

The ‘Waterloo Wonders’ Inspired a Generation of Players

The Lima News – Bob Seggerson, Guest Columnist – February 12, 2020

In the early history of high school basketball, the sport spread quickly and easily through the rural and farming communities across the state of Ohio. The game required a limited number of athletes and resources: five players, one ball, a couple hoops. In an era before consolidation wiped many of them off the map, it was the perfect sport for the many small, low-enrollment schools that dotted the state and struggled to field athletic teams because of a limited number of student-athletes.

Stories of makeshift basketball courts sprouting up in barn hay lofts on farms all over Ohio became a common theme. Basketball became more than just a sport in many of these small farming communities. The game grew into a source of pride and created passionate fan bases that still exist to this day. If you want proof of this dynamic, take a trip through the rural communities in Putnam and Mercer counties during the basketball season. It’s serious business.

In the midst of the Great Depression in the 1930’s, barely a decade after the OHSAA began sponsoring the high school postseason basketball tournament, a tiny rural school, in a poor farming community in the hill country of southern Ohio, turned high school basketball on its head. Waterloo High School, with an enrollment that included only 26 boys, fielded a team that captured the hearts and imagination of hoop fans all across the state and is given credit for catapulting the game to new levels of interest and exposure.

One newspaper described the Waterloo team as “the most talented, the most colorful and the most unusual team ever to play on an Ohio court.” A local sportswriter dubbed the boys, “The Waterloo Wonders,” and it was an apt nickname.

The story of the “Wonders” actually began years before when a group of young boys fell in love with the game of basketball. Because they did not have the proper equipment, the boys were forced to improvise. They crafted a court in the hay loft of the McMahan family farm which was located down a dirt road in tiny Greasy Ridge, just a stone’s throw from Waterloo. They brought back to life an old deflated basketball by stuffing rags in it and spent hours shooting through a rim fashioned from an old barrel stave. The ball was too flat to bounce so the boys played games without a dribble, relying on passing and movement to get open. The skills of passing, moving without the ball and shooting became their calling card years later.

When the five boys began playing in high school with the proper equipment, they were more than prepared to take the state by storm. Curtis McMahan, Stewart Wiseman, Beryl Drummond and brothers Orlyn and Wyman Roberts were about to become folk heroes.

Under the direction of head coach Magellan Hairston, Waterloo captured the 1934 Class B State Championship, and finished the season with a 31-0 record. They won their games by an average of 26 points that season. The “Wonders” captured the imagination of fans with a different style of play. It was an era when the game of basketball was very physical and slow moving. Shots were taken with two hands on the ball and two feet firmly planted on the floor, a style the Waterloo team abandoned.

The Waterloo “Wonders” did more than score points at a prodigious pace. They introduced a faster game with a minimum of dribbling, relying on speed, pin point passing and spot on shooting. They also had fun playing, including antics that would not be accepted in today’s game, but drew sell-out crowds whenever they competed.

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The “Wonders” often conceded the opening tip and then stayed at half court, allowing their opponent to score first. It was not uncommon for the boys to rebound a missed shot and then give it back to the shooter for a second try. When the score got out of hand, the “Wonders” would play with two or three payers and let the other two rest on the bench or grab a hot dog or popcorn and sit and watch the game from the bleachers. Fans did not object to the “Wonders” antics. In fact, looking for a distraction from the hard times of the Depression, they stood in line for hours just for the chance to see them play.

Following their State Championship in 1934, Coach Hairston was besieged by schools all across the state begging to schedule a game against the “Wonders.” In that era, the OHSAA did not place a restriction on the number of games a high school could play. Waterloo took on all comers, scheduling a mind-boggling 66 games in the 1934-1935 season, most of them on the road. That’s right, they played 66 games. Coach Hairston crammed six players in his Ford V-8 sedan and drove all around the state, playing big and small schools and even several college freshmen teams.

The “Wonders” had a stretch of seven games in nine days, including six days in a row. They ran their win streak to 56 games, still a record, before finally losing a game. They once played two games in one night. The “Wonders” built a big lead against Chesapeake High School by halftime and left the reserves to mop up the win while Coach Hairston drove the starters to Jackson High School. They arrived at 10 p.m. to a full house waiting for them and won 45-24.

Waterloo won the 1935 Class B State Championship for the second consecutive year. The 9,000 fans who watched their championship game in Columbus was more than the total

attendance for all the Class B games played at state two years previous. They ended the season with a 63-3 record. That made them an incredible 94-3 during the two years.

After graduating from Waterloo High School, the boys turned down scholarship opportunities and began barnstorming the state as the “Waterloo Wonders.” They were given permission by the OHSAA to play high schools on their barnstorming tour but the majority of the games were against industrial squads and club teams. They passed through this area in February of 1936, taking on teams in Leipsic, Ottoville and Wapakoneta. They also played a game at Shawnee High School, taking on the Superior Body team from the Lima Recreation Department league. I could not find results from these games.

The Waterloo Wonders continued to barnstorm for the next five years. Their biggest win came against the New York Celtics, considered the dominant professional team of that era. The game was played in Cleveland before a standing room only crowd of 9,000.

The beginning of World War II ended the barnstorming tour for the “Waterloo Wonders.” Today the team is a distant memory. Waterloo High School closed in 1960 and the only reminder of the team now is a historical marker in the middle of the quiet little town. But the impact they had on high school basketball can still be heard echoing through those rural areas where many young athletes chase the same hoop dreams that inspired the “Wonders” improbable rise to fame.