

By Kevin Kelly

Rich South Big Dipper XXXVI features a glittering field that includes defending champions like Hales Franciscan, Rich Central, Shepard and Rich South, along with a returnee in former title-game participant Tinley Park.

However, that group just makes up five outstanding teams that were NOT seeded in the top eight for the 36th edition of one of the finest holiday tournaments in the Midwest.

Before the first tipoff this year, it's still pretty easy to state that this year's Big Dipper field is the deepest in history.

Noted for some brilliant showdowns in the semifinals and sometimes quarterfinals through the years, Big Dipper XXXVI figures to offer fans some outstanding matchups right from the opening round this year. While the field is clearly the deepest ever, it's not because the tourney's not its typical top-heavy with some of the best entries in the Chicagoland area.

At the time of seeding, on the strength of winning the competitive Chicago Heights Classic, tradition Dipper contender Bloom Township earned the top seed from voting coaches. Was there competition for the top spot?

Well, Thornton figured to be in the top seed team picture with an entire squad returning from a 21-victory unit. Then, newcomer Bolingbrook was perfect in winning the same Decatur tournament that included the Wildcats. Meanwhile, the likes of Crete-Monee, Leo and Seton turned in unblemished records in winning Thanksgiving Tournaments.

While an ultra-loaded field will make it difficult for any Cinderella stories this holiday season, south suburban fans will be treated to the holiday magic of a slew of teams with title aspirations, along with an array of individual standouts, fantastic finishes and exciting neighborhood rivalries.

Here's a look at the history of the Big Dipper and how it has grown to be one of the Midwest's best Christmas tournaments through the years.

1973— Kankakee's Bishop McNamara became the first Big Dipper champion with a 60-40 decision over the host Stars. The Fightin' Irish shot 60 percent from the field in the title game and earned the outstanding coach award for boss Bob Sterr. Scott Norgaard and Don Kruppa notched 14 points each to pace the winners.

Rich South's George Stevenson tallied 18 of his 85 tourney points in the title contest, while Clarence Freeman added 16 points for the Stars. In the third place contest, De Sales edged Sandburg, 56-55.

1974— Freeman and the Stars were not to be denied this time as the hosts claimed a 60-51 decision over rival Crete-Monee in the title match. Freeman ripped the nets for 26 points and Rich South improved its record to 11-2 on the campaign. Bill Michalski finished with 20 points to spark the Warriors.

Despite a 15-point deficit at the half, Sandburg battled back in the third place game, only to lose to TF North, 58-54.

1975— This title was never in doubt as St. Laurence rolled over Rich South in the finale, 85-64. The Vikings' closest encounter was in an 81-64 semifinal win

over Bremen. The 85 points was a Big Dipper record at the time.

The Stars shot a dismal 0-for-11 in the initial period, while tourney most valuable player Steve Krafcisin connected on 14 of 17 from the field and collected 32 points in the contest (he had 95 for the tourney). Mike Stawski and Jim Stack added 14 marks for the winners. Rich South was led in scoring by Kevin Hardey with 20 points. The Stars would not visit the title game again until 1981.

1976— After three straight appearances in the third-place game, Sandburg finally got to the championship game and made the most of it. The Eagles routed Bremen, 78-58, after jumping to a quick 8-0 lead. Phil Collins became the first junior to win MVP honors with his 26-point, 19-rebound performance. Jim Stawarz added 15 points for the Eagles.

Michael Hunt paced the Brave attack with 25 tallies. Kevin Boyle scored 19 points to spark St. Laurence to a 71-54 victory over Bloom Trail for third place.

1977— St. Laurence and Bloom Trail met once again, this time for the fifth Big Dipper title. The Vikings dominated again, with a lopsided 85-58 triumph. St. Laurence jumped to a 46-22 halftime bulge and coasted home behind 61 percent field goal shooting. Kevin Boyle (22 points) hit 75 percent from the field and center Dennis Foley was perfect in six tries from the floor.

