

High School Boys Basketball

Shenandoah District Boys Basketball Preview: Storm Lead The Way In Wide-Open League

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Fort Defiance's Samuel Garber goes up for a shot against Broadway's Jet Gonzalez.

The Shenandoah District may be one of the area's most competitive this season.

Staunton, of course, is strong again after a run to the Virginia High School League Class 3 state quarterfinals a year ago, but Wilson Memorial, Stuarts Draft, and Fort Defiance are all strong.

The Storm were picked as the favorite in the Daily News-Record Preseason Coaches Poll, but were followed by the Hornets, Cougars, Indians, Buffalo Gap, Riverheads, and Waynesboro.

Led by senior guard Manny Chapman, who is one of the best players in the league and has an abundance of experience, Staunton will use its speed and athleticism to wear down teams.

But Wilson has shown the ability to get up and go early on this season as well. Draft has an athletic bunch looking to make the jump, and Fort's new system thrives on chaos.

Even at the bottom half of the predicted league standings, teams like Buffalo Gap and Riverheads are showcasing growth, and the Little Giants have some young talent.

The Shenandoah District slate was set to get going on Tuesday, and it could be a year to remember, with over half of the league looking capable of making a postseason push.

As league play officially gets underway, here's a preview of the Shenandoah District:

Buffalo Gap

Coach: Chad Ward (ninth season)

2022-23 Record: 14-10 (Lost to Franklin in Region 1B semifinals)

Key Returners: Gary Logan Hewitt, senior wing; Blake Robertson, senior, guard; Kasey Fitzgerald, senior, wing; Lance Simmers, senior, forward

Key Losses: Bennett Bowers, guard (19.0 ppg, 4.5 apg); Micah Canterbury, forward (10.0 ppg, 9.0 rpg); Tyler Hohenstein, forward (7.0 ppg); Jackson LaPorte, guard (9.0 ppg)

Key Newcomers: Isaac Goff, sophomore, guard; Dalton Coffey, sophomore, guard; JD Lyle, junior, guard

Outlook: It's a unique mix of players this season for Buffalo Gap and head coach Chad Ward.

The Bison lost a ton of talent in players such as Bennett Bowers, Micah Canterbury, Tyler Hohenstein, and Jackson LaPorte, but there are some key role players back this season.

How much those role players can emerge as primary weapons will be a major key for Gap.

But with so much talent gone and some impressive young pieces coming up through the program, this may turn into a rebuilding season of sorts for one of the district's youngest teams.

Ward Says: “We lost a lot of talent from last year's. The majority of the scoring, rebounding, and ball handling all graduated. The guys are going to have to step up and fill those roles. Figuring out who is filling what role is a process, and we are in the middle of it right now. We've been above .500 the last four seasons and will compete to stay that way this year.”

Fort Defiance

Coach: Mike Gale (first season)

2022-23 Record: 14-10 (Lost to Spotswood in Region 3C quarterfinals)

Key Returners: Sam Garber, senior, forward (10.3 ppg, 5.6 rpg); Gio Armendariz Cruz, sophomore, guard (3.7 ppg, 2.6 rpg); Bradley Hebb, junior, guard

Key Losses: Tyreek Veney, guard (17.2 ppg, 4.0 rpg, 2.0 apg); Henry Gutshall, forward (8.5 ppg, 5.6 rpg); Kaden Johnson, guard (3.1 ppg, 3.0 rpg, 2.0 apg)

Key Newcomers: Trey Miller, junior, guard; Evan Braun, sophomore, forward; Tripp Hanger, sophomore, guard; Jasigh Ransome, sophomore, guard; Carter Berry, junior, forward

Outlook: It's a new year and a new system for Fort Defiance, but hope is high.

The Indians are learning first-year head coach Mike Gale's system still, but progress is there.

Led by standout senior forward Sam Garber and sophomore guard Gio Armendariz Cruz, there's no doubt talent is there for Fort Defiance to compete with some of the league's best teams.

As the Indians get more comfortable, expect more wins to occur for this program.

Gale Says: “We expect to be playing our best basketball by the end of the season. It is going to take some time for our guys to make the adjustments to our system but I am pleased with what I have seen so far. They have a positive attitude and have been working hard in the preseason. This is going to be a fun year for all of us.”

Riverheads

Coach: Patrick Weller (third season)

2022-23 Record: 8-14 (Lost to Carver in Region 1B quarterfinals)

Key Returners: Henley Dunlap, junior, guard (4.8 ppg); Jackson Brammer, junior, guard (3.6 ppg); JP Crawford, junior, guard (4.6 ppg)

Key Losses: Bennett Dunlap (8.7 ppg); Carter Mooneyham (6.9 ppg); Gabe Milo (7.2 ppg); Aden Slack (2.5 ppg); Chris Brooks (2.5 ppg)

Key Newcomers: Grady Campbell, junior, guard; Gabe Lloyd, sophomore, guard; Grayson Ward, sophomore, guard; Joe George, sophomore, guard

Outlook: It's another late start to hoops season for Riverheads, but that's pretty common.

As the Gladiators transition from football to the hardwood, there may be growing pains.

But Riverheads has some key returners and have shown the ability to play well defensively.

This team will improve as the season progresses, but a strong defensive focus and a balanced attack on offense surely give this team a chance to compete with anyone in the Shenandoah.

