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GIRLS BASKETBALL SPECIAL

Rivalry casts long shadow

Newington (7-7) hosts Southington (5-9) on Groundhog Day; Indians hope to end four years of frustration against Knights



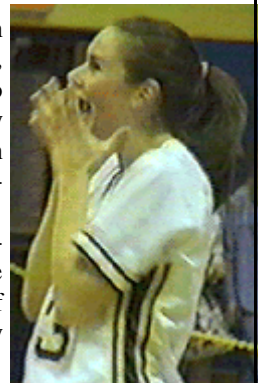
1998

Katie Strong's buzzer shot at the end of regulation would have given Newington a dramatic 32-30 victory over Southington last year — but the shot rolled around and out. The Indians lost in overtime.

Six years ago today, an unbeaten Newington girls basketball team, ranked #1 in the state, strolled onto its home floor in front of a capacity crowd of 1,500 for a showdown with archrival Southington, likewise undefeated and ranked #2.

Newington prevailed, 51-44, ending a six-game losing streak to the Blue Knights and capturing one of the greatest victories in the history of NHS girls basketball.

Today, as those same archrivals
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1996

Ela Lapciuk, then a junior, hoped to lead Newington to a victory at home — but as this outburst of frustration suggests, the Indians fell 7 points short.

INSIDE: *The Hartford Courant's* preview of #1 Newington vs. #2 Southington six years ago today.
Please see page 2.



1997

Clutch shooting by Kim Milardo and others wasn't enough to lift the #5-ranked Indians over #1 Southington; they lost by four at home.

THE STREAK: 9 in a row for Southington

February 25, 1994: Newington 56, Southington 45
January 27, 1995: Southington 43, Newington 23
February 21, 1995: Southington 50, Newington 44
January 26, 1996: Southington 52, Newington 35
February 20, 1996: Southington 56, Newington 49
February 3, 1997: Southington 55, Newington 51
February 20, 1997: Southington 53, Newington 31
February 27, 1997: Southington 44, Newington 39
February 2, 1998: Southington 33, Newington 31 (OT)
February 18, 1998: Southington 43, Newington 39

Rebuilding rivals to do battle tonight

Newington hosts Southington in 7:00 PM conference showdown

(Continued from page 1)

meet for another Groundhog Day battle, the situation will be far different. Newington is 7-7; Southington is 5-9. Neither team is ranked in any statewide poll. Neither has even secured a state tournament bid yet. Both are, as they say, "rebuilding."

But much like that fateful Groundhog Day in 1993, the Newington Indians hope Groundhog Day 1999 will be the day they can finally cast off the "shadow" of another period of seemingly endless frustration against Southington—in this case, *nine* consecutive losses to the Knights.

"It would make me really, really happy to beat South-

ington. And I'm sure it'd make the kids very happy to beat Southington," said Newington's first-year head coach, Jim DiNello, a Southington High graduate. But "I don't want to get caught up in it... The last thing that I want to do is put more pressure on them because it's Southington. Because the fact of the matter is this: if the kids play as hard as they can, they've got a great chance to win."

"It's just another game," DiNello stated. "At least, I'm going to try to convince them of that... We're going to approach it as just another game, and I'm going to tell the kids, 'Just forget what the other shirts say.'"

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Six years ago today: Previewing #1 vs. #2

This article was printed in The Hartford Courant on February 2, 1993.

Get there early. Find a seat.

It has been a long wait, but No. 1 Newington (11-0) hosts No. 2 Southington (12-0) today at 7:30 p.m.

A capacity crowd of 1,500 is expected at Newington's gymnasium for the first of possibly three games between the teams. School officials urge those interested in attending to get to the game at least an hour early.

Both teams realize an anticipated matchup such as this may become only a footnote.

The recent facts: Southington beat Bristol Eastern twice in the 1990-91 regular season, then lost to Eastern in the Class LL final. Platt-Meriden and Southington split in the regular season in 1988-89, Platt winning the second, and both won state championships — Southington (LL), Platt (L). Platt ended up being No. 1 in the final poll.

Still, winning the first is not a bad start.

"We're excited to be in this position," said Southington coach Joe Daddio, whose team has won 37 consecutive games. "At the beginning of the season, we didn't expect to be here. But once we got it going, we've played very well.

"[Newington] is still the favorite. They're the best team in the state, and we're looking forward to the challenge."

Newington coach Sandy Pilz is not sure his team is the favorite, especially the way Southington has played lately.

"I don't look at Southington as having a weakness," Pilz said. "They came a long way in January, and now they're an excellent team. There are certain things that

they become comfortable with. We can't let them feel comfortable."

