Catholic League's 'banged up' teams head into playoffs

BY CHRISTOPHER DABE
Staff writer

Brother Martin came into the game knowing it needed a win to secure a first-round playoff bye, giving injured players an extra week to heal.

With the playoffs beginning this week, it's a luxury every Catholic League team could use, particularly as injuries continue to mount.

"We're so banged up," Brother Martin coach Mark Bonis said.

He's hardly alone in dealing with an extensive injury list.

"We got 10 guys that easily could be cashing us in … playing on MCL, AC joint separations," Holy Cross coach Scott Wattigny said. "Guys are delaying surgery to be on the field, so I'm super proud of the way our guys compete."

Added Rummel coach Nick Monica: "We probably got four, five sprained ankles. We got a torn labrum. We got a couple guys that are sick. We have our issues, but I think everybody does. That's one good thing about earning a bye week."

When the regular season ended, St. Augustine, Jesuit and Edna Karr held the Nos. 1-3 seeds in the Division I select playoffs. Rummel was No. 5, followed by Brother Martin at No. 8.

Elsewhere in Division I select, No. 13 John Curtis hosts No. 20 Huntington, while No. 17 Holy Cross visits No. 16 John Ehret. In Division I nonselect, No. 28 Chalmette visits No. 5 East Ascension.

"This league is unbelievable," Jesuit coach Ryan Manale said. "The tough thing about it is you got to make it through, and you got to make it through healthy. We made it through. I can't say we made it through healthy."

Manale made those comments not long after Jesuit lost quarterback Mani Vandenweghe for the season to a serious leg injury during the opening drive last week against Karr. He left the field on a stretcher.

The final weeks of the regular season offered little relief for some teams.

"You're holding your breath all the way through the finish line there," said Monica, whose Rummel team lost to Karr, Jesuit and St. Aug over the final four weeks. "We're banged up. I'm proud of our kids. We had a bunch of them that probably could have sat out (Week 10), but they didn't, and they gave us what they had."

Perhaps the healthiest team is top-ranked St. Augustine, which completed the regular season 10-0 for the first time since 1987 and won the Catholic League outright for the first time since 2012.

A state runner-up last season, St. Aug is seeking its first state title since 1979.

"I think we're pretty much healthy," St. Augustine coach Robert Valdez said. "A little bumps and bruises here and there. Hopefully nothing major."



STAFF PHOTO BY DAVID GRUNFELD

Tulane guard Krystian Lewis, center, gets through the Nicholls defense during their game on Tuesday in Devlin Fieldhouse.

Lewis, tough defense help propel Tulane past Nicholls

BY GUERRY SMITH
Contributing writer

Tulane coach Ron Hunter devoted three consecutive practices to defense only after multiple breakdowns cost the Green Wave against Jackson State last Thursday.

The extra work paid off on Tuesday night against Nicholls, and when the defense slipped for a stretch after the break, Krystian Lewis took over.

Lewis, a transfer from UL-Monroe who has experienced an incredibly eventful first three games, poured in 35 points, including 11 in a little more than four minutes after Nicholls cut a double-digit lead to 46-45 as Tulane pulled away to win 77-63.

He did not quite match the career-high 40 he scored in the opener against UT-Martin, but he surpassed any other game in his career while connecting on all 17 of his free throw attempts, sinking four 3-pointers and grabbing seven rebounds. In between those two huge games, he drew a technical foul for trying to call a timeout with two seconds left when Tulane had none against Jackson State last Thursday, leading to the tie-breaking free throws in a frustrating loss.

"He's really hard to guard," Hunter said. "I love his resilience after the situation with the timeout. He wanted to come back and prove to people he's a good player."

Right after Nicholls pulled within one, Lewis responded with a short shot in the lane off the drive and a 3-pointer off a pass from Josiah Moore to make the score 51-45. He then hit his fourth 3 of the game with 8:54 left and drove for a layup to restore a 10-point advantage.

Tulane never was in danger the rest of the way, avoiding what would have been its third consecutive last-second decider to start the year.

"It was about my teammates and coaches trusting me," Lewis said. "At the end of the day when my number's called, I want to be able to show up and be consistent."

Tyler Ringgold was Tulane's only other player in double figures with 12 points on a ragged night offensively. Joah Chappelle contributed a game-high eight rebounds to go along with seven points off the bench. Moore made some big plays on both ends of the floor, and the Wave hit 9 of 18 from 3-point range.

Nicholls (1-2), which had played Tulane's fellow American Conference member UAB tough in a 70-63 loss last Friday, looked like it might have a shot for a brief moment before the Wave pulled away. Forward AJ Dent paced the Colonels with 16 points and seven rebounds, while guard Christian Winborne added 15 points.

Limiting Nicholls to 38.5% shooting in the first half, Tulane led 35-24 at the break, holding the Colonels scoreless for nearly five minutes while going on a 12-0 run to pull ahead 22-9. Nicholls responded with a 9-0 spurt to get within four, but the Wave extended the advantage back to double figures by scoring 11 of the last 15 points.

