

Towns County Sports

Towns County's Leader In Sports

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Youth Football: players, coaches, and supporters much appreciated

By Mason Mitcham
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Staff Writer

After the end of an all-around successful season, Youth Football Director Jimmy Smith took a couple of weeks to put together a nice finale to show his appreciation for his players, coaches, and supporters.

The Youth Football Banquet was held on Friday, and fans and families turned out to enjoy a meal of chicken, pasta, and greens.

The banquet was in celebration of a season that saw two of Smith's teams advance to the playoffs. The 9-10 year-old team and the 5-6 year-old team both had a shot at the season title, but were stopped at the last minute by bigger schools. Still, all the players on all three of Smith's teams got individual trophies shaped like footballs.

Before he gave out the awards, Smith wanted to extend his gratitude to several people who had helped make this job possible. Among them was High School Principal Jonathan Gibson.

"This is our future so we want to do all we can to prepare them to be ready when they get here," said Gibson of the



Towns County Youth Football held its annual year-end banquet to reflect on another magical football season. Photos/Lowell Nicholson



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athletes. He also was grateful to Lisa Gibson for handling the logistics of each game. Smith also wanted to thank the present coaching staff: Joey Floyd, Shane Haney, Brandon Burns, Paul Hunter,

Kenny Henderson, Lawson Eller, Austin Greene, Rodney Thomas, Damon Crowder, Randy Smith, and Chris Clinton, and others who couldn't attend the banquet.

Coach Joey Floyd said. He said that he was proud of his leaders. "They were great," he said. "They really, really stepped it up, which in turn caused our first-year players and our five-year olds to step it up."

The cheerleaders got their awards first, followed by the three raucous football teams, who were excited to be given the trophies commemorating their hard work and dedication.

"I think based on the dedication that these young boys have put into this football season, and the hard work that they put into it, and the way they played the game, and the things that they learned during practice, I think it was an outstanding season," Coach Randy Thomas said.

In recognition of the hard work of Smith, his coaches, and the Towns County community, Colton Green, the President of the North Georgia Youth Football Association, wrote a heartfelt letter to Smith that was read onstage before the audience. It was the first time Smith had read the contents.

"I might cry," he said jokingly. He didn't, though the letter was warm and sincere. In it, President Green congratulated not just Smith, but all of Towns County on building such a tough and persevering football program.

"No one faces more adversity," the letter read. "Towns County is truly a light on the hill, a light that serves as an example to dozens of other communities. Congratulations to the towns county Indians for another year of shocking the North Georgia Youth Football Association."

After 20 years the Battle of the States is taking on a life of its own

By Jerry Kendall
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When asked what impact the Battle of the States Christmas Tournament has on Towns County, Lady Indians Head Coach Jim Melton didn't mention basketball.

"The tournament brings hundreds of visitors to our town which is a tremendous benefit economically," he said.

The late-December tournament remains one of the hottest tickets in town and keeps the Christmas Spirit alive for a few more days in the North Georgia mountains.

"The tournament committee deserves all the praise," Melton said. "They do all the work and it's a year-round job."

As for Indians Head Coach Andrew Weekley, he is hoping to get injured guard Dallas Manus back during the tournament, albeit in a very limited role.

"If he can get a release from his doctor, I might let him run the court a couple of times in the tournament."

An impact player like Manus taking the floor, if only in limited minutes, would provide a much needed boost to the Indians.

And with one of the deepest girls fields in a long while, this year's edition is shaping up to be a thrilling one for fans of Towns County basketball.

But before we look ahead, let's take a walk down memory lane. To reflect on the memories, both cherished, and quickly erased, that the Battle of the States has produced, as the tournament turns 20 years old this week.

THE TOURNAMENT CHAMPIONS - Previous Battle of the States Girls' Tournament Champions have been Smoky Mountain (North Carolina) in 1994, Polk County in 1995, Elbert County (Georgia) in 1996, McEachern (Georgia) in 1997, Holy Innocents' (Georgia) in 1998, Polk County again in 1999 and 2000, White County (Tennessee) in 2001, Robbinston (North Carolina) in 2002, Fannin County (Georgia) in 2003, White County (Tennessee) again in 2004, South Cobb (Georgia) in 2005, White County (Georgia) in 2006, Fannin County again in 2007, Polk County for the fourth and fifth times in 2008 and 2009, Gordon Lee in 2010 and 2011, and Dawson County in 2012.

Boys Champions have been Walhalla (South Carolina) in 1994 and 1995, Tavares (Florida) in 1996 and 1997, Loganville (Georgia) in 1998, Andrews (North Carolina) in 1999, Union County in 2000, North Forsyth (Georgia) in 2001, Cherokee County (Alabama) in 2002, North Forsyth again in 2003, White County (Tennessee) in 2004, Chapin (South Carolina) in 2005, Union County again in 2006, Fannin County in 2007, Pendleton (South Carolina) in 2008, Southside-Gadsden in 2009, Union County for the third time in 2010, Hayesville in 2011, and Dawson County in 2012.