Weller Says: "With only three returners and a bunch of new faces moving up from JV, it will take some time for us to find out who we are and what we can accomplish this season. And with another deep football run, we are still waiting on some players, as usual. We will be very young and inexperienced with no seniors in the program but our young guys are working hard and are building towards future success. We will definitely improve as the season goes along and as we blend the guys together and gain experience."

Staunton

Coach: Terrell Mickens (seventh season)

2022-23 Record: 21-6 (Lost to Cave Spring in VHSL Class 3 quarterfinals)

Key Returners: Manny Chapman, senior, guard; Jack Jones, senior, guard; Braylen Fields, junior, forward; Levi Rodriguez, senior, forward; Peyton Dunn, senior, forward

Key Losses: Prodigy Simms, guard; Maaliah Cabell, forward; Andre Johnson, guard

Key Newcomers: Joaquin Bell, junior, guard; Durrell Hamilton, senior, guard; Ky'Ree Scott, junior, guard; Leon Woodard, sophomore, guard

Outlook: The history of Staunton is rich, and it's continued under head coach Terrell Mickens.

With the senior backcourt duo of Durrell Hamilton and Manny Chapman leading the way, the Storm have a veteran roster that should have the ability to make some serious noise this year.

Last season, Staunton reached the VHSL Class 3 state quarterfinals and impressed late.

If the Storm carry that momentum over, they should be able to make a similar run this year.

Stuarts Draft

Coach: Brad DeWitt (fourth season)

2022-23 Record: 7-16 (Lost to Madison County in Region 2B quarterfinals)

Key Returners: Donovan Jenkins, junior, forward (13.1 ppg, 11.0 rpg); Harley Frame, senior, wing (10.0 ppg, 4.0 rpg); Landon Graber, junior, guard (8.0 ppg); Izaiyah Ale Bell, senior, forward (8.0 ppg, 4.0 rpg); Derrick Moore, sophomore, guard (6.0 ppg, 3.0 rpg); Ryan Ramsey, junior, guard

Key Losses: Colin Graham, center (2.0 ppg)

Key Newcomers: Christian Moats, junior wing; Denzel Diggs, sophomore, forward; James Diggs, sophomore, guard

Outlook: Loaded with athleticism, Stuarts Draft may be a sleeper in the district this season.

The Cougars feature a ton of talent, especially in their starting five, and with junior forward Donovan Jenkins leading the way, they have a team capable of giving teams fits defensively.

Combine that skill with the experience, and Draft has plenty of reason for optimism this year.

If the offense continues to develop, the Cougars will be a legitimate district contender.

DeWitt Says: “We are very excited about this group. They work hard each day and want to be successful.”

Waynesboro

Coach: John Spears (second season)

2022-23 Record: 4-18 (Did not reach postseason)

Key Returners: Zevion Robinson, junior; Jackson Darden, junior

Key Losses: None

Key Newcomers: Kaveon Washington, junior; Dmytro Shevel, sophomore; Haden Morris, sophomore; Isaiah Goldsmith, sophomore; Zion Burns, sophomore; Casey Breeden, sophomore; Quidarius Bell, freshman

Outlook: As one of the youngest teams in the league, Waynesboro remains in a rebuilt.

But head coach John Spears is focused on the big picture, and the future appears bright.

The Little Giants are loaded with sophomores, meaning there will be growing pains.

But this year could be a major springboard for the future of the Waynesboro program.

Spears Says: “I expect them to be able to compete and learn to win throughout the season.”

Wilson Memorial

Coach: Jeremy Hartman (seventh season)

2022-23 Record: 16-7 (Lost to Rustburg in Region 3C quarterfinals)

Key Returners: Grant Wright, senior, forward (5.5 ppg, 5.1 rpg, 1.6 apg, 1.7 spg); Max Vess, senior, guard (6.1 ppg, 2.5 rpg, 1.4 apg); Eli Irving, junior, guard (5.8 ppg, 3.2 rpg, 3.2 apg, 1.5 spg); Chase Snyder, junior, guard (3.8 ppg, 1.1 rpg); Addy Flesher, sophomore, guard (1.2 ppg)

Key Losses: Finn Irving, wing (18.8 ppg, 7.8 rpg, 3.6 apg, 2.7 spg); Lucas Schatz, forward (7.9 ppg, 7.0 rpg, 2.0 bpg); Aiden Podgorski, guard (5.3 ppg, 2.4 rpg, 2.6 apg)

Key Newcomers: Mason McWhorter, freshman, guard; Micah Adams, freshman, center, Gavyn Collier, sophomore, guard; Bryce Pulley, sophomore, guard; Keyvon Jones, sophomore, guard; Carter Flesher, junior, guard; Ryan Mundie, senior, forward

Outlook: Jeremy Hartman has continued to build a quality program in Fishersville.

And despite the loss of last year’s Shenandoah District Player of the Year in Finn Irving, Wilson Memorial looks the part of a team that can compete for the top spot in the league this season.

The Green Hornets are a fast-paced team that’s loaded with experience and depth this year.

As the young pieces continue to develop, Wilson should be one of the area’s better squads.

Hartman Says: “We will be young and talented but untested. The hope is to grow and get better each day, each practice, each week, and each game, so we are playing our best basketball when it matters the most.”

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