Five days after fouling Jackson State on a 3-pointer with three seconds left and watching a seven-point lead dwindle to four, Tulane benefited from the same scenario when the Colonels fouled Lewis on a 3-point attempt with 2.9 seconds remaining. He sank all three free throws.

Lewis, who did most of his damage on drives and free throws against UT-Martin, hit a pair of 3s in the first half this time, likely prompting Cheikh Biteye to contest the last 3-point attempt too aggressively.

The freebies gave Lewis 17 points, including nine from the foul line.

"This is the first time since this group's been together that I felt like this is more my style of team," Hunter said. "I know we're going to be able to score, but when our defense is going, that's what makes us a good team."



STAFF PHOTO BY JILL PICKETT

Ponchatoula defends against Benton in the second round of the Division I playoffs on Saturday in Bossier Parish.

Ponchatoula reaching new heights with first trip to state tournament

BY CHRISTOPHER DABE
Staff writer

Lindsay Pinell began her volleyball coaching tenure with a rather modest goal.

"We just wanted a home playoff match," she said. "We never had that."

Four years later, Ponchatoula has reached a milestone that once seemed out of reach: its first trip to the state tournament.

The breakthrough came Saturday, when No. 11 Ponchatoula went on the road and defeated No. 6 Benton in four sets, with sophomore outside hitter Hannah Taylor delivering the winning point on a tip to the far corner in a 26-24 final set. The Green Wave will face Dominican in a quarterfinal Thursday at the Cajundome in Lafayette.

When the school hired Pinell in 2022, the thought of reaching state wasn't a main goal for the coach and her players. Back then, the school had never been seeded high enough to host a playoff game.

But when the Green Wave hosted a playoff game and won as a No. 16 seed in 2023, Pinell and her players set their sights on qualifying for state.

Three players who experienced that breakthrough as freshmen were Morgan Adams, Olivia Boudreaux and Julia Halloway. Now seniors, they've witnessed the program's growth firsthand.

"When I was a freshman, I didn't understand how big of a deal it was to have a home playoff game," said Adams, an outside hitter and setter. "Now I really appreciate how big of a deal that is."

The trio won another playoff game as sophomores in 2024 but then had a setback as juniors, losing in the first round at Central-Baton Rouge.

The loss stuck with the seniors. When they met before this season, they adopted a simple motto: "Make history."

This season, when the playoffs began, "Our goal was 2-0," Pinell said. "Two games get you to the Dome."

The first playoff win came against No. 22 East Ascension. Against Benton, Ponchatoula's players erupted when the final point landed.

"All our players stormed the court," said Boudreaux, a middle blocker. "We were overwhelmed with excitement."

"I could not stop smiling," Adams said.

Other key contributors include senior Isabella Randazzo and junior Emma Rodriguez at the net, along with sophomore libero Natalie Arthur.

Ponchatoula will face Dominican in the playoffs for the third time in four seasons, looking to reverse the outcome of its previous two meetings. Dominican eliminated the Green Wave in the second round each time.

With multiple matches happening across four courts, Ponchatoula players expect a loud environment.

"This is going to be a new environment for most of us," Boudreaux said.

The Ponchatoula seniors spent four years building something special to get to the Dome. They're not ready for it to end.

Cousins' return headlines trades

BY ROB MAADDI
Associated Press

Kirk Cousins is returning to Minnesota. Keenan Allen is heading to San Francisco. Josh Downs is going to Kansas City.

Jonathan Taylor is staying in Indianapolis.

The Colts' decision to keep the three-time Pro Bowl running back was the biggest surprise Tuesday when several teams filled needs ahead of the trade deadline.

Buffalo added safety Amani Hooker, Denver got linebacker Daiyan Henley, and Baltimore and Atlanta swapped offensive linemen.

The Vikings (6-2) turned to a familiar quarterback to try to rescue a woeful offense, acquiring Cousins from the Las Vegas Raiders in a move that bolsters their chances in a competitive NFC North that features four teams with winning records.

Carson Wentz's dismal performance in a 23-6 loss to the Bills on Monday night fueled Minnesota's push for a reunion with Cousins, who threw for 4,547 yards and made his fourth Pro Bowl in 2022 while helping the Vikings win 13 games in coach Kevin O'Connell's first season.

After a 6-0 start, the Vikings have lost two in a row. They have the league's stingiest defense, allowing 14.5 points per game.

But they're scoring just 18.3 points per game. Kyler Murray is dealing with a hamstring issue, but the offense wasn't productive with him. Wentz came off the bench after Murray was injured and completed 12 of 19 passes for 133 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions in a 39-22 win over Green Bay in Week 1.

Against the Bills, he was 8 of 25 for 81 yards, two interceptions and lost a fumble on an overthrown backward pass. His QB rating was 8.9 for the game.

