

Sir Don's Holiday Blog - Mesa Basketball Is Rolling! From ArizonaVarsity.com

Rolling through the corn, cotton fields, and citrus groves a traveler almost feels as if he is going back in time when he visits the city of Mesa, Arizona. The air is cleaner, the neighborhoods safer, the people friendlier and fresh produce stands dot many of the intersections on the outskirts of the city.

Mesa still feels old school while keeping all of the modern luxuries of being the third largest city in Arizona such as light rail, new freeways, an airport, several colleges, and a bustling downtown area that is becoming increasingly cultured. Fun activities, shopping malls, and great restaurants abound.

One can stop by Main Street and visit a few places that preserve the history of the old days at places like the Book Gallery, History By George, Antique Plaza, the Arizona Natural History Museum, or Treasures of the Past (on McKellips). A host of artsy new shops and eateries along Main cater to those more interested in the avant garde and a wide variety of outdoor activities in the broader area await anyone willing to exploit the usually perfect 70 degree and sunny weather.

Every year after Christmas many also stop by either Mountain View High School to see the 5th Annual VisitMesa.com Basketball Challenge or the Fiesta Bowl Junior College Shootout. They are simply the most exciting holiday high school and junior college tournaments in Arizona.

Every year Marc Beasley and Dr. Steve Hogen manage to pull it off what few dare to attempt during the season at the high school level. It's a super-regional tournament with highly ranked teams from all over the West and Mid-West who face off with some of the best teams in Arizona with often dramatic results.

This year they have cast their widest net ever with teams from Northern and Southern California, Utah, Alaska, and Nebraska. They consistently bring in some of the best teams from all over Arizona including teams from Phoenix, Tucson, Mesa, Scottsdale, and Tempe to face some of the best in the country.

In action on Wednesday close local battles such as Scottsdale Chaparral's one point win over Ahwatukee's Mountain Pointe were mixed with interstate clashes such as Phoenix Pinnacle's upset of perennial Oakland power McClymonds HS, a rare Mountain View Toro loss to American Forks Utah, and a Tempe Corona Del Sol victory over Anchorage, Alaska's Bartlett.

Thursday's action will feature previously scheduled matchups while Friday will have its annual surprise pairings discussed with all of the staff and coaches at the tournament. They've also added a showcase on Saturday with Mesa Dobson facing Pinnacle and Mountain View vs. South Sioux City Nebraska.

College scouts often attend to see both the local and regional talent. Some of the best refs in Arizona work the games under the watchful eye of veteran ref Beasley while a leading edge statistics company spits out reams of detailed player statistics during and after each game. Various forms of media cover the game in print, Facebook, the internet blogs, and this year the final two games will have live video streaming by Cox Cable.

Every year they improve on the little details by listening carefully to the participants and that has made this tourney simply the best. They have perfected a format where the early games are scheduled for the expected marquee matchups while the later games are left open to schedule surprise matchups that the coaches and players want to see yet allow for the differing travel schedules of the teams.

The best thing about this event is the hosts. Beasley, an NCAA D1 referee, and Hogen, the Mesa High School District AD, have been the best in the tournament business for many years and they make a concerted effort to get to know the visiting players, parents, and coaches to make them feel at home while on the road. They also run the Martin Luther King Classics at ASU and U of A each January.

Video discs of each game are made on site, the food is great, and plenty of information is provided on the surrounding area. The Mountain View gym is spacious enough to handle large crowds and the host team, the always tough Mountain View Toros, is eager to compete with the best.

Toro Head Coach Gary Ernst, with over 700 wins and 8 state titles, agreed to team up with Beasley and Hogen because rather than traveling outside the state it made more sense to invite other great programs to come and experience what sunny Arizona has to offer during the cold season. The tournament itself, thanks to its hard working founders, has now become the main draw because its reputation for great competition and a team friendly atmosphere has become well known.

At the same time and down the road a few miles at Mesa Community College is also the Fiesta Bowl JC Shootout, one of the best junior college holiday basketball tournaments in the country with highly ranked national teams competing against some of the best JCs in Arizona. This year it has the number one ranked team in the NJCAA competing from Monroe, New York as well as the number five ranked team from Salt Lake City, Utah.

The MCC facilities are top notch, the food is great, parking plentiful and free, and it's got easy freeway access to the metropolitan area. Sam Ballard, the host and Head Coach at MCC, has duplicated the success of the VisitMesa.com Challenge with a similar format for the JC level of competition under the Fiesta Bowl umbrella of events.

The JC game is faster paced with bigger, stronger players than at the high school level and it's interesting to see both tournaments of this caliber played in close proximity to one another at the same time. College recruiters can easily move between the two locations to scout players at different levels.

In action Wednesday both top ranked JCs in attendance fell to their competition and will face off on Thursday in a surprise preview of a national championship caliber game. Former Tucson Amphitheatre PG Lester Medford provided the heroics as AZ Western College defeated number one Monroe, NY in overtime. They advance along with Mesa CC to the Shootout Semi-Finals today. Win or lose the all the teams and their families get to experience Arizona at its sunny best in Mesa.