

## Press Clippings 7/26/2022

### Chicago Tribune/Daily Southtown

#### State of change: Scouting the best returning guards in boys' basketball from the Chicago Tribune's suburban publications --- 7/26/2022

By Staff Reports, Daily Southtown



Mount Carmel's DeAndre Craig, right, takes a shot during a game against Brother Rice in Chicago on Friday, Feb. 11, 2022. (James C. Svehla / Daily Southtown)

Sure, tipoff time for boys' basketball is months away, but the games have already begun.

While many high school players are with AAU teams in July, important questions have bubbled to the surface as transfers abound. Who's coming? Who's going?

It's a constant state of change.

The Chicago Tribune's suburban publications cover some of the top teams in Illinois and Indiana — guards, forwards and centers, all trying to power programs to championships.

Today, in the first part of a weeklong three-part series, we take a look at the guards from a coverage area that runs from Wisconsin's border through Chicago's suburbs into Indiana.

This is what we're seeing:

## Jakob Blakley, Larkin

Larkin's season had ended in a Class 4A supersectional only minutes earlier at the hands of state champion Glenbard West, but Jakob Blakley received a message from his coaches on the way to the locker room.

"They said, 'It's your team next year,'" Blakley said.

He took it to heart.

Star point guard Damari Wheeler-Thomas, a North Dakota State commit, and three other seniors graduated, shifting Blakley from role player to leader this summer for the Royals.

"He's been special," Larkin coach Deryn Carter said of the junior guard. "He had some high-level games offensively. He's starting to become a better leader. He's taking our team to a higher level."



Larkin's Jakob Blakley, left, tries to get a shot past Bartlett's Keegan Kunzer, center, and Conrad Luczynski during a game in Bartlett on Tuesday, Jan. 18, 2022. (Brian O'Mahoney / The Courier-News)

Last season, Carter felt Blakley couldn't spread his wings on one of the most successful teams in program history.

"When you have a team that special, everybody sacrifices," Carter said. "He sacrificed a lot to fit a specific role we needed from him that didn't showcase all of his skills.

"He has a little bit of a chip on his shoulder because people don't really know how good he is."

Blakley's transition to lead guard has gone smoothly.

“Coach Carter trusts me, so that takes the pressure off me,” Blakley said. “This summer he would say, ‘You have to take that shot. You’re the person this year. You’re next up.’”

Blakley couldn’t have learned from a better player than Wheeler-Thomas, who graduated as one of Larkin’s all-time legends.

“Damari was a really good mentor — to see how to play and see what coach Carter really wants,” Blakley said. “He showed me how to be a Division I player.”

That’s the future Carter envisions for Blakley. Before his summer was interrupted by a knee injury, Blakley started hearing from Division I programs.

“It was the first time we had a Division I point guard,” Carter said of last season. “When it’s all said and done, we’re going to have two of them.”

## **Cameron Christie, Rolling Meadows**

There’s been no lull in Cameron Christie’s game this summer, and that’s fine with him.

In fact, the Rolling Meadows senior relishes the annual chance to gauge his development.

“Summer’s great because there’s nothing stopping you from playing,” Christie said. “It’s an opportunity for me to grow as a person and as a basketball player.”

Quantifying Christie’s continued progress is difficult, especially given the advanced state in which he entered the summer.

He was a first team all-state selection last winter after averaging 22 points. He shot 42% from 3-point range, leading the Mustangs to the Mid-Suburban East championship and their first regional title since 2001.



Rolling Meadows' Cameron Christie rises to the basket for a dunk during a game at Deerfield on Saturday, Jan. 8, 2022. (Brian O'Mahoney / Pioneer Press)

"It's been amazing to see how much better he's gotten at everything," Rolling Meadows coach Kevin Katovich said. "The biggest strides have been on defense, where he's taken it to the next level."

Christie likes the contrast of playing in June with the Mustangs before transitioning to the national AAU circuit for the Illinois Wolves.

"It makes for having two different friend groups," Christie said. "My high school teammates I get to hang out with the whole year, and the AAU bond is there too."

Late summer is often the time for top prospects to commit, but Christie has approximately 15 offers. He isn't in a hurry.

Christie, whose older brother Max was drafted by the Los Angeles Lakers in June after one season at Michigan State, said he will likely take one or two of the allowable five official campus visits in the fall.