At one point in the first stanza, the Vikings connected on 10 straight field goal attempts. Jim Stack added 16 points for the winners. Boyle (Iowa) and Stack (Northwestern) would eventually compete against each other in the Big 10. Art Williams paced Bloom Trail with 20. In the third-place battle, Bremen surprised Crete-Monee (10-2) for the Warriors' second straight loss, 57-56. Michael Lindsey led the Braves with 24 points.

1978— After Quinn Richardson hit all seven of his first half tries from the floor to spark Eisenhower to a 40-37 edge, Rich Central ignited for a 20-6 third-quarter run and prevailed, 70-57. Harold Embry sizzled for 13 of 19 from the field to lead the Olympians with 27 points in the title contest, while Ron Harris added 17. Richardson finished with 19.

Rich Central (10-1) avenged its only loss of the year with a 73-51 romp over Sandburg in the semifinals. Sandburg went on to capture a 74-70 overtime win in the third-place contest. Eisenhower got to the title game with a 65-64 trimming of Marian, Richardson canning a pair of free throws with no time on the clock.

1979— St. Laurence gave the top-ranked Olympians (11-0) their closest call of the season, but Rich Central prevailed, 56-52. The Olympians outscored St. Laurence, 10-1, at the end of the third quarter to take a 46-36 advantage. Dave Reed had 18 points to pace RC and Ron Harris finished with 14.

In its first Big Dipper appearance, Joliet Catholic won the third place game by scoring 48 second-half points to trip the host Stars, 81-62. Mickey Penoskey and North Carolina State-bound Terry Gannon had 35 and 20 points, respectively, for the Hilltoppers. Paul Jackson shot a sizzling 11 of 15 from the floor to lead Rich South with 25.

1980— After a see-saw first half, Crete-Monee ignited for a 70-65 decision over Rich Central behind Weldon Williams' 28 points. Troy Thompson scored nine first-period points to give RC a 15-9 lead at the quarter. But Williams tallied 16 in the second quarter to put the Warriors up at the half, 29-28.

Thompson finished with a game-high 36 marks for the Olympians, while Randy Waterford added 22. Jim Niemeyer notched 18 points for Crete-Monee and Ron Henderson added 17. The Warriors shot 90 of 122 from the foul line for the tourney. In the third-place contest, Bernard Campbell tallied 17 points to lead Eisenhower to a 60-54 win over Evanston.

1981— Rich South entered the Big Dipper with a 5-4 record, but rambled through tourney foes for four consecutive wins, including a 55-52 win over defending champ Crete-Monee in the title tilt. Terry McElroy paced the Stars with 25 points, while Weldon Williams topped the Warriors with 21.

The Stars got to the title game by outlasting Sandburg in the semifinals by a 51-49 count in double overtime. Joliet Catholic defeated Sandburg in the third-place game, 60-35, as Sean Smego pumped in 19 points.

1982— Bremen jumped to a 23-12 advantage after one quarter and coasted to a 75-66 triumph over Rich Central in the championship contest, avenging its only loss of the campaign. Tourney MVP Maurice Pullman (21.5 points per game) notched 23 points in the title contest and joined teammates John Jones and Shawn Watts on the all-tourney team.

Watts finished with 18 points for the winners, while Dwain Wyatt topped the Olympians with 21 markers. Bloom Trail celebrated its return to the Final Four with a 56-49 victory over Bloom for third place, despite 19 points by the Trojans' Frank Nardi.

1983— Evanston's Everette Stephens scored 27 points to spark the Wildkits (13-0) to a 70-58 derailing of Bloom Trail. The fine swingman moved on to play at Purdue. Evanston outscored the Blazers in every quarter and never trailed after midway through the second quarter. Louis Wool added 18 points for the champs and Carl Daun finished with 15 for the Blazers.

Both teams needed to go into overtime in their semifinal contests. Bloom Trail bested Shepard, 66-58, in an extra session. Evanston was trailing Bloom, 56-49, with 3:34 left in regulation, but rallied for a 65-61 overtime victory.

1984— The Wildkits (12-3) became just the second team in Big Dipper history to capture back-to-back titles when they opened the second half with a 15-4 spurt and went on to topple Crete-Monee, 67-50. Tourney MVP Mike Cobb poured in 19 points in the title game, while Phil Henderson paced the Warriors with 15.

