Basketball, up north

*Trying to keep up in hoops, post-economic downturn*

By Bruce Strand

It wasn’t always like this, but state championships from the Iron Range and the rest of the northern tier of the state have been exceedingly rare in the last three decades.

Among Iron Range teams, only the Esko boys in 2014 have been champs since 1991.

“It’s time for somebody in the Northland to bring home a championship,” Esko coach Mike Devney said after the Eskomos beat Annandale in the finals. “It’s time to bring some respect back to the basketball community up north … I know hockey is king up there, but basketball should have a place, too.”

The Eskomos were acutely aware that no northern team had been state champ since Chisholm won the last of its four state titles in 1991.


The northernmost champion of either gender was Roseau girls in 2017; the Rams were also runners-up in 2018. The only state girls champs from the Iron Range have been Moose Lake-Willow River in 1982 and Chisholm in 1984. The only other girls champ from the northern part has been the Ada-Borup girls in 2008, 2009 and 2015.

North Woods, which would have been the northernmost boys champ, was runner-up the last three years.

State boys champs from the Iron Range before 1991 were Chisholm in 1934, 1973 and 1975; Duluth Central in 1950, 1961, 1971 and 1979; Gilbert in 1951; Duluth Denfeld in 1947; Buhl in 1941 and 1942; Virginia in 1916; Aurora in 1923; and Two Harbors in 1924. Other state boys champs from up north have been Moorhead in 1929 and 1930; Bemidji in 1936, 1948 and 1974; and Norman County West in 1987.

Rhett McDonald, Duluth East coach for eight years, whose grandfather Bob McDonald won those four titles with Chisholm, was asked for his take. He pointed to falling population, deceased economic power, and geographic isolation from the AAU programs.

“Populations are declining, schools have less money (and) families have less money to spend on sport spe-
cialization,” said McDonald, comparing now to the heyday of the mining industry, which started to slide in the 1980’s. “Whether people want to believe it or not, economics plays a large role with the sustained success of athletic programs.”

McDonald, whose Greyhounds are currently 13-2, insists that players and teams on the Range are “better than they have ever been — period.” But they have not improved nearly as much as those in, or closer to, the metro areas, where AAU programs give players the opportunity to play between seasons.

“It’s tough to tell a family from Ely to play AAU for a metro team that requires a three and a half hour drive (one way) and to make that trip multiple times per year.”

Dick Swanson, longtime basketball and softball coach in Duluth, still coaching softball at Denfeld, had some observations. “I think the vast differences in population, proximity, and open enrollment have given metro teams a great advantage,” said Swanson. “Thanks to Governor Rudy Perpich, transferring was made easier, even if it was — ha ha — only for academic, not athletic reasons.”

Swanson recalls that in 1990 Duluth East had about 1450 students while Denfeld and Central had about 1300 each. Now, Central is closed, East has 1458 and Denfeld 449, a total public schools reduction from about 4,100 students to 1,907. Grand Rapids has held firm with a number of Duluth area students coming over, 1,200 then and 1150 now.

“No jobs, no students,” Swanson said. He added, “We don’t ‘reload’ anymore. We have to wait for a good group to cycle through, like smaller schools.”

Of course, in Duluth and in other Iron Range towns like Hermantown, there’s fierce competition for athletes from another sport. “Hockey seems to be in fine shape,” said Terry Kunze, who follows pro and college sports for MBBB and led Duluth Central to the 1961 state title. “Duluth has always lagged in the middle school (basketball) teams which feed the high school. It takes dedication and work to make a successful program. They (hockey) are more aggressive getting kids at an early age.”
Crusaders clip DLS for lead

By Bruce Strand

St. Croix Lutheran outdueled Class 3A’s top-ranked DeLaSalle 74-65 in a duel for the Tri-Metro Conference girls lead on Jan. 16 at DLS.

The Crusaders (11-4), who took leads of 13-0 and 20-5 and hung on, were powered by Juel Skrien with 32 points. The junior forward shot 9-for-16 (three 3-pointers) from the field and 11-for-13 at the line.