His goal is to decide before the season begins.

"There definitely are some days where there's pressure," Christie said. "I want to play the season stress-free. For all of us seniors, this is our last ride, and I want to make sure there are no regrets."

## DeAndre Craig, Mount Carmel

As he gets ready for his senior season, DeAndre Craig is attracting more attention from Division I schools, recently picking up offers from Illinois State and Denver.

“I feel like recruiting is going good,” Craig said. “I had a whole bunch of colleges at my tournament (last weekend). I know people are watching me, and if I just keep going, I’ll hopefully land some more offers.”

Craig averaged 20.2 points, six assists and five rebounds last season while playing point guard. He expects to play off the ball at times in 2022-23.

“We can push the ball faster this year,” he said. “We’ve got a lot of good guards, and considering that, I don’t have to have the ball in my hands 100% of the time.

“That frees me up a lot.”



Mount Carmel’s DeAndre Craig (4) drives to the basket against Marmion’s Jacob Piceno (5) during a game in Aurora on Tuesday, Jan. 11, 2022. (Mike Mantucca / The Beacon-News)

Mount Carmel is set to return two of its other top scorers in brothers Anthony and Angelo Ciaravino. The bond the trio formed last season could help the Caravan do big things.

“The Ciaravinos and me know each other like the back of our hands now,” Craig said.

Craig pointed out his main focus as a senior will be guiding his teammates.

“I’m trying to be more of a leader on the court,” he said. “I feel like I’ve led by example in the past, but I want to be more vocal my senior year.

“I want to project what our coaches are saying on to everyone else. I want to get everyone involved, help my teammates in any way I can and help my team win a lot of games.”

## **Luke Kinkade, Neuqua Valley**

Junior guard Luke Kinkade wanted to make sure he was not a one-dimensional player.

“Last year, I was mostly a 3-point shooter,” he said. “I didn’t get many rebounds or assists.

“My focus this summer has been about being a leader, getting better at passing and getting more assists and rebounds.”

Kinkade had a breakthrough sophomore season for Neuqua Valley. He averaged 10 points and made a team-best 70 3-pointers. He shot 88% from the free-throw line.

The 6-foot-2 Kinkade balances size with speed and a quick release.



**Neuqua Valley’s Luke Kinkade shoots from 3-point range against Lincoln-Way East during a Class 4A Neuqua Valley Regional semifinal game in Naperville on Wednesday, Feb. 23, 2022. (Jon Cunningham / Naperville Sun)**

A left-handed shooter, he knows how to find his spots on the floor to create the necessary separation for a clean look.

He isn’t an unknown quantity anymore, either. The shooting prowess has turned him into a defensive target. And he knows what it means to be under review.

“I feel like it is going to be harder for me to get open, so I have to do more with moving off the ball,” he said. “Sometimes, that means get the ball, dribble and help other people get open, set screens, just move without the ball.”

Neuqua (22-11) won a Class 4A regional last winter. Change is inevitable.

Now, Kinkade is the face of the team.

His older brother Nick, guard Jayden Dean and forward Cole Vonnahme all graduated.

Luke’s game was more diversified than he lets on. He also averaged 3.3 rebounds, 1.1 assists and 0.7 steals.

A year older, savvier and a little bigger, Kinkade has been continually working on all aspects of his game. He wants to guide his younger teammates.

“It is a very hard transition from freshman or sophomore to varsity,” he said. “The more I can help people, the better our team is going to be.”

## **AJ Lux, Crown Point**

Although he’s a teenager on the verge of his senior year, Crown Point guard AJ Lux sometimes sounds like a professional player with his approach to basketball.

It sounds that way when he’s talking about his summer priorities.

“Getting stronger, working on my shot and scoring at all three levels,” he said.

It sounds that way when he’s talking about his off-the-court agenda.

“Making sure I’m eating right and taking care of my body,” he said.

It sounds like a player who intends to advance well beyond the high school level with his career.

Lux took a step in that direction near the end of June, committing to Bellarmine — another part of his summer plans to have sorted out before high school season arrived.



**Crown Point's AJ Lux passes the ball during a game at Valparaiso on Friday, Feb. 11, 2022. (Michael Gard / Post-Tribune)**

For Lux, though, this grasp of the bigger picture comes with help from his father T.J., who starred at Northern Illinois before spending four seasons playing professionally in Europe.

