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Boys Basketball Preview: Shenandoah District

SHENANDOAH DISTRICT BOYS BASKETBALL PREVIEW: League Is Filled With Depth, Experience

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Fort Defiance's Tyreek Veney takes a shot against Riverheads' Landon Lightner during a game last year.

Daniel Lin / DN-R

There may not be a league in the area as competitive as the Shenandoah District.

From top to bottom, the Shenandoah is filled with talented teams with the potential to beat anyone, including defending league champion Wilson Memorial, which looks good early.

There's plenty of star power, too, with Wilson Memorial's Finn Irving, Buffalo Gap's Bennett Bowers, Staunton's Manny Chapman and Fort Defiance's Tyreek Veney the notable names.

Early on, the entire league has looked impressive — even a rebuilding Waynesboro team.

And while there's a long way to go, there's no reason to doubt any team is capable of beating another in the league and each one has legitimate playoff potential this season.

As another season gets underway, here's a look at the league's boys basketball teams:

Buffalo Gap

After going 18-7 a year ago and reaching the VHSL Class 1 state tournament, there's a lot of buzz around Buffalo Gap and its potential to do something extremely special this year.

Senior Bennett Bowers (19.5 ppg, 4 apg) returns as an all-state selection and arguably the best player in the district this season and will play a major role in carrying this team.

Micah Canterbury (10.5 ppg, 8.5 rpg) and Jackson LaPorte (5.5 ppg, 4.0 rpg) are also back, along with senior Tyler Hohenstein and junior Gary Hewitt from last year's roster.

Jamie Hewitt and Jackson Ingram are a pair of players gone from last year's team that contributed strongly, but senior newcomer DJ Strother is a player that could surprise folks.

After finishing as the district runner-up a year ago, the Bison are out for more this season.

And with a roster loaded with talent at the Class 1 level, they certainly are capable.

"There's a lot of excitement around our program after last season," said Buffalo Gap head coach Chad Ward, who is in his eighth year with the program. "This year, we are longer, more experienced, and have more offensive threats than last year's team. We know there are high hopes for us but the only game we are concerned with is whoever is next."

Fort Defiance

One of the area's most experienced teams this season will be Fort Defiance.

Under seventh-year head coach Brandon Fulk, the Indians have been a solid program.

But after struggling with consistency a year ago, Fort will look to right the ship.

Senior guard Tyreek Veney (18.8 ppg) is back as one of the area's top players, along with fellow seniors Henry Gutshall (6.7 ppg), Kaden Johnson (5.0 ppg), Jack Liskey and Alphonzo Bruce, juniors Sam Garber (5.6 ppg) and Conner Patterson and sophomore Bradley Hebb.

Although the loss of Josh Jones will hurt at the forward spot, key newcomers include four juniors in Dell Ray Jones, Jalen Alexander, Carter Fink and Austin Metz, along with a talented freshman that has already opened eyes in point guard Gio Armendariz Cruz.

With several guys with multiple years of varsity experience and a commitment that Fulk praised throughout the offseason, the hope for Fort is to contend for a league title.

"We break every huddle with, 'Together,'" Fulk said. "That's to reinforce it's about all of us. Each person has significant value in many different ways for our team. It's not about Coach Fulk, the assistant coaches or specific players. It's about all the many parts making up one strong body."

Riverheads

Another late start to the season due to football's success won't slow down the Gladiators.

After an inconsistent season a year ago that saw Ryan Farris (15.1 ppg), Levi Byer (9.4 ppg), Tye Morris (5.8 ppg) and Landon Lightner (6.0 rpg) graduate, Riverheads is looking to reload this year with a guard-oriented offense that is focused on scoring the basketball.

Bennett Dunlap (10.7 ppg, 3.1 rpg), Carter Mooneyham (3.2 ppg), Aden Slack, Chris Brooks and Gabe Milo make up the key returners for the Gladiators on the court this season.

Among the promising newcomers are four sophomore guards in Will Gardner, Jackson Brammer, Henley Dunlap and JP Crawford, who is an RHS golf standout.

With a large chunk of scoring gone from a year ago, Riverheads will increase the tempo in an effort to create more easy transition buckets for the entire team this season.

"We have a lot of new faces this year and with some guys still joining the team after another football playoff run, we will be working on blending this group together as the season goes along," RHS head coach Patrick Weller said. "I expect us to be playing our best basketball at the end of the season as guys learn the system and have a chance to gel."

