

Commentary

Sports predictions for the New Year

As 2006 ended, it made me wonder, what could be in store for the sports world, at the high school, collegiate and pro levels, in 2007?

If anyone doubts my ability to prognosticate the future, here are some predictions I correctly stated in a similar commentary about a year ago. I said the University at Buffalo Bulls football team would win two games, and the Buffalo Bills would fire Tom Donohoe as General Manager and release Eric Moulds and Mike Williams, which all happened. Some of my Section VI high school predictions that came true included Orchard Park and Amherst boys lacrosse; Amherst girls lacrosse; Orchard Park, Iroquois, and Lackawanna football and Orchard Park baseball all winning section titles and Williamsville North diver Casey Matthews claiming her second state diving title in three years.

With those kind of results, bet on these 2007 sports predictions occurring, beginning with the local high school scene.

In boys hoops, look for Niagara Falls to beat Sweet Home for the Section VI Class AA title and St. Joe's to roll to a Catholic state title. In girls hoops, Jamestown should beat Lancaster for the Class AA section crown while Hamburg and Williamsville East battle it out for

top honors in Class A.

Expect Williamsville North hockey to finally break its curse of not winning back-to-back Division I state titles with its fourth championship in six years. For the first time, Sweet Home will win the Section VI Western New York Varsity Hockey Federation title and qualify for the Division II state playoffs. St. Joe's will cruise to another Catholic state title.

In boys swimming, Amherst and Williamsville East should surprise many at ECICs and sectionals. Orchard Park is a lock to send somebody to state's.

In the spring, Orchard Park boys lacrosse will once again win a Class A section title, but look for Hamburg to give Amherst headaches in the Class B finals. Other spring teams who should win section titles are Amherst and East Aurora girls lacrosse and Williamsville South softball and baseball.

Jumping ahead to the fall, Orchard Park, Iroquois and Lackawanna football should once again vie for section titles. Also expect big things from Starpoint, Clarence and North Tonawanda.

In girls soccer, Williamsville East should return enough firepower to win its second straight Class A section title over rival Grand Island. Other fall teams who should vie for section titles include Kenmore East and West soccer, Sweet Home and Lancaster girls volleyball and Eden boys volleyball. Sweet Home and Williamsville North field hockey will meet again for the Class A section crown. Matthews should close out her high school diving career with her third state title in four years.

On the professional sports scene in Buffalo, expect the Bills to lose London Fletcher and Nate Clements to free agency and pick several defensive linemen in April's NFL draft.

The Buffalo Sabres will finish as the No. 1 seed in the Eastern Conference for the NHL playoffs, advance to the Stanley Cup finals and beat Anaheim in seven games.

I'm also sure UB's football team will pick up three wins, and Joe Mesi should beat more obscure boxers and never fight in New York State.

Let the guessing begin.



PATRICK NAGY

Sports Reporter

Sweet Home boys win Ken-Ton tournament, Rankin named MVP

by **PATRICK J. NAGY**
Reporter

Sweet Home went back to basics to win the Ken-Ton Holiday Tournament.

The Panthers hit eight three-pointers and had four players in double figures as Sweet Home rolled to a 73-56 final victory over host school Kenmore West on Thursday.

"It's always nice to go in and win a tournament," said Sweet Home coach Paul Schintzius. "I was happy we got back on track."

Sweet Home had lost its last two games, 58-57, to St. Joe's and, 58-53, against Orchard Park. In those games, plus a defeat earlier in the season to Grover Cleveland, the Panthers were outshot from three-point range, 24-6. Against the Blue Devils, Sweet Home hit eight three's to Kenmore West's five. Six of the Panthers' three's came in the first half, split three apiece by Eric Schnirel and Terrell Rankin. Schnirel hit another two three's in the second half, finished with 17 points, and was named to the all-tournament team. Rankin led Sweet Home with 22 points to earn tournament MVP honors.

