

Fall ball in 'The Barn' is premier tuneup

By Matt Langone
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NORTHANDOVER — Inside the lobby of a charming red gymnasium, affectionately referred to by those in the know as "The Barn," stands a dry-erase board.

Written on the board in red marker is a list of colleges, all of which have a representative in the building to scout the high school basketball talent on an unseasonably warm fall Monday night.

It's a lengthy roster of Division 2 and 3 programs — Endicott, Keene State, Bridgewater State, Worcester State, Merrimack and Anna Maria are among the schools present and accounted for.

Every Monday and Tuesday night from mid-September through late November, that's the scene in the North Andover Fall Ball basketball league at the Joseph N. Hermann Youth Center. Now in its 11th season, it serves as the area's premier tuneup for the high school basketball season and is widely regarded as one of the finest fall high school hoop leagues in New England.

What started as a fun little idea by league founder and youth center director Rick Gorman has blossomed into a yearly-must for teams from all

over the region, and college coaches in search of future additions.

"Eleven years ago we were trying to do something for the hometown North Andover basketball team and we started a four-team fall league," said Gorman, a true basketball lifer who lives in Methuen. "It was North Andover, Methuen, Lawrence and Whittier Tech. Then it kind of just grew. From there we went to eight teams, 12 teams and then 16 teams the last couple of years."

This season, the league is maxed out at 20 teams. Gorman actually had to turn away schools to avoid flooding the schedule and damaging the flow of the league.

There are two 10-team divisions, one of which is named the Scollan Division after longtime Westford Academy head coach Ed Scollan. Westford, Chelmsford, Tewksbury, Lowell, Billerica, Central Catholic and Pelham all have teams in Fall Ball. New Mission, St. John's Prep, Salem (N.H.), Wachusett Regional and St. Peter-Marian also have teams, despite the longer commutes to North Andover.

"It's taken on a life of its own," said Gorman. "We have a real camaraderie with the high schools. The kids love it, the coaches love it. It's great competition. We have an eclectic group of guys that help run the league and every team has a volunteer coach (high school coaches are allowed to spectate but not coach in the fall due to MIAA rules). To win this league is huge."

Gorman, who is very active on social media, consistently promotes Fall Ball by posting photos and league information. The league's well-organized website (nafallball.com) maintains up-to-date standings and statistical leaders. Gorman even makes sure the referees

are of the highest quality.

The best attraction, however, just might be the facility.

'Barn' has old-school feel

The gym is modeled after the original red barn that sat on site. On warm nights, the barn doors at either end of the gym are opened, allowing spectators to sit on outdoor bleachers just outside the doors. College coaches, who visit to recruit, have their own designated roped off area and are given meticulously-crafted handouts with brief scouting reports on several players from each team in the league.

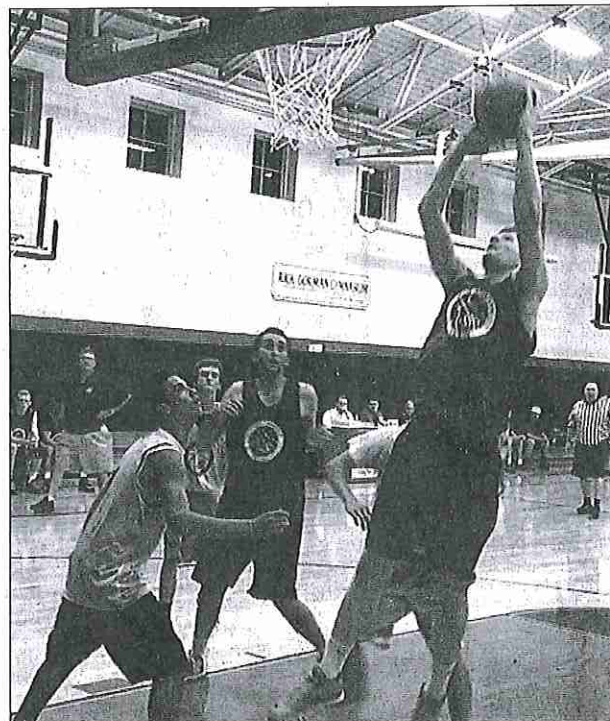
It's a small gym that has been newly renovated but still has the aura of an old-school fieldhouse. If they ever do a modern remake of "Hoosiers," it could easily be filmed at "The Barn."

"I mean, this is as great of a fall basketball league as you're going to find," said Tewksbury High head coach Phil Conners. "The atmosphere is just awesome, the games are intense. Rick does a great job of putting the whole thing together."

Since the league started in 2005, 102 former players have played — or are currently playing — college basketball. Six went on to play at the Division 1 level, including Portland Trail Blazers rookie guard Pat Connaughton (St. John's Prep).

Last fall, 42 different colleges attended Fall Ball games. Gorman, who is also the director and founder of the New England Storm AAU program, has developed strong relationships with college coaches throughout New England. He hopes Fall Ball shines a light on local kids who have the talent to play at the next level, but may be lacking exposure.

"We feel we have about 25-30 seniors who could play college basketball," said Gorman. "Most of them will be at the



Westford's Bobby Hartmann pulls in a rebound in a recent Fall Ball league game against Triton.

SUN PHOTOS/MATT LANGONE

Division 3 level. But we've probably got about five-to-seven Division 2 prospects. I think the prestige of this league is how we run it. We bring college coaches in. When I call them up and say 'you need to come down here, there's a couple of guys you'll want to see play,' they trust my opinion and they know I'm credible. It gives these kids the exposure in a nice setting with their high school team, instead of all these showcases."

Gorman said his staff and the team coaches constantly emphasize the importance of playing the game the right way and not playing to impress college coaches.

"You really just have to not worry about impressing the coaches, because once you start worrying about that you start

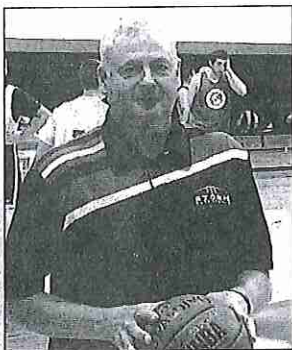
playing selfish," said Westford Academy senior Pat Coffey. "You just have to play the way that's best for the team."

The Fall Ball playoffs start Monday, with all 20 teams involved. Tewksbury (7-1) earned the top seed, edging out defending champion Lawrence (7-1). Central Catholic (6-2), Westford (6-2) and Billerica (6-2) round out the top five seeds.

Pelham senior Keith Brown leads the league in scoring at 29.5 points per game, followed by Billerica senior forward Josh Bradanese (26 ppg), Coffey (21.4 ppg) and Tewksbury senior point guard Nate Tenaglia (20.2 ppg).

Central Catholic has won the league championship a record three times.

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Fall Ball league founder Rick Gorman at 'The Barn'.