The 2012 tournament was just the third time for an individual school to capture both championships after White County (Tennessee) in 2004 and Fannin County in 2007 achieved that goal as Dawson County took both championships last year.

The Towns County teams have never won the tournament although the Lady Indians have finished second on seven occasions, including each of the first three years and 2008 through 2010. They have also finished third three times and fourth on four other occasions. The Indians have made it past the first round nine times, finishing second on one occasion, third on another,

and in fourth place seven times. **TOUGH COMPETITION BUILDING STRONG TEAMS** - It's a very tough assignment to win a tournament such as the Battle of the States but beyond winning such a tournament, the tough competition enables teams to get a learning experience for the remainder of the season. In looking at details from earlier tournaments, it may seem strange to look at some of the seventh place games of the past, but a close look at the teams who appeared in some of these contests gives perhaps the most interesting insight into how tough the Battle of the States Tournament can be.

In 1994, the Cherokee County (Alabama) Girls appeared in the first Tournament with a 7-1 record and ranked Second in Class 4A, with 6A being the highest classification, in their state after having won State Championships in two of the three previous years. They proceeded to lose three straight games to eventual Tournament Champion Smoky Mountain (North Carolina), Polk County, and Walhalla, with the latter two games going into overtime, for an eighth place finish. Of course, the Cherokee County Girls appeared in many subsequent Battles of the States and acquitted themselves well, including finishing second in the 2001 tournament.

In 1995, the Lake Weir (Florida) Girls appeared in the Tournament with a fifth place ranking in Class 6A, with 6A being the highest classification, in their State. Although playing without an All American Player who was injured, they were defeated by Hayesville and Smoky Mountain before pulling away in the final quarter of their game with Walhalla for a seventh place finish.

Although the significance was not known at the time, perhaps the Seventh Place game eventually creating more discussion than any among close observers of the Tournament was the Boys contest in 1996. Polk County defeated Hayesville 50-48 in one of the most intense and interesting games of any year the Tournament has been held. No one could have anticipated it at the time, but the eighth place Hayesville Boys from the Battle of the States would become almost invincible in future weeks and play in the Dean Dome in Chapel Hill and earn a State Runner-up Trophy in Class A in North Carolina for the year.

More recently, the Pisgah (Alabama) Boys, a very impressive seventh place participant in the 2003 Battle of the States, made it all the way to the Class AA State Final Four in Alabama that season where they lost by just three points to the eventual State Champion. They defeated Polk County 86-61 in the seventh place game but had fallen to North Forsyth by three points in the opening round and to Union County by seven in the second.

And the Pendleton Girls, who defeated Hayesville 75-35 in the seventh place game in the 2008 tournament, especially surprised observers of that tournament after losing to Union County by fourteen points in the first round and to Gordon Lee by eighteen in the second. The Lady Bulldogs battled their way through a thirty two team field to the state Class AA finals in South Carolina before losing by just a 58-54 score to Marion.

EXCELLENCE IN THE BATTLE OF THE STATES AND CONTINUING - Success in post season has, of course, not been limited to the teams competing for seventh place in the Battle of the States although perhaps more striking. The 1997 Battle of the States featured three teams who would make huge marks in their states during post season play. The Cherokee County Girls

entered that Battle of the States with a 12-0 record and finished fifth by taking nine and five point wins over Franklin (North Carolina) and Polk County following an opening night eight point loss to fourth place Towns County. The Lady Warriors went on to win the Alabama Class AAAA State Championship for the third time in the 1990's.

The Cherokee Ladies were under the direction of Head Coach Jason Shields who currently serves as head coach of the Hokes Bluff Girls who will be making their sixth straight appearance in the tournament this year. The Paideia Boys of Atlanta finished third in that 1997 Battle of the States and went on to become State Runners-up in Class A in Georgia while the Paideia Girls, who finished second in the Battle of the States the same year, made it to the State Final Four in Class A.

The 1998 Battle of the States Girls Champion, Holy Innocents' of Atlanta, won the Class A State Championship in Georgia later that school year and at least two teams from the 1999 Battle of the States went on to prominence in post season play. The Towns County Lady Indians, who finished second to Polk County in the 1999 Tournament, compiled a 24-6 record in winning their sixth consecutive Sub-Region 8A North Championship and making it to the 2000 State Final Four in Class A in Georgia. Meanwhile, the 1999 Battle of the States Boys Champion Andrews Wildcats finished their season with a 24-2 record in winning their Smoky Mountain-West Conference Championship and finishing in the Final Eight in Class A in North Carolina.

