

## **Former Newsman Remembers First Half Century Of Montgomery County Basketball**



Photo courtesy of Grady Franklin

Radio broadcaster Ed Campbell chats with sports editor Jack Hess during halftime of a game, circa early 1960s.

By JACK HESS  
For The Paper

It all started innocently enough when kids first flung a ball toward a hoop. Little did they know this game called basketball would make its way into the hearts of Montgomery Countians and has been revered hereabouts like few other places on the planet.

For generations it has remained king of sports, especially in the era when every town had a school and its own team. The little schools have long disappeared but the love of basketball hasn't and likely never will; it's in the county's DNA.

It was my good fortune to have covered some of Montgomery County's unforgettable teams in the late 1950s in the '70s. During that time, one team played in a State Championship game, another had back-to-back years without a regular season loss and there was a Sectional Tourney upset of epic proportions.

Individual stars abounded, some of whom are considered among the best in the county's storied history.

For some, 1971 is a year remembered above all others. North Montgomery and Southmont were born, changing the face of local sports forever. New fan bases formed and adjustments were made to nicknames "Chargers" and "Mounties." Consolidation of nine county schools outside Crawfordsville into two was a huge undertaking, not the least of which was organizing athletic programs. School boards and administrators, burning lots of midnight oil, pulled it off admirably.

While basketball retained widespread popularity, new sports in '71 gained attention, especially football. Kids from many of the small school had never played football, but they proved to be quick learners. Southmont amazingly went undefeated in its first year. North Montgomery later won State titles.

Basketball though, in the minds of many, was never the same after the county's schools were assigned to different Sectionals. Still, you'd be hard-pressed to find more excitement than in local gyms on Game Night.

#### Background

When I came to Crawfordsville in 1958 as sports editor at the Journal Review it was the only local news source as there was no other paper in town and no commercial radio station. Basketball games were broadcast on a

*EDITOR'S NOTE: As Montgomery County basketball teams embark on a second half century since school consolidation, retired Indianapolis News veteran Jack Hess – who was the editor in Crawfordsville for many of the pre-consolidation years – reflects on an era of the county's storied past when he covered sports.*



Jack Hess

church-run station, announced by Ed Campbell and Jack Tibbett, owners of the Sportsman Shop, a local sporting good store. Later, Fred Barth announced games on newcomer station WCVL with Vance Pyle his capable partner. Fred sometimes got so excited he nearly lost his voice. The announcers, with little or no experience, did a more than creditable job. It was fun sharing the press box with the guys.

Broadcasts would sometimes suddenly go silent because the power supply cord plugged in a socket behind the press box got loosened. When that happened, an engineer at the station would frantically call to alert announcers, "We've lost power!" There followed a scramble, sometimes on hands and knees, to reinsert the cord.

The Journal Review, which published a morning and afternoon edition and costs 7 cents a copy, covered 27 high schools from Boone County to the Illinois state line in pre-consolidation days. There were 10 high schools in Montgomery County. Box scores were phoned in by coaches as there was no Fax or e-mail in those days. Sometimes that required special cooperation. In most towns calls were operator assisted from in-home switchboards. One operator closed at 10 p.m. except for emergencies. She made an exception for the coach to call after hours so the game would be in the next morning's paper. People were eager for news about local teams and the JR was the only way to get it.

I covered games in nearly all 10 gyms in the county. The lone exception was New Ross. The school had discontinued home games because its gym was no longer adequate. As a result, the team played all games on the road. While the players would like to have played before hometown fans and have home court advantage, it didn't affect their performance. Thanks

to a seemingly unending stream of exceptional players, the Blue Jays won most of the time. Loyal fans followed the team regardless of distance.

The annual County Tourney was a big deal as the small schools got to play in the

big gym at Crawfordsville. Because of the schools' close proximity, relatives sometimes played against relatives, one generation to the next, with family bragging rights on the line.

Keen competition existed among all schools, but early on was particularly fierce between Crawfordsville and Wingate. Bad blood between the two dated back to when the State Tourney started in 1911. Crawfordsville and Wingate won State titles and animosity stemmed from trying to recruit away each other's players. It got both schools in trouble with the IHSAA and hostility between the schools festered for decades.

