By Bruce Strand

Duluth Marshall has been perilously short of players this season, suiting up as few as six or seven girls.

Fortunately for the Hilltoppers, two of those, both guards with initials G.K., are combining for 58 points per game and have carried them to a 22-7 record, one game from the state tournament. They face Proctor on Friday in the Section 7A finals.

Gianna Kneepkens, 5-10 sophomore pours in 32 points per game, which leads the state. Grace Kirk, 5-6 junior is close behind with 26 per game. “They’re like peanut butter and jelly,” said their coach, C.J. Osuchukwuo. “They jell together ... they’re also competitive.”

Each in their fourth season, Kneepkens has 1,846 career points with a high game of 51, and Kirk has 1,686 with a high game of 49. “Gianna and Grace get most of their points from mid-range jump shots and layups,” said their coach. They are deadly from 3-point range: Kirk 53 percent and Kneepkens 44 percent.

Kneepkens also averages eight rebounds, four steals and three assists. Kirk, described as “the engine” by their coach, averages eight rebounds, eight assists and four steals.

GK-squared have been program changers, to put it mildly. Marshall had an 88-game conference losing streak before their era took hold. The long skid ended early in their second season when they were in eighth and ninth grade. Marshall went 22-6 that year and 21-6 last year.

Kirk is recruited by Wisconsin-Green Bay, Hampton and St. Bonaventure, and Kneepkens has an offer from North Dakota State among many suitors, Osuchukwuo said.

Marshall also gets solid play from sophomore Merlea Mrozik (7.2 ppg) and freshman Dasia Starks (6.4 points, 7.7 rebounds). Mrozek hit seven 3-pointers and scored 23 points when Marshall beat Aitkin 78-64 in the section semifinals.

However, the lack of depth leaves them vulnerable.

Three seniors who had been playing since eighth grade quit before the season started, Osuchukwuo lamented. “One choose another sport. I don’t know what the other two are doing,” he said. “Two of them probably would have started for me. They were good players.”

By the fifth game, four girls were injured, including a returning starter, Hannah Brawshaw, out for the season. “I had six girls for a six-game span,” the coach said. “It was a struggle, but girls stepped up and learned quick.” The Hilltoppers currently have nine players, four of them in their first year of basketball.

The Duluth News Tribune recently featured the duo. Kneepkens said, about her team: “We can be really good, because we all have different roles and everyone fits in with each other.” Kirk said, about her running mate: “I can’t imagine not playing on the same team as her. I’d feel really scared to go up against her, so I’m glad she’s in a Marshall jersey.”
Litchfield snaps 18-game skid against NL-S

The Litchfield girls had lost 18 consecutive games to New London-Spicer over seven years, most recently 72-31 on Jan. 24, before turning the tables on the Wildcats in sectionals Friday. The Dragons trailed 16-7 after a first half of horrendous shooting by both teams, then caught a spark to pull out a 41-38 upset.

Maddy Schoultz, senior guard, scored all 15 of her points in the second half, including four 3-pointers and a pair of clinching free shots with six seconds left. “Maddy definitely got hot in the second half,” said coach Shannon Walters. Sydney McCann and Laney Huhner added nine points each.

“The team was very excited about finally beating them, and beating them when it mattered, in sections,” Walters said. “In the past, our offensive possessions (against NLS) have lasted less than 15 seconds, so our game plan was to slow down and hold them to under 40.” The Dragons displayed that patience while catching NLS on a poor shooting game including 3-for-20 three’s.

Ava Kraemer had 14 points and 12 rebounds for NLS, a very young squad that finished 20-6 and tied Annandale for the conference title, but made its earliest playoff exit (second round) since 2007.

Litchfield (17-11) was then ousted by undefeated Eden Valley-Watkins 53-34 on Tuesday.

One last big game for Maple River star

An 18-point lead was not enough against Maple River and its senior sharpshooter Madi Schirmer in its Section 3A opener Feb. 27. Schirmer sank nine 3-pointers, seven of them in the second half, and totaled 45 points as the Eagles stormed back to edge Lake Crystal Wellcome Memorial 73-70. It wasn’t a school single-game record as she had 47 against Bethlehem Academy in 2017. Her career ended three nights later when the Eagles (17-11) lost to Waterville-Elysian-Morristown 58-55. She scored 2,398 points, the school record for boys and girls.
Six ranked teams in one section

By Bruce Strand

Six of the top 12 teams in the Class 1A boys rankings were among the eight battling in Section 2A Thursday evening.

