

Inside Sports: Alhambra basketball keeps bringing them back to Allegany County



Eight high school teams from Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C., go head-to-head on the court in the 54th annual Alhambra Catholic Invitational Tournament hosted by Bishop Walsh School in Cumberland. (Tom McCarthy | CR Staff) See a photo you're interested in purchasing? View the Catholic Review Smugmug gallery.

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Updated March 17, 2014 1:30 p.m. FROSTBURG - Just as the devout make pilgrimages to Lourdes and Medugorje and Rome, generations of basketball players, coaches and fans flock annually to Allegany County to renew its brand of March Madness.

The 54th annual Alhambra Catholic Invitational Tournament will conclude its three-day run at Frostburg State University March 15.

Eight high school teams from Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C., attack each other on the court, then return to the same Cumberland hotel to share meals, make friends, listen to old-timers' stories and help a Catholic fraternal organization better the lives of some who might otherwise fall through the cracks.

College coaches and adults with Down syndrome enjoy the same hospitality at a gathering that is equal parts competition, endurance test, fundraiser and family reunion.

Watch a video from the event.

The tournament has always had a local Catholic high school as host, and a mammoth volunteer effort.

Just as the Knights of Columbus work to protect the unborn, the Order of the Alhambra serves the needs of those with developmental disabilities. Without the

Cumberland-based Wamba Caravan No. 89, the Special Olympics in Western Maryland wouldn't be the same.

Joe Carter, director of the tournament, explained the link between the organization's approximately 160 volunteers and the host school, Bishop Walsh of Cumberland, which this year has 150 boys and girls in grades 9-12.

"Look at this year's game program," Carter said, of a book 200 pages thick. "You'll lose count trying to tally the number of businesses advertising that are owned by graduates of Bishop Walsh."

UNIQUE HISTORY

The tournament, which Carter believes is the oldest of its kind in the U.S., has its own quirks, traditions and terminology. While locals call it the ACIT, it is known as the Alhambra in Baltimore and Washington.

It is the reward of traditional powers such as DeMatha Catholic of Hyattsville, the 21-time champion, and a showcase for talent, as Carmelo Anthony (Towson Catholic, New York Knicks) and Rudy Gay (Archbishop Spalding, Sacramento Kings) are among the 10 Alhambra alumni currently playing in the NBA.

The March 13 quarterfinals matched Melo Trimble of Bishop O'Connell in Arlington, Va., who will play for the University of Maryland, against Mount St. Joseph's Phil Booth, the Baltimore Catholic League Player of the Year who is headed to Villanova.

"It's cool that we get to see so many top-notch athletes from teams that are nationally ranked come to Western Maryland," said Ann Workmeister, interim principal of Bishop Walsh. "It's a great experience for our boys."

The only high school in the Archdiocese of Baltimore west of Hagerstown, Bishop Walsh, "BW" in local parlance, entered this year's tournament with a 9-16 record. A half hour after a 101-39 quarterfinal loss to St. John's of Washington, which has seniors signed to play at Georgetown and the University of Miami, Spartans' junior Darius Berry was still wide-eyed.

Three years ago, BW beat St. Benedict's of Newark, N.J., by a point in the consolation semifinals. It is the Spartans' only Alhambra victory since 1996.

BW has been the host team since 1967, a year after it was created out of the consolidation of several Catholic high schools. The tournament is a paradox for the school. The more attractive its graduates made the ACIT, the harder it became for the Spartans to compete.

Carter, a BW alum, coached the Spartans from 1980 to '84, and again from 1990 to '96. Now the supervisor of mathematics instruction for Allegany County public schools, he pointed out the contributions of his former players.

"Joe Caporale, Dave Turnbull, Troy Thomas, they all played for me in 1996, and they're all members of the (Wamba) Caravan," Carter said. "So is Todd Logan. He made the shot that beat Judge Memorial of Salt Lake City in the seventh-place game

that year.”

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Carter tends to tournament details year-round, following the lead of Joseph F. Divico, a charter member of the Wamba Caravan and tournament founder who died days after its 2003 conclusion. A special education seminar at Frostburg State is named for Divico.

