Not quite every happening in Ohio basketball this season revolves around LeBron James. One of the great roundball stories unfolding this year is the Columbus Northland High School Vikings. The season is still young, but the defending Div. 1 state champions are a good bet to be around near the end of the tournament again this March. And Ohio State basketball fans will want to be watching as a future Buckeye builds on his own Ohio high school legend.

Mr. Clutch

Led by Jared Sullinger , a 2010 Ohio State recruit and the reigning Ohio Mr. Basketball, the Vikings are 11-0 and flying in rarified air these days, after what can only be called signature wins over two of the best-known teams in the country. Playing on national TV on ESPN on December 16, and hosting Findley Prep of Las Vegas, the No. 1 team in the country, the Vikings pulled off a stunning upset , largely owing to Sullinger's 32 points and 19 rebounds...not to mention his clutch free-throw shooting.
Sullinger (6' 8", 260) is by consensus the nation's top high school big man this year (and probably last year too). He can dominate the paint, but his shooting range goes well beyond 20-feet. He's a shot-blocker and a tenacious rebounder, with better low post moves as a high school player than NBA first-rounders Kosta Koufos or B.J Mullens ever showed us in Columbus. And he is an astonishingly good ball-handler for a kid his size. (YouTube Sullinger highlight video)

On top of all that, he's the coach's kid, and plays like a coach's kid should. Smart...a leader...a guy who wants the ball in his hands at the end of the game. It is becoming more and more apparent as he prepares to move up to the college level, that Jared Sullinger is...as the kids say today...The Truth. But back to Findley Prep....

To get some idea of the magnitude of this victory, consider that Findley Prep is essentially an

all-star basketball team posing as a high school. Started and run by the team's coach, Findley Prep is stocked top to bottom with Division 1 basketball players-in-waiting, and its uncertain academic status is cause for many high schools to refuse to even play them . In addition to being at the top of all the national polls coming in, they were on a 45-game winning streak over a 19-month stretch, and were averaging 100 points a game.

With Sullinger roaming the paint swatting or changing shots with his huge wingspan, Northland held Findley to *15 points* in the first half, and 52 for the game, and prevailed 53-52. Making the win yet more remarkable was that Northland's second best player, J. D. Weatherspoon , also an Ohio State commitment, sat the game out with an injury. Sullinger's 32 point night included 10 of 10 from the free throw line. Coach's kid.

Sullinger's reputation as a cool customer started last year in the Div. 1 state finals against Cincinnati Princeton, when he was fouled with one second to go in a tie game and drained two free throws to win the state championship. Then against Findley last month, Sullinger got the ball with eight seconds to go and Northland down a point at 52-51. He drove the baseline and drew the foul, getting to the line with four seconds on the clock and the game in his hands.

You know the rest. Sullinger calmly sank both freebies and the Vikings survived a last-second shot by Findley to win it. All that victory did was vault the Columbus city school into the national spotlight and into the No. 1 national ranking , where they sit today , give or take a spot from week to week.

That brings us to Springfield, Mass. on January 16, and a Hoophall Classic matchup with Northland against the legendary Oak Hill Academy, of Virginia. The Oak Hill strategy was to double Sullinger for the entire game....and it very nearly worked. The Northland star played with a broken nose, and was held to three points (with 16 rebounds) but it was Weatherspoon stepping up with a 21-point performance to keep the Vikings in the game till the end.

Oak Hill held Sullinger without a field goal for the entire game, but when Oak Hill took a one-point lead with under 30 seconds to go in the game, Mr. Clutch took over again. Taking it to the hoop on Northland's last possession, Sullinger drew the foul, and (I'm not making this up) sank two free throws in the final seconds to win the game 47-46 . Oh...and he finished with a flourish, swatting away an Oak Hill shot as time ran out, to preserve the win.

Sullinger alone would be enough to generate excitement in the fan base for the future of the Buckeye program, but he's far from alone in Thad Matta's Class of 2010 . Ohio State's six-man recruiting class is ranked No. 2 in the country (behind Memphis) by the people who get paid to rate such things. Now, as before, the challenge facing Matta will be to keep the talent in Scarlet and Gray long enough to see them come together as a team that can take the Buckeyes deep into the NCAA Tournament.

