

Reflections on top stories in girls basketball

Written by Jim Ecker

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We're not supposed to root for the athletes and teams we cover for the Metro Sports Report, but it's only natural to feel a special tug for the local kids who work so hard.

In particular, I was looking forward to following two story angles as the girls basketball season unfolded this year. I was looking forward to seeing Shelby Hembera of Cedar Valley Christian become only the sixth player in state history with 2,000 points and 1,000 rebounds in her career, and I was looking forward to seeing Amanda Ollinger help Cedar Rapids Jefferson have a winning season and perhaps reach the state tournament.

Neither happened. Or will.

Hembera suffered a severe ankle injury in January and finished her remarkable one-girl show at Cedar Valley with 1,859 points and 893 rebounds, among the best ever in Metro 5-on-5 history. The Huskies were riding high with a 7-3 record when Hembera got hurt, but they managed to win only one more game without her and the season ended quietly with the lanky senior on the bench.

I was ready to campaign for Hembera for "Miss Basketball" in Iowa, not because she was the best player in the state, but because she represented all the best qualities in a student-athlete in terms of dedication to her team and school.

Hembera got hurt, so that ended that. And Ollinger stunned the local girls basketball community when she transferred from Jefferson to Linn-Mar at mid-season due to family-related issues, namely that her parents both worked in Marion and wanted to move there from southwest Cedar Rapids, which they did.

Ollinger is a special talent, a power forward with perimeter skills who will make a fine addition to the Iowa Hawkeyes when she gets there for the 2016-17 college campaign. Her departure

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devastated her former teammates at Jefferson and left them in tears, and her arrival at Linn-Mar in early January undoubtedly created some tensions at her new school as the Lions tried to embrace a new player who changed the dynamics.

Jefferson struggled without Ollinger, limping to the finish line as best they could. Linn-Mar initially struggled with their new player as well, but the Lions figured it out and now are only one victory away from reaching the Class 5A state tournament. Linn-Mar has a tricky assignment at sixth-ranked Southeast Polk Tuesday night in the regional finals, but don't bet against Coach Jamie (Printy) Brandt and her squad.

Brandt enjoyed fabulous playing careers at Linn-Mar and Iowa, despite serious knee injuries, and now the new young head coach could be on the verge of a glorious coaching career as well.

The Lions are one of the new stories to follow this week as they bid for a spot in the state tournament. So are the young Marion Indians, heading into the Class 4A regional finals with three talented freshmen in prominent roles.

So are the Xavier Saints, with Coach Tom Lilly working his magic again with an unheralded group. And so are the Kennedy Cougars, with Stephanie Botkin and Minnesota transfer Lela Sellers giving them a potent 1-2 punch.

Old story lines fade away and new ones take their place. The Metro area could have a strong contingent of teams at the state tournament next week in Des Moines. It's time to root (quietly, at least) for them.