



## Preseason Boys BB Ranks (1-15)

By [Ronnie Flores](#) | Published: November 16, 2017

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Harrison Butler and the other top players at Mater Dei hope they are looking back all of the rest of the teams in California at the end of the 2017-18 season. Photo: Andrew Drennen

**It's time to launch our winter basketball content on CalHiSports.com and we'll do it with our preseason boys basketball state rankings. The most tumultuous summer and fall we can ever recall in college and grassroots basketball has trickled down to the high school ranks in California and will undoubtedly impact the landscape. Even after all that has transpired with elite players leaving the CIF ranks, we are going with Mater Dei of Santa Ana as the preseason No. 1 team for the 2017-18 season. Defending CIF Southern Section and CIF Open Division state champ Bishop Montgomery of Torrance starts out at No. 2 and is nipping at the Monarchs' heels. Go inside for teams No. 1 through No. 15 in our preseason State Top 40.**

**Note:** During the season, all of our writeups, analysis and predictions of what's coming next will be content for our Gold Club VIPs only. To become a member of our Gold Club so you can check out all of our boys basketball content, including player rankings in each class, please [CLICK HERE](#).

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California boys hoops is entering its sixth season of CIF Open Division playoffs at the regional level. In those five seasons, four programs have hoisted the CIF Open division crown: Mater Dei of Santa Ana (twice), Bishop O'Dowd of Oakland, Chino Hills and Bishop Montgomery of Torrance. The only time our preseason No. 1 team didn't win the CIF Open state title in that time was in 2012-13 when Long Beach Poly (a team that included all-state forward **Roschon Prince** and fast-rising Golden State Warrior **Jordan Bell**) finished No. 3 in the state.

You have to go back before the open division format was created (specifically 2008-09) to find a season in which our preseason No. 1 finished outside the Top 5. In fact, only eight programs since the 1999-00 season have started as state preseason No. 1 and in 12 of those 18 seasons the preseason No. 1 team did end up as the No. 1 ranked team in the state with a CIF state crown in tow. It just takes a certain level of talent, or a super elite player, to be pegged as the state's best and finish there.

In the early 2000s we had a streak where our preseason No. 1 team [finished as the No. 1 team in the state six consecutive seasons](#) and we are currently on a roll perhaps just as impressive. National power Montverde Academy, which started out as the No. 1 ranked team in the country in the [2017-18 preseason FAB 50 National Rankings](#), is the only program to defeat a full-strength California No. 1 team in the past four seasons, as Bishop Montgomery lost in last season's opener to Bishop O'Dowd of Oakland while nursing injuries to two starters.

Which brings us to this year's hectic off-season and this season's preseason state rankings.

The ongoing FBI Investigation has put a cloud over college and high school basketball. Some current high school stars across the country are assumed to be some of the unnamed players in the indictment papers made public and nobody is certain how shoe companies' involvement in summer ball and sponsoring high school tournaments will change going forward. It just hasn't unraveled yet. Many people involved in the game are a bit on edge and it's certainly effected the landscape of high school basketball in California.

While we are currently on a rankings roll, that could certainly come to an end this season because of player movement and the uncertainty going forward that elite players will finish at the CIF schools in which they began their careers. Just this off-season, **Marvin Bagley III** from Sierra Canyon of Chatsworth moved up year to begin college at Duke, center **Jordan Brown** of defending NorCal champ Woodcreek of Roseville moved to non-CIF program Prolific Prep in Napa and just in the last week, center **Bol Bol** of state power Mater Dei left for basketball-academy program Findlay Prep of Nevada. And then, of course, we also had Class of 2019



*Jordan Brown scores two of his 31 points during Woodcreek's win over Sheldon in NorCal Open Division championship. The junior did not return to Woodcreek this season, but he was not the only prominent player that left a CIF school early. Photo: Willie Eashman.*

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standout and Cal-Hi Sports State Sophomore of the Year **La'Melo Ball** removed from classes at Chino Hills by his father to be home schooled.

Those four were the CIF's biggest draws and likely best overall prospects for 2018 and it certainly is a blow to the amount of elite teams California will field on a FAB 50 national scale and opens up the possibility for more teams to have a legitimate shot at a CIF state open crown.