“Many people are saying that our section is a mini state tournament,” said Isaac Fink, the Mr. Basketball finalist and one of the combatants, for Springfield.

Indeed, that’s probably more ranked teams that will wind up in the actual state tournament. Even the two unranked teams have 18 wins each.

Here’s what happened Thursday evening:

No. 10 New Ulm Cathedral (21-6) ousted No. 4 BOLD 73-70 in overtime with Ethan Kirchberg delivering 26 points, including seven 3-pointers, in St. Peter. Jon Zinniel added 18. Kirchberg’s last triple gave NUC a 69-68 lead, after which Zinniel scored after a steal and blocked a 3-pointer in the final minutes. Jordan Sagedahl hit 23 points and Carter Henry 18 for BOLD (22-4).

No. 3 Minnesota Valley Lutheran (23-3) pummeled the defending champion, Mayer Lutheran, 77-38, at St. Peter, led by Jake Kettner with 24 points, eight steals, and four assists. Jace Marotz added 18 points and Dunwa Omot 17. Mayer Lutheran finished 18-10.

No. 2 Springfield (25-2) got 37 points and 12 rebounds from Isaac Fink and triumphed 86-64 over No. 12 Mountain Lake/Comfrey (23-4) at Lake Crystal-Wellcome Memorial. Derek Scheffler added 23 points.

No. 9 Waterville-Elysian-Morristown (25-1) fended off Nicollet (18-8) by 71-61 in the other game at LCWM.

In sub-sections finals Monday at Gustavus Adolphus, Springfield faces Waterville-Elysian-Morristown at 6 p.m., followed by Minnesota Valley Lutheran vs. New Ulm Cathedral.

The section championship will be played Friday at Minnesota State-Mankato at 6 p.m.

‘Great Five-State’ playoffs get under way soon

The Minnesota Timberwolves and Minnesota Lynx are sponsoring a five-state NCAA-style fantasy playoff, “The Road to Target Center,” for all youth teams in grades 4-9, leading to an eight-team championship on the main Target Center floor.

Teams from Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin will play off February through April in their own state for a chance to reach the “Great Five-State Championship” final eight teams in Minneapolis. All teams will play 3-4 games in one day in the playoffs. Sites are Sioux Falls and Huron in South Dakota, Jamestown in North Dakota, Des Moines in Iowa, Ripon in Wisconsin, and eight regions in Minnesota: Rochester, Mankato, Redwood Falls, Moose Lake/Willow River, Hutchinson, Alexandria, Grand Rapids/Mountain Iron-Buhl, and Bemidji.

The “Great Five-State Championships” will be held at the Target Center in June and July in conjunction with Minnesota Lynx games. All players are being offered special prices for both Timberwolves and Lynx games. Registration and further information are available now online at www.pacesettersports.net.
MR. BASKETBALL FINALISTS ANNOUNCED

Matthew Hurt
Rochester JM

The 6-9 forward averages 36.7 points (leading the state) and 12.4 rebounds, and will play in McDonald’s All-America game. Blue-chip prospect has not committed.

Matthew Hurt
Rochester JM

Isaac Fink
Springfield

A 6-4 guard signed by Augustana (basketball & baseball), he averages 31 points, 12.3 rebounds, and 5.4 assists. He has 3,189 points and 126 career wins.

Isaac Fink
Springfield

Zeke Nnaji
Hopkins

The 6-11 forward set for Arizona averages 23.4 points and 10.2 rebounds, shooting 62 percent. A 3-year starter on 70-12 teams had dozens of D-1 offers.

Zeke Nnaji
Hopkins

Tyrell Terry
DeLaSalle

A 6-3 guard signed by Stanford, he averages 22.2 points, 7.0 assists and 5 rebounds, and has been all state tourney twice on state champ and 3rd place teams.