Eighth-grader Laura Hauge notched 14 points (5-for-7 with two 3-pointers) and seven rebounds. Lucia Hauge supplied 12 points, 10 rebounds and strong defense. Clara Avery notched six points, 10 assists and five steals. Kenna Moon hit nine points while helping beat the DLS press.

“Juel scored a lot of points, but it was definitely a team win,” coach Dave Mielke said. “They share the ball so well, and all of them hit key shots when needed.”

Kennedy Klick and Nurjei Weems led the Islanders (10-4) with 12 points each.

Belle Plaine girls end WEM streak

The Belle Plaine girls handed Waterville-Elysian-Morris-town its first loss 61-55 on Tuesday, leaving each team with a 15-1 record. Belle Plaine’s edge came at the free throw line, going 20-for-28 while the Buccaneers were 10-for-16. WEM did not enjoy its usual 3-point accuracy, shooting 4-for-24. For Belle Plaine, Sarah Lenz netted 16 points, Leah Lenz 15, Lauren Johnson 13, and Jaylen Struck-Schmitz 11. For WEM, Brielle Bartelt sank 17 points and Toryn Richards 15.

Three girls teams remain unscathed in the past week -- Hopkins, Marshall, and Pelican Rapids -- along with nine boys teams -- Eden Prairie, Caledonia, St. Croix Prep, Perham, East Grand Forks, BOLD, Southwest Minnesota Christian, Fertile-Beltrami, and one we missed in last week’s update: Twin Cities Academy/Great River, a pairing of two St. Paul charter schools.

Glover hits 47 for Madelia record

Ja’Sean Glover broke Madelia’s single-game record with 47 points in a 102-59 win over Alden-Conger on Jan. 14 at home, the New Ulm Journal reported. The 6-3 sophomore guard notched nine rebounds, four steals, four assists and no turnovers. Glover is averaging 29 points and 8.4 rebounds for the Blackhawks (5-8). The previous record of 42 was shared by Kendall Peterson ad Paul Olson.

Hopkins foils Wayzata in 1-2 summit

The top two girls teams in the state clashed for the Lake Conference lead with No. 1 Hopkins turning back No. 2 Wayzata 87-77 on Tuesday in Hopkins. Senior superstar guard Paige Buckers pumped in 27 points and 6-4 sophomore center Maya Nnaji delivered 23 points and 11 rebounds as Hopkins (16-0) extended its Class 4A record win streak to 48 straight. Taylor Woodson added 15 points and Alayna Contreros 11. Jenna Johnson, junior forward, tallied a game-high 28 points for Wayzata (14-2). Scoring 22 points each were Annika Stewart, 6-4 senior forward, and sophomore guard Mara Braun.

Duluth Marshall pair each over 2,000

Grace Kirk of Duluth Marshall passed the 2,000-point marker on Thursday and joined teammate Gianna Kneepkens in that club. Kirk had 1,997 points entering the game and scored 24 in an 83-61 win over Cloquet. Kneepkens, who poured in 44 points, is a junior, averaging 30.4 points. Kirk, a senior, is averaging 19.4 points. The Hilltoppers are 13-2. This marks the seventh time two teammates in Minnesota have been 2,000-point scorers.

Hall of Fame Classic boys rescheduled

Poor weather caused the first annual Jack Link’s Hall of Fame Classic games to be called off Saturday. The three boys games were rescheduled for this Saturday. The three girls games were not rescheduled. The lineup Saturday at Anoka-Ramsey Community College will be Hibbing vs. Hopkins at 4 p.m., Eden Prairie vs. Park Center at 5:30 p.m. and East Ridge vs. Rochester Mayo at 7 p.m.

