
Big Reds look to finish near top of MAC Red

Third in a series of boys high school basketball previews. Today, county teams from the Macomb Area Conference Red Division: Chippewa Valley, Dakota, Eisenhower, Ford, L'Anse Creuse, L'Anse Creuse North, **Romeo.**

By John Hetzler

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Chippewa Valley

Coach: Kevin Voss

2008-09 Record: 4-8 MAC Red, 10-11 overall

Outlook:

Chippewa Valley has won three MAC Red Division titles in the last eight

years — as many as any other team in that span — though none

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MAC RED: Voss thinks his Big Reds squad will be competitive

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in the last five seasons.

Voss hopes that can change.

"I think we'll be very competitive," Voss said. "We believe we can be competitive for the top spot."

There's reason for optimism. A pair of three-year varsity players return in seniors Christian Fincher and Kevin Nickel.

Fincher, a 6-7 forward/center, gives the Big Reds size in the post, though he will be out to the end of December after undergoing minor knee surgery.

Nickel missed parts of last season with injuries, and Chippewa Valley hopes his return to health will help the team.

"When he was in our lineup, I thought we were a pretty good team," Voss said. "The problem was he wasn't in our lineup often enough."

Senior guard Robert Love gives the Big Reds a threat from the perimeter, and 6-5 senior Garrett Briningstool provides another big presence in the post.

Nick Gregory, a 6-4 junior, is a good scorer inside, and junior Joe Bastone is an athletic threat inside.

Junior guards Dominic Spear and Sam Bunkley, both good shooters, will see time in the backcourt.

They will be joined there by sophomore point guard Trent Jax, who played last season on the varsity as a freshman.

"He's just made great strides," Voss said. "We feel he's one of the most mature sophomores we've had."

Another sophomore, Mario Mashii, also figures prominently for the Big Reds. The 6-6 Mashii is an athletic player who can see the floor and handle the ball, Voss said.

Junior guards Anthony Santilli, Miles Adams and Antonio Ndonj also figure in the mix.

Voss said Chippewa Valley can play a big lineup — "We think we're blessed with size," he said — or go small with four guards on the floor.

"We've got a lot more options this year," Voss said.

Dakota

Coach: Bill Snyder

2008-09 Record: 7-5 MAC Red, 15-8 overall

Outlook: Dakota has plenty of options this season with players that provide the squad with versatility.

"That's the key word: versatility," Snyder said. "We have a lot of players who can play a lot of positions. I think the key for us is to get the ball up quickly."

Two starters return from last year's squad: Evan Walker and Mark Morris.

Walker is a 6-foot-5 senior forward. "Evan's strengths are an inside-outside game," Snyder said. "He's definitely a threat from the perimeter as well as with an inside game. That opens up our options."

Morris, a junior guard, set a school record by making 63 3-pointers last season while shooting 42 percent from beyond the arc.

"Obviously, he can put the ball in the basketball in varsity competition," Snyder said. "I know he's looking to build on that and we are too."

Will Stone, a 6-2 junior guard, saw considerable time on the varsity last season. Stone is a versatile player who can run the offense or play inside

Senior Deontae Rex also returns after playing quality minutes at point guard last year, and Snyder said he is dependable with the basketball.

Dakota will expect big things from Agron Nicaj, a 6-3 forward who is "very strong inside," Snyder said, though Nicaj is out indefinitely after undergoing surgery.

Deandre Smith, a 6-2 junior guard, adds to the team's versatility and is one of the best athletes on the squad.

Sophomore guard Alec Tortamasi played on the junior-varsity team last year, and Snyder said Tortamasi is a good shooter.

Quickness figures to be a strength for the Cougars, who may employ four guards at a time on the floor.

They will have to rely on their speed and excel in transition to overcome a lack of size.

"We're not a huge team," Snyder said. "We don't have a bunch of big bodies on the floor. Walking the ball up the floor is not our strength."