The County Traveling Keg was a valued possession. In 1957, the County Coaches Association came up with an idea to show basketball superiority. It came in the form of a small wooden keg purchased at a hardware store for about 10 bucks. It was up for grabs in intra-county games, excluding Crawfordsville, with the winning team keeping the trophy until it lost to another county team.

Darlington owned the keg for the last time before consolidation. Ironically, according to historian Bill Boone, the Indians had the distinction of owning the keg for both the longest accumulated time (two years, 10 months, 16 days) and the shortest (seven hours). The latter happened at the '65 County

Tourney when the Indians won in the afternoon semifinals but lost in the title game that night. The keg is now on permanent display in the Indiana High School Basketball Hall of Fame at New Castle.

#### Top Coaches

I met outstanding coaches, both in teaching winning basketball and integrity. The list includes, but not limited to, Tom Bowerman, Bob Tandy, Dave Nicholson and Dick Baumgartner. They were highly principled individuals

who could be counted on to be truthful in interviews.

"Legendary" is an overworked word but is appropriate in describing Bowerman. He coached in Montgomery County for over a quarter-century, 22 years at Alamo and 5 at Waynetown. During that time his team amassed 261 regular season wins, second in the County only to Jack Hester's 263 at Ladoga and New Market. Cliff Davis had 485 wins coaching teams in the County and elsewhere.

Bowerman's Alamo teams often were underdogs, because of its small enrollment (less than 50), not from a lack of talent. The school won four County Tourneys and produced stars. Among them were Charlie Bowerman and Lawrence "Whitey" Reath. I didn't see Charlie play at Alamo but followed his brilliant career at Wabash College. Neighbors said it was common to see Charlie sitting on the porch after school bouncing a basketball with one hand while holding homework in the other. He had NBA opportunities but opted to play for Phillips 66ers in the National Industrial League in hopes of eventually landing a job with the company. The strategy worked as he embarked on a career with the corporation, becoming its vice president. Some say Charlie was the county's greatest player of the modern era. Whitey was Alamo's all-time leading scorer and was the only Warrior to top 1,000 career points. He was second only to Bowerman for a single season scoring record. He also was a top player on the baseball diamond.

Besides being near the top in victories, Tom Bowerman was endearing for his unpretentious manner and being straight forward. He was a gentlemen's gentleman.

Bob Tandy excelled both as a coach and administrator. He put competitive teams on the floor, often playing above their talent level. He also was an intense motivator, but in a positive way.

A fond recollection was being invited to Bob and Susie's home to listen to taped replays of the Purple Flyers winning the 1962 County championship and for refreshments (milk and cookies, of course). Bob later became principal and then superintendent at Southmont, when I was editor at the paper. If he disagreed with something I wrote, he would call but was unfailingly profes-



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sional and polite. If nothing else, Bob Tandy should be remembered as a person who sincerely cared about others.

Dave Nicholson had a brilliant coaching record, then became a color commentator on tourney telecasts. The Indiana Hall of Famer set a record other coaches can only dream about, winning 49 regular season games (excluding tourneys) in a row, including two years at Darlington. He then went to Noblesville where he turned a struggling program around. Noblesville was assigned to the Carmel Sectional, which I covered after joining the Indianapolis News. Dave had a unique way of communicating with players without calling time out. He had small, hand-held flags of different colors that he would save to signal change in defensive schemes or strategies on offense. At game's end, he seldom had to figuratively wave a white flag because the Millers usually won. Dave was well liked and respected by reporters because he was accommodating and honest.

Dick Baumgartner built exceptional teams at Crawfordsville. When I started at the JR in early 1958, little did I know – or even imagine – what was about to happen. Within weeks, one of the most remarkable chapters in the school's celebrated history would unfold as the team went to the State Finals.

It was a highly improbable journey. The Athenians struggled late in the season and barely survived their own Sectional, beating tiny Alamo in overtime. But then came upset after upset, including wins over perennial powers Lafayette Jeff, East Chicago Washington and Muncie Central. The team did not lose again until the State title game, bowing to Fort Wayne South, which featured a 7-foot center. Undersized with no player over 6-3, the Athenians had talented players, including floor leader and Trester Award winner Dick Haslam who was named to the Indiana All-Star Team.

A favorite story about that team concerned leading scorer Joe Krutzsch, who played with high emotions and intensity. Baumgartner once said, "If Joe didn't throw up before the game, I knew we were in trouble."