The 38-year-old Cousins threw for 2,340 yards, 20 TDs and eight picks for Las Vegas (4-5). The Raiders now turn to rookie No. 1 overall pick Fernando Mendoza while the Vikings hope Cousins can lead them on a Super Bowl run.

The injury-riddled 49ers (7-1) added another veteran receiver to a depleted group, getting Allen from the Colts to give Brock Purdy a reliable option. The 34-year-old Allen has 40 catches for 351 yards and one touchdown in eight games in his first season in Indianapolis.

PREP REPORT

Football

Area playoff seedings, pairings

Dates, times TBA unless noted

Division I select
No. 1 St. Augustine (10-0) bye
No. 2 Jesuit (8-2) bye
No. 3 Edna Karr (8-2) bye
No. 5 Rummel (7-3) bye
No. 8 Brother Martin (7-3) bye
No. 17 Holy Cross (3-7) at No. 16 John Ehret (6-4), 7 p.m. Friday at Memtsas
No. 19 Woodlawn-BR (5-5) at No. 14 St. Paul's (5-5)
No. 20 Huntington (4-6) at No. 13 John Curtis (4-6), 7 p.m. Friday at Bertolino
No. 21 Warren Easton (4-6) at No. 12 Evangel Christian (6-4)
No. 22 West Jefferson (3-6) at No. 11 Acadiana (6-4)
No. 23 Higgins (4-6) at No. 10 Lafayette (7-3)
No. 24 Peabody (2-8) at No. 9 Bonnabel (7-3)

Division II select
No. 1 Shaw (9-1) bye
No. 4 Kennedy (8-1) bye
No. 6 Patrick Taylor (10-0) bye
No. 8 Booker T. Washington-NO (7-2) bye
No. 17 L.B. Landry (5-5) at No. 16 Hannan (7-3), 7 p.m. Friday
No. 18 George Washington Carver (3-6) at No. 15 E.D. White (5-5)
No. 19 Young Audiences (5-5) at No. 14 Haynes (6-3)
No. 21 Willow (3-7) at No. 12 Carencro (5-5)
No. 23 Abramson (6-4) at No. 10 Sarah T. Reed (7-3)

Division III select
No. 1 Notre Dame (10-0) bye
No. 3 St. Charles (9-1) bye
No. 4 Newman (9-1) bye
No. 7 De La Salle (5-4) bye
No. 17 Country Day (6-4) at No. 16 Pope John Paul II (7-2), 7 p.m. Friday
No. 24 Fisher (3-7) at No. 9 Dunham (7-3), 6 p.m. Friday

Division IV select
No. 1 Riverside (9-1) bye
No. 17 St. Martin's (6-4) at No. 16 Glenbrook (5-5), 7 p.m. Friday

Division I nonselect
No. 1 Mandeville (10-0) bye
No. 3 Northshore (9-1) bye
No. 17 Southside (5-5) at No. 16 Slidell (6-4), 7 p.m. Friday
No. 20 Covington (6-4) at No. 13 West Monroe (6-4)
No. 26 Sam Houston (4-6) at No. 7 Hahnville (7-3)
No. 27 East St. John (3-7) at No. 6 Destrehan (8-2)
No. 28 Chalmette (3-7) at No. 5 East Ascension (8-2)

Division II nonselect
No. 17 Belle Chasse (7-3) at No. 16 Plaquemine (6-4)
No. 18 South Lafourche (7-3) at No. 15 Lakeshore (6-4)
No. 28 Franklinton (3-7) at No. 5 Salmen (7-3)

Division IV nonselect
No. 25 Delcambre (5-5) at No. 8 South Plaquemines (5-4)
No. 27 West St. John (2-8) at No. 6 Jeanerette (8-1)

Volleyball

State quarterfinal schedule

Thursday-Saturday at Cajundome

Division I
No. 12 Northshore vs. No. 4 Chapelle, 5 p.m.
No. 8 Ruston vs. No. 1 Mount Carmel, 7 p.m.
No. 11 Ponchatoula vs. No. 3 Dominican 7 p.m.
No. 7 Barbe vs. No. 2 Mandeville, 7 p.m.

Division II
No. 5 Teurlings vs. No. 4 Belle Chasse, 3 p.m.
No. 10 Academy of our Lady vs. No. 2 E.D. White, 3 p.m.
No. 9 South Lafourche vs. No. 1 St. Thomas More, 5 p.m.
No. 6 St. Michael vs. No. 3 St. Scholastica 5 p.m.

Division III
No. 7 Parkview Baptist vs. No. 2 Hannan, 1 p.m.
No. 5 St. Louis Catholic vs. No. 4 Haynes, 3 p.m.

Division IV
No. 8 Northlake Christian vs. No. 1 Country Day, 11 a.m.
No. 5 Lafayette Christian vs. No. 4 Newman, 11 a.m.
No. 11 John Curtis vs. No. 3 Catholic-NI, 11 a.m.

Division V
No. 3 Riverside vs. No. 6 McGehee, 9 a.m.

Semifinals
Quarterfinal winners, Friday

Finals
Semifinals winners, Saturday