

BASKETBALL CRAZY

By Dan Wakefield

When I was a sophomore at Shortridge I went to a High School Journalism Conference in French Lick, Indiana, and shared a room with my classmate and fellow sports columnist on *The Daily Echo*, Dick Lugar. When we turned out the lights at night we spoke of our hopes and dreams, and Lugar asked me, “What would you be, if you could be anything at all in high school?” I answered without hesitation: “High point man on the basket- ball team.”

“Oh Dan,” Lugar said. “You’re so frivolous!”

Lugar’s high school dreams were more appropriate for a future United States Senator: President of the class, valedictorian, student body president. Neither of us achieved our high school dreams, but Lugar came a lot closer than I did. I didn’t even make the basketball team, much less become the player who scored the most points. In defense of my dream, though, I would argue that I wasn’t being “frivolous”—I was just “basketball crazy,” an Indiana affliction.

I pleaded with my parents for a backboard and basket in our backyard when I was ten years old, and my father hired the Broad Ripple Lumberyard people to do the job (the basket was always supplied with a real net so you could hear the satisfying swish of a score.) This not only sated my lust for the game but also insured my popularity with every kid in the neighborhood.

We played in fall and winter, summer and spring, on ice and in snow, in heat and rain, sleet and slush, in the earliest mornings till the shadows of winter drew us home for supper with the

passing of the Monon train to Chicago at the very back of our yard, beyond the Victory Garden, at five-fifteen every evening. Playing in all seasons, I became a good shot, but my flat feet denied me the ability to run at even a normal pace. (I bought a stopwatch to time myself and learned that I couldn't break the seven-minute mile—roughly a minute slower than the average kid my age.) My only basketball glory was reflected in two of the graduates of my back-yard basketball court—Gene Neudigate and Dicky Richardson, the legendary “Itchy,” a slender, slithering master of the court and nonstop shooter from any angle. Itchy and Gene were both backyard regulars, and both went on to star for Broad Ripple. Though I'm a true blue Shortridge Blue Devil, my earlier loyalty to School #80 and my backyard backboard allowed me to root for both those guys even though they were Rockets. Not only were they great players they were also a lot of fun. We sometimes tried to spook whoever was about to take a shot by shouting incantation-like curses the moment the ball was about to leave his fingertips: “Oogum-Sloogum!” “Puget Sound!” (Don't ask me to explain why these sappy syllables sent us doubling over with happy hysterics that caused noses to run and stomachs to ache. You had to be there, in my backyard, in 1944.)

Gene Neudigate now sports a neatly-trimmed white beard; he's a retired, respectable businessman, but he still lights up like a kid when he tells me how he averaged fifteen points a game and was seventh in the city in scoring his senior year.

“We beat Tech in the Sectionals when I was a Junior,” he says. “They were the favorites, but then we got beat ourselves the next day.”

Those were the days when the tournament was played in the “any team can win” era that was dramatized in the movie “Hoosiers,” before the schools were divided up according to enrollment numbers into “athletically correct” divisions so more kids could be called “winners,” but the sacred *spirit* was lost. Butler Fieldhouse was filled to the rafters for every game from Sectionals to Finals, rocking in a frenzy of unforgettable March madness that will never be matched. Those were

the days when fourteen thousand people came to The Fieldhouse to see Crispus Attucks play in a regular season game when Oscar Robertson was there; everyone waited for “The Crazy Song” that meant The Tigers had the game sewed up, and you clapped in rhythm no matter what school you were from as they sang: *You can beat everybody—but you can’t beat us.*

Gene and I were so basketball crazy we not only went across the Monon tracks at night to the Broad Ripple gym to see the high school games and the grade school “curtain raiser” that came before the freshman game that came before the varsity game; we even went to games of “old guys” who played for company teams after work.

“We used to laugh at those ‘old men’ who were probably in their twenties and thirties,” Gene reminds me. “We even made up a cheer for the team of guys who worked for 7 Up. We knew the head man of the company was Tom Joyce, so our cheer was ‘7 Up’s our choice/ Rah Rah Tom Joyce!’”

Gene said sometimes he even went by himself just to watch the Broad Ripple team practice. (I can hear the often-quoted words of the NBA star Alan Iverson complaining that he was rumored to be traded because of missing a practice:

“We talkin’ about *practice*—not a game, not a game—we talkin’ about practice. We talkin’ about practice, man. We talkin’ about practice. . .”)

Gene Neudigate is talkin’ about walking over the Monon tracks after school to go watch the Broad Ripple high school team practice—not even to see them play in a *game*, man, but just to watch them practice. His devotion—addiction—is more understandable when you know he was watching the Broad Ripple team that went to the state finals in 1946 (and was beat by Bosse of Evansville 35-33.)

“Do you remember that the guys from that Broad Ripple team used to stop by sometimes after school at Gene Purcell’s Pure Oil station and get peanuts out of the penny machine?” I ask Gene.

“That team was my inspiration,” Gene says, and we both, in unison recite the starting lineup: “Allen and Chafee at guards, Chapman at center, Baker and Steinhart at forward. . .”

The coach was Frank Baird. So just imagine how Gene felt one day when he was shooting around by himself at the outdoor basket by School #80, and a car stopped and the driver sat there a while and watched Gene shoot the ball. After a while, the man in the car asked Gene “Are you going to go to high school at Broad Ripple?” Gene said he was, and the man said, “Well, I hope you do, and I hope you play for me.”

The man was Frank Baird.

That was the neighborhood equivalent of Knute Rockne watching a boy named George Gipp kicking a football and asking him if he’d like to play for Notre Dame.

“Frank Baird was a real gentleman,” Gene said. “He never once used a cuss word. But he could make you feel small. Once when we were losing a game and playing badly he told us at halftime “I’m going to deflate this ball and you can use it for a sewing kit—you might as well use it for something, since you don’t know how to use it to play the game out there.”

Even the low points of basketball memory are high points now.

“Remember who made the shot that beat Ripple in the Finals?”

“Brock Jerrell!”

How could we ever forget?

I remember playing for The Coagulators, an intramural team at Shortridge that won at least half their games (as I remember). I remember being in the starting lineup with Jerry Burton, Don “Moto” Morris, Bailey Hughes, and Johnny “Big Red” Peterson, backed up by the all-star bench of

Pete Estabrook and Dick “Ferdie” Falendar. I remember joining Ted Steeg of Shortridge and Jere Jones of Broad Ripple in a pick-up game at an outdoor court in Greenwich Village against three high school guys from Harlem in 1957. I remember being so beat and exhausted after the game that my teammates and I couldn’t speak until we flopped down on the grass in Washington Square Park and Jere Jones summed up our experience: “The Parable of the Three Fools,” he called it. We were basketball crazy.