

# Part-Time Basketball Coach

By James P. Holl – Timeline (A Publication of the Ohio Historical Society) January/March 2013

It couldn't happen today. The truth is so unlikely that many people still find it hard to believe. In 1923, Ralph Geesey took two teams to the Ohio state boys' basketball tournament. The schools were at West Unity and Stryker, two small villages located about seven miles apart in Williams County in the corner of northwestern Ohio.

In 1923, when the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) assumed sponsorship of the tournament, two classes were established: Class A large schools and Class B small schools with less than 150 boys enrolled. Some five hundred schools participated in the season-culminating event to determine the state champions. About three-fourths of the teams were in the Class B category. Many rural schools at that time had no gym and played wherever they could find a suitable venue: a public auditorium, YMCA, church hall, theater, barn, or perhaps at a larger school in a nearby town. Most small school faculties had one or two male teachers who often doubled as superintendent or principal. Few of them had any basketball coaching experience. But coach they did – no one else was available.

West Unity and Stryker were no exception. Both had only thirty-five to forty boys enrolled in the high school grades and that number often dropped during the year as boys and girls as well left to help with planting and harvesting chores on their farms. The West Unity team previously had played their home games in the town hall before 1921, when a new high school, complete with a gym, was built. They hired local boy Ralph Geesey at \$25 a week to coach their basketball team. His younger brother, Charles, was the center on the team.

Stryker built a new school in 1922, complete with both an indoor swimming pool and a gym. The gym also featured an indoor running track that circled the upper level; the overhanging track prevented shots from being taken from the corner of the floor. Stryker, too, was looking for a coach. Fred Salter, Geesey's brother-in-law and a teacher at Stryker, prevailed on a school official to hire Geesey at a salary of \$85 a month.

Ralph (Misel) Geesey was born on December 16, 1900, on his parents' two-hundred-acre dairy farm in German Township, Fulton County, about three miles east of West Unity. He was the third of six children born to Clarence and Minnie (Misel) Geesey. The Geesey family had come to the area around 1850 as part of a wave of immigrants mainly of German and Swiss descent who subsequently carved prosperous farms out of the nearly impenetrable Great Black Swamp that once covered much of northwestern Ohio. Geesey remained on the family farm his entire life.

He graduated from West Unity in 1917. As a youth, he loved to play basketball. A self-described "runt", he was primarily a substitute who got into few games. After graduation, however, he grew quickly to more than six feet and he began to play with the semi-pro town team: The West Unity Speed Demons. Over the next fifteen years, Geesey played on and coached a number of amateur and semi-pro teams in the area. In addition to starring for the Speed Demons, he played for the Bryan Wonder Fives, the Archbold City Drugs and the Kunkle Merchants. Later he

coached Hamler Tech, a team composed of local farm boys who played town teams and traveling semi-pros throughout much of northwest Ohio and adjoining parts of Michigan and Indiana. All the while he worked full-time on the farm. Although he was only twenty-two years old when he was hired, Geesey clearly was no basketball novice.

He worked out a Solomon-like arrangement with the two schools. At the close of school each afternoon, Geesey practiced with the West Unity team. Then he hurried home to milk the cows and have a quick meal. Next, he drove seven miles and coached the Stryker team in the evening. Later, he downplayed the busy schedule, recalling that the basketball season was an off-season for farm work. His dad, who was a big basketball fan, helped by carrying much of the workload.

Although West Unity and Stryker were only a few miles apart, they were quite different. West Unity primarily was a farm service center whose grocery store, hardware, rug store, banks and farm-implement dealers served the surrounding rich agricultural lands of northern Williams County. The town was platted in 1842 and was named after Unity, Pennsylvania - birthplace of one of the town's founders.

Stryker, on the other hand was a small, thriving manufacturing town straddling the busy main line of the New York Central Railroad. The line carried goods processed locally from timber, grain and cattle by rail to Toledo and points beyond. The town was laid out in 1853 along the Northern Indian railroad and was named for John Stryker, a New York state-born attorney and railroad executive.

Proximity and differences both made for a strong rivalry between the two towns. Nowhere was the rivalry more fiercely contested than on the basketball court. And Ralph Geesey, as coach of both teams, was caught in the middle.

To help ameliorate the situation, Geesey also arranged his schedule so his Speed Demons played on nights when his high school teams were idle. On game nights it helped, too, that Stryker had a girls' team while West Unity did not. Geesey could coach the reserve and varsity games at West Unity, travel to Stryker just as the girls' game was ending and arrive in time to coach the Stryker boys in the final game of the evening.

West Unity and Stryker – county rivals of long standing – usually played each other twice in the season. Again, Geesey's solution to that situation was novel. He coached neither team and instead sat in the stands as a spectator! The two school principals temporarily assumed coaching duties. Geesey's brother played for West Unity and his sister cheered for Stryker. No one recalls where Geesey sat. Did he begin on the visitor's side and perhaps switch sides at halftime? Either would have been in keeping with his stance of strict neutrality. In a strange twist, in 1923 both teams lost their only regular-season games to each other on their opponent's home court: Stryker won at West Unity in early January and West Unity prevailed 22-8 at Stryker a month later. Both finished with 16-1 records. Geesey later would claim that

he had coached two undefeated teams that year since he did not coach in the games each team lost.

