

Observations from the dugout as teams begin district play

We're nearly a month into the high school baseball season, and like I said on Twitter a couple of weeks ago, I've seen every team in our coverage area play. Some I've seen four times, other just twice, but I have now been to see every team play at least two times.

I've decided to split this topic in two columns, and talk about four teams this week and four teams next week.

Oak Grove (13-1)

I've been so impressed with the Warriors through the first month of the season, and they find themselves highly thought about in some national polls.



By Camal PETRO

Oak Grove is absolutely knocking the you-know-what out of the ball this season, something that kind of hurt the team late last year.

Sophomores Kade Shannon, Kris Jones and John Rhys Plumlee have stepped up huge this season, and they are nice contributors at the plate to go along with seniors Mack Pickering and Drew Boyd and junior Hayes Maples.

If they can continue to hit at a high level, they're a serious threat for the 6A State Championship, because the pitching staff has a collective 1.83 earned run average. Leading that staff is Boyd, who is 4-0 with a 0.00 ERA. He's given up just seven hits in the 22 innings he's pitched while striking out 27.

Petal (8-5)

The Panthers have surprised me a little bit so far. Coming into the season, it was widely known they were going to have to hit the ball. Well, Petal has two players who are batting more than .400, and four more everyday players who are above .300.

Senior Braxton Miller is crushing the ball with a .463 batting average, five doubles, two home runs and 24 RBI.

The pitching staff has two no-hitters, albeit both were against a weak Meridian team, but it's still impressive, no doubt. Taylor Gatwood is off to a good start as the ace of the staff, and junior Hunter Dykes has proven to be a really good No. 2. Tyler Dobson and Miller have had good outings, too.

But, the depth in the bullpen is a serious issue, so as long as Petal doesn't play four games in

a week, it'll be fine. Good news, you don't do that come playoff time.

Hattiesburg (10-5)

After starting the season 3-3, the Tigers have won seven of the last eight games. They split the first two district games with Pearl River Central, which will be a biggest hurdle for the Tigers in the district.

The four-headed monster at the plate, Joe Gray, Dexter Jordan, A.J. Stinson and Jamarcus Lang are all hitting better than .300, as Gray leads the group with a .429 batting average with 13 RBI and six doubles. Led by Jordan, the pitching staff is off to a nice start with a 2.61 ERA, too.

It's not a secret the expectation is to win a state championship, so we'll see if they can get consistent play down the stretch.

Purvis (7-6)

I like this team a lot and I think the Tornados have a good future ahead of them. The two seniors, Quade Delancey and Lane Knight, are hitting above .400 – .471 and .421, respectively – and Tony Farlow's squad as a bevy of young talent around those two.

The pitching staff is super young, led by a couple of freshman, a sophomore and a senior as the top inning getters. I've only seen freshman Jesse Johnson pitch once, but I was super impressed with his ability to throw strikes consistently, and like Farlow said after that game, he's really athletic coming off the mound.

Follow Camal on Twitter via @PineBeltSPORTS or email him: camal@PineBeltSPORTS.com

We're entering the 'sweet spot' of the sports calendar

If you've played golf or baseball, you surely know about the sweet spot.

In baseball, it's when you swing the bat and hit the ball, and you can't even feel the percussion. You hit the ball flush, right in the middle of the barrel of the bat and the ball just jumps off the bat. Ted Williams knew all about the sweet spot.

Same deal in golf. You swing that driver and catch the ball perfectly on the clubface, right in the center, in the sweet spot. If you've never felt it, it's hard to describe. If you have felt it, you want to feel it again and again. It's the sweet spot. Heaven on Earth.

We are entering, as March winds down and April arrives, this sports fan's sweet spot on the calendar. For me, at least, it doesn't get any better than this.

We're slap dab in the middle of March Madness, winding down to the Final Fours of both the NCAA Men's and Women's basketball

tournaments. For drama – the late Jim McKay's "thrill of victory and agony of defeat" – it surely doesn't get any better. While TV Ratings for some sporting events lag and ESPN's revenue suffers, the NCAA Tournament's ratings continue to soar.

We are winding down to a men's Final Four that will be played on April 1st and 3rd in Phoenix.

So what are you supposed to do on April 2? Funny you should ask. That's the start of the Major League baseball season. You know: Hope springs eternal and all that. Last year, the Chicago Cubs broke a 108-year drought and won the World Series. The 2017 season will have a hard time topping that, but we'll see.

Later that week, we get The Masters, always the first of golf's

four major tournaments. Every sports fan has his or her favorite event to watch. Mine is Sunday at Augusta National. The sport, itself, has changed so much over the years. Sweet spots are larger for one thing on these high-tech

golf clubs. The players hit the ball so much farther. But Sunday, at Augusta, never changes. Something will happen such as what happened to Jordan Spieth last year. Somebody's heart will be broken. And somebody – Danny Willett, anyone? – will seize

the day. I can't wait.

But there's so much more. In Mississippi, spring means college baseball. In no other state do baseball fans converge on college ballparks as they do in the Magnolia State. You can look it up.

