

Busy day in store at Civic Center

by Greg Oshust

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Entering its third edition, the SEBA Atlanta High School Hoop Festival will again have a strong Cobb County flavor as the prep basketball showcase takes place today inside the Cobb County Civic Center.

Half of the 12-team field - Hillgrove, Harrison, North Cobb, Sprayberry, Lassiter and Kennesaw Mountain - consists of Cobb teams.

The festival will also feature two all-Cobb matchups as North Cobb takes on Lassiter at 6:30 p.m. and Hillgrove plays Harrison at 8 p.m. Sprayberry will play Stockbridge at 1:30 p.m., while Kennesaw Mountain will take on Berkmar at 4:45 p.m.

Blessed Trinity, last year's state runner-up in Class AA, will play St. Francis at noon in the first game of the day.

"We're looking forward to a strong day of high school basketball, and I am excited about the field of teams we have participating," said Billy LoPresti, the Southeast Basketball Academy's (SEBA) Director and the event's organizer. "We have six Cobb County schools participating, highlighted by Hillgrove, (one of) the state's (top teams) in Class AAAA."

This will be the second time that five of today's six Cobb teams have played in the event, with Kennesaw Mountain the lone newcomer. Hillgrove, Sprayberry, Lassiter and Harrison participated last year, while North Cobb took part in the inaugural event in 2007.

LoPresti said he has been encouraged by the growth of the event over the last three years, and the role it plays in showcasing the area's high school basketball talent.

"We've been blessed to see the Hoop Festival event grow since its inception in 2007," LoPresti said. "We've been fortunate to attract some very good teams over the past three years. The metro-Atlanta area is one of the nation's top hotbeds for high school basketball, and a multi-team event like this helps bring some well-deserved attention to area talent."

"One of our main objectives with the Southeast Basketball Academy is to create exposure opportunities for athletes to get in front of college coaches, in the hopes of landing scholarships. This Hoop Festival event, along with our Prospect Exposure Camps, has

been a good vehicle to create opportunities for the athletes."

The final game of the day will feature Class AAAA powerhouse Hillgrove (9-1) facing young Harrison (3-4), a team still trying to find its way

Hillgrove coach Ed Morris said he has enjoyed the quality of opposition his team has faced in the event, which reminds him of the Cobb County Christmas Tournament, a holiday staple for many years at the Civic Center.

"I think it is a great event," Morris said. "It allows us to play a quality opponent like Harrison at a neutral site, but yet our fans don't have to travel too far. I remember the days of the Cobb County Christmas Tournament at the Civic Center. This event sort of has that feel to it."

Harrison coach Robert Churchwell also likes the atmosphere and the quality of competition that it provides for his team.

"We are excited to be a part of this exceptional day that is the SEBA Classic," Churchwell said. "I think the Cobb County Civic Center is a great place to host the games. It gives you that old-school midwestern feel. I also think it is a good experience for the kids."

The other all-Cobb matchup features a couple of young, rebuilding teams in North Cobb (4-4) and Lassiter (0-5).

The Civic Center is a familiar locale for North Cobb coach Terry Gorsuch, who played for Walton in the Cobb County Christmas Classic while he was a student.

"The Cobb County Civic Center is a great basketball venue," Gorsuch said. "I played in the Cobb Holiday tournament in the 1980s at the Civic Center and it was the place to be during the winter holidays. It provides good memories for me to go back and coach in that venue."

Lassiter coach Jeremy Morris is also looking forward to playing in the event again.

"SEBA puts on a great event," Morris said. "The Civic Center is a great venue. I would like to see a lot more high school basketball events take place there."

Another strong matchup will be Sprayberry (3-2) against an 8-1 Stockbridge team on an eight-game winning streak. Yellow Jackets coach Marc Carver is hoping his team can repeat the success they enjoyed at last year's event, when they defeated Jonesboro, 68-65, in overtime.

"Last year, we had a great comeback win against Jonesboro, which gave us some confidence, and we went on to win the Woodstock Christmas tournament," Carver said.

The game between Kennesaw Mountain (3-1) and Berkmar (1-6) will features Mustangs coach Jesse Bonner meeting first-year Patriots coach Greg Phillips, a former assistant under Bonner at Kennesaw Mountain.

Like Gorsuch, Bonner played in the old Cobb County Christmas Tournament during his playing days at Sprayberry.

"This gives our team a chance to play a quality non-region game in a facility that has a rich basketball history," Bonner said. "I remember playing on the Civic Center court many, many years ago in the Cobb County Christmas tournament. I personally look forward to coming back to the Civic Center."

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