Larry Sullivan's

SPORT SIDE

After Break, Let Games Play

Touching All The Bases: Now we can get down to some serious sports.

The spring season had barely begun when along came Easter to provide us with a pause. But now, with that holiday behind us, it's time to play. And play hard.

From now through the remainder of the school year, with exceptions provided primarily by weather, the local sports calendar will be jam-packed with spring-sport activity. The more the merrier. It was hard to get into the mood prior to the Easter break, mainly because we knew it was coming and realized that our schedules would be interrupted. But now, we have no excuse. We're ready to play.

Baseball and softball teams, which seem to hog the limelight this time of year, buckle down with the bulk of conference play, games that will determine their postseason fates, if any. League play heats up in the other sports as well, making those contests equally important. The prep season winds down in a hurry, so teams must return from what holiday hiatus they enjoyed still in tip-top form.

So, while the break was welcome, so, too, is the return to regular sports programming. Let the games begin.

Pivoting On A Double Play: Corresponding with the return of regular play by our area high school teams, professional baseball opened with a bang earlier this week. And what a relief.

I would hate to have to think that all we sports fanatics would have to look forward to now is hockey playoffs and WLAF regular-season games. Baseball winds up a savior.

Holding no bars, baseball is my favorite sport, and its season also tops my list. I get into and behind teams in college and even professional basketball, but baseball is when I rise and shine. I'm wide awake now.

As usual, we've established our baseball office pool. I'm proud of my picks. We're not to the point where we can pick our rotisserie teams, so we take the lazy way out. We pick teams already established. We select teams we feel will have the most success in each of the four divisions. Then, at the end of the season, we compare our picks against those of others. There are incentive clauses and bonuses for better picks.

For the record, I feel I've duked the field by picking Oakland in the American League West and Boston in the East. As for the National League, I went with the San Francisco in the West, and New York's Mets in the East. We get benefits for picking division winners and World Series champs. I suggested that my competitors ease the pain of humiliation by settling up before the season. They declined. It's their money.

I must admit, though, that it will be hard to watch the games this year without at least acknowledging the sadistic amount of money some, or rather most, of the players are being paid to simply play a game. When is it all going to stop? Since when is a million bucks, much less two or three, for a single season not enough? Sounds more than fair to me.

There has to be a stopping point. Just when you think a player cannot receive a more lucrative contract, another player comes up with one. There's poor ole Bo Jackson, whose hip injury has sidelined his baseball career for this year. Big deal. He's still being paid $700,000 for watching. I'll be watching, too, Chicago, in case you're interested. And I'm not even hurt.

Where is all this money coming from? The obvious answer it television. ESPN will again be broadcasting games several times a week, with CBS picking up games on weekends and during the playoffs. Fans will again fill up stadiums at a record pace. But the time will come when this, too, will pass. It hasn't happened yet, but there will be a time when the game is no longer fun to watch. The big-money contract and player-team hassles will be more than we can take. Take the fan out of the game, and you no longer have a game. The players need to take this under consideration.

And where is loyalty? It simply no longer exists. It's all now based on who has the biggest pocketbook. Used to be, the money end of pro sports played second fiddle behind the games themselves. It's not like that now. Ahead of batting averages and runs batted in, we are made more aware of a player's worth. And the fact that he can be bought.

America's game has lost its hold on America. We have the players to blame.

Camping Under An Infield Fly: Okay, I know. I struck out at this year's NCAA tournament. That fact has been pointed out to me more than enough times, thank you. The bottom line, though, is that the team I wanted to win did. So there.

Originally, I had predicted that North Carolina would top Kansas, and UNLV defeat Duke in the Final Four semi-finals. That, according to my bracket, pitted the Heels against the Runnin' Rebels in the finals. There, I had UNLV defending its crown by whipping Carolina. So, I missed it by a little.

Okay, a lot. I was officially 0-for-three in the Final Four. But it happened so long ago, who remembers. Just thought I clear the record.

Driving Through The Fairway: A reminder: Monday is April 15. And Monday is the day when the Mooresville Municipal Golf Course begins its new procedure of securing week-day tee times to go along with those already required on weekends and holidays.

Beginning Mondays, tee times will be needed for play seven days a week. The policy will be in effect throughout the peak playing season, from then until Sept. 15. Those wishing to get in nine holes after work had best call ahead of time to secure starting times. Daily requests will be fielded 24 hours in advance.

