

Tigers, Warriors set to compete in 35th Annual Prairie Farms Collinsville Holiday Classic

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December 27 2018 8:04 AM



COLLINSVILLE – Both Edwardsville and Granite City are set to compete in the 35th annual Prairie Farms Collinsville Holiday Classic basketball tournament, which gets underway Thursday morning at Vergil Fletcher Gymnasium.

The 16-team field includes five Southwestern Conference teams, a former SWC team in the Warriors, and some of the best teams from around the area and state.

The tournament gets underway Thursday morning at 9 a.m. with defending champion Springfield Southeast, who defeated the host Kahoks 68-56 in last year's final, going up against Oakville from South St. Louis County, the only Missouri school in the field. The Tigers then will go up against Quincy, one of the most storied basketball programs in both the state and the nation, at 10:30 a.m.

The third game of the day pits Rockford East against Decatur Eisenhower at 1 p.m, followed by East St. Louis vs. Belleville Althoff Catholic at 2:30 p.m. The lower half of the bracket starts with Decatur MacArthur taking on O'Fallon at 4 p.m., followed by host Collinsville meeting Chicago Hansberry at 6:30 p.m. Lincoln, Ill., meets small-school power Madison at 8 p.m., and the opening day concludes with Belleville East and Granite City squaring off at 9:30 p.m.

The tournament continues on Friday with the quarterfinals and semifinals in both the championship and consolation brackets beginning at 9 a.m. in both Fletcher Gym and the school's auxiliary gym, and concludes on Saturday with the final at Fletcher Gym, with the tip-off set for 7:30 p.m.

The Tigers go into the tournament at 2-6 but have played well in those games, and look forward to going up against the Blue Devils in their opener.

"Quincy's a very tough opponent, and we're looking forward to the challenge," said Tigers coach Dustin Battas. "We know it's tough competition, and we're looking forward to playing in the tournament again."

The Tigers continue to work hard in their practice sessions, a trait that Edwardsville is known for.

"We continue to practice well, and keep improving on the things that we need to improve on," Battas said.

Seniors Malik Robinson, Nic Hemken and Lavontas Hairston have been among the leading scorers for the team, and sophomore Brennan Weller gives Edwardsville an additional scoring threat.

Defensively, the Tigers have held many teams to season lows, holding Belleville West to 55 points and East St. Louis to 49 in recent games. The Tigers execute their defensive schemes well, and have shut down some of the best players in the state, having held

West All-Stater and recent Ohio State signee E.J. Liddell to six points and East St. Louis' Terrance Hargrove, Jr. to seven.

Although the Tigers' record isn't the best, the team is continuing to work hard and will be very competitive come tournament time.

"The kids are really working hard, they're not down, and their attitude is great every day," Battas said. "We are going to compete with some really good teams, and give ourselves a chance to win every game. It's all that I can ask for as a coach."

The Kahoks come into their tournament with a record of 10-2 and have one of the top players in the area in junior guard Ray'Sean Taylor, who's averaging 21.7 points and 5.1 rebounds per game. Another player to watch for will be Marshall Harrison, who's averaging 14 points per game. Cawhan Smith has also contributed with 8.2 points per game, and Keydrian Jones averages 7.6 points per game.

Granite City comes into the tournament with a 6-3 record, one of the program's best starts in recent years, and also owns a signature win over the Tigers 50-47.

The Warriors are led by seniors Zidane Moore, the team's chief ball handler who averages 15.4 points per game, Jerry Watson, Jr. and Davontay Mason, who both average 10 points per game, and junior Freddy Edwards, who averages 12 points per game. Freshman Christian Jones, who's averaging 10 points per game, gives Granite an extra dimension shooting wise.

The tournament should provide fans with excellent basketball throughout the three days, and a chance to see some of the better players in and around the local area.