“The Alhambra helps fund one of our programs that benefits students with dyslexia and organizational struggles,” Workmeister said. “We want our students to do more than just collect canned goods for a cause, and the Alhambra (order) gets them involved in the Special Olympics.”

That sense of community was on display March 1, at the 10th Hooley Plunge, Western Maryland’s answer to the Polar Bear Plunge. Two weeks after members of the Wamba Caravan ran in and out of Lake Habeeb at Rocky Gap State Park, they were back raising awareness of those with developmental disabilities at the Alhambra.

There is team transportation, a welcome banquet and other meals to be coordinated. Saturday includes both a 1 p.m. Mass for tournament participants at St. Patrick in Cumberland, part of Our Lady of the Mountains Parish, and a slam-dunk contest.

Players from Chicago and New York experienced celebrity treatment in Cumberland. Philadelphia stopped sending teams once its Catholic schools became eligible for the Pennsylvania state high school tournament, but the City of Brotherly Love does send bread and Italian specialties, donated by Marchiano’s Bakery.

The local economy benefits from the only annual sports event that is regarded on a par with the high school football rivalry that is Cumberland’s version of Friday Night Lights.

“After the Allegany-Fort Hill football game, this is the biggest event we have,” said Mike Burke, sports editor of the Cumberland Times-News, which had a 12-page ACIT preview in its March 12 issue. “There are so many friendships made and sustained here. The Baltimore Catholic League coaches are up every year, whether their team is in or out. That’s as much a part of the fabric as the basketball.”

BALTIMORE BLUES

Like Bishop Walsh, Mount St. Joseph and Calvert Hall lost their tournament openers March 13. Calvert Hall handled Bishop Walsh in one consolation semifinal March 14, 75-34, but then was routed by Mount St. Joseph in the fifth-place game March 15, 99-66. Bishop Walsh fell to Benedictine College Prep of Richmond, Va., 77-55, in the seventh-place game.

Paul VI of Fairfax, Va., beat DeMatha in the title game, 48-35, making it one more year in which the BCL has taken a backseat to members of the Washington Catholic Athletic Conference.

The late Paul Baker coached Towson Catholic to a championship in 1962, the tournament's second year.

In 1982, Calvert Hall and coach Mark Amatucci capped a perfect national championship season at Alhambra. That team included Paul Edwards, whose nephew, Drew, is now Calvert Hall's top player.

In 1996, Mark Karcher and an upstart St. Frances Academy program won it all for coach William Wells, but that is it for the BCL, just three titles in 54 years.

Loyola Blakefield was in the final for coach Jerry Savage in 1976 and '77, but lost to D.C. teams. Another maddening finish for the BCL came in 2006, when Mount St. Joseph was unbeaten and had a state record 38 wins before it unraveled against De Matha in the final.

"It drives me crazy that we haven't won it," said Gaels' coach Pat Clatchey, whose parents, members of an Alhambra caravan in Baltimore, began taking him to the tournament when he was 10. "Every season our goal is to earn an invitation. It's big-time basketball, in a small-town atmosphere.

"The people there are saints, for all the time and effort they put in."

Carter, the tournament director, graduated from Bishop Walsh in 1972. As a junior, his Spartans beat unbeaten Benedictine of Richmond on opening night and thought they were in for something big. Instead, they ran up against DeMatha, coach Morgan Wootten and sophomore Adrian Dantley in the semifinals.

The Stags beat the Spartans by 25, then nipped Mount St. Joseph and Barry Scroggins in the final. DeMatha repeated in 1972, and again in '73. Both Dantley and Wootten, who compiled 1,274 wins as the Stags' coach from 1956-2002, are members of the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame.

Wootten's son, Joe, is the coach of Bishop O'Connell, a four-time champion, and it was left to his father to frame the significance of the tournament.

"The Alhambra helped promote national rankings, and awareness of the basketball played around the country," Morgan Wootten said. "The beauty of the tournament is that it has always brought in great teams, and they all stay in the same hotel. The camaraderie there is unique."

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