Besides Haslam and Krutzsch, the starting five on the State Finals team were Mike Walker, Bill Burget and Bryson Wilkinson. Wilkinson was

affectionately known as "Sleep" for his relaxed appearance, not for lack of effort. There was plenty of help off the bench, players who would have been starters on other teams. Some believe the '58 team was the best in the school's history.

Dick Baumgartner was a straight shooter, careful about what he would say, ever respectful of opponents ("Fear none, respect all," he preached to his players) and was always truthful.

### **Standout Players, Scholars**

There were many outstanding players in Montgomery County during my JR tenure. However, in my view, some were in a special class.

Daryl Warren is recognized almost unanimously as one of the county's greatest players, which says a lot when put alongside the likes of the fabled Homer Stonebraker, "Wizard of Alamo" Charlie Bowerman, etc. Daryl was elected to the County All-Time Basketball Team and County Hall of Fame. He is the county's all-time scoring champ even though he played before 3-point baskets. As opponents quickly learned, he was almost unstoppable. Yet, he was not a ball hog. To the contrary, he was always looking for an open teammate to take a shot. Historian Butch Dale wrote that he was "an unselfish player (who) could hit the open man when the other team was two-timing him." Daryl went on to play four years at Indiana Central College (now University of Indianapolis) where he was leading scorer, team captain and won the Most Valuable Player Award.

Don Evans starred in basketball, baseball and track at Waveland and is considered by many as the county's best all-around athlete. He was intellectually gifted, too, becoming valedictorian of his 1964 graduating class. He continued to excel in athletics and academics at Wabash College. Tragically, Don's life was cut short in 1966. He and Joe Mahoy of Darlington, once opponents on the basketball court but co-workers on a summer job, perished in a construction-site accident. The loss of those fine young men was felt countywide, leaving family, friends and strangers alike in shock and disbelief.

Most admired? Russell "Rusty" Nichols of New Ross gets the vote here. Besides being an honor student, he starred in basketball and baseball

for the Blue Jays and Wabash College, where he was elected to its Athletics Hall of Fame. Rusty coached at Wabash for several years, then went on to a distinguished career as an administrator in higher education. He was president at Hanover College for 20 years, then was interim president of Tusculum College. He also served in several capacities for 12 years at Hillsdale College, which awarded him an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree. He received a Ph.D. from Purdue University and held administrative positions at Eastern Illinois University and Wabash. He served as president of the American Association of Presidents and Independents Colleges and Universities. Wabash awarded him its Career Service Award for many contributions to higher education.

Any "most honored / respected" compilations would have to include Richard Haslam. His awards as an athlete are too numerous to list here but there were many. In high school he was team leader and play-maker on the '58 Crawfordsville team that went to the State Finals. He received the Arthur L. Trester Award for mental attitude, at that time the highest honor in high school sports. He also made the Indiana All-Star Team. He took his talents to Butler University where he starred in basketball and golf. Legendary coach Tony Hinkle called Haslam "the smartest player I ever coached." He started 66 straight games and helped lead the Bulldogs to their first NCAA Tournament appearance. He was voted to the Crawfordsville Athletics Hall of Fame and Montgomery County Basketball Hall of Fame. At Butler, he was selected for the Hilton U. Brown Mental Attitude Award and was named to the school's Golf Hall of Fame. Dick coached high school basketball for several years before becoming athletic director at Maconaquah High School, a position he held until retirement. He continued to substitute teach into his late 70s and was esteemed by students and colleagues alike. He played – and excelled in – golf throughout his life, winning a tourney just days before a heart attack took his life in June 2022. How good was he on the links? Good enough to have 17 holes-in-one to his credit.

### **Tragedies**

While Montgomery County expe-

rienced success in sports, it wasn't immune to tragedy. Four of its athletes lost their lives in a span of seven years, including Don Evans of Waveland and Joe Mahoy of Darlington, mentioned previously.

New Market endured unfathomable grief when two brothers died in separate incidents. Phil Carr, a promising underclassman, was killed in a farm accident in 1962 while older brother Marion was on his Senior trip. Bob Tandy said one of the hardest things he ever had to do was to meet the returning bus and inform Marion his brother was dead. Incredibly, Marion, known as "Mo," then died in a 1969 traffic crash. For the close-knit, everybody-knows-everybody community, their deaths were like losing family members.

### **Remembering Others**

Athletes I remember for their effort and conduct as much as for ability and scoring average while I was sports editor (1958-1963) and county resident (until 1975).

