



Scott Credit Union Tiger Pride Tournament attracts teams from around region

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE – Youth teams from across the Metro-East area, along with teams from Southern Illinois and St. Louis, came together over the weekend to compete in the Scott Credit Union Tiger Pride Tournament, a showcase of youth basketball held at both Edwardsville High School and Liberty Middle School.

A total of 57 teams, ranging from third-grade to eighth-grade levels, competed in the event, which was a fund raiser for the Edwardsville High basketball team's booster club. The tournament also showcased the future basketball talent from around the area.



“It's an intense two days of a lot of teams,” said tournament director Eric Stopka. “We have 57 teams playing this year, but everybody's having a good time, especially as we head into March Madness on the college side of things.”

It was noted that the final day was on Selection Sunday, where the brackets for the upcoming NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament were announced that evening.

“It's also Championship Sunday for us,” Stopka said. “We typically play two pool games on Saturday, and then we try to have our championship brackets on Sunday.”

The tournament has in the past attracted many teams from around the immediate area, as well as teams from both central and Southern Illinois, along with teams from the Missouri side of St. Louis.

“Any given year, we have between 50 to 80 teams in some years,” Stopka said. “This year, we have 57 teams, spread everywhere from third grade all the way up to eighth grade; we have both boys and girls divisions. We have teams from as far away as Springfield (Ill.) and other small communities throughout the state. The best thing I like about it is that most of the teams that are here that are in the older groups are repeat returners; they've been here many years in a row.

“We try to run a very well-organized tournament,” Stopka continued. “Constant communication with the coaches, and great facilities here at the high school, and at the middle schools.”

The tournament has two major goals: To be the main fund-raiser for the Tigers' booster club and to promote youth basketball and its spirit in the area.

“Well, there's two goals,” Stopka said. “Obviously, for the booster club, which supports most of the costs of the Edwardsville High School basketball program, all ages, freshman to varsity, it's our primary fund-raiser for the year.

But what we've tried to do in recent years is we've tried to use it as a way to really promote the basketball spirit in the younger age groups.

“I have two boys that have been playing all the way from grammar school, and now up into middle and high school,” Stopka also said. “And, you know, these kids, they get a chance to play on the big gym (Lucco-Jackson Gym) at the Edwardsville high school here. We've had some really good players coming through here, so a lot of them find it really exciting. We bring in some of the Edwardsville cheerleaders; they'll cheer for some of the smaller kids and age groups and stuff like that. So we try to make it a real tournament-festive environment.”

In championships determined on Sunday, the boys third-grade division was won by the Centralia Junior Orphans, who took a 24-17 decision over the Staunton Junior Bulldogs while the Carrollton Hawks defeated the Calhoun Warriors 20-14 to take the B division. In the boys' fourth grade division, the Edwardsville Elite and ATC of Springfield finished tied for first with identical 3-0 records, but Edwardsville took first place on the basis of a better point differential for their three games. The Elite defeated the Clinton County Elite 22-15, the Roxana Shells 33-25 and the Future All-Stars 30-2 to win its bracket.

The Quincy Devils won the boys' fifth grade division, defeating Ball Hogg Academy 45-25 in the final, while the B pool was won by ATC, a 27-20 winner over the Germantown Bulldogs. The boys' sixth grade gold division was won by the O'Fallon Junior Panthers, a 35-31 winner over the Southwestern Illinois Jets Orange team, while the Eastside Blazers took a 41-40 win over the Jets Blue team to win the B pool. The C pool winner was a third Jets team, a 52-33 winner over the Troy Little Knights black squad.

In the boys' seventh grade silver division, Taylorville were the winners, defeating the Classics 33-22 in the final, while the B pool was won by the Jets, a 39-35 winner over the Southern Illinois Thunder white team. The Clinton County Thunder won the C pool, taking a 46-21 win over the Carrollton Hawks. Meanwhile in the eighth grade silver division, the winners were the O'Fallon Flight, a 42-32 winner over the Southern Illinois Thunder. The B pool was claimed by Collinsville's Junior Kahoks white, who upended the Fairfield Futures 41-38, and the C pool winners were the Elite Black, a 30-20 winner over the Edwardsville Warriors.

The St. Louis Majestic won the boys eighth-grade gold division, sweeping all three games in its pool, while the Clinton County Elite swept all three games in its pool to win the girls fourth-grade division.

