAUL BARNES

Still undefeated, the Ashland Oredockers girls soccer team holds firm on its No. 6 ranking in WIAA D3 polls. With a 5-0 record in the Heart O'North Conference, the 'Dockers are a good bet to secure a second consecutive conference championship. Bay Area foe Washburn will not go into tournament play with an unblemished record, but has loaded its schedule with top-notch teams that Coach Lee Dennis believes will prepare his 'Guards for a deep playoff run in D4.

We viewed this match as an opportunity to test ourselves against a strong, athletic, well coached, and experienced team that we will not really come across until likely deep June, in the state tournament."

The Castle Guards compete in WIAA D4, by virtue of Washburn's small enrollment, and in preparation for a run at a state berth the team expects to take some regular-season losses by scheduling non-conference contests against good teams from large schools — plus HON matchups with the likes of AHS, which has

an enrollment size over three times that of Washburn.

Weather was a factor, according to Oredockers Head Coach Jonny BeBeau, but not in comparison to Washburn and its gritty play that the coach was quick to credit.

"The ball feels different when it's cold and it is a factor," BeBeau said. "Your feet don't always do what you want them to do, and possessions can be tricky. But Washburn is well-coached and stout defensively. That threw us off our rhythm in the first half — especially when we

saw a few close chances go begging. We just kept reminding the girls to be patient, not to panic, and play the simple passes. We did a better job of this in the second half."

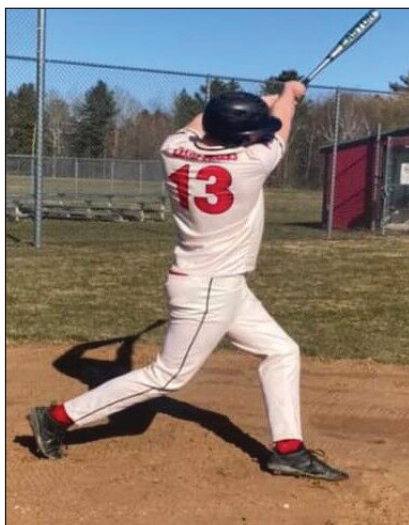
The teams will play again in Washburn on Tuesday, May 9, and both are racing through an abundance of rescheduled games due to the storms of April. Each coach has a plan for getting through May healthy and ready for regionals. Dennis will be judicious in how he uses players, he said.

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COACH REFLECTS ON 150TH WIN

Ashland girls soccer Head Coach Jonny BeBeau notched his 150th career win April 25 against Somerset. He spoke this week about hitting the milestone:

"I wasn't aware of how close to 150 I was. Numbers are just numbers. When I think of the success I've been able to be a part of over the years, I can't help but think of the good times with all the teams I've coached. They deserve all the credit. They are the ones who go out every game and put in the work. I'm just happy they have bought into the way I coach and the type of soccer I've wanted us to play. Our youth program has been instrumental in preparing girls for the next level and that has also played a large part of our program's success. I'm not sure what the future holds for me. This is my 10th year as the head coach and 17th overall. That's a long time, but I'm still having fun and don't think I'm ready to be done yet. With that said, I have small children at home and being a present dad to them is the most important thing to me. I'm very fortunate I have an amazing wife who is supportive of my passion for coaching."



FILE PHOTO

Washburn made the most of its indoor practice sessions forced by snowy spring weather. It has outscored opponents by a whopping 80-11 in early season play.

Washburn dropping bombs in early season

PAUL BARNES
For the Ashland Daily Press

If the Washburn Castle Guards baseball team's April games are any indication of what might be coming this spring, bombs will be exploding and laser strikes will be cast upon squads invading the Washburn Athletic Field Complex.

The Guards have thumped visitors by scores of 25-4 vs. South Shore in the season opener on April 14; 19-1 vs. Mellen on Wednesday, April 26; and 18-2 vs. Bayfield on Thursday, April 27, while also presenting a formidable attack away as demonstrated in an 18-4 win at Drummond on

Monday, April 24. All this despite loads of cramped indoor practices because Bay-Area spring weather has unleashed some bombs of its own. The work inside hasn't been all bad, according to Castle Guards' Head Coach David Barningham.

"With a long the long winter it's meant a ton of time in the gym," the coach said. "We have a large squad so the kids have been able to face a lot of live pitching from teammates in the cage. This has really helped our swings. We get outside in the parking lots when we can and try different drills to keep things interesting. But everyone wants to be on a field."

The early season assaults on fellow Indianhead Conference teams isn't entirely surprising from his team, Barningham said, while also acknowledging it would be a mistake to overlook these and others in the conference.

"Mellen and Drummond usually put out good teams — we caught them early," he said. "Hurley and Solon Springs/Northwoods will have good teams. They played us tough last year and I expect the same. But I think with our talent we just need to play clean ball and we'll be OK. I think our bats will be solid — we can hit. We have really good pitching depth which has been

bolstered by a big freshman class. We need to work defensively on communication and positioning — things that are difficult to do in a gym."

Last year's team won conference and fell in the regional finals against Solon Springs/Northwoods, which plays in the Lakeland-East Conference. It was a team for the ages, in some respects, for a Washburn program that has been building talent and skills under Barningham, who has been guiding the 'Guards since 2016. How will this team compare? Well, the coach predicts.

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