**Alamo:** White and Leslie Reath, Joe and Mike Melvin.

**Coal Creek Central:** Dick Shull, Rick Haas, Larry Lidester, Lee Fouts, Roger Newnum, Chuck McKnight, plus Pat McDowell, Phil Miller and Don Hipes, coaches.

**Crawfordsville:** Dick Haslam, Joe Krutzsch, Jeff Davis, Kelly Cochrane, Larry Grimes, Bill Burget, Mike Walker, Joe Pierce, Dick and Bryson Wilkinson, Bill and Bobby Williams, Mike McCarthy, Bob Reese, John Hessler, Clint Dennison, Gary Rice, Steve Templeton, plus Paul Curtis and Tommy Thompson, coaches.

**Darlington:** Don Threlkeld, Rich Douglas (on my list of best-ever players in that time frame), Bill Douglas, Terry Cain, Dan Nichols, John "Butch" Dale (lifelong county fixture as an athlete, teacher, county sheriff, librarian and newspaper columnist), Winston Wilson, Jerry Gick, Mike Mutterspaugh, plus Galen Smith and Al Niswonger, coaches.

**Ladoga:** Dave Williamson, Dave Duncan, Fred Sabens, Paul Roahrig, plus Bill Bays, coach.

**Linden:** Daryl Warren, Phil Winger, Fred Johnson, Ron Denhart, plus Bill Springer, coach.

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**New Market:** Steve Powers (one of the best all-around athletes I covered), Jim Slavens, John Lytle, Joe Chamness, Mike and Tom Deck, Marion and Phil Carr.

**North Montgomery (list limited to when I left JR in 1975):** Hal Shelton, Jim Tribbett, Ross Foxworthy. Deserving special recognition were coaches Chuck Kriston, Emerson Mutterspaugh and Eual McCauley. Kriston, the Chargers' first basketball coach, was responsible for getting the program off in the right direction (translation: win), for which he was more than up to the task. Mutterspaugh, already respected as a coach and administrator when he became the school's first assistant principal and athletic director, followed by Kriston as A.D. for over 20 years. An annual award was established in their names and given to the senior boy and girl athletes for outstanding athletic ability and citizenship. McCauley coached at Waveland before becoming principal at Darlington, superintendent of Montgomery County Schools and later superintendent of North Montgomery School Corporation. Eual, a native of Alabama, was one of my favorite people, if for no other reason that his Southern drawl.

**New Ross:** Rusty Nichols, Charlie Frederick (small in physical size, huge in heart), Mike Whitecotton, Mike Stewart, Bill Evans.

**Southmont (list limited to when I left JR in 1975):** Rick Oswalt. When consolidation occurred in 1971, Southmont joined the Wabash River Conference and was competitive. In 1985, Mounties joined the bigger-school Sagamore Athletic Conference and struggled to gain footing to match rivals' talent, not winning a SAC title until 2002. They won their first Sectional in 1994. However, if the Mounties historic performance last season is an indication the lean years are over. One of their early coaches was Pat Rady, who came to Southmont after leading small school Bainbridge to an elite level, beating the state's top teams at tourney time. After his tenure at Southmont, he continued his sterling career before retiring after 51 years as the state's second-winningest coach.

**Waveland:** Don Evans, Duane Miller, Herschel Tague, Mike Mitchell,

Phil Myers, Ron Bruner.

**Waynetown:** Jim Harpel, Joe Pierce (later transferred to Crawfordsville), plus Fred Johnson, coach.

**Special Mention:** Rick Haas was a star at Coal Creek Central but the family sports participation didn't end there. His son Darren went on to become one of Indiana's top sports officials. He has worked as a Division I football official and officiated high school State Finals in three sports. Quite an accomplishment and, still in his 40s, there likely will be more big assignments.

A lesser-known athlete I appreciated was Crawfordsville's Donnie Hubbard. Smaller in size and less gifted athletically than opposing players, he would beat his man through hustle and determination. With their gritty, in-your-face styles, Donnie and Charlie Frederick of New Ross would have made fun-to-watch running mates.

Also, while I never saw him play, Ladoga's Bill Boone was one of the county's best-ever and was elected to County and Wabash College Halls of Fame. Bill has few peers when it comes to knowledge of, or has written more about, Montgomery County sports.

