

Meridian looks for repeat sectional performance

Gallatin County, Crab Orchard, Sesser-Valier need big efforts this week

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JUNCTION – Last season the **Meridian Bobcats** were on the brink making the school's first trip to the state basketball tournament finals since finishing second in the 1972 Class A state title game to Lawrenceville.

Coach Jeff Mandrell's club was just 16-minutes from making it to Peoria, leading Woodlawn 30-21 at halftime of the Salem Supersectional. However the Bobcats would manage just 11-points in the second half as Woodlawn rallied to spoil the Bobcats' dream of making it to Carver Arena.

A year later the Bobcats look to be even better than last season, having rolled to a 26-2 mark while remaining the top-ranked team state-wide and the ABV Preseason choice to get to the promised land in the city on the Illinois River.

Meridian has just a pair of losses this season, to Herrin in the semifinals of the Eldorado Holiday Tournament and a non-conference defeat at the hands of Missouri nemesis Charleston.

The Bobcats are a high-scoring bunch having lit up a lot of teams this season as they average 77.4 per contest with four players averaging double-digits in scoring.

The top scorer this season for Meridian is Joshua Jones, a 6-foot-5 junior forward who nets 15.4 points a contest. His frontcourt running mate Jerry Johnson, a 6-foot-4 senior, is pitching home 14.2 p.p.g. while guard Cameron Ballard, a 5-foot-11 senior, is tossing in 14.6 p.p.g. Johnson is the top board man for the Bobcats, ripping down over seven per outing while Jones has grabbed 6.3 r.p.g.

Just those three scoring wiz-kids would make the Bobcats a tough team to beat, but Coach Mandrell has more weapons.

Two other players are capable of huge offensive numbers.

Five-foot-nine senior guard DeMarko Ransom adds 12 points a night for Meridian.

Michael Schoffner is a 6-foot sophomore guard contributes 6.2 points per outing.

One of the bright spots this season for Meridian has been the improvement of Justin McClellan, a 6-foot-5 senior, who stepped up early in the season to give Coach Mandrell yet another good athlete to help run the floor and finish.

David Davis, a 5-foot-10 freshman (3.3 p.p.g.) has played in all 28-games this season for Coach Mandrell.

Meridian has a lot of big wins, grabbing the titles of both the Vienna Classic Thanksgiving Tournament and the South Egyptian Conference Tournament.

They have a win over highly-regarded Paducah (KY.) St. Mary's along with triumphs over rival Egyptian (2), Goreville, Massac County, Risco (MO.) and a very impressive 88-51 win over their Tuesday sectional opponent Gallatin County at the GEC/SEC Shootout.

Those **Gallatin County Hawks** have won back-to-back regional titles for the first time in school history following a 57-48 victory over Carrier Mills to win the NCOE Regional.

Coach Robert 'Radar' Patton has his team poised for a big showing this week at home.

The Hawks, after strengthening their early season schedule, have been playing their best basketball late in the season.

They won the Greater Egyptian Conference Tournament with a 52-50 win over Crab Orchard, a team that had beaten the Hawks two previous times during conference race.

The Hawks rely on the broad shoulders of 7-foot junior center Andrew Drone. Drone is the top

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scorer and rebounder on the 20-8 club that, after losing their first three games at a Tournament of Champions in Washington, Illinois to begin the year, have found their niche.

Drone is averaging 22 points and 10 rebounds a game for the Hawks. He is also blocking an average of six shots per contest.

Drone has a lot of help from his Gallatin County teammates as the other four starters are averaging a combined 36-points a game.

Patrick Lowe, a 6-foot-5 junior forward, who is the best athlete on the squad according to Coach Patton. Lowe grabs the rebounds that Drone doesn't gobble up (eight per game) and is second on the team with 14-points a night. Six-foot-two forward Andrew Cox is a senior starter who chips in nine points and four rebounds. Five-foot-ten junior Daine Hish is one of the top shooters for Gallatin County (seven points a game, four assists) and he gets backcourt help from 5-foot-9 senior Bryant Aud adds six points and a team-best five assists a game.

Hish and Aud are the top two free throw shooters on the team, both over 75 percent from the line.

Six-foot-four junior forward Wes McGuire and 5-foot-9 sophomore Mitchell Ramsey are major producers for the Hawks, who finished second to Crab Orchard in the GEC.

The **Crab Orchard Trojans** have also won back-to-back regional titles for the first time ever. Coach Jon Brown has gotten used to having Ben Kissing and Drew Johnson wearing Orange and Black.

Both are four-year varsity players and starters.

Meridian isn't the only team in this sectional to score a lot of points. In going 29-2 the Trojans have averaged 70.7 points a contest. Over half of those points have come from Kissing, a 6-foot-5 senior forward (20.7 p.p.g., 11.2 r.p.g.) who is the school's all-time leading scorer with over 2,300-points and Johnson (18.3 p.p.g., 4.5 a.p.g.) has over 1,000-points.

But the key factor for this season's big run has been the play of the supporting cast.

Hunter Arnold is a 6-foot-3 senior (8.8 p.p.g.) who just completed his only season of organized prep basketball. He added some much needed size up front.

Five-foot-eight senior guard Coty Wece (7.7 p.p.g.) and 5-foot-9 sophomore Caleb Perry (8.8 p.p.g.) round out the starting unit. Crab Orchard won the GEC with a 14-0 record and their only two losses were to Cairo and Gallatin County.

Although they struggled some last week at the Steeleville Regional, the **Sesser-Valier Red Devils** advanced to the sectional after taking care of the host Warriors and New Athens to win the title. Coach Chip Basso gets a rematch on Wednesday night with Crab Orchard, the team that beat them last February in the regional championship game on their own floor.

The Red Devils (21-9) have some solid wins, including a win over Woodlawn during the regular season while also splitting conference games with both Trico and Goreville. All three won 20+ games this season.

Tim Witcher, a 6-foot-5 senior forward, is the top player for Coach Basso. He scored 13-points in leading S-V to a 44-34 win over New Athens. Witcher is pitching home 17.5 p.p.g. while grabbing 8.2 rebounds. Having two senior guards never hurts and Sesser-Valier has them in 6-foot Kyle Stanley (12.7 p.p.g.) and 5-foot-11 Greg Jenkins. (3.2 p.p.g.). Up front Witcher gets help from 6-foot-6 junior Justin Kulich (9.8 p.p.g.) and 6-foot-2 senior Drew Dorris (6.8 p.p.g.).

ABV Projected Sectional Champion – Meridian.

Jack Bullock is the Editor/Web Publisher of A Baseline View.com. For the past 14-seasons, ABV has covered boy's high school basketball in southern Illinois.