

MG boys after big prize in Austin

Written by Don Wallace
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Fans who think Miller Grove is so tickled just to make it to state and they won't play hard are mistaken.

Any arm chair basketball coaches who feel the Hornets will be overwhelmed by the big game, big stadium situation, can guess again.

These Hornets are battle-tested and ready to bring home the state championship trophy. That's if head coach Gary Billingsley has anything to say about.

"We are just as good as any team playing in our division," Billingsley said. "The key will be handling the pressure. That's when you give up points."

The Hornets take on Laneville in the state semifinals Friday at 7 p.m. at the Frank Erwin Center on the campus of the University of Texas.

The squad, coaches and some fans left Wednesday to make the 250-plus mile journey to Austin.

Laneville has made 10 trips to the state tournament with three state titles to boast about. The Yellowjackets won state 1991-92, 1992-1993 and 2007-08.

Billingsley said with a grin, "Yes, they won state before. But none of these kids have played in Austin."

So the hardwood court is even, as far as experience. Even if it is the first trip to the "big show" for Miller Grove.

"Our kids have competed before on the state level in cross county and in front of big crowds," Billingsley said. "I don't think they will be nervous."

Going to the state tournament is old hat for the coach.

"I started going when I was 13 and have been going every year," Billingsley said. "I just missed the years I was in college. But I have been many times as a fan, but this is the first time as a coach. It's a different feeling."

Billingsley said one year he got first row seats to a 5A championship game and that was enjoyable.

"Now I am taking a team down there, it's sunk in a little," Billingsley said. "But right after we won the regional title, it was hard to believe. It sure is exciting and such a great thing for the players, the school and the community."

Miller Grove got to the state tournament overcoming tough odds against some highly-touted teams.

Miller Grove won the 23-1A title and got a bye to the area round. The Hornets downed Fannindel, 51-33. The squad fought off a tough Bellevue team taking a 69-61 win in the regional quarterfinals.

At the regional tournament - the Hornets edged Huckabay, 58-56 and staged yet another comeback to defeat a favored Roxton team, 59-55 for the ticket to Austin.

Laneville won the Region 4 title. The Yellowjackets also got a first round bye after winning the District 25-1A title. Laneville whipped Round Top-Carmine, 100-48. In the regional quarterfinals they won 69-55 over Calvert. In the regional tournament the team defeated Moulton, 67-40 and won 77-69 against Oakwood.

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Billingsley said, "We have seen speed. Roxton was fast with a 6-5 kid who dunked on us twice. But we still won. We able to take care of our business."

Laneville won at home over Miller Grove 68-61 earlier in the season.

"Laneville is a good team, very athletic," Billingsley said. "They use full court pressure and they will trap anywhere. They have a big kid, Ty Johnson (6-5, 195) who is a physical specimen at our level."

"This (state tournament) is something we have been working at doing for nine years," Billingsley said. "It is not an easy accomplishment."

Billingsley said this group of players has had a hunger some of the other talented teams did not possess.

"It is a amazing feeling to the regional champions with the opportunity to play in Austin," Billingsley said. "It's crazy how many people have called, texted or reached out through the social media. The community is very excited about our trip to state."

Billingsley said, "We have a good chance. We've done the work to get there. We've had some good practices leading up to this point. I think we will play well."