With that in mind, we open the season with Mater Dei of Santa Ana as preseason No. 1 in the state and Bishop Montgomery a close No. 2. When the FAB 50 rankings were released on Ballislife.com on November 5, the Monarchs opened up No. 7 in the nation and Bishop Montgomery No. 33. With Bol Bol gone, that gap has obviously closed and we were tempted to make a switch. In the final analysis, however, **Gary McKnight**, the state's all-time winningest coach, still has an excellent track record and a team that could win its third state open division crown in six years.

With Mater Dei's national schedule and the exodus of elite players from the CIF ranks, this could be the season where a full-strength No. 1 team is likely to get beat and someone else besides the preseason No. 1 team could emerge as the state's best.

It's been that kind of off-season.

## **2017-18 CAL-HI SPORTS PRESEASON BOYS BASKETBALL STATE RANKINGS**

*(This is the 38th consecutive season that CalHiSports.com will provide state rankings; Last year's final rating in parentheses with 2016-17 won-loss record)*

**Note:** During the season, all of our writeups, analysis and predictions of what's coming next will be content for our Gold Club VIPs only. To become a member of our Gold Club so you can check out all of our boys basketball content, including player rankings in each class, please [CLICK HERE](#).

### **1. (2) Mater Dei (Santa Ana) 33-3**

For the ninth time in our current Top 20 format dating back to 1988-89, Mater Dei is the preseason No. 1 ranked team in the state. The Monarchs also opened up as the No. 1 team in the country in Gary McKnight's (1,082-98 won-loss record) second season back in 1983-1984 when we did rankings by CIF Divisions. A preseason No. 1 ranking in our current format has been a good omen for the program, as Mater Dei has gone on to win a CIF title and finish No. 1 five times in that time span. This year, however, its position is certainly not a slam dunk choice and we easily could have made a switch with Bishop Montgomery and even considered Sierra Canyon. Mater Dei, however, has a good track record of coaching, solid players who understand the Monarchs' system and they've dealt with late player defections before and still turned in successful seasons. Yes, losing 7-foot-2 Bol Bol is a major blow, but that's more from a national perspective than anything else, where the Monarchs started out No. 6 in the preseason FAB 50 National Rankings. With Marvin Bagley and Jordan Brown also no longer in the CIF ranks, no top tier team has an elite big man and the Monarchs still do have experienced players. It begins with Harvard-bound point guard Spencer Freedman (6-0, Sr.), a four-year starter who is one of the state's best at initiating offense and hitting big outside shots. Southern Utah-bound small forward Harrison Butler (6-6, Sr.) is much improved, co-captain Reagan Lundeen is an underrated talent with loads of crunch time experience and Penn commit Michael Wang (6-10, Sr.) is a good all-around forward whose production will need to take a

step forward for Mater Dei to hoist its third CIF Open Division state crown. Mater Dei actually played a vast amount of games this summer without Bol and that led to the development of depth with talented newcomers such as Wilhelm Breidenbach (6-9, Fr.) and Devin Askew (6-3, Fr.). Another reason to like the Monarchs is they have a loaded schedule, which includes trips to the City of Palms Classic in Ft. Myers, Fla., a trip to the Les Schwab Invitational in Oregon, a date with nationally-ranked Gonzaga of Washington, D.C. at the Cancer Research Classic and a game with FAB 50 No. 1 Montverde Academy of Florida at the Hoophall Classic.

## **2. (1) Bishop Montgomery (Torrance) 31-2**

We were confident in placing the Knights as our preseason No. 1 team last season despite Sierra Canyon having Marvin Bagley and one of the most talented teams in the country. In the end, our preseason forecast was correct and that was true even after Mater Dei added Bol Bol mid-season. That's another factor in why we stuck with Mater Dei at No. 1: Bol (nor Bagley) didn't end up being the difference in the race for the CIF Southern Section and state open crowns. The difference was the now graduated Mr. Basketball Ethan Thompson (Oregon State), who is one of two starters coach Doug Mitchell (651-171) lost off of his CIF Open Division state championship team. Montgomery still has a potent backcourt led by UCLA-bound David Singleton (6-4, Sr.) and Gianni Hunt (6-3, Jr.). Hunt recently broke his ankle, so Singleton will have to shoulder even more of the scoring load and with a good start to the season could develop into the early 2017-18 Mr. Basketball front-runner. Hunt's injury also means more opportunities for Josh Vasquez (6-3, Jr.) and the continued development of transfer Oscar Lopez Jr. (6-4, Jr.). Boston University commit Fletcher Tynen (6-5, Sr.) can do a lot of what graduated Jordan Schakel (San Diego St.) did in terms of rebounding and the dirty work defensively and if Lazar Nekic (6-11, Jr.) has a big season this team could be near the level of last season come playoff time. Bishop Montgomery doesn't face the overwhelming schedule Mater Dei will endure and we wouldn't be surprised to see the rankings move around early in the season. At the end, however, you can bet this team will be one the SoCal teams want to avoid in the quest for a CIF Open Division title.



