

U.S. Cellular could host boys hoops

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 27 January 2015 18:46 -



Boys basketball could take center stage at the U.S. Cellular Center in early March.

Plans are in the final stages to hold Class 3A substate finals and Class 4A substate finals at the arena in downtown Cedar Rapids on March 2 and March 3, with doubleheaders both nights.

Officials from the Iowa High School Athletic Association (IHSAA) and the U.S. Cellular Center hope to reach an agreement this week.

"We are aggressively pursuing this," Sharon Cummins, the executive director of the U.S. Cellular Center, said Tuesday. "I think it's looking really positive, but nothing has been set in stone yet."

"We're so excited that we're this far with the negotiations and that it's looking so positive."

Brett Nanninga, the associate director of the IHSAA, is confident an agreement will be reached.

"We're close to having an arrangement in place," he said Tuesday. "We haven't confirmed yet, but we're close to having that done."

The Class 3A substate doubleheader on Monday, March 2 would feature teams from Districts 5, 6, 7 and 8. The Xavier Saints and Marion Indians are in District 8.

The Class 4A substate doubleheader on Tuesday, March 3 would feature teams from Substate 3 and Substate 4, which include Linn-Mar, Kennedy,

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Washington, Prairie and Jefferson. Iowa City West, the defending 4A state champ, also is in that group.

The games would be scheduled for 6:30 and 8 both nights.

Cummins and Nanninga declined to reveal details about the proposed rental agreement and fees.

"That's what we're negotiating with them at this point," said Nanninga. "It can't be an exorbitant amount, or we'll walk away.

"I would think the carrot for them would be to have back-to-back doubleheaders. I think the size of the event is going to make it more palatable on their part."

The girls state volleyball tournament is held at the U.S. Cellular Center and Rivalry Saturday girls basketball games were held at the arena earlier this month, but there have not been any substate boys basketball games at the U.S. Cellular Center since the arena re-opened in 2013.

Substate winners advance to the state tournament in Des Moines.

Cummins confirmed both sides would like to reach an agreement this week. "Exactly. Completely," she remarked. "We're all on the same page about that.

"We're very optimistic. At any moment something could change. (But) we're working on it and we're really hoping for some really positive news by the end of the week."

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Cummins said rental agreements for high school events at the U.S. Cellular Center depend on the event. "We're working on each one as it comes along:

Day of the week, opportunity for rent, revenue from concessions, attendance and all those kind of things" enter into the rental fee, she said.

Nanninga said he did not have a final rental proposal as of Tuesday morning. "That's what I'm currently trying to find out," he said.

"They sought us out," he said. "Because they're excited to have us there, they're willing to negotiate a price that's agreeable to both parties."

The substate games will be held in neutral high school gyms if they are not held at the U.S. Cellular Center. Nanninga clearly wants the games to be played in downtown Cedar Rapids.

"I feel like it's a great chance for kids to get in and play on a floor that's the same length (94 feet) as the state tournament," he said. "It's a nice experience for them to get into those arenas."

"Right now I think it's going to happen," he said. "I really hope we can work out the details of the deal and make it happen. I would hate to see it fall apart at this point."

Nanninga wants to reach an agreement this week and not let it linger.

"I don't want to go beyond this week," he said. "We should really be able to sort that out this week and let people know it's going to happen."

Sixteen teams will be vying for four spots in the two Class 3A substate finals that would be held at the arena March 2. They are Cresco,

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Decorah, Oelwein, Waukon, Center Point-Urbana, Independence, Dubuque Wahlert, West Delaware, Davenport Assumption, DeWitt Central, Maquoketa, Mount Vernon, Benton Community, Marion, Solon and Xavier.

Twelve teams will be vying for the four spots in the two Class 4A substate finals that would be held at the arena on Tuesday, March 3. They are Cedar Falls, Kennedy, Linn-Mar, Marshalltown, Waterloo East, Waterloo West, Burlington, Jefferson, Washington, Iowa City West, Ottumwa and Prairie.

There is a chance the Class 4A substate finals could feature Kennedy vs. Linn-Mar in one game and Washington vs. Iowa City West in the other.

The Class 3A substate finals could feature Xavier or Marion, but not both since they would have met in an earlier round.

Mike Dick, the executive director of the IGHS AU, said there are no plans to hold any girls basketball playoff games at the U.S. Cellular Center this year.