In the third-place battle, Kendall Gill swished a 15-foot jumper at the horn to propel Rich Central to a 70-68 triumph over Bloom Trail. The Browns, Ricky for RC and Darren for the Blazers, each led their team in scoring with 25 tallies.

1985— Rich Central (12-1) and Bloom Trail met again, this time the Olympians emerging with an 84-72 win in a record-setting year. MVP Kendall Gill notched 30 points in the title tilt and had a record 118 in four games. Keith Gill

(21), Bobby Smith (18) and Charles Warnell (15) did all the rest of the scoring for RC, while James Banks topped Trail with 17 points.

Oak Forest captured third in its initial Dipper outing with an 89-86 decision over Crete-Monee. Jeff Delaney, who set the tourney three-point goal record at the time with 12, paced the Bengals with 25 points, including five three-pointers. Warrior Phil Henderson responded with a tourney-high 39 points.

1986— Keith Gill scored seven of his game-high 25 points in the second overtime, as Rich Central (12-0) tripped Oak Forest, 73-70, in a battle of unbeatens. MVP Bobby Smith poured in 22 points in leading the Olympians to their fourth Dipper crown.

Jeff Delaney, who hit a record 19 three-pointers in the tourney, led the Bengals with 21 points. Bloom Trail defeated Tinley Park, 65-50, for third place, as the Blazers made their fifth straight Final Four appearance. Marian Catholic nipped Sandburg for the consolation crown.

1987— Kass Weaver buried a pair of free throws with 13 seconds remaining in overtime to send stunning Rich Central (7-7) to a 73-72 victory over Tinley Park for the Olympians' record third straight and fifth overall crown. Tourney MVP Eric Gill led RC with 22 points, while Titan Chris Dillard poured in a game-high 26 points.

Watseka got 25 points from Dennis Miller in the third-place game and toppled Eisenhower, 65-60, for the Warriors' best finish ever. Shepard denied Marian Catholic a second straight consolation crown, as the Astros were led by Andre Mitchell's 18 points.

1988— Despite some second-half foul troubles, repeat Dipper MVP Eric Gill (18 points) and Gene Cross (13) sparked 12-2 Rich Central to its fourth consecutive Big Dipper crown with a 67-58 decision over rival Rich South. An 8-2 run late in the final period helped the Olympians fend off the pesky Stars (8-5), who were led by Cornelius McNary's game-high 20 points.

Bloom Trail toppled St. Laurence, 67-62, for third place, the Blazers' sixth top four finish in seven years. Guards Mike Richardson (20 points) and John Davis paced the Blazers. Making its third straight appearance in the consolation title game, Marian Catholic fell to Crete-Monee, 50-47.

1989— The Hillcrest Hawks (8-4) quieted all nay-sayers when they knocked off Rich South, 67-59, to win the 17th Big Dipper Tournament. Four-time tourney champion Rich Central turned its talents to the Windy City Classic, leaving top-seeded Eisenhower to the task, many thought. But the Hawks upset the Cardinals (72-69 in overtime) in semifinal play.

Torrey Lewis (game-high 25 points) and tourney MVP Jessie James (15 points) powered Hillcrest to a 21-12 first-quarter lead and despite a late 12-2 run by Rich South, the Hawks man-aged to grab their first Big Dipper crown.

St. Laurence put Eisenhower into an even bigger funk, beating the Cards, 62-54, for third place. Viking center Steve Oldendorf (22 points) scored 10 points, blocked a shot and grabbed three of his 10 rebounds in the third quarter to lead St. Laurence to victory. Sandburg captured the consolation title with a 72-57

victory over Crete-Monee.

1990— Sparked by 23 points from Jessie James and 13 from MVP Torrey Lewis, Hillcrest became the third team to capture back-to-back titles when it knocked off previously-unbeaten Shepard, 68-63. Lewis also grabbed 11 rebounds, while Todd Gillespie chipped in 15 points and Terrell Duffin 11. Astro Steve Payne topped all scorers with 26 points.