The Rest of the Class

It seems like Matta has always brought in top talent to OSU by the boatload rather than one stud at a time. Greg Oden, Mike Conley, David Lighty and Daequan Cook all arrived in the same freshman class...and with the exception of Lighty, they exited OSU together for the NBA after one electric season as Buckeyes. Then the currently maturing crop of Evan Turner, Jon Diebler, and Dallas Lauderdale rolled in on the same bus three years ago along with Kosta Koufos in another of Matta's killer classes.

The effectiveness of the strategy is certainly debatable, especially after three straight years of defections by freshman centers (Oden, Koufos, B.J. Mullens) complicated life for Matta. It's always tougher to recruit quality kids the year after you bring in a classful of blue-chippers. Nobody wants to sit for two or three years behind a Conley or an Oden. But when those guys bolt after one season, a coach can be left in the lurch if hasn't backed himself up in the next year's class.

Who'll stay and who'll grab the NBA brass ring early is often hard to predict, and losing promising college players to the lure of big money is the price any coach risks when he pursues the very best prep players year after year. But if Matta has been chastened by his recent experience, it doesn't show. He'll continue to recruit the best...and take his chances.

In the current class, Matta has covered all the bases, surrounding his big man Sullinger with standouts at all the other positions on the court. All six of Matta's 2010 recruits made Rivals Top 150 nationwide.

If Sullinger is the No. 1 recruit in the class, then 5-star power forward Deshaun Thomas is 1a. Thomas (6' 6.5", 210) verbaled to Ohio State two years ago, and some observers thought he might waver in his commitment once Indiana came calling, but it didn't happen. He's an inside-outside scorer (4th all-time high school scorer in Indiana history) who averaged 29 points a game as a junior. Thomas can play the power forward spot, but he's equally comfortable on the wing shooting from 3-point range.

Rated the nation's No. 4 power forward by Scout (No. 6 by Rivals), and among the top 20 overall players in the country, Thomas showed his stuff to Columbus fans last Saturday night at OSU's Value City Arena when his (Ft. Wayne, IN) Bishop Luers team squared off with Northland and his future OSU teammates Sullinger and Weatherspoon. The game's outcome was never really in doubt, as Northland ran out to an early lead and coasted to an 88-67 win, but Thomas went off for 36 points for the visitors, on 11 of 21 shooting, including 5 of 10 from 3-point range, and he added nine boards for good measure. (BTW, Sullinger's line was 24 points, on 9 of 12 from the floor including two 3's, nine rebounds, three assists, two steals and a block.)

Weatherspoon is the other frontcourt player in the class, as he is offically listed as a power forward as well. Like Thomas, he's capable of playing the 3 spot, and both guys may be used in

the small forward role from time to time once they get to Columbus. Matta will probably welcome some more size on the front line, as he has been playing four 2-3 swingmen and a center out of necessity as much as design for most of the last two seasons.

Changing of the Guards

There's lots of backcourt talent in this class to complement the bigs. Jordan Sibert (6' 5", 180) from Cincinnati Princeton is a sharpshooting wing scorer who probably projects as a 2-guard as a Buckeye. As a junior he led his Princeton team to the state championship game against Northland, where they succumbed to Sullinger's heroics. He's ranked as the nation's 37th best overall player by Rivals, and the #11 shooting guard by Scout . Rivals also rates Sibert the "best shooter", and the best overall shooting guard among all Big Ten recruits for 2010.

The last time Matta went to the Windy City for a recruit, it worked out pretty well. One hopes that Lenzelle Smith can one day evoke comparisons to fellow-Chicagoan Evan Turner, although that's probably setting the bar unreasonably high for the 6' 3" combo guard out of Zion Benton. Smith is a strong, stocky guard, but is what one scout called "sneaky quick". He reports that Coach Matta projects him as a "power point guard" for OSU, perhaps reprising the role he has Turner playing in this season. He was sort of a late-comer to the national recruiting scene, which probably explains the 3-star rating, but he came on strong in AAU action, and drew interest from several Top 20 college programs. Rivals ranks Smith the "best passer" among all 2010 Big Ten recruits.

Sibert and Smith could both probably play the point in a pinch, but Matta has also landed a pure point guard in Aaron Craft , from (Findlay, OH) Liberty Benton. Craft (6' 1", 170) is the 18th-ranked point guard according to Scout , and #61 overall. He averaged 18 points a game, but is well thought of for his defensive skills as well, earning Rivals ranking as the "best defender" among all Big Ten recruits for 2010.