Both Union County Teams from the 2000 Tournament went on to excellence in both regular and post season play as both won their Sub-Region 8AA North Championship and had very successful postseason runs as well. The Lady Panthers, who finished fifth in the Battle of the States, made it all the way to the State Finals before losing to fellow Region 8AA foe Greater Atlanta Christian while the Battle of the States Champion Panthers made it to the Elite Eight in Georgia.

The Towns County Lady Indians, who finished sixth in the Battle of the States that year, were no slouches either in regular season and postseason play. They finished just one game behind Union County in their Sub-Region and qualified for the state tournament for the third straight year with very impressive games played against the two Class AA state finalists. They used a 43-14 run in rallying from a 24-8 deficit in handing state runner up Union County a 58-54 regular season defeat on the Lady Panthers' home court and outplayed Greater Atlanta Christian for more than three quarters, leading 33-28 through three quarters, before falling in the Region Tournament semi finals to the soon to be State Champions. The GAC Lady Spartans of that year featured front line players measuring 6'4", 6'2" and 6' along with Superstar Sherrill Baker, a four year star guard for the nationally prominent University of Georgia Lady Bulldogs.

The 2003 Battle of the States featured another team in addition to the aforementioned Pisgah Boys which made a strong showing in post season play. The unranked Battle of the States Champion Fannin County Girls, who had won two State Championships in the 1990's under legendary Head Coach Johnny Farmer got stronger as their season progressed. The Lady Rebels completed a 25-8 season by finishing second in the Georgia Class AAA State Tournament, falling to fellow Region 7AAA foe Gainesville, which featured 6'3" Superstar Tasha Humphrey, later a four year sensation with the University of Georgia

Lady Bulldogs. Although the neighboring North Carolina Class A State Champion Hayesville Boys of 2004 didn't participate in the 2003 Battle of the States, they did encounter strong battles with two tournament participants. The Sixth Place Battle of the States Robbinsville Boys handed the Yellow Jackets one of just two losses, their only home court loss for the season. Further, the Third Place Battle of the States Towns County Boys were within one point with four minutes to go at Towns County and the Indians led the Yellow Jackets by a point with two minutes to go at Hayesville before the Yellow Jackets pulled away for seven point victories in each game.

And the Towns County Lady Indians, who finished third in the 2007 Battle of the States, went on to a record setting season, finishing with a 28-4 record and making it to the Georgia Class A State Final Four for the second time in nine years. They trailed by just five points near the three minute mark of the fourth quarter before falling in the state semi-finals by a thirteen point margin to eventual state champion Calvary Day of Savannah.

The Lady Indians then followed up runner-up finishes to Polk County in the 2008 and 2009 tournaments with a Region 8A Championship the first year and as region runners-up the second. Their records for those two years were 25-6 and 23-7 respectively and it required a team of metro all stars from the Wesleyan School in Norcross to eliminate them in the Elite Eight and Sweet Sixteen rounds respectively those two years. The Wesleyan Girls went on to easily win their sixth and seventh state championships, split between Class AA and Class A, in the last nine years.

The Lady Indians continued their stellar run the last three years, winning Region 8A Championships all three years along with making it to the state tournament for the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth times in fifteen years under Head Coach Jim Melton with last year's state final four appearance covered above. In 2010, the Lady Indians finished second in the Battle of the States to Gordon Lee but wound up with a spectacular 27-2 record, falling this time in the sweet sixteen round of the Class A State Tournament to Pace Academy of Atlanta, the eventual state runner up to Wesleyan.

The most competitive grouping of teams to date in the Tournament would have to be the Boys field in 1995 when five of a total of twelve contests were decided in overtime and four other games were decided by seven or fewer points. A comparison of results of some of the contests reveals the competitiveness of the 1995 Tournament from top to bottom. Tournament Champion Walhalla was taken to three overtimes in the semi-finals by Fourth Place finisher Towns County who was taken to overtime by Seventh Place Gilmer (Georgia) who was taken to overtime by Eighth Place Polk County during the course of the tournament.

Further, the competitiveness of the four games among the top four finishers in 1995 is just as striking when including Second Place Franklin and Third Place Hayesville in the comparison. Franklin won in overtime in the semi-final game over Hayesville while the Championship game between Walhalla and Franklin and the Third Place Game between Hayesville and Towns County were decided by four and two points respectively.

PLAYERS FROM PRIOR TOURNAMENTS ACHIEVING CONTINUING SUCCESS - There have been numerous individual performers from the Battle of the States who have

pursued their basketball careers and in other sports as well with great success in college, including in Division I, through the years. It would be impossible to list or even know of all the performers who have continued their careers in college but several will be identified here.

Some of the more notable among the Division I signees are Lee Scruggs, a 6'10" three year starter in the Tournament for Franklin, who went on to stardom for three years at Georgetown University in Washington, DC; Angelina Miller, also a three year starter in the Tournament for McEachern (Georgia), who was a top player for four years at Georgia State University in Atlanta; and Megan Isom of Paideia, a two year starter at Georgia Tech. Wynter Whitley of Holy Innocents' finished her career several years ago at Duke University as did Andrea Neeley of Union County at Georgia State University.