In third-place action, Tinley Park tripped up Crete-Monee, 70-55, behind 25 points and six three-pointers from Kurt Powell. Marian Catholic, making its fourth appearance in the consolation title game in five years, surprised Andrew in double overtime, 75-70, as Rodney Harrison poured in a game-high 32 points.

1991— With its departure for Pontiac, Bloom Trail left the Big Dipper in much the same way it spent most its years in Richton Park— jinxed. The top-seeded Blazers saw Rich Central return from a two-year hiatus and hand Bloom Trail a 64-62 title-game loss when Cory Huddleston hit a desperation three-pointer at the buzzer for the win.

The Olympians (12-2) had halted Hillcrest's 11-game Big Dipper winning streak with a 75-50 thrashing in the semifinals, but the Hawks rebounded for an 80-77 victory over Rich South for third place. Marian Catholic captured its second straight consolation crown with a 59-46 decision over Andrew.

1992— Tourney newcomer Hinsdale South (10-2) halted Rich Central's 24-game Big Dipper winning streak with a 70-60 title-game decision, as tourney MVP Mike Grunwald scored 15 of his team-high 17 points in the second half. The Hornets dominated inside, taking a 46-24 rebounding advantage.

St. Rita captured the third-place trophy with a 68-56 victory over Shepard. Eisenhower avenged an earlier 35-point loss in the consolation title game, scoring a 71-63 win over Hillcrest as Chris Hale had 18 points and 12 rebounds.

1993— Cinderella Bloom entered the tournament 0-7, then got on a three-game roll until host Rich South (12-0) cooled off the Trojans with a 71-66 title-game decision. Tourney MVP Tedaryl Fason paced four Stars in double figures with 21 points, while Ed Hampton chipped in 19, Tai Streets 18 and Jon Cooper 11. Demond Bibbs topped Bloom with 20 points.

Marlon Hughes scored 22 points to pace Hillcrest to a 67-64 third-place game victory over St. Rita. Meanwhile, Crete-Monee staved off a Marian Catholic rally and used the 28 points of Tywan Mitchell for a 70-61 consolation title-contest victory.

1994— John Economos lit up the board for 25 points and 13 rebounds, while tournament MVP Tony Pryor chipped in 19 points to lead Shepard (13-1) to its first Dipper title, 69-56, over Hillcrest. Hillcrest, led by George Bunn's 15 points, was outscored, 34-15, in the first half.

Behind 19 points from Jerry Gonzalez, St. Laurence toppled Crete-Monee in the third-place contest, 53-51. Rich Central captured the consolation crown for the second time, using 18 points from Maurice Jackson to notch a 62-59 decision over Marian Catholic.

1995— After playing the bridesmaid role on five occasions in the Big Dipper, School District 206 finally got its crown as Bloom Township (12-2) scored a title-game record 27 points in the fourth quarter to topple Crete-Monee, 58-53. Tourney MVP Korey Evans and Terrence Saffold each scored 17 points for the Blazing Trojans, while the Warriors' Kenyea Beach topped all scorers with 26 points.

Brian Wardle tallied 23 points to lead Hinsdale Central to a 67-66 victory Rich South for third place in its initial tourney appearance. Eisenhower, which also won the Jim Becker Sportsmanship Award, got 18 points from Andre Shelby to score a 66-43 consolation title-contest win over Hinsdale South.

1996— In its first Big Dipper appearance, Thornton turned in one of the most dominant four-game performances in history. Led by tourney-MVP Erik Herring and three other all-tourney choices, the Wildcats eventually toppled SICA East rival Bloom Township, 75-49, in a title-game battle of unbeaten. Melvin Ely tallied a game-high 22 points in the championship contest, while Herring added 16.

Jim Becker Sportsmanship award winner Rich South got a tourney-high 32 points from Marcus Blossom to score an 82-51 third-place game decision over Hinsdale Central, while Rich East's Walter Young collected 30 points in the consolation title game to key a 76-70 overtime decision over Crete-Monee.

1997— Rich Central (10-3) overcame a 10-point second-half deficit to capture its eighth crown with a 68-61 decision over Rich South (8-2). The Olympians defeated the first, third and fourth seeds en route to their first title since 1991. Reserve Darren Randle paced RC with 19 points, while tourney MVP D'Juan Surratt collected 16 points and nine rebounds.

