

Basketball “King” in Putnam County

Vidette, January 15, 1975

Basketball has always been the “king” sport in Putnam County, or so it seems. Back in the early 1930’s, county play included no less than a dozen teams. And some of today’s biggest names in the prep sport, Kalida and Fort Jennings, were not yet in action.

It was generally Ottoville or Vaughnsville at the top of the heap in the basketball of the day. Other teams participating in the highly regarded county tournament in Ottawa’s old National Guard armory, included Ottawa Public, Ottawa Parochial, Crawfis College (Gilboa), Blanchard, Pandora-Gilboa, Continental, Leipsic, Glandorf, Belmore, Pandora, Miller City, Palmer and Columbus Grove.

Columbus Grove’s basketball veterans recall playing in the gym on the second floor of the present city building. Max “Red” Blosser, a regular on teams in the 1930-1931 era, recalls Bulldog home games in the cramped quarters with six or seven bleacher rows on each side of the small hall.

Blosser also remembers the time Columbus Grove played in the dedication game at Continental’s last new gym. He doesn’t recall the score although present day basketball zealots won’t quickly forget that it was a Columbus Grove team which carried the first defeat to the Continental Pirates in their 1973 gym.

Glandorf played their home games in an upstairs room of the school. A crowd of 50 fans represented about the maximum which could be squeezed into the quarters.

If such a thing as a “hot stove league” existed in basketball, Palmer or Miller City’s home court would have been the ultimate. Apparently, players in the games of the 1930’s found a stove at each end of the Miller City court easily accessible to a player who was thinking more of the basketball game than he was of protecting his own hide. Perhaps that is where the jump shot originated; recollections around county are a bit hazy on this point.

Vaughnsville, which some say had the best overall basketball record during its history before consolidation with Columbus Grove, played in a frame building adjacent to the present schoolhouse. It too had the two heating stoves for a trace of warmth. Low hung rafters and incandescent light bulbs gave special obstacles to a shooter trying to look through the glare and push the ball through the rafter to score.

Ralph Radabaugh of Gilboa, now lives in Toledo. He reportedly still works as a basketball official and was reputed to be the best shot “through the rafters” in the county. He earned his stars in the role by leading his team to success in the annual county tournaments in Ottawa. The two-day affairs would generally advance three teams to a sectional tourney simply because Putnam County had so many contending schools to begin play with. Other counties advanced only two teams as a general rule.

The Ottawa tournaments were a real credit to the endurance of the winner. The event generally began on a Friday morning, continued in the afternoon and evening. Then on Saturday, teams advancing with victories would have to play two games, sometimes in both the afternoon and evening. It was Class B basketball at its best.

A number of almost legendary figures emerge from the recollections of Putnam County’s great basketball past. Other schools remember Miller City’s Izzy Noon, who was reputed to throw bullet-like passes left-handed the length of the Leipsic gym, which came to replace the armory as the site of the county tourney. Roger Slusser, the Irwin boys and the Benroths were all names to remember for the Vaughnsville squad. But the biggest name of all, Sylvester “Stretch” Goedde of Vaughnsville, was yet to come.

In the mid 1930’s, Leipsic opened what proved to be the finest gym in the county at the time. With a ceramic tile floor, it provided a special feature remembered by most of the players of the day. The floor “sweated” in damp weather giving players of the day an almost certain way to slip through the defense.

Good old Class B basketball. There are a lot of memories which haven’t even been tapped yet!