



Class A State Tournament Preview

HIGH SCHOOL

MINNESOTA



By **Marc Hugunin**

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Like the other classes, the Class A tournament will feature a lot of familiar teams and players this year. And, wouldn't you know, in every one of the 4 1st round matchups, the team that has been in the tournament the most often and the most recently is the one that is seeded and favored.

Meanwhile, 2 newcomers will try to throw a monkeywrench into the proceedings. Menahga, to name one, is unbeaten and comes into the tournament with a 30-game winning streak, but seeded behind twice-beaten Mountain Iron-Buhl and Ada-Borup and 4-time loser Minneota. Heritage Christian, to name the other, is a 10-time loser and has no beef with its lack of a seed.

Class A opens play on Thursday morning at 11 a.m. with all 4 1st round games at Williams Arena.

The Matchups

11 a.m. at Williams Arena #1 seed Lyle-Austin Pacelli (29-1) vs. unseeded Heritage Christian (19-10)

Lyle-Pacelli has only been to one tournament—that was in 2015 when it led Ada 45-35 at 7:49 but lost 54-52. The following year the Athletics led Goodhue 41-26 with 7 minutes to go in the section semis. Goodhue stormed back to win 43-42, and went on to win the state title both that year and the next. Now, Lyle-Pacelli bounces back from those disappointments to come into its 2nd state tournament with a 29-1 record, undefeated against Minnesota competition, and as the #1 seed. They're rated #2 here at Northstar Girls Hoops, behind Mountain Iron-Buhl. They started the year at #5 and moved up, up, up over the course of the season. The question is whether those past disappointments will breed some jitters, or an iron determination, or perhaps none of the above.

Meanwhile, Heritage started the year at #2 in our rankings but spent much of the year going backward. They opened with 3 losses, and quickly dropped out of our top 25—especially after losing 82-56 to their main section rival Mayer Lutheran on January 26. They snuck back into our top 25 at #19, ironically, after losing their last 2 regular season game. But, they gave Maranatha (63-73) and Mountain Iron-Buhl (65-71) a couple of competitive games. That competitiveness carried over into the post-season, where they turned the tables on Mayer Lutheran 71-58.

So the former #2 meets the current #2. And, in fact, Heritage may be better equipped to compete with Lyle-Pacelli and its 6-5 Mankato State-bound post Kristi Fett and her 27 ppg scoring average. OK, there's nobody 6-5 but there are a pair of 6-footers in senior Annika Simonson and sophomore (and much improved) Jordyn Allen. Heritage probably matches up with Fett better than the Athletics guards match up with hard-nosed junior Heritage guard Taylie Scott.

With all of that, Lyle Pacelli sophomore wing Olivia Christianson may be the toughest match up of all. As Grant reported here in February, she is one of Minnesota's most improved younger players, and she could be the difference in this one. **Lyle Pacelli 64 Heritage 51.**

1 p.m. at Williams Arena #4 Minneota (25-4) vs. #5 Menagha (30-0)

Maybe it's Minneota's past tournament success . Maybe it's a belief that Menahga "didn't play anybody." What really got the Vikings and their 4 losses seeded ahead of unbeaten Menahga? I don't know, but every team in central Minnesota, from Anoka to Bemidji, ought to be offended by the lack of respect for their region.

In a manner of speaking, Minneota is appearing in their 6th straight Class A tournament. They appeared in 2011 through 2015, winning the title in 2013. The past 2 years they were in Class AA. Now, no sooner are they back in Class A, than they're back at state. They started 5-3, then finished 16-1, losing only to Class AA state tourney entry Tracy-Milroy-Balaton. They're led by 5-9 junior post Lydia Sussner, who averaged 20 ppg for the season, but broke loose for 34 in the final against defending section champion Southwest Minnesota Christian in an 82-74 win. Their improvement over the course of the season is the result of the emergence of guards Morgan and Abby Hennen, a sophomore and a freshman.

Menahga counters with that 30-0 record and, probably, a bit of a chip on the shoulder over their seeding. Win-E-Mac rode that same chip on the shoulder to a state title in 2014. Coming in 28-2 with no seed, they knocked off the #3 and then the #1 seeded defending state champion—wait for it—Minneota in the final. Menahga is led by a bevy of juniors including Alyssa Peterson and Cierra Ahlf, guards, and Megan Hendrickson, a forward, and their 20, 17 and 16 ppg averages. **Menahga 63 Minneota 62.**

3 p.m. at Williams Arena #2 Mountain Iron-Buhl (27-2) vs. unseeded Stephen-Argyle Central (27-3)

MIB may be seeded #2 but they're the one sure thing in round one. Mary Burke, Allie Negen, Macy Savela, Madisen Overby and company can run, they can score, and chances are they've got a little bit of that chip on the shoulder thing going, too. I'm not talking about their seed. Rather, they're playing in their 8th straight tournament, but they've never won. Last year they came in as #1 and rolled into the finals, only to get overpowered by Goodhue 73-51. They're undoubtedly perfectly happy to be #2 now. They won't be happy to be #2 on Saturday again.

Like Lyle-Pacelli, Stephen-Argyle was here in 2015, but in their case, here and gone, losing to Maranatha in the 1st round 65-50. Guard Autumn Thompson, now a senior scoring 20 ppg, scored 18 in that game. She's got some help from juniors Abi McGlynn and Savanna Riopelle at 26 additional ppg between them. But this could be MIB's year and that certainly implies not losing on Thursday. **MIB 63 Stephen-Argyle 52.**

5 p.m. #3 Ada-Borup (27-2) versus Sleepy Eye (26-4)

Sleepy Eye probably has the top player among these 2 teams in senior point guard Madi Heiderscheidt 21 ppg) and her supporting cast of McKenzie Czelovski, Sarah Ibarra, Mya Ibberson and Brianna Polesky, all seniors, have been playing together forever, and play like it.

But junior point guard Mariah McKeever (15.5 ppg) will be no pushover for Ada, and her supporting cast of Brooklyn Erickson, Kora Kritzberger and Maddie Smart is perhaps a little more athletic and a little more explosive. Besides, Ada has that tradition on its side—10 state tournament appearances now in 13 years, with state titles in 2008, 2009 and 2015. **Ada 53 Sleepy Eye 51.**

The Rest of the Way

In the semis, look for **Lyle-Pacelli** to advance over Menahga 58-57, and **MIB** to knock off Ada 62-57. In the final it will be **MIB 67 Lyle-Pacelli 65** as Mary Burke's full-court game is a little bit more productive than Kristi Fett's inside, and Allie Negen plays Olivia Christianson to a draw.

For the record, Burke and Negen are the #1 and #3 top returning career scorers in the state tournament with 68 and 53 points, respectively. Lyle-Pacelli point guard Brooke Walter is next with 55 in 3 games way back in 2015, but since Kristi Fett arrived Walter has been too busy feeding Fett to score very many points of her own.

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