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Geesey gave credit to his 1923 players and their talents, saying, “They were all good shooters and knew how to handle the ball.” Most observers noted the two teams played aggressive defense and relied on sharp passing to obtain good open shots.

Then came March and tournament time. West Unity and Stryker, it appeared, were on a collision course to decide the district championship. But they found an out. In 1923, OHSAA rules permitted a school to enter either the Class A or the Class B tournament. The only condition was that a decision was irreversible. A team could not enter the Class A tournament at the district level and, if successful, switch back to Class B for the state finals. Geesey chose to enter his Stryker team in the Class A district tournament at Defiance College on March 2-3. He reasoned that with only seven teams in Class A and thirty-one teams in Class B, Stryker had a better chance of winning. He also thought the Stryker team was stronger physically and played better defense, hopefully enabling them to compete more successfully with the larger schools. Besides, he certainly did not want to pit his two teams against each other if he could prevent it.

West Unity breezed through the Class B district tournament, defeating Montpelier 20-12, Columbus Grove 16-9, Ridge Township of Van Wert County 14-12 and Convoy 27-14 in the finals. On the same weekend and at the same place, Stryker won the Class A district title beating Napoleon 12-8 and Defiance 20-13 in the district final game. Geesey’s two teams had six wins in two days and he had coached them all – with no assistants, no trainers, and certainly without sophisticated game strategies.

The following weekend, March 9-10, both teams and the coach boarded the local train to Columbus and the state basketball tournament. None of them had ever remotely experienced such a time in their lives before. They stayed at fraternity houses on the Ohio State University campus – raw country boys, strangers to the big city. They were eating strange meals, sleeping in strange beds and saw few, if any, of their hometown fans. They had one lone cheering telegram from a team in Ney (another old Defiance County rival) wishing them luck.

The 1923 state boys’ basketball tournament was a grueling test that would make a modern-day coach cringe in disbelief. For two days, thirty-two teams (16 in Class A and 16 in Class B) played at Ohio State University’s gym and the state Fairgrounds Coliseum. The contests began on Friday with games at 9:00 AM and continued without a break until 9:30 at night. First-round games were scheduled at thirty-five minute intervals. Tournament rules specified preliminary-round games consisting of two twelve-and-a-half minute periods separated by a five-minute rest period. Championship games featured two twenty-minute halves with a ten-minute intermission. With injury delays and overtimes, the final games sometimes ended close to midnight.

West Unity’s first game against Amherst was scheduled to start at 10:10 AM. If successful, they next played a second-round game at 6:30 PM. Stryker’s first game with Columbus West began at

3:10 PM and, if they won, they would play again at 9:30 PM. Unfortunately, Stryker lost their first-round game, so Geesey had a chance to get a decent night’s sleep.

On Saturday, the chase renewed. West Unity, after defeating Amherst 26-17 and Bradford 13-12 the previous day, lost a morning semi-final game to eventual state champion, Plattsburg, by 29-11. Stryker had bowed to Columbus West, a school with nearly as many students as Stryker had residents in the entire town, by a 20 to 8 score.

Geesey took it all in stride, already used to the hectic timetable. With games schedules so close together, he told his boys not to bother changing out of their uniforms but just keep limbered up for the next round. Neither West Unity nor Stryker would win a state championship trophy in 1923. Center Charles Geesey and guard Harold Radabaugh of West Unity were named to the Class B all-tournament team. But there was no fairy-tale ending for the coach who took two teams to Columbus in the same season.

The Ralph Geesey story did not end there, however. Unable to reach a salary agreement with the schools, he took a year off and returned to his farm. In 1925, he signed on as the basketball coach at Kunkle, another small, unincorporated community in Williams County, about four miles northwest of West Unity. In five years at Kunkle, Geesey’s teams compiled a 110-11 record and made trips to Columbus in 1927 and 1928. His 1927 team, which reportedly had only eighteen boys in the school at tournament time, went undefeated, finished with a 26-1 record and losing the state final to state champion Marshall from Highland County. His 1928 team had four starters weakened by the flu and Marshall repeated as state champions.

After the 1928-29 season, Geesey resigned as Kunkle’s basketball coach. The decision was not of his making. The OSHAA initiated a rule that required the coach to be a member of the school faculty. Geesey returned to farming. He sold his dairy herd around 1960 but continued to raise corn and soybeans. He also remained a loyal high school sports fan, attending a football game between West Unity and Hicksville on October 4, 1974, the night before he died.

In 1973, on the golden anniversary of Geesey’s unique 1923 season, sportswriters from around the state wrote of his achievements. Dennis Horger in the Toledo Blade wrote that “Geesey Had Genius Touch.” Gerry Rohrs in the Farmland News noted that Geesey’s record probably will never be equaled. And Allen Rupp in the Marietta Times argued that Geesey deserves to be in the Ohio Basketball Coaches Hall of Fame. His old West Unity players, Maynard Short and Charlie Allen, voiced similar tributes.

Geesey’s six-year coaching record at the three schools combined for 151 wins against only 15 losses. He took four teams to the state finals in six years. Yet, Ralph Geesey is not in the Ohio Basketball Coaches Hall of Fame. He should be!