

Less Drops in the Bucket?

Kern looking for answers why prep hoops scoring is down

Findlay Courier – Dave Hanneman – March 17, 2016

In March of 2005, Upper Sandusky allowed 90 points in one game, 86 in another and still won the Division II boys State Championship. A year before that, Holgate never scored more than 40 points in either of its Division IV State Tournament games and took home a state title as well.

Sixteen teams will take the floor this week for the 94th annual OHSAA State boys basketball tournament at Value City Arena. By the end of the day Saturday, four of them will be calling themselves State Champions.

Miller City's Dan Kern will be taking in the state tournament. But he won't just be watching the action. He'll be analyzing offenses, defenses, styles and structure. It's one of the things he does best. It's one of the reasons that, while he was meticulously updating the Putnam County basketball records, stats and standings, something caught his eye.

When Kern retired after a 29-year baseball coaching career at Miller City that included over 450 wins, 11 Putnam County League titles and two State Championships, he immersed himself in researching, cataloging and publishing several books on the sports history of Putnam County. "I wasn't computer literate until the late 90's. But once I started working with spread sheets and excel files, a pattern on scoring started to show up," Kern said.

It was a page on boys' team scoring averages since the 1950 season that grabbed Kern's attention.

What he noticed was that after a steady increase in offensive averages which was attributable in part to the 3-point shot that was instituted in 1987, more up-tempo run-and-gun philosophies which was initiated by Paul Westhead at Loyola Marymount in the late 1980's and simply the presence of bigger, faster, stronger athletes, scoring averages among Putnam County teams started to steadily decline. Since 2010, for example, Putnam County teams have averaged 51.7 points a game, almost three points less than they did 60 years ago.

Kern's stats and figures include only basketball schools in the Putnam County League, along with Ottawa-Glandorf. He feels that the numbers represent a gradual, but continual overall trend in the sport.

"The game is so rough and physical today," Kern said. "Kids are bigger, faster, stronger, no doubt about that. If a kid put his hands on a player, they'll probably call a

foul. But if a player bodies up on a guy, a foul probably won't be called. You can basically do whatever you want as long as the hands are not involved."

"The 'experts' thought that the 3-point shot would open up the middle, but I don't think it has. It doesn't matter whether a team is playing a man-to-man defense, a zone or a zone with man principles, just passing the ball doesn't get it done any more. It takes screens to get open shots and that's where some of the physicality comes in."

"I observed some games late in the season in which both teams were running, not necessarily a flex, but a motion continuity offense. There were screens and constant motion. Players were having to fight and shove their way through screens, but there wasn't one call in any of those games for a moving screen....and there were moving screens on almost every play."

"I don't know how it can change, unless they modify or change the rules in which more fouls are called. Hopefully, the players would learn to play defense with less physical contact or go to bench much earlier in foul trouble."

Kern's research also brought out an interesting fact when it came to foul shots.

In 1953, Columbus Grove, 23-3, converted 450 free throws. In 1954, Kalida, 23-4, made 495 free throws and Ottoville, 23-3, made 444. In 1956, Continental, 16-8, made 434 free throws and Miller City, 21-3, made 429.

Compared to recent years, those are very lofty numbers. In 2013, Leipsic, 25-5, converted 371 foul shots during its State Final season. In 2014, Ottawa-Glandorf, 14-11, made a county-high 362 free throws. In 2015, Miller City, 17-6, led the league in made free throws with 316.

The last time any Putnam County school made as many as 400 free throws in a season was 1988, when Kalida sank 422.

During this past 22-game regular season, Van Buren led all Blanchard Valley Conference schools in made free throws with 250. Buckeye Central of the Northern 10 Conference made a league-high 260 foul shots in 24 games.

Kern sees the drop in free throws as a reason in lower teams scores. While scores did show a marked climb for 30 years, from 54.2 points a game in the 1950's and 60.0

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in the 1960's to 66.9 in the 1970's, they have dropped ever since, from 62.8 in the 1980's, 59.4 in the 1990's, 54.9 from 2000 to 2009 and 51.7 this decade.

Kern feels the offensive drop correlates to a drop in attendance as well. "It's not just points," Kern said. "A good defensive game is one thing, but games in the 40s are not as much fun for fans to watch."

There are, obviously, coaches who prefer a more rugged, physical style of play. Kalida's Dick Kortokrax, who played in the days of short pants and Chuck Taylor's, has just completed his 56th year as head coach isn't one of them. Kortokrax is Ohio's winningest prep basketball coach with 890 career wins, the fourth winningest active high school boys' coach in the country and – depending on what happens when contracts are awarded this spring – hopes to continue coaching. He's seen plenty of changes in the game during his 56 years on the bench, but his ideals remain steadfast.

"To me, basketball is not about physicality, it's about skill," Kortokrax said. "If you want to play a physical game, play football." "Number 1, the rule books haven't changed that much since I played. To me, a foul is still a foul," said Kortokrax, who played high school ball at Ottoville, graduating in 1951, and began his coaching career at Fort Jennings in 1957.

"In my opinion, how officials interpret the rule book determines how a game is played. If they feel a lot of physicality is allowable, there's going to be all kinds of contact and therefore it's going to be difficult for you to run your plays and very difficult for you to score."

Kortokrax can see other factors, some of them social, as factoring in lower point totals as well. "I realize, and I'm sure most coaches realize, that players don't spend as much time on their game in the off-season as they used to," Kortokrax said.

"The off-season is when most players worked on their shot. But many of our athletes are three-sport athletes and because they have other commitments, they don't have as much time in the off-season to work on their jump shot or offensive skills. Everybody wants to play offense, but when players don't have the time to work on those things coaches today realize that if they are going to stress offense or defense, stressing defense is your best shot to get a win. And defense wins championships."

In any sport, from basketball and football to baseball and hockey, precise execution is essential to the success of

any offense. Many coaches feel the more physical a game is played, the more successful a defense is at disrupting that offensive execution.

"The game is so physical today. It makes it tough to execute offensively," said Findlay High coach Jim Rucki, who is regarded around the Three Rivers Athletic Conference as running some of the most detailed offensive sets in the league. It used to be if you put your hands on somebody, that was a foul. There wasn't nearly as much contact, so a player could pull up and shoot a jumper or cut to the basket. You could make a clean post move and shoot or you could get the ball down the floor and cut to the basket for a layup. Today, you'd get knocked on your read end."

Rucki wasn't surprised by the rise and then the fall in basketball scoring averages. As he sees it, it's a sign of the times.

"If you look at Findlay High teams in the early 70s, they averaged 78 to 80 points a game," Rucki said. "There was less contact back then and a lot more freedom of movement. You would not be allowed to do on defense what they can do now, so offenses were more free flowing. That's the way the game was played. I think it's just a fact of the game that it's become more physical. Banging offensive players; hand-checking; things are allowed today that you never would have gotten away with back then. Scoring might have gone up a little bit when they brought in the 3-point shot in 1987. People always talk about a shot clock (to improve scoring in high school basketball), but I don't think that's the problem. The biggest thing, in my opinion, is that defenses are allowed to be so physical."

Kern, the analyst, may have put it best. "Fans want it both ways. They want the fouls called, but at the same time they're yelling at the officials to 'Let them play,'" he said.

"Just for the heck of it, I'd like to see a game where every shot taken outside the 3-point arc would be worth two points and every shot taken inside the arc would be worth three. Also, fouls would be called as they were in the 1970s. I'm curious to see what kind of game that would turn out to be."