

Boys substates booked for U.S. Cellular Center

Written by Jim Ecker

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Ryan Luehrsmann remembers playing in the substate basketball finals at the U.S. Cellular Center as a junior at Cedar Rapids Washington in 1995. The Warriors lost to Jefferson that night, but the experience made a lasting impression.

"It was packed," Luehrsmann said Wednesday. "I think they had to turn people away, if memory serves me right."

Luehrsmann is the head coach at Xavier High School now and he's hoping the Saints will get a chance to have a similar experience at the U.S. Cellular Center this March.

The Iowa High School Athletic Association has reached an agreement with the U.S. Cellular Center to hold Class 3A and Class 4A substate doubleheaders at the arena in downtown Cedar Rapids.

There will be a Class 3A doubleheader on Monday, March 2 and a Class 4A twinbill on Tuesday, March 3. The games both nights are scheduled for 6:30 and 8. Tickets will cost \$8 per night and fans can attend both games.

The IHSAA and U.S. Cellular Center finalized the agreement Tuesday afternoon.

"I'm thrilled," said Brett Nanninga, the associate director of the IHSAA who worked on the deal. "I really believe it's a great opportunity for our schools, fans, communities and kids to get to a nice venue like that for postseason play."

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"It will build momentum, I think, between now and then, and there's already a lot of excitement. People are anxious for it."

Nanninga said the plan is to make this an annual event at the arena.

The IHSAA will pay the U.S. Cellular Center a percentage of gate receipts as the rental fee. The arena will receive 23 percent of all gate receipts for the first \$5,000 in ticket sales and will receive an additional 10 percent of all gate receipts for everything beyond \$5,000 in ticket sales, according to Nanninga.

As an example, let's say they sell 5,000 tickets at \$8 per ticket for both nights for a total of \$40,000 in ticket sales. The U.S. Cellular Center would receive 23 percent of the first \$5,000 in ticket sales for \$1,150. The arena also would receive 10 percent of the remaining \$35,000 in ticket sales for an additional \$3,500. That would put the total rental fee at \$4,650 for both nights.

Nanninga called it a "standard agreement" for IHSAA events at major arenas and thinks it's a good deal for both parties. "I'm thrilled that they're doing it," he remarked.

Boys substate finals have been held at neutral sites in high school gyms in recent years. The last time the substate finals were held at the U.S. Cellular Center was in 2011, prior to the arena being closed for several years for renovation.

"Now that the facility has been rebuilt and beautiful and an asset to the community, it only makes sense to use it to reward the youth in our community," said Luehrsmann. "I think it's great for high school basketball to give kids an opportunity to play in that kind of venue. It's a win for the community and the schools and the Association."

The U.S. Cellular Center has 6,000 seats for basketball.

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Xavier and Marion will be vying for spots in the Class 3A substate finals. Linn-Mar, Kennedy, Washington, Prairie and Jefferson will be competing for spots in the Class 4A substate finals. The substate winners advance to the state tournament in Des Moines.

"I'm extremely excited about it," said Kennedy Coach Jon McKowen. "From the standpoint of our community - Wow! It could be an electric atmosphere."

There have been packed high school gyms and standing-room-only crowds for some substate finals through the years. They had to turn fans away from the Class 4A substate finals in 2012 in a game that featured Marcus Paige and the Linn-Mar Lions against the Kennedy Cougars in a contest held at
Prairie.

The U.S. Cellular Center should have enough room for everyone.

"A lot more people are going to be able to witness it and be a part of it, because if there are local teams playing there, it's going to be full and it's going to be loud," said McKowen. "And beyond that, for teams that make state it's kind of a prep for state."

You're playing in a big arena, you're playing in a big gym. For a team that comes out of substate, they already know what the state tournament is going to feel like.

"You're going to go through those emotions, you're going to go through that scenario of not knowing what the locker rooms are like and all that unknown."

Linn-Mar, Kennedy, Cedar Falls, Marshalltown, Waterloo East and Waterloo West are in Substate 3 in Class 4A. Two of those six teams will play in one of the Class 4A substate finals at the U.S. Cellular Center on March 3.

Washington, Prairie, Jefferson, Iowa City West, Burlington and Ottumwa are in Substate 6 in Class 4A. Two of those six teams will play in the other Class 4A substate final here on March 3.

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Iowa City West has won three straight 4A state titles and is ranked No. 1 in the state again.

Xavier, Marion, Solon and Benton Community are in District 8 in Class 3A. Davenport Assumption, DeWitt Central, Maquoketa and Mount Vernon are in District 7 in Class 3A. Two of those eight teams will play in one of the Class 3A substate finals at the U.S. Cellular Center on March 2, with the District 8 winner facing the District 7 winner.

Crestwood, Decorah, Oelwein and Waukon are in District 5 in Class 3A. Center Point-Urbana, Independence, Dubuque Wahlert and West Delaware are in District 6 in Class 3A. Two of those eight teams will play in the other Class 3A substate final at the U.S. Cellular Center on March 2, with the District 5 winner facing the District 6 winner.