

Season of '50, '51 Nearly Fulfilled Waynesville 6th Graders' Dream

By Ray Campbell

Since there was little or no television to distract one's attention, except for a few variety shows (Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour, Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts, Your Show Of Shows and Perry Como) and some westerns aimed at the young people (Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, The Cisco Kid and The Lone Ranger), summer days and nights were spent actively, for the most part. Small children had their Silly Putty while the older youngsters would swim, play baseball and spend time down at the drugstore putting small change into Seeburg's new jukebox that played the all-new 45 RPM records.

Those new machines belted out the hits of the day. Such classics as Patti Page singing the Tennessee Waltz and Frankie Laine telling the world about the Cry of the Wild Goose. Red Foley was relating the story of the Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy and the Andrews Sisters asked "I Can Dream, Can't I?"

That was a fitting song for several young men that hot summer of 1950. Those particular groups of Waynesville High School students were waiting anxiously for that summer to wear down so they could get back to school in the pursuit of a dream they had nurtured since they had all attended sixth-grade. Those youngsters had watched the 1946 WHS Tigers go to the state basketball tournament and finish third. They thought that was a wonderful accomplishment, but their dream was to go all the way to the state championship.

They truly thought they could do this thing and they intended to work as hard as necessary to accomplish that feat. To that group, the summer and fall of 1950 was merely a delay in their chase to make their long-time dream a reality. Especially since some of the kids in the grades just below had gotten caught up in the dream and could add the necessary talent to get to the championship game.

Dwight Hensley, Tom Lynch, Kenny Foster, Bob Dodds and Gary Hansen were the sixth-graders who began the chase of the dream. Slightly behind in grades was Tom's brother, Vic. Joe Long, Jim Prewett and Bill George were one grade farther back. Their coach was a young man named Bill Wasson.

The young men played basketball all summer, practicing as a team more often than not. They had every intention of being ready for the regular season, when their Tigers would take the court as a member of the Frisco League. It must have paid off. The Tigers won their first 18 games, along the way winning the prestigious St. James Invitational, which garnered them an invitation to play in the annual Greenwood Blue and Gold Tournament in Springfield. They were winners of the Gold Division, beating Buffalo 42-39 in the title game.

Playing such good basketball meant a very good Christmas in the year 1950. Radios and jukeboxes were blaring out "Rudolph, The Red Nosed Reindeer," a new song by Gene Autry. Bing Crosby was wishing for a "White Christmas" and Spike Jones was reminding everyone "All I Want For Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth." "Cinderella" opened in movie theaters across the nation and the nation was beginning to do battle as a "peace action" in Korea.



Sitting: Kenny Foster, Victor Lynch, Dwight Hensley, Gary Hansen, Norman Anderson.
Standing: Coach Wasson, Thomas Lynch, Jimmy Prewitt, Joe Mart Long, Billy George, Bobby Dodds, and manager, Jim Knight.

Still, things were good for those kids chasing their dream and their parents. Minute Rice launched the first-ever advertising campaign featuring that food staple. Tupperware was introduced and Paper Mate was the first leak-proof ballpoint pen. Paul Harvey was introduced to a national radio audience and Ezzard Charles was the heavyweight boxing king while the phone company began direct-dial nationwide service. And then along came the very first commercial computer.

Very little of those happenings kept the attention of that group of dedicated young high schoolers. The Tigers lost their first game of the year against Phillipsburg, whom they turned around to beat twice more, the last time in the semifinals of the Ozark Tournament. Ozark handed the Tigers their second loss, winning their own tournament in the third overtime period.

There were just two classes of teams in the 1950s. Large schools were Class A and smaller schools were Class B. That latter category housed most of the teams on Waynesville's schedule. When it came to state tournament time, there were sub-regional and regional tournaments, with the top teams being allowed to move to the state tournament.

So as the rest of the nation listened to Tony Bennett crooning "Because Of You" to the ladies, the Tigers were focusing their attention on the sub-regional tournament just ahead at Lebanon. It was a 16-team tournament and the Tigers defeated Mansfield, Iberia and Crocker (led by big Art Helms) to earn the right to face Dixon in the title game. Since they had already beaten Dixon they were heavily favored. Dixon shocked the Tigers, however, winning a close game by a 40-37 score.

In those days, the top two teams were allowed to move on to the regional tournament, also being played in

Lebanon. Only eight teams were in the tournament: Koshkonong, Camdenton, Liberal, Birch Tree, Warsaw and Stockton. And, of course, Dixon and Waynesville. To the surprise of nobody, the two teams met in the finals, but this time the Tigers managed to win, 40-36. Both teams earned the right to advance to the Class B state tournament at Cape Girardeau.

There were some big obstacles in the way of successfully making their six year-old dream come to fruition, not the least of which St. Louis Brentwood (19-9), whom the Tigers (31-4) drew in the tournament's first round. Neighboring Dixon didn't fare as well. They drew the Puxico Indians, who entered the tournament undefeated at 36-0. "We had seen Puxico play because we had gotten there early," said Vic Lynch. "We tried to tell Dixon what they needed to do against them, but we couldn't explain it very well. Puxico really whopped them." The final was 85-45.

The Tigers continued their march to the state title game. They beat Brentwood 47-44, then avenged that earlier loss to Ozark by nipping them 39-35. That placed the Tigers in the semifinal game against a very good John Burroughs of St. Louis.

Headlines on the sports pages of a St. Louis newspaper gave the Tigers little chance against Burroughs. "Burroughs, Puxico Head For Showdown In Class B Meet" screamed the heading. Dwight Hensley, who had pretty much remained in the background during the Tigers' earlier state games, found his range. The little guard hit five straight shots from long range, shocking the Burroughs team and their fans.

"Dwight's sixth shot just barely missed," recalled Tom Lynch. "It just kind of rolled around and nearly went in, but it didn't. He hit his seventh, though."

A sportswriter for the St. Louis Post Dispatch gave the Tigers little or no chance against still undefeated Puxico. He wrote that Puxico would complete their trophy case "without much trouble" from Waynesville. He ate his words when the Tigers gave the Puxico team a big scare before falling by four at 42-38. The Tigers had played a tough zone defense and held the high-scoring Indians to a paltry 42 and had literally gave them their biggest scare of the year. Puxico finished 40-0 and were state champions.

A disappointed Tigers team went back to Waynesville. The boys turned their efforts to making themselves successful in their chosen careers.

And in that, the nine boys once again proved to be up to the task. All had highly successful after-basketball lives. Tom and Vic Lynch. Bob Dodds, Bill George, Gary Hansen and Norman Anderson all were noted businessmen in the area. Kenny Foster had a long career as a civil servant on Ft. Leonard Wood. Jim Prewett became a federal judge working out of Springfield. Dwight Hensley worked his way up to become Assistant Superintendent of the very same schools he attended. Somewhere along the way, the group lost contact with Joe Long. Gary Hansen recently passed away.

While American casualties in Korea were mounting up and people were lining up to see "Alice in Wonderland," and shoppers started saving S&H Green stamps, and others were reading about the exploits of Tom Fears, Otto Graham, Johnny Lujack, George Kell, Bob Lemon and Ralph Kiner on the backs of Wheaties boxes, Waynesville and Missouri citizens were talking about the boys on the basketball team who had almost fulfilled a long time dream by becoming state champions. And Burma Shave signs were everywhere!