Behind 20 points from Ryan Blankson, Hillcrest (14-1) toppled Chicago Vocational, 85-68, to take third place and the Jim Becker Sportsmanship Award. Defending champ Thornton won the consolation side this time, as Dontrell Jackson tallied 22 points to lead a 77-68 decision over Rich East.

1998— Thornton helped to establish itself as a perennial contender to the title as the Wildcats pulled out the unexpected tournament championship by defeating Bloom Township, 61-58. The win improved Thornton's Big Dipper record to 11-1 in a three-year run. Big Dipper MVP Jonathan Woods led the Wildcats with 18 points, while all-tourney selection Chris Alexander had 13 points. Bloom had mounted a furious comeback to tie the game at 58-58 behind Beunie Green's game-high 20 points and Philip Alexander's 19. However, Damien Miller's three-point play sealed the win for Thornton.

Rich Central earned a third-place finish by toppling the host Stars, 77-74. Derrick Murphy led the Olympians with 20 points, while Rich South's Giani Bearden scored a game-high 31 points in the loss.

1999— In a see-saw defensive struggle, top-seeded Thornton (8-2) limited Rich Central to an all-time title-game low four points in the fourth quarter en route to a 51-49 victory and its third title in four years. Tourney MVP paced the

Wildcats with 14 points and 12 rebounds, while Jonathan Woods chipped in 15 points and seven boards.

Derrick Murphy had a game-high 19 points to go with eight rebounds for RC. Behind 19 points from Steve Callahan, Hinsdale Central toppled Bloom Township, 59-54, for third place, while Rich South edged out Hinsdale South in the consolation title contest, as Chris Collins had 18 points and 10 rebounds.

2000— Tournament MVP Mike Smith scored 19 points and grabbed nine rebounds to lead a balanced attack that produced Shepard's second Big Dipper title with a 68-63 decision over Chicago Vocational. The Astros had four in double figures, including Mike Hall with 15 points and 17 rebounds.

Bloom Township, in its tourney-best eighth straight year in the winner's bracket, toppled Hinsdale Central for third place, 70-52, as Antonio Cool led the way with 21 points. Leo fended off a tourney-high 39 points from Marian Catholic's Rick Romeli in winning the consolation crown, 76-70. Dulles (Texas) earned the Jim Becker Sportsmanship Award.

2001— Shepard's Mike Smith scored 30 points and grabbed eight rebounds to become just the second repeat MVP in leading the Astros to their second straight title with a 76-63 decision over Chicago Leo. Mike Hall added 12 points and Reggie George 10 for Shepard, which took command with a 25-15 third-quarter margin.

Rich South got 23 points from Brandon Cole to notch a 58-56 third-place game decision over Bloom Township and the tourney's high scorer Joe Chapman, while honorary tournament manager Bob Frasor guided his Eisenhower Cardinals to a 68-57 victory over Prosser in the consolation title contest.

2002— Sophomore Nathan Minnoy earned the scoring title when his 13 of 15 performance from the floor led to 30 points and ignited Hales Franciscan (11-2) to a 68-64 title-game decision over Bloom Township. The Blazing Trojans, led by Kevin Howard's 22 points, saw retiring coach Gary Meyer (all-time Dipper wins leader) denied his second title.

Rich Central's Jimmie Miles tallied 22 points as the Olympians drilled Thornton, 62-42, for third place in a battle of two of the Dipper's best all-time winning percentage leaders. Chicago Vocational topped Prosser for the consolation crown, Hinsdale South earned Sportsmanship honors and Rich East's Amundsen Brown set history as the first male individual cheerleading champion.

2003— Two of the Big Dipper's winningest all-time teams met for the title, as Rich Central erased an eight-point halftime lead and handed Thornton its first title-game setback, 53-51, for the Olympians' record ninth title. Fred Washington scored 16 points, Brandon Long 14 and tourney MVP Tyrone Brazelton 13 in a balanced RC attack, while Thornton's Brandon Dagon tallied a game-high 21 points.

