

Bishop Walsh ready to shock basketball world

Just before he took the Millennium Falcon into an asteroid field in the “The Empire Strikes Back,” movie character Han Solo was told his slim probability of survival.

“Never tell me the odds,” he quipped.

The Bishop Walsh boys’ basketball team knows all about improbability as the host of the annual Alhambra Catholic Invitational Tournament, scheduled to begin March 19 and conclude March 21, at Frostburg State University. The Cumberland school has not won a game in the three-day tournament since 1996, when it beat Judge Memorial of Utah, 60-57.

The Spartans have lost their last 36 Alhambra games.

The tournament draws some of the best Catholic high school teams in the country to Allegany County, most notably from the talent-laden Baltimore Catholic League and Washington Catholic Athletic Conference.

That means there is no such thing as a favorable draw for Bishop Walsh, which won the Cumberland city championship for the first time since that landmark 1995-96. The Spartans were to open this year’s ACIT against one the nation’s best-known programs, DeMatha Catholic High School of Hyattsville.

The label “underdog” was created for teams like Bishop Walsh.

“We have to accept it,” first-year coach Jeff Rhodes said. “It’s the role we’re in. I think (the players) are pumped up. This is a big thing for us. We’re looking for kids who can compete.”

Bishop Walsh last met DeMatha in 2005, when the score was 86-37. DeMatha claimed this year’s WCAC and Washington city championships. Baltimore Catholic League champion St. Frances Academy and runner-up Calvert Hall are also in ACIT.

The Spartans struggled during a Christmas tournament with some of West Virginia’s

top teams, but bounced back with a 10-game winning streak to get to 17-6 overall.

Point guard Kamran Khataian, a second-team all-Alhambra selection a year ago, returned to average 24.2 points and dish out 84 assists this season. He's also the defending champion in the ACIT's three-point shooting contest.

"It's deadly when it's hitting," Rhodes said of Khataian's three-point ability.

Center Dylan D'Atri, who averages 4.8 rebounds, will miss the tournament after recent season-ending surgery. That will put more pressure on forward Spencer Wine (10.2 points and 4.7 rebounds) and guard Myles Clifford (17.3 points and 5.1 rebounds).

Clifford is capable of dominating a game.

"This kid has more ability than anyone in the (Western Maryland) area," said Rhodes, who believes a new day is dawning at Bishop Walsh and the Alhambra tournament.

"We are so fortunate to be in this area to play these top-ranked teams every year. Everyone's all excited. We're looking to compete and hopefully win some games."