"That opens everything else inside," said Schintzius. "When our perimeter game is not going, we're going to face a ton of zone and forces Glenroy (Carr) and Ali (Ramadan) to play in tight quarters and it's hard for them to get

wiggle room because other teams sag for the double team. But we hit three's early which stretched out the defense and allowed some inside opportunities for Glenroy and Ali, especially in the second half."

Carr and Ramadan each finished with 12 points. Ramadan also grabbed nine rebounds.

Tiny point guard Steven Roberts added six points, four points coming off first quarter steals. He also dished out eight assists.

Sweet Home led Kenmore West, 17-11, after the first quarter and outscored them, 21-11, in the second quarter for a 38-22 advantage.

Joe Mogavero led Kenmore West with 16 points and five rebounds. Mike Maritato and Edvin Ramulic each scored 10.

The Panthers played a much better game than its first rounder with Kenmore East last Wednesday.

The good news was Sweet Home won, 50-37. The bad news was they didn't play very well.

"It was sloppy," said Schintzius. "The shots were not falling and the tempo was very slow and deliberate. Kenmore East plays a lot of zone and it forced us to be patient. We weren't getting easy looks in transition and it made us take time off the clock."

Schintzius also credits Kenmore East's players' athletic abilities for giving his team problems.

It also didn't help that the game was moved to Kenmore West because the original venue, Kenmore East, lost power from a boiler room malfunction. Schintzius said his team had been practicing for Kenmore East's gym, a smaller, confined venue, where they could trap and press, as opposed to Kenmore West's, which he said is similar to the size of University at Buffalo's Alumni Arena.

Sweet Home led, 9-8, after the first quarter and came back from an eight-point deficit to tie the game at 19-19 by halftime.

At halftime, Schintzius challenged Rankin, who had only scored five points.

"I said 'you're way too good a player as a senior to have five points in the first half. We run through you. You're our heart and soul offensively. If we're going to win, you're going to have to give us more,'" he said.

Rankin responded with a productive second half, scoring 11 points in the third quarter as Sweet Home built a 36-29 lead, and another 10 in the fourth. He finished with 26.

Josh Parker only scored five but made a timely three in the second quarter when the Panthers trailed, Schintzius said.

Schnirel added seven points. Carr and Ramadan combined for eight points.

It was Sweet Home's first appearance in the tournament under Schintzius.

Sweet Home (3-1, 6-3) hosts Williamsville North at 7:30 p.m. Friday. Its next five games are on the road.

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Best quarter sparks Sharks' tourney victory

by **PATRICK J. NAGY**
Reporter

Sister Maria Pares has coached a lot of girls basketball teams in her tenure with Sacred Heart Academy but even she was amazed by her team's first quarter performance against Frontier in the Fredonia Xpress Holiday Tournament finals on Friday.

The Sharks (8-0) outscored Frontier, 23-3, in the first quarter en route a convincing 44-24 win. Sacred Heart won the Sweet Home and Al and Rose Pastor Tournaments earlier this season.

"It was probably the best quarter of high school basketball offensively and defensively that I've seen Sacred Heart kids play," said Pares. "It was amazing. They were setting screens, going to the basket and doing everything right. Everybody who played communicated with one another when they saw openings and talked with each other on the court. I was a very happy camper."

Tournament MVP Krystal Watson scored 12

points and grabbed eight rebounds in about 10 minutes of work. Katie Keller added 10 points for the Sharks, who led 32-11 by halftime.

Sacred Heart beat Holy Angels, 54-28, in the first round last Wednesday. They led, 29-15, at halftime. Meaghan Daley led the Sharks with 14 points.

Gina Ricotta was named to the all-tournament team.

The Sharks open the league portion of their schedule at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday against Mount St. Mary's at the Villa Maria Athletic Center, Sacred Heart's new home for games and practices.

"What we set the preseason up to do was for everyone to get used to each other," said Pares. "For a lot of these kids, it's all new. Defensively, we were fine. Offensively, it takes much longer when you got new kids, especially the timing with one another."

Sharks center Liz Subjeck, who is out with a badly sprained ankle, is off crutches and should return in a few weeks, Pares added.

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