

MLK BASKETBALL CLASSIC

Amphi feels it's on the verge of doing something special

Greg Hansen: Rare air for Panthers

Opinion by Greg Hansen Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Tuesday, January 19, 2010



[Buy this photo](#) David Sanders Arizona Daily Star These "knuckleheads," as Amphi coach Ben Hurley calls them, have painted themselves for every game — the last 19 of which were victories. Players feed off their energy.

In a parking lot outside McKale Center on Monday afternoon, 11 not-so-shy young men stripped to the waist and painted themselves shades of Amphi green and black.

Then came a second coat of paint. The first guy became an A. The next guy was an M.

Then came P, H, I, T, H, E, A, T, E, R.

"Those knuckleheads have been doing it every game," smiling Amphi boys basketball coach Ben Hurley would say two hours later. "We really feed off their energy."

To their credit, the green-and-black brigade knows good entertainment and can't seem to get enough. On Monday, a day off from school, they arrived in full colors to watch the Amphi Relays, Part 19. In winning for the 19th consecutive time, Amphi scored 98 points in a game abbreviated from 32 minutes to about 28 when officials decided not to stop the clock for the first seven minutes of the fourth quarter.

The Panthers (19-1) still might have scored 100 had not sophomore star Tim Derksen elected to dribble out the final seconds, showing some mercy in a 98-58, MLK Basketball Classic victory over Pueblo, which, at 11-7, is a capable team itself.

It's just that Amphi appears to be onto something so special that it has a chance to win its first basketball state championship in 71 years of existence.

"We've got chemistry," said speedy junior guard Lester Medford, the trigger-man of a run-and-stun defense that forced more than 30 Pueblo turnovers. "What we run is perfect for us."

In his third season as Amphi's head coach, Hurley has implemented a dribble-drive offense that has become the rage, invented by once-obscure junior-college coach Vance Walberg and brought to light by Kentucky's John Calipari.

In the dribble-drive, quickness kills, and Amphi's Medford, Malcolm Millner, Domineik Banks and Fred Simms, among others, operate at blur-level speed.

Former UA associate head coach Jim Rosbrough, now an assistant coach at Pima College, watched Amphi take a 55-26 halftime Monday lead and left impressed. He compared Amphi's offensive structure to the attacking offense Arizona deployed with Michael Dickerson, Mike Bibby and Miles Simon to win the 1997 NCAA championship.

Amphi is averaging 83 points, which is the equivalent of 104 in a college game. In their last five outings, the Panthers have scored 101, 99, 109, 80 and 98.

Of course, none of those points can be put toward tonight's colossal showdown against Santa Rita, Tucson's most feared boys basketball opponent with Southern Arizona's most accomplished player, point guard Terrell Stoglin.

The Panthers will meet the Eagles at 7 on the Amphi campus in what Hurley suggests could be played before a capacity crowd.

"We played at Palo Verde last Friday, and our side of the gym was full for a road game," he said. "We've got about 2,000 seats there, maybe 2,200. It should be full."

Amphi's rise to prominence isn't unexpected. Hurley coached the Panthers to a 26-7 finish and a region championship last year. He uses 10 players in his pressing, trapping defensive system, which can be exhausting. It's a no-star system, although Derksen, a lefty with good touch, has range to 20 feet and can also score off the dribble.

By the time Amphi led 82-48 after three quarters Monday, I counted 46 points that came as a result of defensive pressure, steals and interceptions, that led to quick strikes on offense.

It's a smothering and unrelenting, guard-abundant style that Hurley fully installed over the summer.

"You attack like crazy," said Pat Derksen, who was Amphi's varsity coach from 1987 to 2006 and has returned as an assistant. "I've really been renewed by the energy and enthusiasm of this club."

The beauty of Amphi's emergence is that it isn't a team that fell together by accident.

"I saw them all coming from middle school and other Amphi district youth teams," Hurley said. "They've known each other for a long time, and they play together well. They're unselfish. They know we need to run 'em in and out to stay fresh."

Tonight's Amphi-Santa Rita game is a continuation of a remarkably competitive three-way Gila Region series that also includes 16-4 Palo Verde. It's a reflection on the notably improved caliber of high school basketball in Tucson, which probably has a dozen potential Division I scholarship recruits, perhaps the highest number ever.

Amphi has played in but one state title game in 71 years, a 1949 loss to Tucson High, and has produced just four all-state players in that span: Sid Kain in 1949, Jim Sparks in 1952, Bill O'Donald in 1953 and Craig Meyer in 1964.

But that's ancient history; starting tonight, the Panthers of 2010 have a chance to make a little of their own.

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