Mankato East takes Big Nine lead

Mankato East is the Big Nine boys leader after fending off Austin 58-52 at home Monday. The two perennial Class 3A powers shared the conference title last year. Jax Madison, senior guard, led the Cougars with 20 points, sinking four 3-pointers in the second half. BJ Omot chipped in 15 points and seven rebounds. Agwa Nywesh led Austin with 16 and Ogur Gari added 10.
Albert Lea ends string of 27 losses to Austin

By Bruce Strand

Albert Lea snapped a 27-game losing streak against conference rival Austin, 72-71, on Tuesday in Austin. The Tigers last beat the Packers in 2006. Austin won the rematch, then swept them the next 13 years.

Albert Lea is 5-7 this year under first-year coach Lantt Benavidez, after going 3-23 last year — and losing 105 of 106 games the four years before that. Austin (12-3) is a 32-time state entrant including six of the last eight years.

“Being new to the area, I was not really aware of the streak,” said Benavidaz, a Texas native. “But of course it felt good to beat one of the top teams in the state. Our guys were definitely excited by the win, but also realized that this is not our ultimate goal. We will enjoy the win tonight and move on to our next opponent.”

Albert Lea sank five of six free shots in the last 32 seconds, with Javarus Owens going 4-for-4, to open a four-point lead, offsetting a 3-pointer at the buzzer by Austin.

“Give them credit. I thought they defended extremely well around the basket,” Packer coach Kris Fadness told the Austin Herald. “We had a hard time getting it inside and we had a hard time scoring in there.”

It was a sweet one for Albert Lea seniors, with five of them contributing — Chay Guen (19 points, 10 rebounds), Connor Veldman (15 points, six rebounds, eight assists), Owens (12 points), Andrew Willner (10 points), and Koby Hendrickson (six rebounds, nine assists).

“This win is a confidence booster for our team,” Benavidaz said, “and we are ready to build off of this and try to improve every single day.”

Austin had dueled Big Nine arch rival Mankato East on the road the night before, losing 58-52. And the Packers lost a starter, Ogur Gari, to a knee injury in the opening minutes. Okey Okey scored 18 points, Agwa Nywesh 13, Teyghan Hovland 12 and Pierre Lilly 12. The Packers will get their chance for payback on Feb. 28 at Albert Lea in the conference finale.
Two Minnesotans have led Big Ten teams to close victories over the Gopher women recently, both at Williams Arena. Northwestern nipped the Gophers 56-54 on Jan. 9 with Elk River’s Abi Scheid pumping in 24 points, including 4-for-6 shooting on three’s. Iowa rallied to beat Iowa 76-75 on Jan. 16, led by Watertown-Mayer’s Monica Czinano with 21 points, sinking 10 of 11 free shots. Scheid, a 6-2 senior forward, is averaging 11.9 points and 4.3 rebounds for Northwestern. Czinano, 6-3 sophomore forward/center, is averaging 15.7 points and 4.7 rebounds for Iowa. Meanwhile, the lone Minnesotan playing for the Gophers, guard Sara Scalia, is having a fine freshman season, averaging 11.4 points and 4.7 rebounds.
Pacesetter’s youth state tourneys, leading to Great Five-State, coming up

Pacesetter Sports will conduct its 28th annual Minnesota Youth Basketball Championships for teams in grades 4-9, starting with region playoffs from February through April.

This one-class, statewide competition involving 600 to 800 teams will start with eight regional qualifiers.

The regionals are as follows. Region 1 in Rochester and Stewartville, Region 2 in Mankato, Region 3 in Redwood Falls, Region 4 in Mora and Willow River, Region 5 in Paynesville, Region 6 in Alexandria, Region 7 in Grand Rapids and Mountain Iron-Buhl, and Region 8 in Bemidji.

The region champions are invited to the Minnesota Youth Basketball State Championships in Maple Grove in June. The champion and runner-up at the state tournament are invited to the Pacesetter Great Five-State Championships in Minneapolis along with top teams from Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota and South Dakota.

All teams in that tournament will have at least one game on the main Target Center floor.

Teams may register online now by visiting our web site at www.pacesettersports.net.

