

A league of its own: Fall hoops in North Andover draws top teams and many college recruiters

By Bill Burt

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NORTH ANDOVER — There are fall high school basketball leagues. And then there is the Reebok Fall League at the Joseph Hermann Youth Center in North Andover.

"There is no comparison," says Merrimack College men's basketball coach Bert Hammel of the local league, which takes place every Wednesday night.

"This is the best around. I've been a lot of them. It's not even close. This is professional all the way around. There are rosters. There is talent. They have standings. They keep stats. There are college refs," says Hammel. "And the facility — the Youth Center — is phenomenal. It's a great atmosphere. It's packed almost every week. There's a reason why so many coaches go."

Hammel has two perspectives here. One as a parent — he has two sons, Lucas a junior at Central Catholic and Cooper a freshman at Methuen High — and the other as a college coach in search of new talent. In fact, three players on his Merrimack roster played in the Reebok Fall League.

This is the seventh season of its existence. In the previous six years there have been six different champions.

And if everything stays on course, with Central Catholic undefeated entering the final game tonight before next week's playoffs, there could be a seventh new champion.

The league was the brainchild of long-time Youth Center executive director Rick Gorman, who has an unbridled passion for basketball.

As the league has developed, Gorman has added a nice touch every year, like "pizza days" for coaches or players or a "grab bag" for college coaches with information on each participating player.

Gorman's son Michael, who is a freshman player at Anna Maria College in Paxton, Mass., understands the process of promoting area student-athletes as well as anybody.

And this league probably does it better than any other of its kind.

A few weeks ago, 15 different coaches were in attendance, including representatives from Merrimack, UMass Lowell and Stonehill. The majority of recruiters, though, are from Div. 3 programs.

"Division 3 coaches love this league," said Gorman, who usually is on the sidelines for Methuen High (Mass. high school coaches are not allowed to coach their players in off-season leagues). "When they come we will ask if they are here to see any players in particular and then we will set up a meeting. This is another avenue to help our area players play at the next level."

Several college coaches have made the trip almost every Wednesday night as the recruiting season heightens.

"Rick attracts the top basketball programs in our region and the games more closely match the intensity of regular season play than the typical fall league," says Worcester Poly Institute men's basketball coach Chris Bartley, who has been a regular visitor to these games as he is hot on the heels of Central Catholic star Luis Puelo.

"Having seen the league since it began several years ago," says Bartley, "I can attest to the fact that it gets better and better each year and is one of the premier leagues in all of New England."

Hammel says that Thursday morning might actually be the best part of the league. That's when Gorman, through his pen name "Fennis Dembo," who starred at University of Wyoming in mid-1980s, puts out a lengthy newsletter about the previous night's action ... on and off the court.

"Fennis" is not shy to praise or critique anybody, including players, coaches, referees, fans and the food.

"I can't wait for it every Thursday," says Hammel. "It always has my laughing. He goes after everybody. I love it. It's just a lot of fun. The whole is a lot of fun."