Of more recent vintage, two all tournament players from previous Battles of the States both battled injury but had significant success at Division I Kennesaw State University. Nikki Gurley of Union County earned all tournament honors in the Battle of the States three times during her career while Stephanie Searce of Fannin County made the all tournament squad in her only appearance in 2003. Kennesaw State, by the way, was coached during those years by Colby Tilley who directed Truett McConnell College to a Junior College National Championship in 1980 with Towns County's own Martha Moss being a superstar on that team.

Two other Division I players to mention are all tournament player Matt Womack of North Forsyth from 2003 and Union County's Candace Williams, a three time all tournament selection through the 2008 tournament, who each participated for a year as walk on players at the University of Georgia. Kori Penland of Gordon Lee, a 2007 Battle of the States all tournament player, completed two seasons of basketball at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga before leaving after limited action, in part due to injury, to spend more time working with faith-based groups.

And Gordon Lee superstar Cassidy Blevins, who led her team to the 2010 Battle of the States Championship and the aforementioned Class A Public State Championship last year while capturing the overall Georgia Sportswriters Class A Statewide Player of the Year honor is continuing her career at Division I Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama.

Locally, 1997 Towns County Graduate Keisha Taylor was a top flight player for NCAA Division II Columbus State University in Columbus, Georgia, with the Lady Cougars being the top ranked team in the nation for much of the 2001 season. The Lady Cougars made it to the National Final Four for the second year in a row before being upset in a close decision for their only loss of the season by Cal Poly-Pomona, the eventual National Champion, in the Semi Finals.

Three vital members of the Towns County Lady Indians Class A State Final Four Team in 2000 completed successful four year college careers. Brandy McNabb completed her career in 2004 at LaGrange College as did Olivia Swanson in 2005 while Candice Blythe completed her career in 2004 at Piedmont College under the late Head Coach Charles Cooper, the 2001 Battle of the States Breakfast Banquet Speaker. McNabb and Blythe were two year starters at Truett McConnell Junior College before moving on to their respective four year schools. Blythe returned to Piedmont for the 2005

season as an assistant coach and recently served for two years as the top assistant for the Towns County Lady Indians.

Further, Heath Hooper of Towns County made the 2004 Battle of the States All Tournament Team and continued his basketball career at Reinhardt College, now Reinhardt University, in Waleska. He battled injury throughout his four years at Reinhardt but saw some quality playing time, including several starting assignments as a freshman, when able to play. He followed up service as an assistant coach at Reinhardt to become a valued assistant coach for the newly revived Young Harris College men's basketball team for two years before leaving for a lucrative teaching assignment at Shorter University in Rome.

Five members of the 2008 Towns County State Final Four team continued their basketball careers at the college level. Amanda Irwin of the Class of 2008 at Towns County continued her career at Division II Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville for three years. Nikki Winn, Ellie Parton, and Missy Conrad of the Class of 2009 went on to play basketball at Young Harris College as did Jordan Moss of the Class of 2011. Winn has had the most on the court success at YHC in being at or near the top in several statistical categories during the first year of play for the revived program during the 2011 season.

Of perhaps even greater significance, however, than their athletic contributions is the fact that all four Lady Indians at YHC have excelled in the classroom in making the dean's list and Moss was honored by receiving the Most Promising Freshman Scholar Athlete Award for the 2012 season.

Conrad, Irwin, Moss, and Winn all received Battle of the States All Tournament recognition on at least one occasion while Parton was an All Region performer in Cross Country as a freshman at Young Harris during the school's last year in junior college prior to being approved for NCAA Division II status.

And the beat continues for the Lady Indians as three seniors from the 2012 TCHS team have continued their careers at the college level. Single game and career statewide 3-point scorer Gabby Arencibia is now playing basketball at Piedmont College in Demorest after a year at North Georgia College and State University in Dahlonega. Ali Bleckley is in her second year at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, and Lindsay Patton is in her second year at Point University in West Point, Georgia.

And current Lady Indians Eryn Cochran and Stephanie Patton are already set to continue their basketball careers and education at the college level. Cochran, a senior who has been sidelined all season with a severe ankle injury but hoping to return shortly, has signed to play at Division II Columbus State University in Columbus next year and Patton, just a junior, has verbally committed to play at Division I Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, two years from now.

AND FINALLY - This summary just scratches the surface in detailing the events and highlights of past tournaments and continuing successes for the participating teams and players so fans interested in top flight basketball action involving current and future individual superstar athletes and championship games, seventh place games, or anywhere in between, should give serious consideration to attending the 2013 Battle of the States Tournament.