Officials needed

Officials interested in working Pacesetter basketball tournaments from March through July should write to jeff@pacesetternet.com. See www.pacesettersports.net for more information.
## STATE BOYS TOP 20 RANKINGS

### CLASS 4A
1. Eden Prairie (2) 14-0
2. Eastview (3) 13-2
3. Cretin-Derham Hall (4) 12-2
4. Shakopee (2) 11-2
5. Hopkins (6) 10-4
6. Robbinsdale Armstrong (6) 11-1
7. Park Center (5) 8-3
8. Lakeville South (1) 12-2
9. Chaska (2) 12-3
10. East Ridge (4) 11-4
11. Prior Lake (2) 7-5
12. Tartan (4) 13-1
13. Champlin Park (5) 8-5
14. Lakeville North (3) 7-6
15. Spring Lake Park (5) 11-2
16. Minnetonka (2) 9-5
17. Mounds View (5) 12-2
18. Rosemount (3) 7-5
19. Rochester Century (1) 9-4
20. Cambridge-Isanti (7) 11-1

### CLASS 3A
1. Minnehaha Academy (4) 10-2
2. Mankato East (2) 13-1
3. DeLaSalle (6) 10-2
4. Totino-Grace (4) 9-4
5. Marshall (2) 14-1
6. Waconia (6) 9-4
7. Delano (5) 11-2
8. St. Cloud Apollo (8) 12-1
9. Austin (1) 11-3
10. St. Peter (2) 10-5
11. Mound Westonka (6) 9-4
12. Columbia Heights (4) 7-3
13. Minneapolis Henry 10-3
14. St. Croix Lutheran (3) 8-5
15. Holy Angels (3) 9-4
16. Bloomington Kennedy (3) 9-5
17. Bemidji 8-4
18. Hibbing 9-5
19. Princeton (7) 11-3
20. South St. Paul (3) 11-4

### CLASS 2A
1. Caledonia (1) 14-0
2. Waseca (2) 11-3
3. Lake City (1) 12-1
4. Minneapolis North (5) 8-5
5. St. Croix Prep (4) 15-0
6. Perham (8) 11-0
7. East Grand Forks (8) 12-0
8. Stewartville (1) 13-2
9. Minnesota Valley Lutheran (2) 14-1
10. Rockford (5) 12-2
11. Eden Valley-Watkins (6) 11-1
12. Osakis (6) 14-1
13. Albany (6) 10-4
14. Fergus Falls (8) 10-4
15. Litchfield (5) 11-4
16. Annandale (6) 10-2
17. Virginia (7) 12-2
18. Pine City (6) 14-1
19. Esko (7) 9-4
20. Moose Lake-Willow River (7) 12-3

### CLASS 1A
1. BOLD (2) 14-0
2. Henning (6) 14-1
3. Ada-Borup (8) 11-1
4. Southwest MN Christian (3) 15-0
5. Waterville-Elysian-Morristown (2) 14-1
6. West Central Area (6) 12-2
7. Springfield (2) 14-1
8. Fertile-Beltrami (8) 16-0
9. Blooming Prairie (1) 10-1
10. Cromwell-Wright (5) 12-1
11. New Ulm Cathedral (2) 13-1
12. Hayfield (1) 11-3
13. Mountain Lake-Comfrey (2) 11-2
15. Parkers Prairie (6) 10-3
17. Nashwauk-Keewatin (7) 11-3
18. Norman Co. East/Ulen-Hitterdal (6) 11-4
19. Martin County West (2) 13-1
20. Nevis (5) 11-1
BOYS & GIRLS ENTERING GRADERS 6-10

Willmar Community Christian School

Tuesday-Thursday

June 9-11

Tues: 10am-8pm • Wed: 8:30am-8pm • Thurs: 8:30am-4pm

Player Fee: $250 - 28 hours, includes 5 meals & 7 snacks

REGISTER ONLINE: www.pacesettersports.net

REGISTER EARLY! Minimum of 20 players needed by JUNE 1 to hold this camp.

