Packing it all in a weekend

By Larry Pritchett
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A couple of weekends ago, I got to spend a couple of days in Kearney and Grand Island and had the opportunity to watch eight basketball games in the two days that I was there. I got to see Kearney High and Lincoln Southwest on Friday night and then the Heartland Hoops Classic in Grand Island on Saturday–a great way to work up to watching the state tournament.

You need to work on your conditioning and discipline to stay and watch multiple games since you don't really have that chance during the season. The SPVA helps if you go to the finals because they play six games in one day so you attend those to work into something like the Heartland Hoops Classic and then state tournament basketball.

If you like basketball, you need a plan. I try to refine my approach to going to games all during the season.

The games are entertaining and such, but you also get to meet up with a lot of old and current coaches and that is something that I really enjoy.

The friendships that are made during the years mean a lot and it is sometimes surprising who you find at these contests.

The first thing with this situation was that we stayed with John and Nancy Stritt. John and I coached together for a long time so it is always good to get together with good friends and talk about old times and what is going on presently with our families.

A Thrill to Watch

In this case, I also had the opportunity to go on Friday afternoon and attend the Oak Hill Academy practice. Their Coach, Steve Smith, is an acquaintance. I can't say a close friend, but we have known each other for about 10 years and he was a student of my sister Rita when he was a student at Asbury College in Wilmore, Ky.

My sister was a professor there for 40 years. In 2003 or so, Coach Smith, his father who was the basketball coach at Asbury, and my sister Rita who also coached at Asbury were part of the first Hall of Fame group for the college. I met Coach Smith then and we have kept in contact since then.

He has been the coach at Oak Hill for 30 years and has won numerous national championships there (eight). His record at Oak Hill is 848-52 coming into this season. Some of the players who have played for him at Oak Hill are Kevin Durant, Rod Strickland, Jerry Stackhouse, Carmelo Anthony, Rajon Rondo, Josh Smith, Ty Lawson, Brandon Jennings, and Michael Beasley just to name a few.

Watching the practice, being able to visit with the players and the coaches was a lot of fun for me.

Team Talent

The Oak Hill team is a very disciplined group, a talented group, but they are still 17 and

18-year-old kids. Practice, even though the talent level was extremely high, wasn't much different than anyone of the many that most Nebraska coaches hold. The kids still had to be told to hustle, work hard, pay attention to detail but the difference was most drills ended with a thunder dunk or a deep three.

Oak Hill is a small private, Baptist-affiliated, secondary school in Mouth of Wilson, Va. The school has about 150 students, a C-2 Nebraska school, but has four basketball teams with the gold team traveling the United States and plays at the high level of competition. To get them to come to Nebraska to play was a pretty big deal.

The final game of the night was Oak Hill and Omaha Central. There were seven games prior to the big featured game, so it was a big day of lots of basketball. You had about every class represented, you had all the Grand Island schools there but there was no doubt which was the feature game.

I have to admit, I sold Omaha Central short. They have won the Class A State Championship three years in a row, and probably will have a fourth by the end of the season, but they had been beaten lately by a couple of Omaha teams. Omaha South defeated them, and Papillion LaVista had beaten them so I thought maybe they were struggling. Whatever the problem was, they got it fixed.

Central went toe to toe and took the pressure and the "Above the Rim" play of Oak Hill and matched them with pressure of their own and played on top of the rim themselves. Central's Akoy Agau who has committed to Louisville, did a great job and Central also got outstanding efforts from Nick Billingsley, TreShawn Thurman plus a number of other players and ended up with a seven point victory.

The win pointed out that Nebraska does have some players that are D1 material and they can play at a very competitive level. I didn't think Central would beat Oak Hill. I don't know if they played again if they would come out on top the second time, but they only are playing once and Central got it done.

Weekend Highlight

When you put all the elements together, that weekend was a great weekend. I got to see some pretty good teams play, got to see many old friends and rehash tons of stories and see what is probably the best high school game I have ever witnessed.

The rumor in Grand Island was that the organizers are trying to get another team the caliber of Oak Hill to come to next year's Hoops Classic. It would be worth marking on your calendar. This might be one of the best kept secrets of the basketball season.

Heartland Hoops Classic and I hope to be there again next year!

When Is It A Real Rival Game

I can remember when Bill McCartney wanted the CU and NU football game to be a big rivalry game, but CU could never win enough times to really make it what Coach McCartney thought he wanted. It is the same way with KU and K-State in basketball.

KU had lost three games in a row–something they hadn't done in over 260 games, and last Monday K-State came into Allen Field House actually rated higher in the polls than KU. When it was over KU won again 83-62 in a game that really wasn't that close.

KU 's win was the 11th one in the last 12 games and the 46th in the last 49 and they have won 185 times to K-State's 91.

So before you heard the Rock Chalk Jayhawk, KU chant, the KU students were chanting "This is our state!" The stars realigned Monday and all was well in the Big 12. KU is trying to win their ninth straight Big 12 Championship but they still have a tough finish.

Losing to TCU was a bad loss. The losses to Oklahoma, and Oklahoma State, although hard to take, were to quality teams. If they could just play them all at Allen Field House–not going to happen.