Staunton

Fifth-year head coach Terrell Mickens, a Staunton alum, has a loaded roster this season.

Guard Manny Chapman (11.0 ppg, 3.1 apg, 2.4 rpg, 1.8 spg) is one of the area's top players while Prodigy Simms (10.1 ppg, 2.4 rpg, 2.3 apg, 1.7 spg) and Maaliah Cabell (9.1 ppg, 5.4 rpg) are also a pair of standouts that could be set for a breakout season.

From top to bottom, the Storm have depth and athleticism and it has been evident early.

Alex Stell and Andrew Johnson are a pair of senior newcomers for Staunton that could contribute in a big way and the team, as a whole, is aiming to get over the hump.

Off to a strong start already, there's reason to believe the Storm are the league favorite.

"Our goals are the same as everyone else's," Mickens said. "We want to win the hardware for district, region and state. We want to compete at a high level each game. We want to do that with great character and team work."

Stuarts Draft

With a reloaded roster and some promising young pieces, Stuarts Draft could be a surprise.

The Cougars went just 5-16 last year, but are off to a strong unbeaten start early on.

While Chase Schages (13.1 ppg), Devin Brydge (9.2 ppg) and Nate Wayne (5.9) are tough to replace, there are capable youngsters that have shown early on they have no fear.

Landon Graber (3.4 ppg, 2.3 rpg), Harley Frame, Isaac Wood and Colin Graham all return this season as key players for Draft under third-year head coach Brad DeWitt.

Among the promising new faces to watch out for with the Cougars is freshman standout guard Derrick Moore, sophomore big man Donovan Jenkins and juniors Izaiyah Ale Bell, Ryan Ramsey, Thomas Clements, Trent Cote, Andy Wang and Aidan Conner.

With a refreshing burst of young talent on the roster, the Cougars should be improved.

"We are very excited about this young team," DeWitt said. "This team has the potential to be very good defensively and allow us to play much faster. Our coaching staff loves how they compete and battle each day in practice. We are excited to watch them grow."

Waynesboro

The John Spears era has officially began with the Waynesboro boys basketball program.

The longtime area official and AAU coach takes over a Little Giants team that won just one game a year ago and has desperately needed stability on the sidelines in recent years.

Although it won't happen overnight, many believe Spears has the team improving.

Charlie Haynes, a senior guard, is the focal point for this Waynesboro squad while sophomores Zevion Robinson and Jackson Darden, junior Vaiden Hite and freshman Haden Morris are all key newcomers that Spears expects to play big-time roles this season.

As the head coach continues to try to change the direction of the program, he said his goal is for his team to win some games in the process and find the joy in the game again.

"We want to change the culture of the basketball program," Spears said. "To get the players to buy into that continued hard work each day in practice will pay dividends down the road. The goal is to improve each game and hopefully get a few wins to build some confidence within the program."

Wilson Memorial

The defending Shenandoah District champions could certainly make it back-to-back.

Josh Johnson (11.0 ppg, 3.5 apg, 2.8 rpg), Ethan Briseno (10.0 ppg, 4.0 rpg, 1.7 spg) and Taylor Armstrong (7.2 ppg, 2.5 rpg, 2.0 spg) are all gone, but Wilson Memorial is talented.

Finn Irving, a senior guard and the reigning Player of the Year, is back after averaging 19.5 points, 9.3 rebounds, 3.3 assists and 2.9 steals as an all-state selection a year ago.

Other key returners for the Green Hornets include Lucas Schatz (6.2 ppg, 7.3 rpg, 2.0 bpg), Eli Irving (2.6 ppg), Grant Wright, Aiden Podgorski, Max Vess and Colton Lavender.

Among the most promising new faces stepping up for Wilson this season are seniors Christian Pittman and Clarka Dana, sophomore Chase Snyder and freshman Addison Fisher.

With confidence brewing from last season and a talented roster once again, sixth-year Green Hornets head coach Jeremy Hartman has high expectations for his group.

"We have plenty of depth and experience back from last year's Shenandoah District title team," Hartman said. "With eight returning players and led by our seniors, Finn Irving and Lucas Schatz, we should be formidable again. Our size and shooting ability, along with our depth, should allow us to have good success moving forward this season."

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