

# Ottawa Public Memories Relived Putnam County Tournament of 1939

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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 was 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 referee was involved in the play and didn't see the guard at the other end of the floor trying to block the other teams' forward."

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

hanged rapidly during the first quarter and Ottawa fans see-sawed 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 the guards and forwards around, dumbfounding the whole team.

"I had never played forward before and here I was trying to make basket," 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 gospel truth."

## Ottawa Public Team Members of 1939

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