

Devil's Den

Club, AAU, Tourney Teams, Travel Teams. Good? Bad?

By BRUCE JOHNSON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times



It all depends on who you talk to about the subject. If you talk to somebody who has no children, or whose children have already received their college education, they'll probably think things were better in "the old days," when kids learned their sports on the fields and blacktop of Franklin, Columbus, McKinley, Washington, Wilson, Jefferson and Grant schools. When they played their sports by season: football, soccer or cross-country in the fall, basketball, wrestling or swimming in the winter, baseball, track or tennis in the spring.

If you talk to somebody who has a child—and who would love for that child to earn some type of athletic scholarship to college (either from a financial or egotistical standpoint)—they probably think club/travel/AAU teams and their coaches are the cat's meow.

But is it good to just play one sport for 11 or 12 months a year? I guess if you're an elite player in that sport, that's how you became elite and that's how you stay elite. But if you're not elite, aren't you better served by experimenting with several sports? Isn't variety the spice of life?

Once upon a time, many Americans ridiculed the East Germans and Russians, for the sports academies they forced their youth to attend from a very young age. They'll just become sports robots, those people said. But these days American kids—and their parents and club coaches—have narrowed down what sport they'll specialize in by the time they're 12, sometimes even younger. What the heck would Sam Mitchell or Dave Townley have done? They were three-sport standouts at WHS, Mitchell playing all three major sports at the University of Washington. How about Joe Wiend? He was a football-wrestling-baseball standout at WHS, then went to Wilkes College in Pennsylvania and made All-America in football, was an NCAA wrestling champion and played baseball (in his spare time he played baseball all summer for Robert Turner's Westfield Merchants). How the heck would Greg Weiss have been an All-State football player and a state champion swimmer (and hit over .300 for the baseball team) as a WHS senior?

On a more modern level, which sport would Dave Brown (basketball?) or Brian Ciemniecki (track?) or Bryan Power (swimming?) have specialized in if they'd had to make that choice at age 11?

I guess it's just a sign of the times, another variation of the "keeping up with the Joneses" only this time in sports. If Jimmy or Jaime down the street gets a new bike, then our kid should too. And when they're older, if Jimmy or Jaime down the street gets a new car, our kid will get one too, only

better and shinier. If Jimmy or Jaime down the street is playing travel soccer, our kid should too.

And if Jimmy or Jaime down the street gets a college scholarship, well, our kid better get one too. (If they don't, it's probably the fault of the idiot high school coach, not the club coach or the fact the kid wasn't good enough.)

TRIVIA QUESTION

Today we have another Den Trivia question from *The Star-Ledger's* Bruce Moran, WHS Class of 1976. When the WHS boys basketball team won the 1972 state Group 4 championship—the only one ever won by the school—it had to beat two teams for a second time during the run through the state tournament. Who were those teams?

MURRAY HONORED

WHS has a long and grand tradition of producing catchers. From Lee Waring and Frank Ketcham back in the 1930s, through Bill Evans, Bobby Dougherty and Dave Townley in the '40s, Jeff Torborg in the late '50s, and then Dick Myers, Charlie Widmer, Bob Brewster, Kurt Stiefken, Bobby Hearon, Roger Brewster, Chris Masterson, Brian Flynn and Josh Ludmer, the string of outstanding backstops seems never-ending.

The latest in that line is Mike Murray, a current junior who has started as varsity catcher since his freshman year. Last Sunday, Murray was honored at the Union County Baseball Association's annual Hot Stove Dinner for winning the Union County American Legion League's batting title. The sweet-swinging lefty hit .509 last summer with 27 hits and 33 RBI.

Murray hit .386 as a WHS freshman, and last spring was even better at .400. He had 32 hits each year as Westfield went 12-10 and 16-7. Murray and classmate Tom Ricciuti, a shortstop/pitcher, figure to be the main cogs this spring on what could be one of veteran coach Bob Brewster's best teams.

LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

The Den two weeks ago was not meant to appear anti-parochial/private school education. The point was supposed to be that parochial/private schools make up a small percentage of the state's higher education institutions yet they make up a large percentage of the state's top-10 rankings in almost every sport. And since that's the way things are, and probably the way things are going to be for a while, then I felt they should play in leagues with teams that play by the same rules they play by—i.e., no boundaries on where their players can come from. If the kids at those athletic giants are actually there for the education, fine. But are they?

Speaking of leagues, it would be nice—especially with the price of gas these days—if somebody could figure out a way to return to the days of the county leagues. Smaller counties could merge, like Hunterdon and Warren do for their county tournaments. But it would keep things local, and create better, closer rivalries. I mean, does anybody from Westfield consider Shabazz, East Side or Irvington a big rival? And Kearny is a rival only in soccer. But Summit, Governor Livingston, A.L. Johnson and Rahway could easily be rivals of WHS in a lot of sports.

A Union County League would have big schools: Elizabeth, Westfield, Union, Linden, Plainfield, Scotch Plains; medium schools: Cranford, Summit, Rahway, A.L. Johnson, Hillside, Governor Livingston; and small schools: Roselle, New Providence, Roselle Park, Brearley, Dayton. Parochial schools, and/or non-football schools, would be put into proper size divisions. Unfortunately, everything in New Jersey sports revolves around football power points, so nothing will come of this idea.