Tyrell Terry
DeLaSalle

Tyler Wahl
Lakeville North

The 6-7 guard, a Wisconsin recruit, leads a top-five team in scoring (18.7), rebounds (10.2), assists (6.7), steals (2.0), blocks (2.1) and shooting (54.5 percent).

Tyler Wahl
Lakeville North

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FOR STRONG TEAMS ONLY!
25 wins, then tears, for Hills-Beaver Creek

By Bruce Strand

Great seasons don’t always end in the state tournament. Hills-Beaver Creek’s girls had probably their best year ever, winning their first 25 games, but it stopped with a loss to old nemesis Southwest Minnesota Christian, 58-46, in the sub-section finals Friday evening.

“We hadn’t experienced defeat for a full year. We sat and we cried,” coach Kale Wiertzema said. “I told them I loved them, I was proud of them, and this loss does not define who they are as a basketball team or as a person.”

HBC was one of four remaining unbeaten girls teams in the state and had vanquished SWC 72-54 and 77-65 on the way to the Red Rock Conference title.

Their school has never gone to state in boys or girls basketball. SWC stopped the Patriot girls in sub-section the last two seasons also when the Patriots were 21-6 and 20-6. So, this one definitely hurt and sooth words were needed.

“We talked about the excitement they brought to the community, and the growth that we’ve seen throughout the year,” said Wiertzema, in his sixth year as coach.

“I’m not positive, but I think this is the best season for HBC ever. I know there have been teams make it to the section finals.”

SWC (23-4) nabbed their fourth straight sub-section title and a date with No. 1 ranked Minneota in the Section 3A finals on Friday evening in Marshall.

Sidney Fick, HBC’s career scoring leader with 1,922 points, bowed out Friday.

The Patriots could not find a spark on this night, though. “SWC’s defense made us uncomfortable,” Wiertzema said. “We talked all year about disrupting other teams by making them uncomfortable, and they were able to do that to us.”

For the season, HBC shot 40 percent and held opponents to a paltry 25 percent, but they got outshot for once by the E-Gals and fell behind by double digits early. Trying to catch up, HBC shot 4-for-22 on three’s.

The E-Gals had five double-digit scorers in Cybil Vander Top (15), Hannah Nerem (12), Holly Vis (11), Jazlynn Prins (10) and Maren Nerem (10).

Fick, 6-0 forward who’ll play for Dakota State, averaged 21 points and made 61 three-pointers. Bundesen, 5-8 forward, averaged 12 points and eight rebounds. The other starters in this grand season were Whitney Elber, junior center, who averaged 10 points, nine rebounds and four blocks; soph guard Abby Knobloch, who averaged seven points; and senior point Madison Spath, who took care of the ball (just 1.4 turnovers per game) and was the shut-down defender.
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MIB’s streak goes on, Maranatha’s ends

Mountain Iron-Buhl has advanced to state for the ninth straight season —while Maranatha Christian’s streak of state trips ended at nine.

MIB shut down Cromwell-Wright 50-31 for the Section 7A title, led by Macy Savela with 19 points. The Rangers, who lost to C-W 78-58 on Jan. 21, used a triangle-and-two defense that held talented cousins Taya and Shally Hakamaki to a combined 14 points. MIB (25-5) has four seniors who’ll play in their sixth state tourna-

ment. Cromwell-Wright (24-2) has no senior starters.

Maranatha Christian lost a section game for the first time since 2009 with the Annandale Cardinals stopping them 69-65 on Tuesday in the Section 5AA semifinals. Hannah Purcell sank 20 points, Taylor Medvec 18, and Kitri Reimer 15 for Annandale (22-6), which faced Holy Family Catholic in the finals Friday. Macy Smith tallied 19 for Maranatha, which bowed out 20-9.

Two No. 1’s fall in sectionals: Red Wing, Sauk Centre

The Red Wing girls, ranked No. 1 in Class 3A girls, were toppled by Austin in the Section 1AAA semifinals by Austin 73-70. The Wingers, who had won 17 in row, finished 24-3. They had beaten the Packers 53-46 and 72-39 in conference play. Austin (19-8) rose up for the upset with Hope Dudycha scoring 20 points, Colie Justice 18 and Emma Dudycha 14. They won at the free throw line, making 19 of 24, including 6-for-6 in the final minute. Red Wing was 4-for-6 in the game. Lyndsay Reps scored 17 and Sydnee Nelson 16 for the Wingers.