*David Singleton had a bunch of big games for Bishop Montgomery down the stretch in its drive for CIF Open Division state title. Photo: Ronnie Flores.*

## **3. (4) Sierra Canyon (Chatsworth) 27-3**

The Trailblazers are entering a new era with Andre Chevalier taking over head coaching duties from Ty Nichols, but expectations remain high at a program looking to capture its first CIF Open Division crown. Sierra Canyon actually had Chevalier as acting head coach in last year's playoffs when the team faded down the stretch, but it's basically a moot point since this is a totally different team with five new starters. An influx of talent lands the Trailblazers in this position, as does their performances in various SoCal fall leagues where they looked like a FAB 50 ranked team. It begins with Ohio State-bound Duane Washington (6-4, Sr.), a transfer from Grand Rapids (Mich.) Christian who is physically strong, fundamental and a great scorer with a terrific outside stroke. Scottie Pippen Jr. (6-2, Jr.), the son of the former NBA great, is crafty and isn't afraid to make the clutch play. Chevalier got another son of a former NBA standout when K.J. Martin (6-8, Jr.) transferred over from Chaminade

of West Hills and he provides toughness and can finish with the best of them. It's the Harvard-Westlake transfers, Terren Frank (6-8, So.) and high-flying Cassius Stanley (6-4, Jr.), which could be key because this team is as talented as any in the state. Frank has a strong work ethic and if Stanley develops chemistry with the other guards after the 30-day sit out period, this team should be able to win a state regional playoff game, which the last two Sierra Canyon teams were unable to accomplish after winning the CIF D5 state crown in 2015.



*Jamal Hartwell had an impressive junior season at L.A. Fairfax. Photo: Andrew Drennen.*

#### **4. (14) Fairfax (Los Angeles) 26-6**

The Lions were nearly placed in the preseason FAB 50 rankings, as Bishop Montgomery was No. 33 and Sierra Canyon No. 37. Fairfax was literally team No. 51 or 52 and with Bol Bol gone, the gap between the Monarchs and the other top teams just closed significantly. In the first season under coach Steve Baik (who coached Chino Hills to the 2016 CIF open and mythical national FAB 50 crown), the Lions started off No. 6 in the state, but the underclass-dominated unit battled injuries and finished in fourth place in the race for the coveted L.A. City Section Open Division crown. This year, the Lions are the prohibitive favorites with five starters and eight lettermen returning. Jamal Hartwell (6-0, Sr.) is one of the state's most explosive point guards and

he's steadily gotten better each season. Both Ethan Anderson (6-1, Jr.) and Bobby McRae (6-3, Jr.) caught the injury bug last season and it hampered the team's development because it happened at different times so Fairfax didn't have its regulars in the lineup for a majority of the season. Anderson is one of the state's best perimeter scorers and McRae is a team-first defender with an improving offensive repertoire. Kirk Smith (6-8, Sr.) is the glue inside and if he can stay out of foul trouble this team can play with and potentially defeat any in the state. Depth is provided by underrated Mekhi Kimble (6-2, Sr.), a hellacious on-the ball defender, and Daylen Williams (6-6, Jr.), the son of Crenshaw legend John Williams who will spell and assist Smith against the bigger clubs. Fairfax plays a strong schedule, including a trip to the Iolani Classic (along with No. 5 Bishop O'Dowd, No. 23 Taft, and nationally ranked clubs Jefferson of Portland, Rainier Beach of Seattle and FAB 50 No. 1 Montverde Academy of Florida) and to the Torrey Pines Holiday Classic, plus dates with No. 3 Sierra Canyon (Harvey Kitani Classic) and No. 2 Bishop Montgomery (Rolling Hills Prep State Preview Classic).

