

# IMMACULATE BASKETBALL

## LIONS ON A ROLL HEADING INTO THE END OF THE SEASON

March 04, 2021

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Immaculate Conception High School's boys basketball team built a 40-26 halftime lead against St. Thomas Aquinas on Monday, Feb. 22, on its way to a dominant 71-59 win. That victory by the Lions, ranked No. 8 in the state, over the No. 12 Trojans took ICHS to three wins in a row, a 7-4 record, and 3-0 in the Super Essex Conference.

For head coach Jimmy Salmon, the record and win streak are good, but the team left some wins on the table earlier this season.

"I'm happy with our effort," he said before Monday's game. "I'm disappointed in some of our results. I think

we're 6-4 right now, but in my opinion we gave away three wins. And you know, I'm very disappointed with that."

As is always the case, the Lions have a very difficult out-of-conference schedule and expect to see that reap benefits in conference.

The 3-0 record is a good indicator that it's working, but Seton Hall Prep (6-1, 5-1 SEC) is up next, tonight, Feb. 25, on the road. The team also faces the 7-1 Patrick School, which beat ICHS last year in the quarterfinal round of the NJSIAA Non-Public B

sectional tournament, on March 3.

The difficult schedule isn't just the brainchild of Salmon or Athletic Director Ryan Horan, as the team expects and wants the toughest competition it can get every year.

The Lions know the difference it makes come tournament time, and it's



important to them this year even without postseason tournaments.

“The kids asked me to get them the toughest schedule that I could,” Salmon said. “I think we’ve done a good job with it.”

The players’ having some ownership of their schedule helps to drive them even harder to succeed.

Salmon puts a lot of the success on the shoulders of his seniors, especially guards Jayden Brown, Zakai Zeigler and DiAndre South.

Brown leads all scorers with 233 points, while South has been a beast on the glass, with 99 rebounds. Zeigler has distributed the ball exceedingly well, accumulating a team-high 55 assists.

While a lot of teams will rotate lineups and move players in and out trying to find a hot hand, Salmon and

the Lions find a core group of players and ride them.

In this case, Brown, South and Zeigler are those guys.

“I like to get a core group of guys. You kind of roll with them, and it has paid off for us over the years. It has paid off this year,” Salmon said.

“They have been our leaders and very consistent. For them to come through has been pretty big.”

The Lions won’t have the wealth of postseason tournaments this year that they have in the past. There will be no NJSIAA tournaments, so the regular season is even more critical in gauging how successful a team can be considered. So finishing with more wins means more, especially when many felt this Lions team is the most talented it has been in years.

“I think we’ve got a very, very good shot [at the division],” Salmon said. “[We could have won] the tournament, if it existed [this year]. We felt like we had one of the top five teams in the state.”

Ranked as the No. 8 team, it seems as though the Lions can still achieve that. A strong win tonight against Seton Hall Prep and a good showing or a win against the Patrick School would likely secure that top-five ranking.

Salmon’s other focus has been trying to help his seniors make decisions about their futures, including where they might play in college.

Head coach Jimmy Salmon credits his seniors for much of the success Immaculate has had this season.  
ANDREW GARDA/STAFF

COVID-19 has made this very hard, though, and not just because college scouts can’t travel.

“I mean, it is literally the worst year in the history of high school to be a senior,” Salmon said. “Because the NCAA has extended the eligibility of all athletes in Division I, II and III [as well as] junior college. So this [high school] class of 2021 is really getting the short end of the stick, because of this new rule. A lot of these kids are going to have to go to prep schools and junior colleges when they should be getting recruited to Division I or II levels.”



Salmon continues to work the phones and call colleges for his seniors, though, to get them the best opportunities he can.

“I know it’s going to be tough saying goodbye to our team,” Salmon said.

The team will officially say goodbye to those seniors at home in the ICHS gym tonight on Thursday, March 4, against the Patrick School. It will be streamed on [AllAbilitiesLive.com](https://www.allabilitieslive.com).