Also falling was Sauk Centre, the defending Class 2A state champion, ranked No. 1 since December. Albany (17-10) pulled off that upset 47-41 in the Section 6AA semifinals and will face Pine City for the title Friday. Sauk Centre finished 20-3.
Hopkins in, Wayzata not

By Bruce Strand

The state’s best girls team beat the second-best for the third time, with Hopkins heading into state with a 29-0 record and Wayzata finishing 26-0 against everyone else and 26-3 overall. Hopkins beat the Trojans 77-60 in the Section 6AAAA finals to earn their fifth consecutive state trip and eighth in nine years. The task for the Royals now is to end a string of three consecutive state runner-up finishes. Dlayla Chikolis sank 26 points and Paige Bueckers 23 for Hopkins and the Royals intense pressure unnerved the Trojans. Kallie Theisen tallied 18 and Mara Braun 16 for Wayzata.

* * *

Eastview (22-5) edged Rosemount 42-41 for the Section 3AAAA title with the Irish (19-10) missing two shots in the last 10 seconds. Eastview trailed 28-22 before senior guards Emma Carpenter, Macy Guebert and Lauren Glass led a rally. They combined for 20 of Eastview’s 25 in the second half and Carpenter’s layup with 25.6 seconds left proved to be the game-winner.

* * *

Defending Class 3A champion Robbinsdale Cooper earned a return trip to state edging Waconia 52-51. Senior guard Aja Wheeler drove past a defender and banked in the go-ahead basketball with 11 seconds left. Andrea Tribble hit 21 points and Wheeler 20 for No. 7 ranked Cooper (20-5), which started this season 1-5.

* * *

DeLaSalle nabbed its third straight Section 4AAA title beating Totino-Grace 65-49, lifted by freshman Sydney Runsewe with five 3-pointers and 17 points, and tenacious team defense leading to 22 turnovers. The Islanders (21-5) dealt with four knee injuries this season and one of their best players, Elaina Jones, missed the whole season. Nurjei Williams aded 14 points for DLS. Carla Meyer drilled 25 for Totino-Grace (16-13).

* * *

Holy Angels will make its fourth consecutive state trip after downing St. Croix Lutheran 60-53 for the Section 3AAA title. The Stars (21-7) had two key players transfer (Kaylie VanDerWerf to Burnsville and Destinee Oberg to Bloomington Kennedy) but kept their section dynasty going with a young lineup including sophomore Frankie Vascellaro, who averages just under 20 points and had 54 in three section games.
# MBBN Boys Basketball Top 20 Final

## Class 4A
1. Park Center 25-1  
2. East Ridge 24-2  
3. Hopkins 22-4  
4. Lakeville North 22-4  
5. Prior Lake 23-3  
6. Shakopee 21-5  
7. Edina 18-8  
8. Wayzata 17-9  
9. Cretin-Derham Hall 20-6  
10. Chaska 21-5  
11. Eden Prairie 17-9  
12. Champlin Park 21-5  
13. Tartan 24-2  
14. Maple Grove 20-6  
15. Blaine 19-7  
16. White Bear Lake 20-6  
17. Robbinsdale Armstrong 17-9  
18. Minnetonka 13-13  
19. Moorhead 20-5  
20. Buffalo 20-6

## Class 3A
1. DeLaSalle 21-5  
2. Waseca 25-1  
3. Mankato East 22-4  
4. Austin 21-5  
5. Princeton 23-3  
7. Mahtomedi 21-5  
8. Hibbing 20-6  
9. Mound-Westonka 20-6  
10. Bemidji 20-4  
11. Holy Angels 21-4  
12. Northfield 21-7  
13. Winona 17-9  
14. Delano 17-9  
15. Waconia 15-11  
16. St. Thomas Academy 15-11  
17. Hermantown 16-9  
18. Alexandria 18-8  
19. Fergus Falls 15-11  
20. Sartell-St. Stephen 18-8