#### **5. (NR) Bishop O'Dowd (Oakland) 19-11**

This is the first spot we go a bit out on the limb, but there is easy logic behind it. Similar to the Mater Dei-Bishop Montgomery decision, our NorCal preseason No. 1 team plays a much tougher schedule early than No. 6 and NorCal No. 2 Modesto Christian and if the Dragons hold serve against that schedule it will be easy to place them as the No. 1 team in The North. O'Dowd plays talented Capital Christian before heading to the Iolani Classic in Hawaii and the Torrey Pines Holiday Classic in San Diego. The game against Capital comes after the Dragons open the season versus No. 4 Fairfax in the NorCal Tip-Off Classic on November 25. O'Dowd and Fairfax were nearly placed in the FAB 50, but the logic was the winner of that game would likely

jump in when the first regular season national rankings are released with the teams perhaps playing again in those out-of-town tournaments. Should O'Dowd lose, then Modesto Christian would likely take over as the NorCal No. 1 with Folsom also looming in the shadows. There is a lot to like about head coach Lou Richie's team this year, as he welcomes back three-year starters and four-year varsity players Elijah Hardy (6-3, Sr.) and Naseem Gaskin (6-4, Sr.) to his backcourt. Hardy is headed to Washington and Gaskin is bound for Utah and no NorCal team has ever had two Pac-12 bound guards in its backcourt in the modern-day era of CIF state championships. Will Chaverin (6-3, Jr.) and Iniko McNeal (6-0, So.) are also nice pieces for Richie that continue to make strides. Grid-Hoopers Miles Owens (6-7, Sr.) and Tyler Garay-Harris (6-6, Jr.) will need to transition quick from the gridiron because the Dragons need their rebounding and toughness inside against the more talented teams on the schedule. The production of that inside duo is even more prominent now that talented big man Raymond Hawkins (6-10, Jr.) is not practicing with the team. He obviously can help take this team to its desired goals if he's on board with what Richie is trying to implement, but if he's not the team is prepared for that. The players and Richie like the current chemistry and if Hardy and Gaskin show more consistency than displayed last season, this team should close stronger than it has the past two seasons.

#### 6. (NR) Modesto Christian 22-8

The Crusaders were strongly considered for preseason NorCal No. 1 and the FAB 50, but the decision was made to let them play themselves in because No. 5 Bishop O'Dowd's schedule will quickly show if that team is deserving of the top spot or if it will fall back more toward the pack. There is a lot to like about coach Brice Fantazia's team, which has a nice blend of returnees, newcomers and players coming back from injury. Tyler Williams (6-4, Sr.) had a big junior season and even though his numbers may not be better in 2017-18, he's a vital cog to the Crusaders' success. Northwest Nazarene commit Gabe Murphy (6-9, Sr.) is a rock inside and Tsotne Tsatsidze (6-8, Jr.) is a future D1 player who is primed for a breakout season. Mike Pearson (5-10, So.) is one of the best young guards in NorCal and transfer and Cal Poly-SLO bound Junior Ballard (6-3, Sr.) could be the difference-maker for this still relatively young team in the post-season. As if adding Ballard wasn't a big plus, talented Dathan Satchel (6-3, Sr.) returns after ineligibility last season and Aaron Murphy (6-7, Jr.) is back after a broken kneecap sidelined him in 2016-17. There is a plethora of talent on hand, so Fantazia will have to manage minutes and rely on his three seniors in order for championship chemistry to develop. Similar to O'Dowd, the Crusaders will look to peak at the right time in order to erase the disappointment of last year's 83-60 loss to eventual NorCal D1 champion James Logan of Union City in a regional opener.