The main focus of the tournament, for many of the teams, is to teach the fundamentals of the game while having fun at the same time. And as in most tournaments, early morning games can be very unpredictable.

“I'll tell you what, we didn't know how we'd play early in the morning, but I'm happy how we played,” said Edwardsville Elite fourth-grade coach Greg Norsworthy after seeing his team defeat the Clinton County Elite 22-15 in the first game of the group.

Norsworthy's team is a traveling team who plays in tournaments and also a league.

“We're a traveling team here in Edwardsville that we call Edwardsville Elite,” Norsworthy said. “We try to have tournaments a couple of times a month. We play in a city league as well. Our team is going to continue to be a competitive traveling team.”

Norsworthy sees his team as a opportunity to help grow and promote the sport locally while developing his players' skills.

“Oh yeah, absolutely,” Norsworthy said, “and Edwardsville in general. Basketball growth is an opportunity here. Today, we have several kids who play in St. Louis, because of a lack of facilities here. So we're trying our best to travel and keep it front of mind here in Edwardsville.”

Norsworthy has a very simple philosophy about coaching at the fourth-grade level.

“The philosophy is this: First of all, sportsmanship is very important,” Norsworthy said. “We talk to our boys about that a lot. And then, we talk about aggressive play, but not physical play that would be considered flagrant. We're very aggressive, but we're fair about it.”

Of course, the main thing is for the kids to have fun, and to that extent, Norsworthy helps organize team activities off the court as well.

“Absolutely,” Norsworthy said. “We really do that a lot. We do things together as a team; we'll go to Edison's and go bowling, and the parents are very supportive. It's not cheap to do this. Just buying uniforms is expensive, so we really have good support here right now.”

Norsworthy, a native of Lexington, Ky., sees much potential for the growth of the sport in the Edwardsville area.

“I would just say the opportunity in Edwardsville for basketball is really big,” Norsworthy said. “Soccer and baseball seem to be more developed here. . .we're trying to develop basketball here, and I want to be a big part of that. I'm retired, and I've worked with the mayor (Hal Patton) here as well. So hopefully, we can get this going.”

And of course, as any Lexington native, Norsworthy is a big University of Kentucky fan. In fact he had tickets to the Wildcats' 77-72 win over Tennessee in Sunday's Southeastern Conference tournament final at the Scottrade Center in St. Louis.

The same coaching philosophies Norsworthy has is shared by Roxana fourth-grade coach Pete Dugan, who was interviewed after his team's 22-15 win over the Future All-Stars.

“The kids played tough,” Dugan said. “Teamwork was a big part for us.”

And said teamwork is a big part of the game at that level, along with teaching the fundamentals and playing the right way.

“Absolutely,” Dugan said. “It's all about getting the ball in transition as well, and then having the kids get back on defense and finding their man.”

And of course, it's all about having fun with the game. And getting the job done as well.

“Overall, having fun,” Dugan said. “We like to play a man-to-man defense to really teach them the fundamentals of the game the right way.”

That many of Dugan's players play other sports definitely helps them in basketball as well.

“Yeah, absolutely,” Dugan said. “All these kids play baseball and football as well. So it's good to switch it up for them. And the kids have a lot of fun.”

And at this level, developing the fundamentals is also important.

“I hope that we develop our game, the fundamentals of the game,” Dugan said. “And again, going back to teamwork, that's the biggest part for us.”

And down the road, many of Dugan's players may be starring for the Shells' varsity at Larry Milazzo Gym.

“Oh, absolutely,” Dugan said with a smile. “I think all these kids will.”

In fact, many of the players may be starring with their high school varsity teams one day down the road.

“As a matter of fact, we've got two of the varsity coaches from this year have been helping in the tournament a lot,” Stopka said. “And it seems like they are spending a lot of time watching the eighth graders. You never know.”

And a tournament such as this couldn't go on without the help of many volunteers, who give up their time to make the tournament a success on so many levels.

“Obviously, this year's tournament is winding down,” Stopka said. “We want to make sure we thank all of the volunteers from the booster club, of course. They're all here giving their personal time to contribute to the cause, as well. And really surprisingly, although the Edwardsville basketball season ended last week, all of our courts are being manned and staffed by players. So I'd say that over the weekend, we've had about 30 to 35 players coming up after the season and helping out.”











[Dan Brannan also contributed to this story.](#)