

# Mighty McQuaid bids for perfection

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER — Ryan Pettinella drives the baseline and smoothly dunks the ball. A minute later, on the other end of the floor, the 6-foot-8-inch senior swats a shot away while barely leaving his feet. Not to be outdone, senior Marty O'Sullivan, measuring in at 6 feet 7 inches, delivers a rim-rattling reverse slam.

These highlight-film plays drew hoots of admiration from fellow members of the McQuaid Jesuit boys' basketball team during a recent Monday-afternoon school practice. Yet the Knights have also managed to demonstrate their immense talents before large crowds, while facing some of the country's best teams.

And they haven't failed yet. McQuaid currently carries a perfect record of 22-0, along with a No. 2 ranking.

No. 2 in the City-Catholic League? Think higher, much higher. Second in Section 5? Nope. In the state of New York? Wrong again.

Try No. 2 in the country.

Joe Marchese, the team's 17th-year head coach, projects that if the Knights win the Section 5 playoffs, then the state public high school and Federation tournaments, they'll finish with a 29-0 record. Whereas some coaches wouldn't dare think that far ahead, fearing the jinx factor, Marchese's team is simply too good not to invite such thoughts.

"I think we're capable," he said.

McQuaid has displayed that capability thus far in the sectional Class A playoffs, winning 76-46 over Irondequoit on Monday, Feb. 24, in semifinal play at Blue Cross Arena at the War Memorial. That followed an 84-56 quarterfinal win over Hilton three days earlier, giving the Knights a date in the Class A title game. McQuaid was set to face either Marshall or Greece Arcadia in the final scheduled for Saturday, March 1, at 7:15 p.m. at Blue Cross Arena.

Leading the Knights are three seniors who will play Division I college basketball next year. Tyler Relph, a 6 foot 1 inch guard, is committed to the University of West Virginia. He recently was voted Mr. Basketball — the top player in New York state — by the Basketball Coaches Association of New York. Relph averaged 22 points in the wins over Hilton and Irondequoit, just above his 21.1-point average for the regular season.

O'Sullivan, a forward, will attend Fairfield University. He had a monster game against Irondequoit with



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

McQuaid's Tyler Relph wrestles for control of a loose ball during the sectional quarterfinal game against Hilton Feb. 21 at McQuaid Jesuit High School.

27 points and 13 rebounds, after averaging 17.8 points and 9.9 boards in regular-season play. Pettinella, the starting center, is headed for the University of Pennsylvania. He scored 19 points against Hilton and averaged 18.6 in regular-season play.

Add in steady scoring from junior guard Jack Leasure (11.6 PPG), and the Knights have averaged nearly 80 points per game — even with a rugged schedule that has involved traveling to out-of-state tournaments. Among the highlights are wins over nationally ranked schools: Rice of New York City, White Station of Memphis, Tenn., and Bishop O'Connell of Arlington, Va. Hence, McQuaid's rise to No. 2 in the national

poll conducted by *USA Today* — a ranking that Marchese feels is well earned.

"When you beat three teams in the top 25, it kind of solidified in my mind that it wasn't just opinion (from a poll)," he said.

The Knights knew they were in for something special after returning several players from the 2001-02 team that went to the New York State Public High School Athletic Association championship game and finished with a 24-3 record. Their 71-56 loss to Syracuse Henninger serves as both a sore spot and motivator for Relph.

"I always think about that game. It's made us work that much harder," he said.

The deeper McQuaid advances, the bigger the spotlight — but Relph said the Knights are well equipped to handle this challenge. "We've played in front of huge crowds so it's nothing really new for us," he said.

Pettinella acknowledged that many schools would love to be the first to tarnish McQuaid's perfect record. "These teams are really pumped to play us. But we're really pumped to play them," he stated.

"They're a pretty determined group. They've come up with big plays when they need to," Marchese added.

As a result, the Knights recorded a perfect regular season for the first time in school history. But Marchese said that in order to make this season truly memorable, his club must keep producing.

"From a regular-season perspective, this team set the benchmark. But the post-season is what it's all about. I think they'll be very disappointed if they don't win a sectional or state title," said Marchese, whose teams have won seven sectional championships over the years. They've also earned NYSPHSAA titles in 1988 and 1997. In both those years, McQuaid was stopped in the semifinals of the state Federation tournament, which involves NYSPHSAA schools as well as New York City high schools.

Winning the Federation title would not only clinch a perfect season for the Knights, it might even bump them up to the No. 1 spot in the final national poll. The top-ranked team, St. Vincent/St. Mary of Akron, Ohio, is led by LeBron James, who will likely be the No. 1 overall pick in this year's National Basketball Association draft.

However McQuaid's season ends, Pettinella said it's already been "a once-in-a-lifetime year, for everyone on the team."

"We've got something really special," O'Sullivan agreed, saying that win or lose, "We're all going to be pretty upset when it ends so we're going to cherish this."

Of course, the Knights would be a lot less upset if they hit that magical 29-0 mark. What are their chances? Well, consider this: O'Sullivan said the Knights' best ball is probably still to come. "We haven't put together a complete game," he remarked.

Scary thought.