*Senior Tyler Williams is slick, effective leader at the point guard position for Modesto Christian. Photo: John Westberg/The Modesto Bee.*

#### 7. (15) Oak Park 23-9

It's been a steady climb for the Eagles' program to where it's now a bonafide contender for the CIF Southern Section Open Division crown. It will be an all-out war since there is no slam dunk favorite and the bracket will be reduced to eight

from the 16-team field it was during its first four years of existence. Oak Park began last season ranked No. 17 in the state and finished No. 15 after it went 1-2 in the CIFSS Open Division playoffs after losing to two eventual state champions in Bishop Montgomery (Open) and Roosevelt of Corona (D1). This year, Oak Park will look to win its playoff opener behind four-year veterans Riley Battin (6-9, Sr.) and Wes Slajchert (6-3, Sr.). The Utah-bound Battin averaged 25 ppg, 12 rpg and 3.6 apg and is easily one of the most productive players in the state. Slajchert, headed to Dartmouth, is smart (3.9 GPA), experienced and productive (13 ppg, 6.5 rpg, 6.6 apg). Wes' younger brother Clark Slajchert is already a better scorer than his older bro (16.7 ppg) and is a fearless shooter. He was arguably the best freshman in the SoCal basin last season. Zeke Richards (6-11, Sr.) has worked hard to turn himself into a legitimate D1 player and is the true paint protector that other top teams now lack because of off-season departures. Depth is provided by Justin Ebor (6-6, Fr.), one of SoCal's best incoming freshmen, Zeke's younger brother Mikai Richards (6-7, So.) and Micah Jackson (5-10, Fr.). Oak Park has a tough schedule that includes a game with academy power Findlay Prep of Nevada, three competitive holiday tournaments and a game with No. 2 Bishop Montgomery at the Westchester Challenge January 6.

### **8. (3) Chino Hills 30-3**

It's been a bit of a roller coaster for this program since it won the 2016 mythical national title with Lonzo Ball (current L.A. Laker rookie) spearheading the attack. Lost in all the hoopla of the big men leaving the CIF ranks is that last year's state sophomore of the year and one of the most popular high school athletes of all-time, La'Melo Ball, won't be on the Huskies' roster this season. Chino Hills may take a step back, but though the program is on its third coach in three years and won't have Melo in the fold, there is still a lot to like about this team. Ball's good friend and the other freshman starter on that 35-0 title team, Onyeka Okongwu (6-9, Jr.), is back and will be more of an offensive focal point. New coach Dennis Latimore (who coached View Park to a L.A. City Section D5 title in 2014) will work on getting his big man accustomed to being an aggressive offensive threat instead of excelling without having a play ran for him. Melo's older cousin Andre Ball (6-8, Sr.), who battled injuries as an underclassman, is in the same boat in that he'll have to get used to taking big shots. He's oozing with potential and if he has a break-through senior campaign this team could remain among the state's elite. There are plenty of weapons on the roster and Latimore will never have to worry about Ofure Ujadughele (6-3, Sr.) lacking confidence on either side of the ball. Will Pluma (5-11, Jr.) is one of the better shooters in the CIFSS and can get hot in a hurry, while Nick Manor-Hall (6-4, Jr.) provides experience and intangibles. Phaquan Davis (5-9, Jr.) played a big role at key moments last season and his older brother Daijon Davis (6-6, Sr.) adds versatility to a talented roster. There is a lot to like about this team and it should be a CIFSS Open Division team with the right combination of health and chemistry.

### **9. (NR) Folsom 22-9**

Some are pegging coach Mike Wall's club as NorCal's best and it could very well end up being that way with its nice blend of players. Similar to Bishop O'Dowd and Modesto Christian, the Bulldogs will have to close strong after two gut-wrenching post-season losses last season to St. Mary's of Stockton. Last season's club began No. 30 in the state after finishing at No. 12 in 2016 and this team has the potential to be better than that Jordan Ford-led club. The Bulldogs not only have the motivation, they have some of the best chemistry in the state; really plays well together and was



*Folsom's Mason Forbes signed his letter of intent last week with Harvard while his sister, McKenzie, signed with Cal.*  
Photo: Twitter.com.

impressive during the fall. It begins with Harvard-bound Mason Forbes (6-8, Sr.), a throw back in terms of his work ethic with a developing offensive game. He won't have to deal with Jordan Brown anymore down low, but how a potential matchup with Elias King of No. 26 Jesuit goes could determine who takes the Sac-Joaquin Section D1 crown. Martis Johnson (6-3, Sr.) is a talented player with next level talent while a big season from Jayce McCain (6-3, Sr.) could decide if this team has success in the NorCal Open Division. Isaiah Jones (6-4, Sr.) and Eljay Gallegos (5-8, Sr.) provide depth for Folsom, which opens the season with St. Joseph of Notre Dame at the Nor-Cal Tip-Off Classic and concludes a December full of tournaments with the competitive Rancho Mirage Holiday Invitational.