Newington has the height and strength advantage, with a strong frontline of Jen Kelly (23.9 points), her sister Beth Kelly (11.6 points) and Donna DeFrancesco (10.3 points).

"There's no secret to what we have to do to win," Daddio said. "We have to keep them off the boards."

Southington is quicker and if it can rebound, it can run. If it scores, it can press. But Pilz isn't as worried about the BlueKnights' press as he is of their half-court defense.

"People talk about their press, but I think they're just as lethal after you break it," Pilz said. "They seem to lull you into a false sense of security, then attack."

Newington will look to Jen Kelly, a 6-foot-1 senior center, to help break the press. Pilz also will use her at shooting guard.

"I think it's a big mistake to use her in one spot against a team like Southington," Pilz said.

Southington has the inside-outside combination of guard Beth Huber (12.5 points) and center Bridget Buist (19.7 points). But Daddio said the key to his team's improvement has been patience on offense.

"Even on the fastbreak," Daddio said, "we're taking the time to get the ball to the proper places."

Southington hosts Newington Feb. 24. The Class LL state tournament could be next.

And indeed it was. Newington defeated Southington on February 2 and again on February 24, but then lost to the Knights in the state championship game, still the team's only state title game appearance ever.

Newington hosts Southington tonight

DiNello downplays rivalry, says “it’s just another game”

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Tri-captain Kathleen Burdelski agreed that “if we play like we can, we’ll do fine.” But she admitted that the Southington contest won’t be quite like any other game

“It feels a little different, because there’s always that rivalry that we’ve always had,” Burdelski said Monday evening. “Ever since I’ve known Newington High basketball, it’s always been the rivalry with Southington.”

“That just helps you get pumped up,” added the junior, who was in sixth grade the last time the Indians beat Southington. “It doesn’t make it seem like a huge deal or anything, it just helps you get pumped up, and know that there’s probably going to be a lot of people there to support you.”

Southington-Newington showdowns are known to produce massive fan turnouts, such as that memorable February 2, 1993 game which prompted *The Hartford Courant* to print that school officials were advising fans to “get to the game at least an hour early.” But with both teams having less-than-stellar seasons in 1999, attendance could be down this year.

Newington’s players hope not. At the end of practice Monday, tri-captain Sandy Ramos told her teammates to wear their jerseys to school today, then added, “And tell all your friends to come to the game!”

But tradition and rivalry aside, what sort of a game can fans expect to see tonight when these CCC South middle-dwellers meet?

Both teams are likely to play very hard, thanks to a number of motivating factors. First and foremost are state tournament considerations. At 7-7, Newington needs one more win to clinch a tourney bid—and with games against, among others, New Britain and Bulkeley looming, the Indians are running out of “easy” chances to get that eighth win. The Knights, meanwhile, need three more wins in their next six games—and because they have New Britain and Bulkeley on their schedule as well, tonight’s game is nearly a “must-win” for them.

**“They’re confident and we’re refocused. So it should be a good one.”
—Newington coach
Jim DiNello**

In addition to tournament posturing, Newington is also hoping to recover from Thursday’s unexpected loss to Bristol Central, an uncharacteristically poor performance by the Indians. Coach DiNello said Monday that the Indians are hoping to use the Southington game to “refocus.” Southington, meanwhile, will be looking to build on its conference momentum after losing to New Britain, the current CCC South leader, by just one point on Monday and then scoring a crucial victory over Platt on Thursday.

“Southington’s a good basketball team,” DiNello stated Monday. “I don’t care what their record says. They will always be a good basketball team.”

“Their record doesn’t indicate how many close games they’ve lost,” he added. “We just happen to have won [our] close games, whereas Southington hasn’t. But they’re a couple points away from being, probably, the same record as us, if not better.”

“They’re confident and we’re refocused,” said DiNello. “So it should be a good one.”

And then there is that rivalry, that intangible factor which, as Burdelski said, helps the players “get pumped up.”

“I’m from Southington, and the kids know that,” said DiNello. “I’ve been living there all my life. My wife and my sister-in-law have numerous state championships, both for basketball and softball, from them. And I played my high-school athletics there; I graduated from South-ington. But [tonight], it’ll be like I never saw the place.”

After Monday’s practice, DiNello predicted a good performance tonight. He made reference to last week’s win over Bristol Eastern, one of Newington’s best performances this year, saying that “the practice the night before the Eastern game was very sharp, very crisp, and relaxed yet intense. And that’s the way they practiced [Monday]. [This] was one of the best three or four practices they’ve had all year. And that, to me, is a good sign.”