



# HIGH SCHOOLS: STATE BASKETBALL TOURNAMENTS: SEMIFINAL PREVIEW: GIRLS' RECORD-SETTING SUCCESS: Private schools go deeper than ever

**By Todd Holcomb**

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Published on: 03/07/07

Among the 20 teams that made the girls semifinals in the five classifications, seven are from private schools.

That's a record, beating the six of last season. The private schools are 25-4 against public schools in this year's tournament.

But it hasn't always been that way.

In the first 50 years of the girls state tournament, which began in 1945, only four private schools ever made the semifinals. Now, there have been 13 different private schools in the semifinals in the last five years.

So what's the meaning of this? Here are five possible answers:

## Numbers

"More and more kids are going to private schools than ever; that would be my guess," says Wesleyan coach Jan Azar, who has won four Class AA championships since she started her school's girls [basketball](#) program in 1997.

True, 15 of the 43 private schools that offer girls basketball have opened since 1996. But only three of the 15 — Wesleyan, Hebron

Christian and Southwest Atlanta Christian — have made the semis.

And how do you explain Marist and St. Pius, which made their first semifinals this decade?

Both are more than 50 years old.

***"Kids today want to make sure they're qualified for college and prepared when they get there," Mayes said. "I think that's where your wave [of private school success] is coming from."***

## Nurture theory

If Wesleyan does have an advantage over public schools, Azar says, it's that all 12 grades are on one campus.

"Most of our kids have been playing basketball here since the third or fourth grade and grew up watching the high school kids play," Azar said. "I've had my kids now for 10 years, and that does make a difference."

## Parents

Basketball is becoming a year-around [sport](#) for the elite players. Most are committed to AAU teams that travel the country. And it's not cheap.

"They're going to Las Vegas one week, down



to Florida the next; you're getting a plane ticket and a hotel," says Marist coach Kim Hixon. "Typically, private-school parents can afford that. Not that public school parents can't, but they [private-school parents] can give their kids the opportunity to specialize."

### Transfers

Just be careful here. It's true that virtually all of the seven private school teams still playing have at least one prominent player who transferred, but Wesleyan's Azar says it's not as common as many believe. She's had only two in 10 seasons.

"There's a perception out there that things have changed vastly in [the way private schools are] attracting kids," Azar says. "and I'm not sure that's the right perception."

### Academics

Ray Mayes, who founded the AAU program Finest Basketball Club that counts Marist stars Drey Mingo (Maryland signee) and Andrea McGuirt (Indiana) as members, says college prospects and their parents are realizing that if a scholarship is the goal, academics is critical. Many see private schools as the best preparation, Mayes says.

"Kids today want to make sure they're qualified for college and prepared when they get there," Mayes said. "I think that's where your wave [of private school success] is coming from."

### ADVANCED PLACEMENT

There are seven private schools in the girls semifinals this year, the most in history, and most are relatively new to their success. Here are the seven and their first season making the semifinals:

Greater Atlanta Christian (1971)

Wesleyan (2001)

Savannah Country Day (2000)

St. Pius (2004)

Southwest Atlanta Christian (2006)

Marist (2006)

Landmark Christian (2007)