

104 Years Of The Macoupin County Basketball Tournament - A Look Back

by Tom Emery
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MACOUPIN COUNTY - This month, the Macoupin County Boys Basketball Tournament will be played for the 104th time. This year's tournament will be held in Bunker Hill, and is one of the oldest high school sports events in the state.

The first Macoupin County basketball tournament, in March 1919, was a five-team affair in Carlinville at the local Nathan Hall, which was owned by a local clothier. The facility, formerly located on the northeast corner of the square, then housed a 62 X 36 basketball court on the second story.

Benld High School captured that first tournament, which also featured Gillespie, Girard, Mount Olive, and Carlinville. In the event's earliest years, games were set by draw. The first tournaments were under the direction of the Macoupin Oratorical and Athletic Association, which also administered the county track meets.

By the 1923 tournament, played at the new Carlinville High School, the field had expanded to thirteen. Three years later, sixteen teams took part, including now-defunct schools in Palmyra, Hettick, Modesto, Scottville, Chesterfield, Shipman, Medora, and Brighton. Over half the teams in the 1926 event have since either closed or consolidated.

Those smallest schools, though, provided formidable opposition. Tiny Chesterfield captured both the county basketball and track titles in 1924. The current field is seven teams.

Eventually, the tournament was hosted by the participating county schools on a rotating basis. With twenty-two titles coming into this week, Gillespie has won the most county championships of any school.

The Miners also hold the record for most boys' county titles in a row – four, from 1953-56. Staunton and Southwestern are tied for second place overall, with 15 each. In fourth place is Mount Olive, which has won twelve county titles, though just one since 1949.

Bunker Hill has collected eight Macoupin County titles in boys' basketball, the first in 1966. The Minutemen were also county champs in 1970, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1996, 1998, and 1999. All eight titles came under legendary Bunker Hill head coach Jim Hlafka.

County tournament fields are often wide-open affairs. In 1993, Staunton drove all the way to the IHSA Class A state title but did not take home a county championship, as Virden took the crown.

In 1980, a girls' county tournament was added. That event has been dominated by Southwestern, with seventeen titles coming into this season, including five in a row from 2003-07. Birds coach Steve Wooley has guided the school to twelve of those titles, more than any boys or girls coach.

Despite its age, the boys tournament is not even the longest-running event in Macoupin County. That designation belongs to the boys county track meet, which dates to 1904.

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