



**BRUTAL GAME** Eastern Cape Aloes' Yandiswa Makasi (right) is challenged by Simphiwe Sithebe of the Gauteng Fireballs in the 2018 Brutal Fruit Netball Premier League at Ellis Park Arena PHOTO: MUZI NTOMBELA / BACKPAGEPIX



## Usual suspects are the favourites to win netball title

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The Brutal Fruit Netball Premier League, the biggest female sporting event in the country, is expected to be a thriller as teams battle it out to reign supreme.

The Gauteng Jaguars, who finally won the league in their fourth attempt last year are definitely going to be one of the top teams to challenge for the honours as they defend their title. They beat the North West Flames 49-43 in the final in Bloemfontein last year to be crowned champions.

It was the first time a team other than the Free State Crinums lifted the prestigious trophy since the tournament started in 2014.

The Jaguars already showed their intentions to defend their title after having a great start in the

opening week. They won their first two games, one of which was defeating last year's semifinalist the Southern Stings 51-43 at the Ellis Park Indoor Arena, one of the two venues for the tournament this year.

The other venue is the Rembrandt Hall in Pretoria within the University of Pretoria complex.

Three-time champions Crinums will also be one of the favourites to take the title home.

They made history by winning the Brutal Fruit Netball Premier League title for three consecutive years but fell short last year, managing only a fifth-place finish.

The Flames, who were the beaten 2017 finalists, could also see themselves win the title but they know they will need to dig very deep despite a promising start this season.

One team which could end the season at the

bottom of the log is the Mpumalanga Sunbirds. They finished ninth on the 10-team log last year and started this season with a loss against the Crinums.

Sunbirds coach Marlie Nel said her charges stood a better chance of doing well this year. "We have some very young players," she said. "Two of them were still at school last year. But we also have some very experienced players and I think we are going to do better this year."

This year the competition will have 10 teams again, one from each province and Gauteng having two teams.

Other teams that could finish at the bottom of the table are the Eastern Cape Aloes and Limpopo Baobabs.

The action continues at the Ellis Park Indoor Arena today (see box).

The Netball Premier League was officially opened by Minister of Sports and Recreation Tokozile Xasa and Netball SA president Cecilia Molokwane last weekend.

### TODAY'S FIXTURES VENUE: ELLIS PARK INDOOR ARENA

- Gauteng Golden Fireballs vs KwaZulu-Natal Kingdom Stars (8am)
- Free State Crinums vs Northern Cape Diamonds (10am)
- North West Flames vs Eastern Cape Aloes (12pm)