It's a sign of the times, folks. The local muni is a heavily-played tract, especially now that time has changed. This policy is being introduced to help ease daily congestion. Actually, it's not a bad idea. It beats the heck out of hurrying from the office in order to be the first to stand in line waiting to play on these beautiful spring and summer days.

It may take some getting used to, but in the long run, it will better serve both the course and the players. Trust me.

Vikings Sandwich Lone Win Between Defeats In Tourney

South Iredell's baseball team emerged hungry from the Metrolina Invitational Easter Tournament last week after sandwiching its lone victory between a pair of defeats.

The Vikings salvaged a single win in three invitational appearances on host West Mecklenburg's field as they used the holiday attraction to prepare themselves for the opening of Foothills Athletic Conference play this week.

South's lone win came last Wednesday afternoon against a team from Marysville, Ohio, when it rallied for a pair of runs in the bottom of the sixth to notch an 8-7 triumph.

That win came sandwiched on both sides by tournament defeats.

In their opening appearance, the Vikes were hit early and hard by Myers Park in absorbing a 16-7 loss.

And in their tournament finale later in the week, South was left on the short end of a 10-6 score against South Meck.

As a result, the Vikings emerged from the post-Easter week affair with a 4-5 record overall, with primarily FAC action left on their remaining schedule.

In their only winning effort Wednesday, the Vikes relied on a two-run uprising in the last of the sixth inning Wednesday to overcome a one-run deficit and then held the out-of-state guests scoreless in the seventh to post the win.

South had things pretty much its own way early, using a single run in the first and four more in the third inning to take a 5-0 lead.

Marysville, the only non-North Carolina team in the eight-member field, busted up the shutout with a run in the fourth, but South Iredell answered with a run of its own in the last of the fifth.

Then, in the sixth, all heck broke loose, as far as the Vikes were concerned, as Marysville staged a six-run eruption that earned it a 7-6 lead.

The Vikes stormed right back, though, and regained the lead for good in the last of the sixth.

South Iredell used a walk, a Tracy Shinn double and two fielder's choice grounders to construct the winning rally.

Shinn worked the first five innings plus, allowing five runs, before Ryan Douglas was called on in relief to collect the win.

Matt McConnell slapped out a pair of hits and drove home three runs to pace the winners. Shinn popped his double and drove home a run, while Douglas and Brian Wagner each slapped a safety.

In the Vikings' opening performance last Tuesday evening, it was one worth forgetting, as the Vikes spotted Myers Parks a 10-0 lead through three innings before scoring.

Even after South notched its first run in the fourth, Myers Paks continued to score at will, piling up three runs in the fourth and tacking on four more in the sixth. The eventual winners added two insurance scores in the seventh.

South Iredell saved its best for last, but it was too little, as the Vikes marched six runners across home plate in the seventh to at least make the final score presentable.

Mark Apgar started and took the loss, pitching two innings and allowing five runs. McConnell worked four frames and allowed another five runs, and Vincent Ketchie mopped up with an inning of work.

Wagner, Mike Cummings and Alex Sprinkle all paired hits for the losers, the latter driving in two teammates, while Douglas and Jeff Cummings also added a base hit apiece.

In South's final tournament appearance Thursday evening, its quick, first-inning lead disappeared in the bottom of the inning and the Vikes never led again in dropping the 10-6 verdict to South Meck.

South Meck rebounded from South Iredell's two-run first with three runs of its own to take a 3-2 lead.

The Vikings tied the issue with a single run in the third, before South Meck went ahead to stay with four runs in the forth.

The Vikes tallied their other three runs in the sixth, but South Meck met the challenge with its final three runs in the home half of that same frame.

McConnell was the starter and loser, working five plus innings, with Apgar finishing.

Wagner paired hits and drove home a run, while Brian Shaw clouted a double. Shinn also plated a teammate, while Mike Cummings, Douglas and Cory Honeycutt all connected for a base hit each.

South Iredell entered this week tabled to christen FAC play with a pair of league encounters surrounded by a non-conference date.

The Vikes were to open league play Tuesday night at Statesville before remaining at the road this (Wednesday) evening to visit non-league foe South Caldwell.

The Vikings wrap up their busy week back with a trip to FAC member North Surry Friday night.

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Gathering Rekindles Memories Of A Most Unforgettable Season

Memories are made of this.

Or, more precisely, memories made this.

What this was, in this case, was a gathering of memories that continue to bounce around from the most memorable girls basketball season in the history of South Iredell High School.