### **Favorite Ex-Coaches**

H.T. McCullough and Cliff Davis. Both had highly successful coaching careers and vast knowledge of high school sports

H.T. coached basketball for many years, after which he became Crawfordsville athletic director and assistant principal. He also served on the IHSAA Athletic Council for 10 years and two years on its Board of Control, including as president.

An effective administrator, H.T. was ever smiling and pleasant. The door to his office was always open and he made you feel welcome.

Cliff coached basketball for over 30 years, winning multiple County, Sectional and Regional titles and taking Roachdale to the State Finals, earning statewide respect. After retiring from coaching, he stayed close to the game by scouting for various teams.

Always enjoyed his company. Alas, he took great pleasure in beating me in our weekly picking game winners. "Knew you were going to miss that one and that one," he'd say with a wry grin, pointing to games I got wrong. Should

have known I was badly over-matched.

### **Other Special People**

Ed Campbell and Bob Whalen. They were walking encyclopedias of local sports history and great sources of background material for some of my stories. Joe Cunningham also possessed a wealth of local sports knowledge.

Dr. Marion Kirtley was Crawfordsville's team doctor for 40 years, seldom missing a game and never charging for players' physical exams. Besides his extensive medical practice, he was a lawmaker, civic leader and admired by many. Kind and humble to a fault, he stands among the giants in Montgomery County history.

Marion "Runt" Maxwell, Darlington, came to our office often to deliver baseball box scores and talk about the game we both loved. Runt knew how to coach too, with numerous American Legion and Summer League championships to his credit. Loved talking baseball with him, even though we'd get carried away and I'd nearly miss press deadline.

Gaidene Duncan Hamilton was Ladoga's superfan. Unfortunately, her love affair with the Cannons was fraught with disappointment. The team was the Sectional's perpetual bridesmaid, reaching the title game eight times without ever winning. Even so, her loyalty was unwavering.

Gail also played a prominent role in local newspaper history and was a special person to me. Besides being friends, we were newsroom colleagues for years. Gail had two stints at the JR, the first ending in early retirement. When the newly promoted managing editor (ahem) took over, his first objective was to rehire Gail. She eventually became editor, but was forced out after the JR was sold to an out-of-state company. She went to work as the editor of a local weekly paper. In the early 2000s, she conceived the idea of starting a new paper, a daring move going up against a long-established publication with deep financial pockets and coming at a time when papers were beginning a struggle that has lasted to today. She had the foresight to recruit Tim Timmons, a veteran newspaperman with management experience, plus an Indiana background. Sadly, Gaidene never got to see the birth of The Paper

of Montgomery County. In a cruel twist of fate, she died just months before its debut. Rest in peace, old friend.

### **Teams Easy to Root For**

**Alamo:** Fan sentimental favorite at tourney time because it was the smallest school (four-year enrollment in 1959 was 44; senior class had 11 members). The Warriors won four County Tournaments but never captured a Sectional.

**Ladoga:** Despite having competitive teams and good players year-in and year-out and capturing County titles, the Cannons never had the thrill of winning a Sectional.

**Linden:** The Bulldogs won the County Tourney six times, second only to New Market's seven, and had outstanding players but never got to celebrate a Sectional championship.

### **'Greatest Ever'**

A popular debate years ago revolved around who was the county's greatest basketball player ever. Inevitably, the choices came down to Charlie Bowerman and Homer Stonebraker. Bowerman starred at Alamo and Wabash College. Stonebraker led Wingate to back-to-back State titles, then played college and pro ball.

It was an unrealistic argument because they played a half-century apart and playing styles were vastly different. For example, Bowerman once set the county's one-game scoring record with 45 points, then scored 63 in a game for Wabash. He also scored 63 in a game for the ages, a 5-overtime 110-108 win over Butler. Charlie was named to the Silver Anniversary All-State Team and was inducted into the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame.

In the low-scoring era in the early 1900s, Stonebraker played in a State Title game won by a score of only 15-14 in 5 overtimes. He also scored all his team's points in a State Tourney semifinal game. He went on to play at Wabash College where he was a 3-time All-American and was hailed as one of the best players in the country. He also played professionally for 10 years.

Bowerman advocates consider him the greatest ever to lace up a pair of sneakers around here. Stonebraker fans point to his dominant role in winning two State championships.