CONTEST UPDATE

We're now up to 12 entries in the "What Year Was the Best for WHS" contest. Remember, your entries—with which complete scholastic year you think was Westfield's best—have to be e-mailed to me (at the address below) by midnight, Feb. 28, to be eligible. The winner(s) will get a night at the Jolly Trolley with the Corbin brothers, Horace and Dave.

So far we've had guesses for years in the 1960s, 1970s and 1990s. Some people picked their own graduating year, some went with years the boys basketball team had its best records. Remember, it's the entire sports program's total win-loss percentage.

Keep those guesses coming folks! There's only 11 days left to cast your vote!

REMEMBER WHEN

Feb. 20, 1959: Heavyweight Gene Barron's pin seals a 36-12 WHS victory over Scotch Plains-Fanwood in the first wrestling match between the schools.

Feb. 21, 1964: Wins in both the 200-medley and 200-free relays and sophomore Harvey Gerber's first place in the 100 butterfly lift the WHS boys swim team to its first Eastern Interscholastic championship.

TRIVIA ANSWER

Cranford and Thomas Jefferson (now Elizabeth), which was ranked No. 1 in the state at the time.

Bruce Johnson's Devil's Den appears every Thursday in the Westfield Leader. Contact him with comments or ideas at bj1019@aol.com

SEAMON NETS 20; ESPERON HITS 19, GETS 14 BOARDS

UC Viking Boy Cagers Snare Brearley Bears in UCT, 63-61

By FRED LECOMTE
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

Union Catholic High School staged a spectacular 10-point rally with three minutes remaining in the fourth quarter to oust the Brearley Bears, 63-61, in the preliminaries of the Union County boys basketball tournament in Linden on February 12. With 15 seconds remaining, forward Chris Esperon dropped in a lay up to earn the victory.

Esperon finished with 19 points, however he also dominated the boards with 14 rebounds while committing two steals. Mike Seamon bucketed a game-high 20 points, including four from 3-point range, grabbed two rebounds and committed four thefts. Forward Matt Peters accounted for eight points, including two free throws with 23 seconds left for a 61-61 tie. Obi Nwizugbo finished with six points, hauled in four rebounds and forward Matt Brown netted six points, blocked one shot and committed two steals. Corey Dixon and Dennis Hoag each netted 15 points for the Bears.

"We thought we could score pretty much whenever we needed to with our half court set, but defensively we did not do a good job. We gave them 20 points early in the game, played a little sloppy and got into a lot of foul trouble," said Viking Head Coach Jim Reagan. "We felt that if we could keep it close, the boys really believed that they could win the game. Defensively, our full-court press finally paid off in the end. We were able to get a couple of turnovers, a couple of easy baskets and we took advantage. We worked hard throughout the season and what was nice is for that it showed up here in the fourth quarter at the County Tournament."

The 10-8 Bears pounced to a 20-14 lead in the first quarter. But, working an effective three-two-zone defense, the

13-4 Vikings displayed their scrappiness, got to the ball more and executed more hustle plays resulting into hustle points in the second quarter. Led by Seamon, Esperon, Brown and Terrell Calloway, the Vikings won the quarter, 17-13 to close the gap to 33-31.

At the crucial three-minute mark, coach Reagan called a time out. A full-court pressure defense immediately paid dividends in Bear turnovers and Viking steals. Seamon drove to the hoop and rolled in two baskets. Peters nailed a jumper then



Fred Lecomte for The Westfield Leader and The Times
ROLLING IN A LAYUP...Viking Mike Seamon, No. 10, rolls in a layup against Brearley. Seamon finished with a game-high 20 points.

Seamon hit from downtown, sank a layup off a feed from Peters then hit two-of-four from the stripe. Esperon and Brown each banged in four points and Calloway contributed two.

"Our game plan was to apply more ball pressure, get the ball down low and score. I give a lot of credit to the guards who did a good job getting the ball down the court and moving the ball down the post," said Esperon.

The Vikings became prey to the Bears who roared with a 16-12 advantage in the third period but the tables were turned in the fourth quarter.

went 2-for-2 from the stripe to knot the score at 61-61 with 15 seconds remaining. Esperon then buried a layup to seal the victory.

"We work hard on all types of situations during practice and that helped the come back in the stretch," said Seamon. "We were down, came back with that hard press defense that we use. We made a some good plays, made the steals and converted the easy lay-ups."

Brearley	20	13	16	12	61
Union Catholic	14	17	12	20	63

Viking Hoopsters Nip Lady Lions, 33-29

The Union Catholic High school girls basketball team appear to be peaking at the right time by nipping Roselle Catholic, 33-29, in Scotch Plains on February 10. The 12-5 Lady Vikings have been on a winning roll and, recently, received the third seed for the Union County Tournament. The Lady Lions had received the second seed.

Leslie Hendricks bucketed 10 points and Katelyn Murray sank nine while Courtney Harris grabbed 11 rebounds for the Vikings. Amanda Sheeny and Latoya McKoy each netted seven points for the 13-3 Lions.

Roselle Catholic	8	7	8	10	33
Union Catholic	5	3	6	15	29



Jim O'Connor (NJ Sport Pics www.njsportpics.com) for The Westfield Leader and The Times
GIVING IT HER ALL...Union Catholic's Erin O'Connor finished fourth in the 100 backstroke and fifth in the 200 IM at the Mountain Valley Championships at Wardlaw-Hartridge in Edison on February 12.



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