#### **10. (25) Santa Margarita (Rancho Santa Margarita) 21-9**

The Eagles begin the season in the exact same rankings position they did in 2016-17, but they expect a better finish and higher final ranking this time around. In fact, coach Jeff Reinert feels this should be his best team since taking over the program for Jerry DeBusk in 2012-13. Santa Margarita struggled at times during the fall, but when you realize this team has three starters back from a team that beat clubs such as preseason No. 4 Fairfax, No. 7 Oak Park, No. 13 Centennial and state champs Roosevelt (D1) and Esperanza (D2), there is reason for high optimism. Reinert did lose all-CIFSS pick Adrease Jackson to graduation but returns second team all-CIFSS choice Jake Kyman (6-7, Sr.), rugged Jordan Guest (6-8, Sr.) and point guard Pearson Parker (6-1, Sr.). In order for the Eagles to finish this high, they'll need to lower the overall loss count even though the schedule is tough. That's where the play of Max Agbonkpolo (6-6, Jr.) and Ryan Evans (6-1, So.) is key. If Agbonkpolo steps up his offensive consistency and Evans can help complement Parker with ball-handling duties (that is the area where the team ran into trouble this off-season), this team could put some real pressure on top-ranked Mater Dei in the Trinity League. Santa Margarita opens its season next week at the Ryse Williams Pac Shores Tourney, plays Moreau Catholic and Archbishop Mitty and participates in The Classic at Damien before opening league play at Mater Dei, where it lost by a single point last season.

#### **11. (37) Alemany (Mission Hills) 24-9**

Just like Santa Margarita, the Warriors open in the same preseason rankings position as they did last season. Alemany is the prohibitive favorite in the traditionally tough Mission League, as it has won the outright league title for three consecutive seasons. Last season, coach Tray Meek's club finished unbeaten in league play for the first time ever, but fell flat in its CIFSS Open Division playoff opener to Long Beach Poly. Despite some concern about his depth, Meeks is high on this team, as it possesses quality size and quickness on the perimeter. Returning all-state underclass pick D.J. McDonald (5-11, Sr.) and center Fred Odhiambo (6-11, Sr.) form one of the best inside-outside combos in the state. McDonald, bound for UC-Riverside, can score or run a team equally well while Odhiambo is the best shot blocker in the CIF ranks and runs the floor similar to a JV player looking for playing time. Brandon Whitney (5-11, So.) was impressive over the summer and Chigozie

Achara (6-7, Jr.) is a rugged inside player expected to make a big jump in production. Crespi (No. 33 in our preseason rankings) is a club bouncing back from injury woes while Harvard-Westlake was weakened by player defections, so Alemany will have to perform well in December tournaments in order to move up in the rankings.



*Junior forward Isaiah Mobley of Temecula Rancho Christian is continuing to develop as a complete player. Photo: Sean Redfield.*

## **12. (NR) Rancho Christian (Temecula) 20-12**

This is the first team in the rankings that will have to make a significant jump up in its level of play in order to live up to preseason acclaim. Head coach Ray Barefield, now in his sixth season, has aspired for his team to compete in the CIFSS open Division the past two seasons and even though that playoff bracket is now reduced by eight teams, the Eagles have their best realistic chance to make it in that time frame. The reason is Barefield's team has two legitimate big men (most of the state's best teams don't even have one) and underappreciated perimeter players. Isaiah Mobley (6-9, Jr.) is one of the most versatile forwards in the Western United States, regardless of class, and should be all-state underclass for the third consecutive season. His younger brother Evan Mobley (6-10, So.) is primed to make a big jump up in production after suffering from nagging injuries and growing pains last season. Stephen Park (6-0, Sr.) is an ultra-quick guard who has next level ability and

the maturity of Jordan Montgomery (6-0, So.) will be key to this team's fortunes against CIFSS Open Division teams that can apply heavy defensive pressure. Isaiah Knox (6-3, Sr.) and K.J. Redfield (6-2, Sr.) are streaky shooters and when they are on this team is awfully tough to beat. As his core group of players has matured, Barefield feels his team now has the proper amount of physicality to play with the section's top tier programs.

