

Sectional rewind

A look back at this week's IHSA state playoff games.



Rolling Meadows' Ian Miletic (10) celebrates with teammates Kenan Pekovic (15), Lazar Lazarevic (22) and Patrick Coen (34) after winning the Mid-Suburban League championship game against Fremd.

Kirsten Stickney/For the Sun-Times

You know what Rolling Meadows has done over the past five seasons?

They've averaged 27 wins a year over the past four and finished 15-0 in the 2020-2021 pandemic-shortened season.

The Mustangs have gone 49-1 in the Mid-Suburban League East and won two Mid-Suburban League championships. They've won four regional championships.

That's some geographical domination.

But they never won 30 games and they never won a sectional championship. Check both of those off now.

With a sweep of Stevenson and Fremd in the Schaumburg Sectional, coach Kevin Katovich's Mustangs captured the program's first sectional title since 1990. That memorable team was led by high-scoring guard Mike Lipnisky and reached the Class AA Elite Eight.

The Rolling Meadows program, led by Katovich, who became the head coach in 2003, did get over the hump. But he quickly shifted the focus beyond his own accomplishments.

"The most satisfying part was seeing our fan section, watching them celebrate and enjoy this," Katovich said. "It's the biggest crowd I've seen since I've been at Rolling Meadows."

Rolling Meadows is a ranked team but has been at the back end of those rankings, closer to being unranked than one that's climbed. There are just four losses, which included three of those coming to teams (Metamora, Evanston and Mount Carmel) who all played in sectional championship games this past weekend.

Ian Miletic is one of the top-ranked prospects in the Class of 2025, one of only two players in the class headed to a high-major program. He's backed it up with impressive numbers all season.

But the ranked team and star player have been somewhat absent when discussing the best of this or that in the season's basketball conversation. They've been a bit of an underappreciated pair considering all they've done this year, which includes a school record for wins and the performances Miletic has strung together.

When I put together a Q & A story late in the season, one of the questions was, “What player in the state means the most to their team?” Miletic was the answer. He’s showed and proven why.

Miletic was terrific in the late-season Mid-Suburban League championship game with 20 points. He was even better, more dominant, in the two sectional wins this past week.

The 6-7 Miletic poured in 37 points in the sectional semifinal win over Stevenson. He then added 33 points in beating Fremd in the sectional championship Friday night.

“He’s been absolutely dominant,” Rolling Meadows coach Kevin Katovich said of Miletic. “It’s funny, because he’s been the most relaxed that I’ve seen all season. It’s like he’s been just waiting for this moment. He knows what’s at stake, what the situation is for us. He’s gone from 50 mph to 100 in a good way.”

But it was how Miletic produced that was even more impressive. When Rolling Meadows absolutely needed a basket, Miletic provided it. Big shot after big shot while doing so in an efficient manner and while being the focus of every defense he faced.

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Seals and Edwards continue to sparkle

Senior TJ Seals is an absolute constant for the Broncos, whether it be scoring, rebounding, defending or making plays with his raw athleticism and strength. He provided the tip-in at the buzzer to force overtime in the sectional semifinals and scored a game-high

26 points in the sectional title game.

Guard Amari Edwards is a consistent three-point threat who must be accounted for on the perimeter. But what Edwards has provided even more of is pure poise in the biggest moments, whether it's hitting big shots or clutch free throws for this team. That experience of playing in a state championship run last season is a big plus.

The mirror image of Rich and Warren basketball seasons

The seasons Warren and Rich have put together are nearly mirror images of one another. It's almost eerie.

They both entered the season with huge expectations and extremely high rankings — Warren was the preseason No. 2 team while Rich checked in at No. 4.

They both started the season with early losses and dealt with some injuries.

They both appeared to be putting it all together in late December with holiday tournament championships. Rich beat Kenwood and H-F to win the Big Dipper Holiday Tournament, and Warren knocked off ranked Public League teams Young and Lincoln Park to win the Proviso West Holiday Tournament.

While both ramped up their schedules this season, the losses continued to pile up in the second half of the season. They both had so-so finishes to the regular season — each went 6-4 down the stretch — and combined for 18 losses on the season.

And now? They both won exhilarating sectional games in overtime and both are playing in a super-sectional on Monday.

Sectional week is different

There is one week of the high school basketball season that is completely different than any other: sectional week.

There is no factual data to back this up, but my own personal history in this sport for three-plus decades is that the best, highest level of basketball is played in the sectional.

And the tension and atmosphere you get in high school gyms during sectional week is both electric and unique. Players competing in their natural habitat, which is high school gyms packed to the rafters, beats any half-filled (or quarter-filled) college arena.

This past week didn't disappoint in that department as several sectional championship games were sold out.

Evanston built differently

Evanston is not going to wow anyone. The Wildkits aren't built that way.

No, you can't underestimate Evanston's X-factor — senior Theo Rocca's leadership, poise and will to win. And don't underestimate how all these pieces and parts fit so well together at both ends of the floor.

They are unselfish offensively. The team defense the Wildkits play isn't one that brings heat, but it's so sound, disciplined and one of the best you will watch in the final week of the season.

Take away the regular-season finale loss to Niles North where the starters didn't play much at all. This 29-5 team's only losses in the past two months came by a grand total of six points,

including two losses (Centralia and Metamora) at the buzzer.

