

Putnam County Earns Reputation as Hotbed of Basketball

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Many people, especially those foreign to the immediate area, are just now discovering how tough Putnam County basketball actually is.

Putnam County didn't exactly become a hotbed for basketball overnight. It all started back in the days of Sylvester "Stretch" Goedde and even before that.

League competition began in 1924, but Goedde's presence in the early 1940s began the creation of what now has become one of Ohio's strongest small school basketball leagues.

Goedde was a giant in what, at the time, was a game void of tall players. At 6-8, he was a starter for Vaughnsville from 1939 until 1942. In his senior year, he averaged 31.5 points per game, tallied 49 points in one game and ended his prep career with 1,538 points – a Putnam County record which remains undisturbed.

Goedde so impressed college scouts that he received a basketball scholarship to Georgetown University which, at the time, was a cage powerhouse. Because of World War II, Georgetown University became a training center and Goedde, who couldn't get into the service because he was too tall, transferred to the University of Toledo.

"For the first two years at Toledo, I didn't play basketball. But I did my junior and senior years," related Goedde, now Superintendent of Van Wert schools. "I signed a pro baseball contract with Toledo of the American Association because, in those days, you could be an amateur in one sport and a pro in another." Goedde, a tall southpaw pitcher, played for the Toledo Mud Hens each summer from 1943 until 1946, when he hurt his arm and was finished in professional baseball.

Vaughnsville, which later merged with Columbus Grove, won titles during Goedde's sophomore, junior and senior seasons. In fact, Vaughnsville captured nine of Putnam County's first 14 basketball championships.

Continental won the first PCL crown in 1924, but the Pirates had to wait until 1971 before winning another one. The Pirates, this season's champions, have won outright or co-titles in five of the last eight seasons.

Ottawa-Glandorf, the largest school in Putnam County, bowed out of the PCL in 1967 after the Titans had captured their third straight crown. Ottawa-Glandorf, which suffered some hard times on the basketball court from 1968 through

1974 (30 wins in seven years), will make its second straight Class AA State tourney appearance under coach Ron Niekamp this week.

Ottoville will also participate this week in the Class A State Tourney, giving Putnam County the distinction of having teams in the State basketball tournament two years running. Continental went to the Class A State Tourney last season.

Current members of the PCL include Kalida, Ottoville, Fort Jennings, Leipsic, Columbus Grove, Pandora-Gilboa, Miller City and Continental. Ottawa-Glandorf is the only other high school in Putnam County and the Titans compete in the Western Buckeye League.

Although the PCL has been an established eight-team circuit for some time, the league has included nearly twice as many teams. Consolidations replaced Vaughnsville, Glandorf, Ottawa Public, Ottawa Parochial (Saints Peter and Paul) and Blanchard. Another name of the past is Palmer which consolidated with Miller City.

Two factors, according to current Putnam county coaches have gone a long way toward shaping the intense rivalries which have developed among the coaches, players and fans.

"Only four schools in the county pay football so basketball is THE sport for most of us," Ottoville mentor Phil Muehfeld says.

"Putnam County has nearly as many high schools as it does communities," Niekamp says. "The kids get in the bus and only go a few minutes to a gym packed with people. This just adds more fuel to the rivalries."

It is not unusual to find a player from one Putnam County school playing his cousin from another school. Or brother coaching brother, as was the case three seasons ago at Miller City when Coach Denny Recker piloted the Wildcats, which included Denny's two brothers, Mark and Fred. In Denny's final year at Miller City, he locked horns with another brother, Leipsic coach, Clair Recker.

Tom Weber, current principal of Glandorf Elementary School, but former Athletic Director and head basketball coach at both Glandorf High and Ottawa-Glandorf, agrees that proximity and shifting the emphasis to one sport has built Putnam County's basketball reputation.

"Every community identifies with the basketball team," Weber says. "For many years, the prime sports program of most the schools was basketball. And today only Leipsic,

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Pandora-Gilboa, Columbus Grove and Ottawa-Glandorf play football.” With the exception of Ottawa-Glandorf, the other three football-playing Putnam County schools haven’t established themselves on the hardwood in recent times.

Seven different teams have won the PCL basketball title three straight years. They include Ottoville (1933-35), Vaughnsville (1940-42), Leipsic (1954-56), Miller City (1962-64), Ottawa-Glandorf (1965-67), Kalida (1975-77) and Continental (1976-78). Ottoville, Vaughnsville, Leipsic and Ottawa-Glandorf each won outright titles while the others won one outright and two co-titles.

Miller City, a tiny hamlet located five miles northwest of Glandorf, is the only Putnam County team to win a state basketball championship. In 1950, the 29-0 Wildcats beat Eaton 44-36 in the Class B State Finals.

Two players who started on that state championship team, Joe Lammers and Dick Barlage, are currently members of the Miller City school board. Other starters on that team were Frank Schroeder, Junior McDonald and Ralph Meyer, now deceased.

It would be impossible to name all the players who have left their mark in the Putnam County record book, but a few of the more prominent players were Goedde, the Heckman brothers, (Ken and Tom), Bill Warren of Leipsic, Gerry Schomaeker of Ottawa Parochial, the Spitnale brothers, (Brad and Greg) at Continental, Ken Pothast and Joe Maas of Ottawa-Glandorf.

Tom Heckman, who played varsity two years at Glandorf and his senior year at O-G when it was formed in 1964-65, is the career scoring leader for the Titans. He ranks second to Goedde on the all-time point list ahead of Greg Spitnale. Brad Spitnale holds the single season Putnam County mark of 661 points.

Ken Heckman was a stalwart for the Glandorf’s Dragons before his younger brother came along. Warren led Leipsic in the Toledo Regional in 1954 and Schomaeker was one of the finest outside shooters to ever play in Putnam County. Pothast was an all-state selection last year at guard and 6-5 Maas is the current dominant figure for the state-bound Titans.

Fort Jennings has never made it to the State Tourney, but the Muskies advanced to the regionals in 1958 and in 1976. Under Coach Don Altenburger in the late 1960s, Jennings came up with some strong teams.

Ottoville lost in the first round of the 16-team State Tourney back in 1937 and advanced to the Regionals in 1954. In 1925 Leipsic made it to the State Quarter-Finals when there were eight teams in the Class B Tourney. In addition to last season, Continental also advanced to the State in 1972. The Pirates went to the Regionals in 1974 while Columbus Grove lost in the 1952 Toledo Class B Regionals. Glandorf made it to the Lima Regionals in 1964.

And who can forget the Kalida team of 1967, coached by Alan Chase. After a 10-8 regular season, including four league losses, the Wildcats advanced to the State Tourney. Along the way, Kalida won a pair of double-overtime-thrillers over Miller City and Fayette. In 1975 Kalida went to the Regionals under Coach Dick Kortokrax who was in his first season after several at Ottoville.

Ottoville and Ottawa-Glandorf, this week, hope to become the first Putnam County teams in nearly 30 years to capture State cage crowns. One thing for sure, their fans or others from Putnam County will be behind them. Known as some of the most vocal and enthusiastic supporters, Putnam County fans know their basketball.