Eisenhower

Coach: Brandon Lemley

2008-09 Record: 11-1 MAC Red, 15-5 overall

Outlook: Things are looking up at Eisenhower, the defending MAC Red Division champion, and opponents will look up at Eagles center Corey Petros, a 6-10 center who has signed to play college basketball at Oakland next year.

Petros will be joined up front by 6-6 senior forward Joe Wirth, who has committed to play college football at Central Michigan, giving the Eagles strength inside.

"We will have a great inside game this season with three-year varsity players Corey Petros and Joe Wirth," Lemley said. "We will be a very hard-nosed defensive team like previous Eisenhower teams."

Eisenhower will also count on junior forward Brandon Bartneck and senior forward Dylan Valko up front, though Valko is expected to be out with an injury until Christmas.

"Those four players will allow us to be very strong on the glass," Lemley said.

While the inside game should prove a strength, the Eagles must replace key pieces from last year's league championship team in the backcourt, including Jeff Rogner and all-conference players Dragan Bijelic and Ryan Tomayko.

Senior Andrew Henk will play point guard for Eisenhower this year. He will be joined in the backcourt by senior Ryan Lemcke, senior Tony Zerafa and senior Lucas Thomas.

"If Andrew plays well and can run our offense, we will be very successful," Lemley said. "Our outside shooting will be a question that needs to be answered. We are hoping to see senior guard Ryan Lemcke step into our shooters' role this season."

In addition to Bartneck, the Eagles also will look for contributions from newcomers Jack Sauber, a senior guard, and Joey Zerafa, a freshman guard.

Lemley believes his team's defense will be a strength, following on the heels of last season's effort that held opponents to 45.75 points per game.

"The MAC Red will be as tough as it has ever been," Lemley said. "It will be a very competitive league."

Ford

Coach: Mark Bray

2008-09 Record: 1-11 MAC Red, 7-16 overall

Outlook: The season started on the wrong foot — literally — for Ford when point guard Evan Crank broke his foot on the first day of practice.

Fortunately for Crank and the Falcons, the fracture was small and Crank already has returned to practice. That has Ford looking up as the season begins Monday at Fraser.

"We feel like we have some nice pieces," Bray said. "We should be more competitive."

Reason for optimism begins with 6-foot-3 junior forward Aaron Cox, one of the team's top scorers and rebounders from a year ago. "Aaron is a big, strong kid," Bray said.

In addition, 6-1 senior forward Ramon Johnson also is back as a starter. "He's very, very talented," Bray said. "He's one of the better players in Macomb County, we think. He's as good as he wants to be."

Crank is a captain, and he will play at either guard position. Sophomore Mark Wouters also will see time at point guard, and senior Alan Ciochetto — whom Bray said is much-improved — will play center.

Senior Danny Schoenherr is another captain, and he provides leadership off the bench.

Junior Nick Boguth, Eric Posavetz, Josh Bitel, Sean Hughes and Richard Houser will contribute in the backcourt for Ford.

Up front, the Falcons also will count on junior Dalonte Blackburn, 6-6 senior Alben Djokaj, sophomore Les Olson and sophomore Anton Marki.

Ford will play three weeks the first week of the season — against Fraser, Utica and Troy — in hopes to prepare for the district tournament.

"It ended up helping last year," said Bray, whose team reached the district finals after struggling for parts of the regular season. "We'll see how it works this year."

L'Anse Creuse

Coach: John Haas

2008-09 Record: 6-6 MAC Red, 10-11 overall

Outlook: Speed is the buzzword for L'Anse Creuse.

"This is the fastest team I've had," said Haas, who has coached the Lancers since 2000-01. "We run the floor quickly."

Haas also hopes his team gets up to speed quickly as the Lancers must replace several starters from last year's squad, including Willie Cruz, who now plays college basketball at Eastern Kentucky.

Fortunately, 6-foot-4 senior forward Herman Washington returns for L'Anse Creuse after earning All-MAC Red Division honors last season.

"Herman's role has obviously expanded over the year," Haas

said. "He's called upon to be an animal on the glass, but he's expanded his range this year."

