

Annual basketball festival features half-Cobb field in its ninth season

by Adam Carrington

acarrington@mdjonline.com

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The SEBA Atlanta Hoop Festival is known for drawing talented teams, and this year is no exception.

Twelve teams will take to the court of Pope's Hound Pound on Saturday, with the first of six games starting at 1 p.m.

Six of the 12 teams are from Cobb County, including Region 4AAAAAA rivals North Cobb, McEachern and Harrison. Pope, Sprayberry and North Cobb Christian are also competing, along with Blessed Trinity, South Paulding, Berkmar, Dacula, Duluth and Peachtree Ridge.

"I'm really excited about the field and teams that we have this year," event director William LoPresti said. "We try to approach where there's a balance. Half the field is usually Cobb County teams, and we try to target teams that we anticipate will be strong outside the county."

The Festival is in its ninth year, and its fourth at Pope after it was originally held at the Cobb County Civic Center.

Saturday's games will begin with Blessed Trinity playing South Paulding at 1 p.m., followed with an all-Cobb matchup between North Cobb Christian and Sprayberry at 2:30 p.m.

North Cobb Christian is off to a 7-0 start with a boost from reigning Region 6A Player of the Year Will Crumly, Demiere Brown, Nick Fleming and Alcorn State commitment Kobe Wilson.

“(LoPresti) didn’t do us any favors,” Sprayberry coach Marc Carver said of his matchup with North Cobb Christian. “They look like a college team when they take the floor. We will have to have one of our best games to have a shot.”

Sprayberry, which didn’t lose any key players from last season, is on a four-game winning streak behind Rian Oliver, Mo Merritt and Djimon Wilson.

In the 8:30 p.m. nightcap, North Cobb will face a Peachtree Ridge team led by Connor Heyward, the younger brother of former Whitefield Academy standout and current NFL player Cam Heyward.

Point guard Ricky Shearman has continued to rack up assists for North Cobb after he averaged six per game last season, while Kenny Ume and Kansas State football commitment D.J. Render is carrying the team in scoring.

Pope, which graduated all five of its starters from a team that made the second round of the state tournament, is looking to stretch its winning streak to four games when it plays Duluth at 7 p.m.

“Pat Abney is one of the best coaches in the state, that runs a terrific program,” LoPresti said. “They have guys ready to step up and make a mark this year.”

Harrison will play at 4 p.m. against a Berkmar team led by sophomore guard Al Durham, who has already committed to Indiana.

With senior forward Austin York becoming Harrison’s primary scoring option, the Hoyas are eager to get back into the state tournament for the first time since making a semifinal run in 2012.

McEachern and Dacula will follow at 5:30 p.m. The Indians are the only undefeated team in Region 4AAAAAA play, with the contributions of senior guards A.J. Jones and Darius Jones.