The 2002 championship-game rematch saw Hales topple Bloom, 83-79, for third place behind 27 points from 2002 MVP Nathan Minnoy. Shepard got its

second consolation title with a 51-45 win over Lincoln Park, while Peoria Woodruff earned the Jim Becker Sportsmanship Award in its first appearance and Herndon traveled from Virginia to capture sixth place and pull down a tournament-best 161 rebounds.

2004— Thornton (14-0) jumped to a 17-6 lead after one quarter and rolled to its fourth championship with a 71-58 decision over Hales Franciscan. Brandon Long hit five three-pointers and paced the Wildcats with 25 points and seven rebounds, while MVP Joevan Catron scored 10 points and grabbed 12 rebounds. Jerome Randle scored a game-high 26 points for Hales.

In its second straight third-place game appearance, Bloom Township toppled Lincoln Park, 67-54, behind 25 points from Larry Dumas. Leo defeated Marian Catholic for the consolation crown, 78-74, as Kijuane Leach tallied 30 points. Crete-Monee won the Sportsmanship for the first time, an honor named after late Crete-Monee Athletic Director Jim Becker.

2005— Thornton's Joevan Catron became the second repeat MVP of the new millennium (and third overall), scoring 18 points and grabbing 10 rebounds to pace the Wildcats (11-1) to a successful title defense with a 58-48 decision over Lincoln Park. Adonte Parker added 16 points for five-time champ Thornton. Lincoln Park was sparked by Jonathan Montgomery's game-high 20 points.

Hales used a tournament-high 37 points from Jerome Randle to capture a third-place game decision over Catholic League rival Leo, while Fenger tamed Dipper returnee Bremen, 65-63, behind Quintin Williford's 20 points for the consolation crown in its Big Dipper debut.

2006— Tournament MVP Michael Thompson scored a game-high 16 points to lead Lincoln Park to its first championship in its second title-game appearance with a 54-40 decision over Chicago Leo. Lincoln Park limited Leo to the lowest title-game scoring output, lowest field-goal percentage (.298) and lowest quarter scoring (four) in title-game history.

Thornton used 29 points from Mustapha Farrakhan and 21 from Josh Parker to claim an 88-76 third-place decision over Seton Academy, which became the first time in history to win back-to-back Jim Becker Sportsmanship Awards. Marian Catholic overcame a 10-point fourth-quarter deficit to topple Peoria Woodruff, 49-48, for the consolation crown in the Spartans' record 10th appearance in the game.

2007— Hales Franciscan used a 21-3 margin from the three-point arc to pull away for its second Big Dipper title with a 63-48 decision over Bloom Township, as D.J. Cooper led the Spartans with 20 points. Tourney MVP Matthew Humphrey chipped in 12 points and five steals, while Bloom was sparked by brothers Jawan (11 points, seven rebounds) and Aaron Nelson (10 points, 10 rebounds).

Brandon Ross collected 26 points and eight rebounds to pace Lincoln Park past Rich South, 52-45, for third place, while Leo toppled Shepard, 67-63, for the consolation crown behind 25 points from James Pointer. Honorary Tournament Manager and Marian Athletic Director Dave Mattio watched his Spartans win the

Jim Becker Sportsmanship Award.

2008— In the most competitive field of team in history, Thornton overcame a nine-point fourth-quarter deficit to force overtime, then hit the magical point-total mark on a late jumper by Reggie Smith (team-high 17 points) in the waning seconds for a 73-71 trimming of Rich East. All three Dipper OT finals have seen the winner score 73. Jamal Gray added 15 points and tourney MVP Trevell Rivers (58 total rebounds) notched 14 in the sixth title for the Rockets (11-1). Bruce Collins and Stephen O'Neal each had 15 points for Rich East in its initial Final Four appearance.

Kendrick Morse poured in a tourney-high 31 points in Rich South's 68-64 third-place conquest of Leo, while Bolingbrook got twin 26-point performances from Antoine Cox and Diamond Taylor, as the Raiders topped Hales, 81-66, for the consolation crown in their Big Dipper debut. Tinley Park returned from a Dipper hiatus to win the Jim Becker Sportsmanship Award.

2009—Bloom? Bolingbrook? Thornton? Seton Academy? Others?