Questions? Call Pacesetter at 320-243-7460 or email info@pacesetternet.com

FEATUREING:

JOHN CARLSON

• Former Litchfield Boys Head Coach
• MN Coach of the Year 2000
• Record 469 - 307
• MN BB Coaches Assoc. Hall of Fame

Examples of skills taught at Pacesetter camps:
• Shooting form
• Jump shooting (age appropriate)
• Dribbling
• Passing
• Ball handling
• Scoops
• Post Moves: 9 Options
• Shooting off dribble and pass
• Ball handling against pressure
• Crossovers, between legs, behind back, reverse pivot

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# STATE GIRLS TOP 20 RANKINGS

## CLASS 4A

1. Hopkins (6) 16-0  
2. Wayzata (6) 14-2  
3. Farmington (1) 14-2  
4. St. Michael-Albertville (8) 11-3  
5. Centennial (5) 14-2  
6. Park Center (5) 12-3  
7. Stillwater (4) 11-4  
8. Rosemount (3) 14-2  
9. Maple Grove (8) 12-3  
10. Chaska (2) 13-4  
11. Elk River (8) 11-4  
12. Eden Prairie (2) 10-7  
13. Shakopee (2) 10-5  
14. Minnetonka (2) 10-5  
15. Burnsville (3) 10-5  
16. Blaine (7) 11-4  
17. Minneapolis South (6) 15-2  
18. Forest Lake (7) 13-3  
19. Rochester Mayo (1) 11-4  
20. Robbinsdale Cooper (6) 13-4

## CLASS 3A

1. DeLaSalle (4) 10-4  
2. Becker (5) 11-2  
3. Simley (3) 13-2  
4. Marshall (2) 15-0  
5. Holy Angels (6) 9-5  
6. Austin (1) 14-3  
7. Red Wing (1) 15-2  
8. Waconia (2) 11-5  
9. St. Paul Como Park (3) 10-4  
10. Hill-Murray (4) 10-6  
11. Mahtomedi (4) 12-3  
12. Alexandria (8) 13-4  
13. Hermantown (7) 15-1  
14. Mankato West (2) 11-5  
15. Hutchinson (2) 11-4  
16. St. Croix Lutheran (3) 11-4  
17. Richfield (6) 15-1  
18. St. Peter (2) 11-4  
19. Bemidji (8) 11-4  
20. Big Lake (5) 10-5

## CLASS 2A

1. Sauk Centre (6) 15-1  
2. Fergus Falls (8) 14-1  
3. Rochester Lourdes (1) 12-2  
4. New London-Spicer (3) 15-1  
5. Minnehaha Academy (4) 12-3  
6. Proctor (7) 16-1  
7. Goodhue (1) 17-1  
8. Providence (5) 15-4  
9. Pelican Rapids (8) 16-0  
10. Waseca (2) 14-3  
11. Duluth Marshall (7) 12-2  
12. Belle Plaine (2) 14-1  
13. Pine City (6) 13-1  
15. Mesabi East (7) 13-2  
16. Stewartville (1) 12-6  
17. Lake City (1) 16-4  
18. Winona Cotter (1) 15-3  
19. Royalton (6) 13-2  
20. Holy Family (5) 9-6

## CLASS 1A

1. Minneota (3) 16-1  
2. Cromwell-Wright (7) 14-2  
3. Mountain Iron-Buhl (7) 10-4  
4. Walker-Hackensack-Akeley (5) 13-1  
5. Waterville-Elysian-Morristown (2) 15-1  
6. Henning (6) 15-1  
7. Blooming Prairie (1) 12-2  
8. Mayer Lutheran (4) 14-2  
9. Cherry (7) 12-3  
10. Hills-Beaver Creek (3) 13-1  
11. Heritage Christian (4) 10-5  
12. Southwest MN Christian (3) 12-3  
13. Sleepy Eye St. Mary’s (2) 14-2  
15. Springfield (2) 12-3  
16. Buffalo Lake-Hector-Stewart (2) 11-3  
17. Red Lake County Central (8) 13-1  
18. BOLD (2) 12-5  
19. Southland (1) 10-5  
20. Warren-Alvarado-Oslo (8) 12-3