Coach Mike Ellis established himself as one of the state's top coaches long ago. But he's one win away from guiding his fifth team (two at Evanston and two at Peoria Richwoods) to a state semifinal appearance.

Benet's unbelievable balance

There are different types of balance and ways a team spreads the wealth. But Benet's equilibrium should be applauded and feared.

The core group can beat you in a multitude of ways. A different player can beat you in a different way on any given night.

There is do-it-all guard Blake Fagbemi. There is skill, size and scoring in 6-9 Southern Illinois recruit Daniel Pauliukonis, a serious shooting threat in Jayden Wright and a towering 7-foot factor in Colin Stack.

In the sectional title game it was Wright with 16 points, including four big threes. Even the defense of Edward Stasys off the bench helped beat Downers Grove North.

Pauliukonis scored 20 in the regional title game and pumped in 23 with five three-pointers in the sectional semifinal victory.

Wright scored 19 in a huge ESCC win over Marist and hit three clutch free throws with four seconds to play to beat Simeon 67-66.

In the regular season wrap-up win over DePaul Prep, Stack put up 22 points and 11 rebounds.

And it was Fagbemi who was the East Suburban Catholic

Conference Player of the Year and who has put together the biggest statistical lines of the year, including the 22 points, 11 rebound and six assist performance in beating Rich.

They all take turns.

How ridiculously balanced is this group? Those four players — Fagbemi, Wright, Stack and Pauliukonis — are now all averaging an unheard of 12 to 12.6 points a game between them.

Is this the year for Mike Bailey and the Shamrocks?

Mike Bailey took over the St. Patrick program in 1994. He's won a lot over the past 30 years.

Bailey's three-decade run includes 13 20-plus win seasons and 15 regional championships. Friday night's win over Fenwick gave Bailey his fifth sectional championship, including three in the past four years, and a school record 27 wins.

We don't want to throw any undue pressure on what is always a pressure-packed super-sectional game, but the highly-successful coach is again oh-so-close to making his first State Finals appearance.

Bailey and the Shamrocks get another crack at it Monday night when they face Mount Carmel in the UIC Super. St. Pat's, which has never qualified for the State Finals, lost to Mount Carmel in last year's super-sectional.

DePaul Prep's continued 3A dominance

DePaul's machine-like ways in Class 3A continue. It's been a rinse and repeat.

Last year in regional and sectional play, DePaul won four games with an average victory margin of 22 points. This year it's been even more dominating with the following postseason scores: 71-21, 53-27, 63-23 and 45-25.

The closest regional or sectional game DePaul has played the past two years was a 46-32 regional win over Carmel last season.

Catholic League leftovers

There were a whopping eight Chicago Catholic League teams playing in sectional championships Friday night. Leo lost in 2A, Loyola lost in 4A, and a couple knocked each other out in Class 3A.

But three are left standing: DePaul Prep, Brother Rice and Mount Carmel. All three will play in separate supersectional games on Monday night with a chance to reach the state semifinals in Champaign. DePaul and Mount Carmel will be favored in their supersectional games, while the Brother Rice-Peoria showdown at the Pontiac Super will be a toss-up.

They're back

You thought you would never hear from Glenbard West basketball again after the magical 37-1 state championship team in 2022?

The Hilltoppers are back with a whole new cast — but with that 1-3-1 still intact — and are one win away from a return trip to Champaign for the second time in four years.

That's some heavy lifting for a program that had one sectional title in the previous 50 years.

Coaching kudos in defeat

Downers Grove North coach Jim Thomas was the City/Suburban Hoops Report Coach of the Year in 2023. He's received well-deserved accolades.

But what Thomas did this year with this team — and what he's done with this program — is worth mentioning again.

Remember, this is a DGN team that returned just one starter from last year's sectional finalist. The rise of Bobby Grganto helped, but it's a team that overachieved, winning 26 games and upsetting Bolingbrook in the sectional semis.

Thomas' program has played in four sectional championships since 2019, winning two sectional titles and finishing fourth in the state in 2023.

How are the picks holding up?

The pre-tournament picks in Class 4A included these forecasted sectional winners before regional play began: Quincy (won), Bolingbrook (lost in sectional semis), Glenbard West (won), Evanston (won), Kenwood (won), Homewood-Flossmoor (lost in sectional final), Rolling Meadows (won) and Warren (won).

When making those picks two weeks ago, I remember going back and forth on two sectional picks — the two I incorrectly picked.

I really liked the fact Benet was playing on its home floor and was oh-so-close to going that way, so hindsight is 20-20 there. But in the sectional at Rich, I hemmed and hawed over picking Marist instead of Homewood-Flossmoor. Wrong on both accounts, thanks to the host school.

But I'll take six of eight with all four of my state semifinal picks still alive.

And in Class 3A, the picks included Brother Rice (won), Peoria (won), Fenwick (lost in the sectional final), Mount Carmel (won), DePaul (won), Kaneland (won), Decatur MacArthur (lost in regional final) and Centralia (lost in sectional final).

Considering I self-admittedly have less of a feel for and know a whole lot less of teams in southern Illinois — as you can see with the 3A picks — I'll take it.