## Class 2A
1. Minnehaha Academy 23-2  
2. Minneapolis North 18-9  
3. Perham 25-1  
4. Breck 20-5  
5. Lake City 22-2  
6. Jordan 21-3  
7. Maranatha Christian 21-5  
8. St. Croix Prep 20-6  
9. Melrose 22-4  
10. Caledonia 21-5  
11. Spectrum 22-4  
12. Osakis 25-1  
13. Albany 21-5  
15. Hawley 20-4  
17. Cristo Rey Jesuit 19-7  
18. Crosby-Ironton 22-4  
19. St. Peter 19-6  
20. Pine City 23-3

## Class 1A
1. Minnesota 23-2  
2. Springfield 23-2  
3. Minnesota Valley Lutheran 22-3  
4. BOLD 21-3  
5. Cass Lake-Bena 25-1  
7. Henning 24-1  
8. Ada-Borup West 24-1  
9. Waterville-Elysian-Morristown 23-1  
10. New Ulm Cathedral 19-6  
11. Parkers Prairie 21-4  
12. Mountain Lake/Comfrey 22-3  
13. Cedar Mountain 20-6  
14. Hayfield 22-4  
15. Randolph 23-2  
16. Ortonville 19-2  
17. Christ’s Household of Faith 20-5  
18. Cromwell-Wright 21-3  
19. Spring Grove 19-4  
20. Pine River-Backus 22-4
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Questions? Email info@pacesetternet.com or call 320-243-7460
## MBBN Girls Basketball Top 20 Final

### Class 4A

1. Hopkins 25-0  
2. Wayzata 24-1  
3. Stillwater 22-2  
4. St. Michael-Albertville 22-3  
5. Eastview 20-5  
6. Centennial 21-4  
7. Farmington 20-4  
8. Park Center 20-4  
10. Eden Prairie 18-6  
11. Roseville Area 20-5  
12. Chaska 19-6  
13. Maple Grove 18-6  
14. Shakopee 17-8  
15. Rosemount 16-9  
16. Lakeville North 14-10  
17. Elk River 17-7  
18. Apple Valley 18-7  
19. Robbinsdale Armstrong 19-6  
20. Rochester John Marshall 21-4

### Class 2A

1. Sauk Centre 22-2  
2. Roseau 23-2  
3. Eden Valley-Watkins 24-0  
4. Minnehaha Academy 19-5  
5. Holy Family Catholic 20-4  
6. Rush City 20-1  
7. Norwood-Young America 21-2  
8. Medford 22-0  
9. Caledonia 20-4  
10. Lake City 18-6  
11. Rochester Lourdes 18-7  
12. New London-Spicer 19-6  
13. Annandale 17-5  
14. Maranatha Christian 18-7  
15. Winona Cotter 20-4  
16. Stewartville 16-8  
17. Esko 19-6  
18. Zumbrota-Mazeppa 19-6  
19. Jordan 19-4  
20. Concordia Academy 16-7

### Class 3A

1. Red Wing 21-2  
2. Waseca 23-1  
3. Hill-Murray 23-2  
4. Willmar 19-3  
5. Cooper 18-7  
6. Alexandria 19-4  
7. DeLaSalle 16-5  
8. Simley 19-5  
9. Becker 21-4  
10. St. Paul Como Park 21-2  
11. Holy Angels 17-7  
12. Waconia 18-7  
13. New Ulm 20-5  
14. Mankato West 18-6  
15. Grand Rapids 16-8  
16. Hibbing 23-2  
17. Fergus Falls 18-4  
18. Benilde-St. Margaret’s 16-9  
19. Marshall 18-7  
20. Kasson-Mantorville 18-7

### Class 1A

1. Minneota 23-1  
2. Grand Meadow 23-1  
3. Goodhue 20-6  
4. Pelican Rapids 23-1  
5. Menahga 24-1  
6. Ada-Borup West 20-2  
7. Hills-Beaver Creek 23-0  
9. Cromwell-Wright 20-1  
11. Mountain Iron-Buhl 21-4  
12. Stephen-Arlye 23-1  
13. Parkers Prairie 19-2  
14. Pine River-Backus 20-4  
15. BOLD 18-5  
16. Wabasso 20-3  
17. SW MN Christian 19-4  
18. Lac qui Parle Valley 21-3  
19. Lyle-Pacelli 19-4  
20. Hayfield 17-8