“My dad’s been great,” Lux said. “He knows what to do and when to rest. Right now, with AAU finishing up, I’m just resting right now and getting ready for the high school season.”

AJ Lux also hopes the family’s genes have more of a boost to provide as well. TJ Lux was a 6-9 forward during his playing career, but AJ Lux said he’s around 6-5 right now.

“I hope I can get up to his height pretty soon,” AJ said.

## **Josh Pickett, West Aurora**

One thing is safe to say about West’s Aurora’s Josh Pickett. He knows his stuff.

Another?

His work ethic may be second to none, both on the court and in the classroom.

The 6-5 junior guard transferred home last fall from St. Rita, where he played on the varsity as a freshman during the pandemic-shortened season in spring 2021.





West Aurora's Josh Pickett (4) fights for a loose ball in the first quarter against Romeoville during a Southwest Prairie Conference game on Friday, Jan. 21, 2022. (Brian O'Mahoney / The Beacon-News)

Pickett enrolled originally at West Aurora but moved to the private school because of in-person learning.

"He's probably the hardest worker I've had the pleasure of coaching," West Aurora coach Brian Johnson said.

Pickett earned second team all-area honors last winter after averaging 14.1 points and 4.4 rebounds for the improved Blackhawks (17-14), who lost to Oswego East in a regional final.

"We definitely had a great turnaround from the one-win COVID season," Pickett said. "We were close in the regional. It was a little disappointing because we thought it ended prematurely."

In the classroom, Pickett has a 5.0 GPA on a 4.0 scale. He credits the example of his parents, Mark and Angela.

"Seeing all that they've accomplished and what it takes," he said. "A lot of hard work and grinding has helped."

With Division I scholarship offers from Northern Illinois, Eastern Michigan, Western Illinois and George Washington, Pickett also has interest from Stanford, Cal Poly, Princeton, Yale, Brown and Iowa State.

"I'm still working on getting my name out there," said Pickett, who is playing this summer in Nike's Elite Youth Basketball League with the Mac Irvin Fire. "It's still early in the process."

Improvement continues on the court too.

"He handles the ball a ton for us," Johnson said. "He's so much better, seeing the floor and finishing stronger."

“He’s a gym rat. He’s in there every single day. He doesn’t veer away, so it’s not a surprise.”

## **Milan Raval, Vernon Hills**

The concept of a relaxing summer doesn’t apply to Milan Raval.

Besides becoming entrenched as Vernon Hills’ undisputed leader on the basketball court, the senior also is a standout player in soccer and tennis.

“The summer has been pretty packed, but I think that helps me be a well-rounded person,” Raval said. “The thing I really liked basketball-wise is a bunch of my teammates grew a lot.”

Growth will be needed for Vernon Hills to match its 20-win season.

Raval is the only experienced returnee. To help establish an identity, the team played in Warren’s summer league and shootouts at Palatine, Lakes and Illinois State.



**Vernon Hills’ Milan Raval, right, shoots a jumper over Maine West’s Julius Murray during a game in Vernon Hills on Friday, Jan. 21, 2022. (Rob Dicker / News-Sun)**

The last event was particularly useful because it reinforced how Raval won’t be a one-man band.

“I don’t want kids to be deferring to Milan because he’s our best player,” Vernon Hills coach Matt McCarty said.

Raval was the Central Suburban North’s player of the year, averaging 16.5 points and 5.9 rebounds. Still, he knows there’s room to get better.

Developing a more polished handle, he believes, will help him become more effective in navigating double teams and also distributing the ball.

Finishing in the lane and becoming more vocal on defense also are focus areas.

“I’m trying to take my physicality to the next level,” said Raval, who also found time this summer to compete in the Future Business Leaders of America national convention.

What comes after high school remains unknown. Raval hopes to find a college with a competitive academic setting that would allow him to play both basketball and soccer.

“I enjoy basketball a lot,” he said. “But if there’s a place to offer the chance to do both, I’d probably take it.”

*Staff reporter Rick Armstrong and freelance reporters Paul Johnson, Patrick Z. McGavin, Dave Melton, Steve Millar and Steve Reaven contributed.*