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At 6-foot-4 and 195 pounds, he was viewed as a giant in those days. “Stoney” was rugged too, having been a lineman on the Wabash football team.

Stonebraker backers claim in a head-to-head matchup he would stuff Bowerman through the hoop, using one hand or two. Of course, he’d have to catch Charlie first.

### Big Upsets, Personal Tidbits

New Market’s unbelievable 1967 turnaround will go down as one of the most remarkable ever. After winning only two games in the regular season, the Purple Flyers won the Sectional. It can be argued it was the biggest upset in local tourney history and New Market is said to be the only team in IHSA history to have a 2-17 record and win a Sectional.

Waynetown’s 1970 Sectional title was another shocker. Bank executive and longtime sports fan Bob Rogers, whether from losing a friendly wager or keeping a wild promise, walked from Crawfordsville to Waynetown after the championship game.

1969 Darlington Indians were one of the county’s best-ever. They also were a favorite of mine despite almost getting me drenched. After a Sectional title game, I was interviewing coach Dave Nicholson amid raucous players in the dressing room. Several celebrants grabbed me and started to drag me to the showers. Fortunately, coach intervened, sparing my notes and a soggy drive home.

Darlington’s upset of previously undefeated New Ross in the 1965 County Tournament will long be remembered. Darlington came into the tourney with a losing record while New Ross had won 15 games in a row, longest winning streak in the state. Unfortunately for

the Indians, their celebration was short lived as they lost to Coal Creek Central in the title game.

Rich Douglas was a delight to watch. The consummate player, he could score from anywhere on the floor, was an aggressive rebounder and had the ability to take over a game. He was fast and could jump. He would be dribbling at the top of the key and a fan would yell, “Burn him, Rich!” As if on cue, he would pull up and drill a 20-footer over his faked-out defender or would leave him muttering as he sped past for a layup. It was also fun to watch Rich whip a pass to brother Bill and vice versa. They seldom had to look at each other because one always knew where the other would be.

After high school, Whitey Reath and I became fast friends / euchre partners / fellow mushroom hunters / fishing buddies. The friendship continues to this day, even though he’s a die-hard Cubs fan and I root for the rival Cardinals. Whitey was Alamo’s all-time scoring champ and ranks among the highest scorers in county history. I never called him a gunner but might have asked if he ever saw a shot he didn’t like? Or if he fired away on the first or second step off the bus? Glad my pal has a sense of humor.

Dick Shull, a standout at Coal Creek, was another guy I got to know after high school. I was covering the police beat when Dick was hired as a sheriff’s deputy. We sometimes engaged in friendly verbal jabs. I’d greet him with “Catch any felons today?” He or another deputy would respond, “No, but we’re getting closer on you, Hess.”

### Poignant Moment

The toughest interviews came when defeat ended a team’s season. For some

players, the anguished finish also meant the end of playing days in organized ball.

In the locker room, players often sat in somber reflection before pulling off uniforms for a final time. Eyes watery, particularly among the seniors, they would go from teammate to teammate in emotional, love-you-brother embrace. Too old to cry, too young not to.

### Times Takes Toll

It is melancholy, even sad, to visit high school gyms that once were the center of every town’s activity on Game Night. Some have been razed or stand in forlorn haunting shambles. Others are still used as non-varsity gyms or for other purposes.

Still, if you listen carefully, you can hear echoes from the past – the squeak of basketball shoes on a glistening floor, cheers like “Go Bulldogs!” and “Go Hornets!” and the sound of a game-ending buzzer. Maybe you can even smell the aroma of freshly popped corn wafting from the concession stand.

For some of us, those golden memories will endure forever.

Disclaimer and explanation: Other teams coaches and athletes could have been cited in this article, but it covers only the years I was in Crawfordsville, and is limited by the writer’s fuzzy memory. Apologies for misstatements, misspelling of names or oversights. None was intended. Also for North Montgomery and Southmont: If Chargers and Mounties seem shorted in this article, it was because I was no long writing sports when they came into existence. Also, girls basketball is not included because it was just emerging in the ‘70s and hadn’t gained popularity or recognition it deserves and enjoys today.

**Credit and thanks:** Much time went into researching this article but it was a labor of love. Not wanting to rely solely on a faulty memory, I frequently turned to articles by Bill Boone and Butch Dale, who are without equal in knowledge of county sports. Acknowledgment and full credit are hereby given with appreciation to Bill and Butch.