Those directly — namely players and coaches — and indirectly — consisting of family members of both aforementioned groups — involved in what was a history-making campaign for the Lady Vikings convened at Mooresville's Western Steer last Thursday evening to once again bring those stirring memories to life, a most unnecessary bit of business seeing as how those directly and indirectly affected can do nothing but remember.

"What more can I say," summed up Sandy Torrence, fondly recalling the most successful of her six seasons as the Lady Vikings head coach. "We simply had a super season. I've very proud of every member of this team and to be associated with it. What we accomplished will be remembered for many years to come."

Here's what the Vikettes did to make it so memorable:

They rattled through an unbeaten first month and a-half of play and capped it off by emerging as queens of the inaugural Lincoln Bank Holiday Classic.

They began the new year by picking right up where they left off in the old one, wrapping up January and February still unbeaten overall.

As a result, the Lady Vikings wound up with a 22-0 regular season mark, tying the school record for the best single-season showing ever while riding their crest of victories atop the state's Associated Press state 3A girls high school poll.

In the process, the Vikettes surfaced with undisputed claim to the Foothills Athletic Cofnerence regular-season championship after polishing off a 10-0 showing agaist fellow league foes.

Even after absorbing their first defeat, they failed to falter, instead regrouping during the state prep playoffs.

In those playoffs, courtesy of two nail-biting, one-point decisions — the first of which wasn't secured until after time expired — South Iredell became the school's first girls team to win a state sectional championship.

That placed the Lady Vikings among the state's top eight 3A girls teams in the state. In regional competition, their storybook season finally found an end with a loss in the equivalent of the state quarterfinal round.

All in all, the Lady Vikes polished off their season with a 24-2 record, by far the best single-season showing ever by a girls team at the school.

"This team is the best I've seen," complimented Torrence, who filled the evening with praise in a season that also featured her 100th career coaching win, "at doing what it takes to win. There were times when other teams would have accepted defeat, but not us. It was a total team effort, too. We had players we counted on more than others, but we couldn't have done the things we did without cooperation and contributions from every player on the roster. This is something everyone of them should be proud of."

So much so, in fact, that the players found themselves celebrating their success separately from the other winter sports squads at the school.

When South Iredell held its end-of-the-season awards ceremony prior to the Easter break, the Lady Vikings put off the recognizing of their accomplishments, and, instead used last week's gathering to officially do them justice.

In the process, every player was able to relish the moment, in keeping with Torrence's coaching philosophy of stressing teamwork over individual excellence.

"There's no doubting the fact that several of our players enjoyed outstanding seasons," assured Torrence, "but all of their efforts helped the team succeed."

And succeed, it did, winning more games than any other girls team before it while advancing farther in postseason play than any of its predecessors.

For that, every member of team was rewarded with a personal players package.

The package consisted of a framed collage of pictures, a conference championship team member certificate, and a pamplet containing newspaper clippings of all the season's games.

For the five out-going seniors, the packages also included the receiving of their names off the back of their warm-up jerseys.

The collection of goodies was increased by the three players who received all-conference recognition, as they also received all-FAC certificates to complete their loot.

Those same three, in senior Heather Woodfin, and junior classmates Gretchen Hollifield and Jennifer Hobbs, also carried home additional team honors.

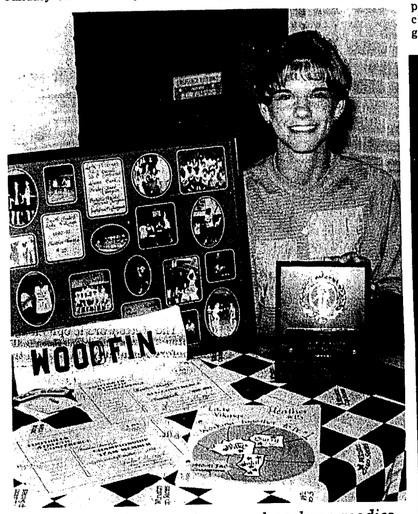
Hollifield, who surpassed the 1,000th-point mark of her career, was tabbed as the team's most valuable player, an expected accolade after earlier being selected as the MVP of the conference.

Woodfin, a four-year varsity player, was presented with the team's top defensive award.

And Hobbs, like Hollifield with another year of eligibility remaining, was honored with the team's hustle award.

The two-hour-long dinner gathering served its purpose of rekindling memories of this past Lady Viking season, but it hardly seemed needed, seeing as how these are memories destined to be remembered.

Those most responsible for the team's success, l-r: Hollifield, Woodfin, and Hobbs



Woodfin with players' personal package goodies

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