At Ole Miss, for instance, the

14-6 Rebels drew more than 25,000 fans this past weekend for a three-game weekend series with Vanderbilt and won two of the three games. Scott Berry may very well have his best team ever at Southern Miss. It's certainly the most powerful. The 16-4 Golden Eagles have slammed 26 home runs in 20 games, including seven in a three-game road sweep of nationally ranked Louisiana Tech this past weekend. State, 12-9, is off to a slower start, in large part due to injuries to pitchers. But the Bulldogs' season is still a puppy. There's time. Hope springs eternal, don't you know.

We are also getting to that time on the sports calendar when NBA games begin to really matter. The 82-game monstrosity and monotony of a regular season is winding down. Pretty soon – April 15, to be exact – they will start playing for keeps. They will play – and play harder – for a few more weeks and then the Golden State

Warriors will be crowned champions. You read it here first.

Now, I know that many in this state will argue that fall is the real sweet spot for a Mississippi sports fan. That's when football takes center stage, baseball winds down to the World Series and basketball season launches.

Nevertheless, I'll take spring. On this, I side with the late A. Bartlett Giamatti, who besides serving as baseball commissioner, was the president of Yale and a Renaissance scholar, who once wrote of baseball: "It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring, when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains come, it stops and leaves you to face the fall alone..."

Rick Cleveland is a Jackson-based syndicated sports columnist. His email address is rcleveland@mspress.org



By Rick CLEVELAND

Do the Pelicans have a playoff chance or building for next season?

Before the New Orleans Pelicans defeated the Charlotte Hornets, 125-122, for a much needed win 12 days ago, the Pelicans had won only two of their last eight games since acquiring power forward DeMarcus "Boogie" Cousins.

The Pelicans were experiencing a downward spiral of losses, mainly centered around the lack of team chemistry with Boogie and how he and Davis would play together on the court at the same time.

Consider that plus the lack of perimeter scoring and one can easily see why the Pelicans struggled to win games. It doesn't take rocket science to figure this one out.

Now, however, since defeating Charlotte, the Pelicans have won three straight games and four of their last five games. Pelicans' head coach Alvin Gentry believes the Pelicans are playing their best since he arrived in the summer of 2015, according to ESPN.com.

Davis and Cousins duo has improved and will only continue to get better. With the "Fire and

Ice" combination anchoring a majority of the offensive production on a consistent basis equates to strong chances for the Pelicans to earn victories in their final 11 games of the season.

Beyond Davis and Cousins, what is more exciting to see is the level of offensive production the Pelicans have gotten from their perimeter scorers, something that has been hot and cold at times throughout the season.

Jrue Holiday, Solomon Hill, E'Twaun Moore and Jordan Crawford have put up double digits in the points category in more than one occasion during this winning streak for the Pelicans, which has really helped New Orleans late in games.

If you're like me and anyone else who is excited about the race to the NBA playoffs, you can't help but ponder the following questions.

Are the Pelicans finally coming together as a team?

Is it too late for the Pelicans to continue their fight of earning the eighth spot in the NBA Western Conference playoff race?

The answer to the first question is yes.

There will always be great players but basketball is a team sport. With any team sport, there has to be a level of chemistry, growth and understanding of each players' role through each game. It is a learning process.

When the Pelicans acquired Cousins, Gentry and members of team knew their would be a bumps-and-bruises phase. While the season is not over and chemistry is not perfect, the Pelicans are showing early signs of how dominant they can be with what they have in the current picture. Imagine how dominant the Pelicans could become after the NBA free agency this summer.

As for the Pelicans' playoff chances, they are not completely gone.

However, it will be a lot tougher to earn a spot by virtue of the caliber of teams they have remaining on their schedule.

New Orleans is 3.5 games back of the final playoff spot in the Western Conference. The Denver Nuggets currently hold the eighth spot; a team that New Orleans has to play three times before the regular season ends.

The remaining schedule for the Pelicans consists of road games against the Houston Rockets on Friday, the Denver Nuggets on Sunday and the Utah Jazz on

Monday. After the three-game road swing, New Orleans returns home to play four games respectively against the Dallas Mavericks, the Sacramento Kings, the Chicago Bulls and the Nuggets. Then, the Pelicans will close the season with four tough road games against the Nuggets, the Golden State Warriors, the Los Angeles Lakers and the Portland Trail Blazers.

Currently, the Pelicans are behind both the Trail Blazers and Mavericks in the Western Conference. The Kings sit 2.5 games behind the Pelicans and the Lakers sit in last place.

For the Pelicans, if they want to earn a playoff spot, every game for them must be played as a "do-or-die or the win-or-go home" mentality.

The Pelicans quest for the eighth spot will continue Friday as they go on the road to play the Houston Rockets, the third-best team in the Western Conference.

Houston leads the season series, 2-1, but the Pelicans won the last matchup between the two teams last Friday at the Smoothie King Center. Even more interesting, New Orleans earned the victory without Cousins, who was sidelined by a left knee and soreness in his ribs.

Solomon Hill poured in 30



By Wilton JACKSON