Senior guard Jerome Doggett also returns after starting several games last season. Doggett made 40 percent of his 3-point attempts last season while sharing some point guard duties, and Haas expects his attempts to increase this season as he moves off the ball.

Junior guard DuJuan Henderson is expected to take on an expanded role after serving as a sparkplug off the bench last season. Haas said Henderson can slash to the basket and he is one of the team's quickest players off the dribble.

Junior Giovanni Gordon will play small forward, and Haas said he has "improved a ton."

Devin Mitchell, a 6-3 forward, will help out L'Anse Creuse inside, and junior Brian Keyes will take over at point guard as the Lancers will try to push an up-tempo style.

Junior guard Jawuan Doggett also will see time after playing on the junior-varsity squad last year, and junior Terrell Wright will give the Lancers depth at point guard when he becomes eligible in the second semester.

"In order to play the style we have to have some depth," Haas said. "Fortunately we can play eight to 10 guys. We have some versatility."

L'Anse Creuse North

Coach: Jay Seletsky

2008-09 Record: 4-8 MAC Red, 7-14 overall

Outlook: Seletsky wants the Crusaders to pick up the pace as they begin their second season in the MAC Red.

"Last year was a tough transition," Seletsky said. "We really slowed it down. We're going to try to spread the floor and get the ball up the floor. We're going to try to be a more up-tempo team."

Seletsky's hopes rest with an experienced squad that returns three starters, led by junior point guard Calvin Curry.

"He sets the tempo for us, and he really sets the tone for us," Seletsky said. "He's a big factor for how we're going to go offensively and defensively."

Also back for LCN is 6-6 senior center Jesse Schienke, whom Seletsky said put in a lot of work in the offseason.

"Jesse's really come into his own," Seletsky said. "We expect him to be a leader."

Mike Osterman, a 6-3 senior forward and another returning starter, will join Schienke up front.

Senior Zach White, junior Ryan Lombardo and junior Craig Smelly each gained some starting experience last season, and all are expected to contribute this season.

White is a guard and one of the team's best shooters; Lombardo is a versatile wing who can play four positions; and Smelly is a 6-2 slasher who can get to the basket.

L'Anse Creuse North also is counting on senior guard Derrick Hanson, 6-3 junior post Drew Isabell and forward Jacob Ruhlman, who gives the team toughness up front.

"I really think it's going to be a dogfight," Seletsky said of the MAC Red race. "It's a really physical league."

Romeo

Coach: Dale Teller

2008-09 Record: 9-3 MAC Red, 18-5 overall

Outlook: On balance, Teller likes what he sees from his squad, one that can go 10-deep and will need to use versatility to overcome a lack of height.

"I've never had a team quite like this," said Teller, who has coached the Bulldogs since the 1999-2000 season. "But it's kind of fun to play that way."

Senior point guard Ryan Thomas, a three-year varsity player, is the only returning starter for Romeo.

"He's one of the guys who makes the offense run," Teller said. "For us to be as successful as we think we can be, we need him to distribute the ball."

The Bulldogs have six other seniors on the roster who saw playing time last year: guard Ryan Gregorowski, guard Logan Fracalossi, forward Ed Theut, forward/center Steve Saliga, forward/guard Spencer Szejek and forward/guard Jason Schirmer.

"These kids have played together quite a bit," Teller said.

Teller also expects big things from junior guards Nathan Fraeyman and Taylor Brynaert, and he calls both versatile players.

Romeo's tallest player is Theut, who is "6-3 if he's lucky," Teller said.

With that in mind, the fundamentals will be key.

"We have to be able to fundamentally box out," Teller said.

"Because if we don't, we're going to get hammered on the boards."

Romeo saw its string of consecutive MAC Red championships snapped at three last season, but the Bulldogs still finished second in the division and posted an 18-5 overall record. Several coaches said Romeo remains a team to watch in the league race, and Teller also feels his squad can contend.

"We're going to be OK," Teller said. "It's going to be chaotic, but hopefully it's going to be controlled chaos."