

Ottawa Public Memories Relived

1939 Ottawa Public High School – Girls Basketball Team

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Once again basketball fans have their annual attack of tournament fever. With more thrills than Cedar Point and more suspense than a James Bond movie, there is nothing quite like it. Few events attract more widespread interest and support. Even those who don't know the difference between the Western Buckeye and Putnam County Leagues get caught up in the enthusiasm.

For the players, tournament competition is a once in a lifetime experience. No one knows this better than the local women who were members of the Ottawa High School girls' team that won the Putnam County Tournament in February, 1939. Their hairstyles are dated and they played by different rules, but for sheer drama and excitement, their game equaled today's tournament.

The story of their triumph in the Putnam county Tournament is told in the November, 1980 Gilboa Gazette.

Led by their captain, Evelyn Frey, now Mrs. Francis Ball, Ottawa prepared to sweep the tourney as they had their opponents during the regular season. "We were sometimes called the "corn-built team" because we were so big and rough, but we didn't let that bother us. "We did use some tricks like kneeling our opponents when the referee wasn't looking, but most of the other teams did the same. In those days all the action was at the end of the court where the one referee was involved in the play and didn't see the guards at the other end of the floor trying to block the other team's forwards."

Ottawa's opponent in the 1939 finals was Leipsic, the only team that had scared them in the regular season with a tie score. The teams were evenly matched and kept the crowd on their feet for most of the game. The lead changed rapidly during the quarter and Ottawa's fans seesawed between elation and despair. Gradually the Ottawa girls settled down and ended the first half with a comfortable lead.

Then Coach Merwin Hilty made a drastic change which almost cost Ottawa the game. He switched guards and forwards around, dumbfounding the whole team. "I had never played forward before and here I was trying to make baskets," Evelyn said. "After Leipsic almost caught us, he switched us back to our regular positions." The final score was 24-17 and the Ottawa girls proudly accepted the trophy, winners of the Putnam County Tournament.

Evelyn, like the rest of the team, held Coach Hilty, a Pandora native, in high regard. "He was a swell guy and a good coach. He was strict, but most of the girls had a crush on him."

Alice (Stauffer) Wilson, another team member agrees with Evelyn. "He was exacting, but we accepted his slightest word as the gospel truth."

The Leipsic gym was the scene of equally exciting boys' games. The same year, 1939, the Ottawa boys faced Sts. Peter and Paul in the tournament finals and lost by one point. Four years later, they evened the score with their crosstown rivals and won the 1943 Putnam County Tournament by one point. In a dramatic finish, that was truly stranger than fiction, Evelyn's brother, Jim (Jinx) Frey, made the winning basket with a last second shot.

It's for moments like these that fans stand in line to buy tournament tickets.

Team Members – Mildred (Ensminger) Shilling, Alice (Stauffer) Wilson, Evelyn (Frey) Ball, Eleanor (Compton) Morman, Norma (Frey) Diehl, Ruth (Robenalt) Barker, Elsie (Conn) Killen, Betty Dennis, Jane Schierloh (Greg, Lois Catterson, Rosellen Kelly, Mildred Jean (Organ) Keilholtz and Mary (Chamberlin) Thornton. The Superintendent was Mr. C. J. Rasmus, the Team Advisor was Bernida (Brackney) Gerig and the Coach was Merwin Hilty.