Already a Team

Matta has had plenty of opportunity to see how several of his future Buckeyes mesh as a unit, since Sullinger, Sibert, Weatherspoon and Craft played together on the All-Ohio Red team that won the Ohio AAU title. He should have a good one-year window to integrate his youngsters into the Buckeye program before they'll be asked to carry the majority of the load.

Turner will be gone to the NBA next year for sure, but Jon Diebler, David Lighty and Dallas Lauderdale all have a year of college eligibility remaining, and William Buford has two. Point guard would appear to be the only spot where a freshman will likely have to contribute as a starter in 2010-2011, since both current Buckeye point guards P.J. Hill and Jeremie Simmons will be gone, as will Turner, who has been the *de facto* point most of this season.

Speaking of the guys who are actually already playing games for the Buckeyes ...they are 1-1 since the last edition of the Leaves, having pounded Northwestern in Columbus and dropped a 71-65 decision to West Virginia in Morgantown, despite having held a 14-point lead in the first half.

24th-ranked Ohio State is now 14-6 overall , with a 4-3 conference mark that is good for a third-place tie in the Big Ten standings with Purdue and Illinois. Michigan State (8-0) and Wisconsin (6-2) are 1-2 in the conference with more than half of the league slate yet to be played.

Evan Turner continues to play to rave reviews in the national media, racking up votes for National Player of the Year , and earning projections as a top two or three selection in this year's NBA Draft. He has now won the Big Ten Player of the Week award seven times in his career, which ties the conference record...with a few weeks yet to play.

And talk about a record that would be hard to ever break...Turner might become the only player ever to win the national Player of the Year award after breaking his back in the middle of the season. Incredible, when you think about it.

Football Recruiting Wrapping Up

We're just a week away (2/3) from national signing day for football recruits, and the Buckeyes are still holding spots for a couple of uncommitted stars. Since the last update in this space, OSU has added two verbal commitments to the 2010 class , both probably ticketed for the defensive backfield.

In a move that surprised exactly no one, Glenville's Christian Bryant announced Tuesday that he'll attend OSU, where he is projected as a cornerback, or possibly a safety. Bryant (5'10", 173, 4.46) is ranked as the #8 cornerback by Scout, and he's talented enough to work his way into the two-deep as a freshman. He's a little shorter than the prototype OSU cornerback we've come to expect under Tressel, but he has great speed to go with excellent coverage and ball skills, and his versatility could be an early asset on special teams.

Bradley Roby was an early commitment to Vanderbilt, but when he opened up his recruiting, OSU was right there with strong interest. Roby hails from Suwanee, GA, where he attends the same school as the Bucks' Cameron Heyward, so OSU had a good "in" with him. He has

excellent straight-line speed and projects as a cornerback or wide receiver at the college level. Roby (6' 0", 175, 4.4) played mostly receiver in high school, so he's a little green as a DB, but his athleticism is off the charts, and the OSU coaches think they may have landed a real sleeper. Late in the process, Roby received offers from Georgia and Alabama among others, so the Buckeyes weren't the only ones to see something special in this kid.

Hope springs for Ohio State to land Seantrel Henderson , the nation's top offensive tackle. This one looks like a battle between USC, Florida, Notre Dame and OSU, but lots of unbiased observers like the Buckeyes' chances.

The other top-ranked recruit for whom the Bucks are reserving a spot in this class may be slipping away. Cincinnati's
Jordan Hicks
, the nation's #1 outside linebacker has had OSU as a finalist for months, but he has always been a Texas Longhorn fan, and he could just as easily end up in Austin. Hicks has been quieter than most recruits, and it's not over till it's over, but right now most of the smart money is on Texas...or even Florida...over OSU.

The OSU staff is also awaiting a decision from Cincinnati St. Xavier offensive lineman Matt James , who is visiting Notre Dame this weekend, and will decide between the Irish and Ohio State when he gets back.

OSU has 18 in the class at this point (counting RB Carlos Hyde , who was originally in the 2009 class) and they'd like to add at least two more at a minimum, and possibly as many as three or four. If Hicks (or one of the other priorities) goes south, the staff has a couple of excellent fall-back options to consider, but I wouldn't be surprised if they eventually settle for a class of 20, especially if the two final pieces turn out to be Henderson and James.

Here's Scout.com recruiting analyst Bill Greene's latest update on the 2010 OSU football recruiting class.

Till next time, gang....Go Bucks!

(Hat tip to the fine OSU site Eleven Warriors , for a couple of the above links..and of course to both Scout and Rivals for many more.)