

Raising the Roof

A scrappy basketball league lays the foundation for civic healing in Liberia

by Joe Jauregui

When I first arrived in Gbarnga, Liberia in 1968 I was assigned to a traveling team of educators, providing in-service training to the teaching staffs of the schools in the surrounding towns. I was also asked to establish a basketball league among the up-country schools. Football (soccer) was the most popular sport in the country but interest in basketball was growing to the point where a tournament had been held among several schools the previous year. Gbarnga was the perfect tournament venue: it was at the intersection of the main roads in the center of the country—and it had the only gymnasium up-country.

Two schools in Gbarnga, Gboveh High School and W.V.S. Tubman Jr. High School, already had basketball teams. I wasn't in town very long before students from a third school, St. Martin's, came to my house and asked if I would be their basketball coach for a full season of games.

The new league and the availability of a gymnasium provided a new experience to the St. Martin's students, who were mostly 6th and 7th graders. I made a scoreboard using scrap lumber, and salvaged a car horn from a wrecked car I found in town and attached it to a breaker switch. We borrowed the battery from the Peace Corps vehicle to power the horn. The gymnasium was always filled to standing-room-only capacity with fans, because, of course, there were no stands.

Traditionally, students would write a "challenge" letter to a neighboring school, asking to compete in football, basketball, and volleyball. When game day arrived, all the students and some



Vice President of Liberia Joseph N. Boakai attended the most recent upcountry basketball tournament in Gbarnga, Liberia.

townspeople would climb onto the back of a flatbed truck in the early morning and travel to the game site. What I remember most about these excursions was riding in the back of a truck packed with students singing at the top of their lungs to the beat of a drum as we lumbered down the dusty African road.

Game Day

In addition to coaching, I was also the Gbarnga correspondent for the national newspaper, *The Liberian Star*. Even though I submitted the game results, the report on St. Martin's first league game did not come close to capturing the excitement that was present in the gym on that afternoon. We started out slow, but were trailing by only one point at halftime. As the second half began, the St. Martin's players matched their opponent basket for basket. The crowd became louder and louder.

As the game progressed, with the lead changing constantly, the crowd gave a deafening roar each time St. Martin's made a basket. On several occasions



St. Martin's first basketball team, Gbarnga, Liberia, 1968.

following the crowd's response I heard a loud crack. I didn't give it much thought, assuming it was a nearby lightning strike accompanying one of those thunderstorms that passed through on a regular basis. At the end of regulation play, we were tied, 43-43. We went into overtime and scored seven unanswered points to earn our first victory.

Afterwards, outside, I realized that the ground was dry; no storm had passed through during the game. Looking to the top of the gym I noticed the corrugated metal sheet roof. The loud cracking sounds I had heard were the corrugated sheets slapping against each other, lifted each time the crowd let out its deafening roars. The walls of the gym were thick and the only direction the energy and noise of the crowd could go was up. The St. Martin's basketball team had literally "raised the roof."

The young team would go on to the tournament at the end of the season, the last of eight teams to qualify.

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The tournament grew in popularity over the years but was discontinued when civil conflict erupted in the 1980s. In 2012, due to the efforts of the Liberian Youth and Sports Minister, S. Tornorlah Varpilah, the up-country tournament was reestablished. Minister Varpilah, a graduate of St. Martin's, Gboveh High School, and Cuttington University, was a participant in the tournament in the 1970s. He is currently implementing a five-to-ten-year National Youth and Sports Development Program that he hopes can help bring Liberians together after years of civil war.

As reported by the *Liberian Daily Observer*, the 2012 tournament officially began when Liberian Vice President Joseph N. Boakai tossed the jump ball for the opening game held at the W.V.S. Tubman-Gray's gymnasium in Gbarnga. The tournament was renamed The McGowan Tournament in honor of Harold McGowan, a former Peace Corps Volunteer who dedicated 20 years of voluntary service to the development of basketball in Liberia.

And, oh yes, St. Martin's was the 2012 tournament champion.

Joe Jauregui served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Liberia, West Africa, from 1967-1969. While there he worked as a teacher and basketball coach at St. Martin's

School. Upon returning to his hometown of Santa Paula, Calif., Jauregui also returned to his high school alma mater and served

for more than 30 years as a teacher and administrator with the Santa Paula Unified High School District.

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