

It's Ho Ho Tournament Time

By Ross Forman



Twenty teams will be battling for bragging rights in the 20th annual Chicago Blackhawks Charities Holiday Hockey Classic, running Dec. 26-29, at The Edge Ice Arena in Bensenville.

Glenbrook North looks to defend its tournament title, while Christian Brothers College (CBC) High School hopes to take the title back to Missouri, as the Cadets have done many times in recent years.

CBC, the only non-Illinois team in the Ho Ho Tournament, has won the Missouri state championship 12 times since 1983, including three straight from 2007-2009, and most recently in 2012.

“This tournament is a real good measuring stick, to see where you are. Doing well in this tournament can really help a team build momentum,” said GBN head coach Evan Poulakidas.

The Spartans’ road to the championship game – which will be played Sunday, Dec. 29, starting at 4:30 p.m. – is certainly a challenging course. GBN is in the Stan Mikita Division, along with Fenwick, Maine Township and Naperville Central.

The Spartans have already defeated Maine twice this season, 7-3 each time. Naperville Central stopped GBN early in the season.

“I think we have the toughest bracket,” Poulakidas said.

The Denis Savard Division is just as fierce, featuring CBC, Stevenson, St. Rita and Waubonsie Valley.

The Glenn Hall Division features New Trier Blue, Providence, Rockford and Sandburg.

The tournament also features the AWF Renegades, Lake Forest, Marist and Neuqua Valley – comprising the Bobby Hull Division.

And the Tony Esposito Division includes Lincolnway, Mt. Carmel, St. Viator and York.

“There will be some surprises,” in round-robin play, Poulakidas said. “A lot can happen in the short round-robin play.

“In this tournament, goaltending is so important because teams get tired so (opponents) do get extra chances.”

The Ho Ho Tournament also features two 22-minute halves as opposed to three periods – an event tradition that many participating coaches, when asked, said needs to be changed for 2014.

“I’m against (two halves), and I don’t know why we do it. I don’t think it makes any sense. I think it’s kind of foolish,” Poulakidas said.

The Spartans (39-10-1) will be led by Alex Merritt (27 goals, 27 assists) and Chad Yale (12, 28). GBN's top scorer, Nate Harris (35, 31) is out with a broken scapula, and Nick Day (26, 20) is just returning from an injury. Two other key players for the Spartans are John McNally (9, 27) and Ryan Slovis (11, 20).

"Unfortunately, we're really banged up," Poulakidas said. "We're going to be hard-pressed to match our offensive output that we've put out all year."

- **Ho Ho Tournament Predicted Winner:** Providence, defeating CBC 4-3 in the championship game.
- **Ho Ho Tournament Dark horse:** York

Ross Forman has written about Illinois high school hockey for the past 15 years and is the only sportswriter to have covered Illinois high school hockey every year during that stretch. He played locally and then at Indiana University before becoming a referee. Ross was a referee for the Illinois high school state championship game (Red Division) several years ago at the United Center. He can be reached by email at: Rossco814@aol.com