

The countdown continues

Written by Scott Unash

Tuesday, 28 August 2012 23:47 - Last Updated Wednesday, 29 August 2012 00:15



Two weeks ago I started my countdown of the top 10 high school stories of the past year.

Last week we took a peek at the football season.

This week we're back with my top five stories of the 2011-12 school year:

5. Basketball coaching changes --

Each year we see maybe one coaching change, two tops, in the Metro. This past year there were a total of five changes in the basketball ranks. Not only that, but some big names left the sidelines. Denny Roloff at Kennedy, Brad Metzger at Wash, Matt Jenkins with Xavier, Brian O'Donnell at Marion and the biggest name of all, Larry Niemeyer at Jefferson. (More on that later) That is 31 percent of the prep basketball jobs in town turning over for this winter. Not only that, but some big and interesting names have stepped into these jobs, former Hawkeye Ryan Luehersman and Marion AD Corby Laube to name a couple. It will definitely make for an interesting winter this season.

4. State volleyball tournament --

This is a two-part story. The first part is the State Volleyball Tournament being held in the Cedar Rapids Ice Arena. That happened because of the renovation of the US Cellular Center. The IGHSAU, city leaders of Cedar Rapids and the Cedar Rapids Community School District all held their breath to see how the show was going to go. After the week had ended, most everyone was in agreement that it was a rousing success. The players liked the atmosphere, the spectators were happy about the proximity to the courts and, especially, the nearby, free parking. Everyone was confident that the city was going to keep the tournament in Cedar Rapids when it went was scheduled to go back to the USCC next year.

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Then the bomb was dropped that the Cell wouldn't be ready for the 2012 tourney. Many people thought it would be the end of the tournament here in town since the IGHS AU was promised they would be back downtown in 2012. But after some negotiation it was announced that Cedar Rapids would be the home of the tourney for several more years with a brand new contract and the Ice Arena would again play host for this year's tourney. The great work of many people saved the tournament for the city and helped insure that the city would continue seeing a nice windfall each November for the near future.

3. Kennedy and Xavier win girls state soccer titles --

It was not only a double but a 42nd Street double! With the Cougars and Saints winning state soccer titles, 42nd Street became the royal address for girls soccer in the state of Iowa. Most experts had Xavier pegged to win their seventh straight soccer championship. The Saints were strong and talented and had played a strong MVC schedule to prepare them for the run in the Class 2A State Tournament. Still, the games aren't played on paper and the Saints had to knock off a good North Scott squad, 3-1, to take the championship on Coach Doug Graham's 50th birthday.

The big surprise was Kennedy's hoisting of the big gold trophy on Saturday evening in Muscatine. The Cougars played inspired ball to reach the finals where they had to meet undefeated and nationally rated Ankeny. Most thought it would be a runaway for the Hawks, but Kennedy took advantage of their scoring chances and stunned the No. 1 Hawks, 2-1. Kennedy beat the No. 3, 2 and 1 teams in a three day stretch to win the 3A title.

2. Linn-Mar vs. Kennedy boys substate basketball game and Marcus Paige --

The date was Feb. 28, 2012, a date that will go down as one of the greatest nights in Metro boys basketball history. The only disappointing part of the night was that many people were turned away at the door since the game was held at Prairie and not at its traditional substate venue, the US Cellular Center due to its renovation. It was the rematch of a game from the final weeks of the season that saw Kennedy put a pretty good thumping on Linn-Mar on the Cougars home floor. There were many storylines heading in to the contest. Could Linn-Mar's record streak of eight straight state tournament appearances continue? Would Kennedy make it two in a row over the Lions? And would this be Marcus Paige's final game or would he find away to get the Lions to Des Moines again?

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At one or another point, the answers to all those questions were yes. It was a fairly close game throughout with Kennedy holding the edge for the most part throughout the first 30 minutes. The Cougars led by three at halftime and found themselves up by 10 midway through the fourth quarter. Kennedy held an eight point lead with 30 seconds remaining. Then Superman stepped into the phone booth. Marcus Paige refused to let the Lions lose. He put them on his back and pumped in nine points in the final 29 seconds to send the game to overtime and finished the night with 49 points. The Lions prevailed in double overtime, 83-77. Linn-Mar went back to state for the ninth straight year and Paige went on to win Iowa's Mr. Basketball award. It was a night that no one soon will forget.

1. Larry Niemeyer era ends at Jefferson --

Not many stories could take the game detailed above off the top spot, but this one did. This certainly was the end of an era both at Jefferson High School and in the Metro area. In fact, in the state of Iowa. Larry Niemeyer coached girls basketball at Jeff for 34 years and 52 total seasons during his career. He won 537 at Jefferson and 871 during his career which ranks him third all time in the history of the state. On the softball diamond, Niemeyer was the nation's winningest coach with well over 2,000 victories.

He resigned his basketball position shortly after the end of the season, saying he did not want to leave the cupboard bare for his successor, which turned out to be Wash assistant coach and Jefferson counselor Jason Edwards. Leaving the basketball court was not a big shock. There were rumors for some time that Larry would step down due to a number of factors, including his health, which had not been the best. But not many thought this would be the last season for Niemeyer to be in the dugout for softball.

Softball, and baseball too, was his passion. He loved the game, and his Chicago Cubs as well. Many around the state were shocked when it was announced that he would not be retained as coach of the J-Hawk softball program. Whether you agree with his leaving or not, or the way in which it was handled, one thing remains for sure, the name Larry Niemeyer will forever be etched in the annals of the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union and at Jefferson High School. He goes back to the days of 6-on-6 basketball, summer and fall softball seasons and a one class system of tournaments. He was one of the individuals around the state of Iowa that put girls athletics on the map, and he will be missed.

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There you have it, a wrapup of the 2011-12 school year.

What will 2012-13 bring? Who knows? Many surprises and some great stories for sure that we will look back on a year from now.

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