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'Tis the season: Holiday hoops tourneys bring teams together

By Jim Halley, USA TODAY

Stu Vetter of Montrose Christian (Rockville, Md.) has been coaching boys basketball for 34 years. He's learned to play someplace warm over the holidays.



Amanda Inscore, Fort Myers News Press

Winter Park's Austin Rivers, shown here in 2009's City of Palms Classic, returns with ninth-ranked Winter Park for the 2010 pre-Christmas tournament.

For the past 12 years, the Warriors played at the Iolani Classic in Honolulu.

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This year, because one of his players, point guard Carmelo Betancourt, is from [Puerto Rico](#), the Warriors will play in a tournament in San Juan.

"Holiday tournaments offer a great opportunity to travel, to bond with your team and to find out how competitive your team is against outstanding teams," Vetter said.

"There's no better way to get to know your team than to travel with them. You find out their good habits and their bad habits. You find out which kids are self-disciplined, and you find out kids who can't do those things."

Two of the biggest pre-Christmas tournaments are the City of Palms Classic in [Fort Myers, Fla.](#), and the Iolani Classic. Both have great weather, tradition and several USA TODAY Super 25 teams.

The City of Palms has been held every year since 1973. This year's event will run from Friday through Dec. 23. Its field includes No. 4 Christ the King (Queens, N.Y.); No. 8 Dr. Krop ([Miami](#)); No. 10 Winter Park, Fla.; No. 11 St. Patrick (Elizabeth, N.J.); No. 15 Milton (Alpharetta, Ga.); No. 16 Bishop Gorman (Las Vegas); and No. 21 Christ School (Arden, N.C.).

The Iolani Classic, which began in 1983, runs Thursday through Dec. 21. Ranked teams in the field include No. 1 Oak Hill (Mouth of Wilson, Va.); No. 14 Mount Vernon, N.Y.; and No. 25 Montverde (Fla.) Academy.

The benefits of playing in such tournaments outweigh the potential pitfalls, said Milton's David Boyd, who has been a coach for 27 years.

"You can get your head handed to you in a heartbeat against all these great teams," he said.

"In the past, the teams of mine that have gone to the City of Palms have not gotten beyond the second round. Yet, all the teams that I've had that have gone have ended up winning a state championship, which is the ultimate goal. It's great competition, and you won't see anybody better in a tournament like this. It also helps bring your team together, because you're traveling and eating together."

Boyd said he usually tries to organize a team outing that has nothing to do with basketball, such as going to the beach, playing golf or going bowling.

Montverde coach Kevin Sutton said tournaments are also a chance to give the players education outside the classroom.

"We do outreach with every tournament," Sutton said. "For our kids, it's a tremendous educational experience. It's a situation where they learn how to live our program's mantra, 'To whom much is given, much is expected.' We look at the educational opportunities and the social opportunities each tournament offers to us."

In 2007, the Eagles went to the Junior Orange Bowl tournament in Miami and took part in an outreach program for emotionally disturbed and intellectually challenged adults.

"It turned out to be such a rewarding experience," Sutton said. "Our kids were moved by it. That particular year, we went 30-0, so we did a lot of great things on the court. But that experience off the court probably was one of those experiences that solidified our team."

Briefly: No. 5 Findlay Prep (Henderson, Nev.) has a big matchup Thursday with No. 22 Yates (Houston) at Texas Southern University in Houston. The game will be on [ESPN](#) at 9 p.m. ET. Findlay is averaging 87.6 points a game this season and Yates, the defending Texas 4-A champion, 112.6. No. 9 Simeon (Chicago) faces Lew Wallace (Gary, Ind.) on ESPN at 7 p.m. ET at Chicago State University. Bob Haas was voted into the Ohio High School Basketball Coaches Hall of Fame in 1996. Saturday, the Willard High gymnasium will be dedicated in his honor. Haas has the highest winning percentage of Ohio boys basketball coaches with 500 wins or more at 82.1%. He went 522-114 at three schools, including 22 years at Willard, where he was 441-74.

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