## **13. (10) Centennial (Corona) 27-10**

The Huskies are one of six programs to participate in the CIFSS Open Division playoffs in each of the four seasons of its existence and four of them are ranked in front of coach Josh Giles' club. The one behind the Huskies (Redondo Union of Redondo Beach) is not expected to battle for an open berth and Centennial is the ninth team in our rankings from the massive section. Some teams that fall in this range likely wouldn't mind falling out of serious consideration, but we know Giles' unit won't be one of them. Despite a smallish, perimeter-oriented roster, Centennial will vie for a spot in the state's premier section playoff bracket using its quickness and outside shooting. D.J. Davis (5-11, So.) made a late-season move over to Centennial from Poly of Riverside last year and is an absolutely fearless offensive player. He can score in bunches while newcomer Paris Dawson (6-1, So.) is talented and rapidly adjusting to the rigors of big-time high school basketball. Jaylen Clark (6-5, So.) is one of the state's best young wing players as excels in the open court. Even Legend Stamps (6-7, Jr.) is a perimeter-oriented player who has deep range ability. What will ultimately determine this team's chances of again making the CIFSS open division playoffs will be the dirty work to get shooters open and its offensive glass work and that's why Allen McBride's (6-4, Soph.) role is so critical. Centennial plays a tough schedule, hosting the BattleZone Tournament and playing

in both the Tarkanian Classic and The Classic at Damien before meeting No. 12 Rancho Christian at the Adidas Hoopfest on MLK Monday.

#### 14. (22) Salesian (Richmond) 27-5

Last season we started out the Pride as NorCal's highest rated team at No. 9, but it was evident the Pride couldn't hang with the state's elite when Woodcreek and Jordan Brown beat them by 28 points. Brown no longer is around and two of SoCal's top three preseason ranked teams lost big men with eligibility this off-season, so that makes the Pride more dangerous this time around. Even though coach Bill Mellis' club starts five spots lower than last year, the top four NorCal clubs are pretty close in ability and this year the Pride have more size while other elite teams are a bit smaller. The beef is provided by Te'Jon Sawyer (6-6, So.), a 250-pound plus forward who is not afraid to use his body. Tyler Brinkman (6-5, So.) is another young player that gives Salesian grit and Shane Bell (6-2, So.) completes the trio of super sophomores. Big things in the future are also expected of Demarshay Johnson (6-5, Fr.). The future is now, however, for this team and with the departure of two experienced guards, the production and consistency of twins Jaden (5-9, Jr.) and Jovon (5-9, Jr.) McClanahan will be key. The cog in the backcourt that makes this team go, of course, is James Akinjo (6-0, Sr.). He wasn't nationally known even after a stellar summer in 2016, but after leading the Oakland Soldiers to the Nike EYBL title last July, he's a legitimate top 50 national recruit and headed to UConn to play for former Crenshaw standout Kevin Ollie. With Akinjo on the floor, Salesian has a chance to compete with any team in the state.

#### 15. (11) Damien (La Verne) 31-5

After opening last season as a bubble club, the Spartans had a fantastic season, decisively defeating No. 4 Fairfax in the post-season before falling in the SoCal D1 regional semifinals to No. 13 Centennial. Coach Mike LeDuc's club will miss all-CIFSS choice Justin Hemsley and flashy guard Ezekiel Alley, but return enough firepower (three starters, eight lettermen) and have enough talented newcomers to make a serious run at another CIFSS Open Division berth. We gave serious consideration to placing JSerra in front the Spartans, but recall LeDuc's club beating the Lions in the post-season so we'll stick to the results for now. Cam Shelton (6-2, Sr.) had a breakout junior campaign, earning San Gabriel Valley Tribune honors and earning a scholarship to Northern Arizona. Elijah McCullough (6-2, Sr.) is another returning all-leaguer and Austin Cook (6-5, So.) is a spot-up shooting specialist. Despite the experienced trio, the key to Damien's fortunes as a CIFSS Open Division entrant will be the contributions of transfer Amar Brown (6-7, So.) and newcomers Malik Thomas (6-3, Fr.) and Joseph Johnson (6-1, Fr.).

For a look at the teams we've ranked from No. 16 to No. 40, plus 25 more on the bubble, [CLICK HERE](#).

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