**Postscript:** My research for this article proved to be bittersweet as I learned many of the people I knew back then had passed away. Their memories are cherished and will always be with me.

### Joke Not Everyone Got

Acquaintances aware I was writing this article urged “You should include the story about the superstar coming to Crawfordsville.” Reluctantly, here goes:

Entirely sober but lacking good judgment, I wrote a tongue-in-cheek column about a basketball phenom transferring to C’ville. He had a huge scoring average and unearthly jumping ability, I wrote. There were reports he could jump and grab a dollar-bill taped to the backboard – not with his hand, but with his teeth! The column appeared on April 1 and a mock photo of the superstar carried the name “Dewey Kidem” with the tag line, “Today we did.”

Well, not everyone caught on it was an April Fool’s spoof. Phones began ringing as soon as the paper came out and continued the next day, much to the displeasure of the business staff who had to help take the calls. The Publisher politely “suggested” it would be a good idea if I wrote an explanation. I thought it was a good idea too, especially since I wanted to keep my job.

Four decades in the news biz and I’m remembered for a goofy April Fool’s column? Ouch!

## The Memory Of 29-Win Seasons Haunts Boilermaker Basketball

Only five times in its 125-year history has the Purdue men’s basketball team won at least 29 games in a season.

Coach Matt Painter owns three of those seasons, including a 29-8 mark in 2021-22.

In those previous four seasons (1987-88, 1993-94, 2009-10, 2017-18), high expectations were not met. Dreams of a

national championship in 1988, 1994 and 2010 were dashed by an upset (Kansas State), and injuries to irreplaceable stars (Glenn Robinson’s back injury before 1994 Elite Eight game with Duke and Robbie Hummel’s torn ACL at Minnesota). The 2018 Boilermakers probably weren’t Final Four bound with eventual national champion Villanova in the same regional. However, Isaac Haas’ broken elbow in the NCAA tournament opener arguably denied Purdue an Elite Eight berth against the Wildcats.

And then there’s last season. Never has a 29-win season felt more underachieving. The school’s first No. 1 ranking by The Associated Press. A clear path to the Final Four with lower seeded Saint Peter’s and a North Carolina team the Boilermakers had already defeated on a neutral floor.

I don’t need to reopen the wound of Saint Peter’s nor the fact that somehow this Purdue team did not win at least a share of the Big Ten title.

Days away from the start of his 18th season, Matt Painter still has a bitter taste

in his mouth.

“I thought our talent was higher than our production, and that’s one of the few times I think that’s happened at Purdue in the last 20 years,” Painter said.

“Even though we had a great year, we didn’t win the league. We should have advanced further in the tournament. We won 29 games. Pretty cool, right? But, you want to do better. You want to do better for the fans and the former players.”

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Doing better starts with taking care of the basketball and playing tough defense, two traits that have served Purdue well over the past 42 years under Gene Keady and Painter.

The 2021-22 Boilermakers averaged nearly 12 turnovers a game and allowed just over 68 points a game to opponents.

“We turned the ball over too much,” Painter said. “When we didn’t turn the ball over, we won.”

The Boilermakers had double-digit turnovers in all eight losses. Saint Peter’s forced 15, lost possessions that could have made a difference in that 67-64 defeat.

“I think I would have a ring on my finger right now if we didn’t have so many turnovers,” returning starter Mason Gillis said. “That’s one thing we can learn from last year. Taking care of the ball also helps our transition defense.”

An offseason spent looking for a true point guard, which Painter has really had just one (Lewis Jackson) during his tenure, through the transfer portal ended up with frustration and settling for Utah transfer David Jenkins. Jenkins, who will likely reach 2,000 career points this season, is more of a combo guard than your typical pass-first, ignite the offense point guard.

Luckily for Painter, it might just turn out that he had already signed the point guard of his dreams.

Braden Smith, Indiana’s reigning Mr. Basketball from Westfield, has by all media reports been impressive in preseason practices. It would surprise no one if he starts the exhibition opener against Truman State on Wednesday.

“He’s a very intelligent player,” Painter said. “He’s got good savvy about him. He has a really good feel. He’s got a high competitive spirit.”

“The same things I just said could be said about Fletcher Loyer. There’s a lot of similarities about them as players.”

Loyer, the runner-up to Smith in Mr. Basketball voting, is the latest in a long line of shooters Painter has targeted in recruiting since the 2013-14 last-place debacle. Dakota Mathias. Carmel’s Ryan Cline. Carsen Edwards. Sasha Stefanovic. Eric Hunter. Brandon Newman. Jaden Ivey. Carmel’s Brian Waddell.

Both freshman have gained the attention of Jenkins, who learned a thing or two about basketball during his stops at South Dakota State, UNLV and Utah.



**KENNY THOMPSON**  
Columnist

“He’s showing grit and toughness, confidence as well,” Jenkins said of Smith. “He’s going to have success early.”

“If you’re not going to come out here playing with confidence, you’re going to get eaten up. Guys who come in (confident) like Fletcher shooting the ball and Braden coming in and guarding and passing. Braden doesn’t look for his shot as much but we are telling him to shoot the ball.”

Newman may have the edge to start alongside Smith in the backcourt, but don’t be surprised if the freshman backcourt of Smith and Loyer record quality minutes together.

“We have guys on this roster that nobody is talking about who are going to be productive players at Purdue,” Painter said.

Despite the loss of NBA lottery pick Ivey after just two seasons and the departures of Stefanovic and Hunter, there’s still talent on this roster.

That comes from consecutive years of recruiting the top two players in the state. Forward Trey Kaufman-Renn, the runner-up to teammate Caleb Furst for the 2021 Mr. Basketball award, is almost certainly one of those guys.

One Boilermaker people are talking about is 7-4 junior center Zach Edey. The Athletic recently rated Edey the eighth-best big man in the nation. Not bad for a Canadian who once was ranked 440th in the 2020-21 recruiting class.

“There is no player more productive on a per-minute basis than Edey, the



Zach Edey

imposing post-up threat who is in the perfect offense for his skillset,” writes The Athletic’s Sam Vecenie. “Simply put, he’s so big and large that it’s impossible to stop him from gaining position when he wants it.”

“He actually plays aggressively and likes to play with physicality. He embraces playing through contact. It’s a huge edge for him. If he can play 25 to 30 minutes per night, Edey could get into the 16 to 18 point per game range.”

The remaining 10-15 minutes could be split among the 6-10 Furst and the 6-9 Kaufman-Renn, who redshirted last season. Furst fought through a foot injury to start 12 games at forward and play key roles in the victories against North Carolina and Villanova in the Hall of Fame Tip-Off Classic.

Furst and Kaufman-Renn also could see playing time at power forward, a position occupied by Gillis. The junior shot better than 41 percent from 3-point range a year ago while averaging 6.4 points and 4.8 rebounds per game.

“(I’m) just doing whatever the team needs me to do, whether it’s hit open shots or making the right pass, rebounding, defense,” Gillis said.

Junior guard Ethan Morton is almost certain to start and could handle some of the defensive responsibilities of a point guard. A 44 percent 3-point shooter, Morton also takes care of the basketball. He was credited with no turnovers in 23 games and never more than two in any of the other 14 contests.

As the only senior in the probable



Matt Painter

playing rotation, Jenkins’ role may be providing instant offense to a team that graduated three of its top four scorers (Ivey 17.3 ppg., Trevion Williams 12.0, Stefanovic 10.4).

“I think coach Painter brought me here to be kind of a lead guard from the point guard role,” Jenkins said. “It doesn’t mean I’m going to go out and get 15 assists but be a scorer from the point guard position. That’s something I wanted when I was in the recruiting process. When I was a 2 guard in certain spots it would be easy for teams to deny me the ball.”

It’s almost a certainty that the latest 7-footer in the Boilermaker program, 7-2 Sweden native Will Berg, will redshirt this season. Time will tell about 6-7 freshman forward Camden Heide’s status. Heide, whose father graduated from Lafayette Jeff, had offers from Arizona, Texas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Virginia Tech, Iowa and Creighton among others.

Waddell suffered a torn ACL during his redshirt season a year ago and is working his way back into playing shape.

In a wide open Big Ten race this season, few are talking about Purdue. That’s just fine with Gillis.

“We’re an underdog,” he said. We need to approach every game like we’re an underdog. We’re going to get the other team’s best shot but they’re going to our best shot every single game.”

*Kenny Thompson is the former sports editor for the Lafayette Journal & Courier and an award-winning journalist. He has covered Purdue athletics for many years.*





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