Wildcat Hoops in the Sixties

With three successive 18 or more wins seasons beginning with the 2013-2014 season, Wildcat basketball is alive again!

The 2015 Luther North basketball team won the Northeastern Athletic Conference (NAC) championship and the IHSA Regional Championship reaching the Sweet 16 and the IHSA Class A Sectional Finals for the first time in school history.   Many Alumni followed the Cats on their journey as they travelled into uncharted territory.  Congratulations to the teams and Coach Tucker.

The 2015 NAC conference title was the first Luther North conference basketball title since 1969. As a member of that 1969 team, it brought back a flood of memories I will share from that era. It was a fun ride.

In the 1960’s, Luther North was a member of the Private School League (PSL).  The eight team league consisted of:

Luther North, Luther South, Walther Lutheran, North Park Academy, Timothy Christian,  Illiana Christian, Chicago Christian and Wheaton Academy.  North Park and Luther South are now closed.

In basketball, the Wildcats won the PSL conference title in 1959 and shared the crown three ways with Chicago Christian and Walther Lutheran in 1962.

But it wasn’t until later in the 60’s when the dynasty began to brew after coach Marlin Zobel took the reins for the 1965-1966 season.

From 1966 through 1969, The Luther North Wildcats had a string of four consecutive 20 win seasons.   Over the course of that four year span, the Wildcats recorded 95 wins with just 20 losses.  Luther North won or shared a regular season conference title in three of those four years.

The lower gym (which was the ONLY gym back then) was packed to the rafters with cheering fans and a boisterous student section sometimes oddly arrayed in yellow gym shirts and a different sort of head gear for home games.  For the big games, there was a standing room only crowd.

In 1966, Luther North shared the regular season title with Chicago Christian.  Both teams however, were upset in the PSL tournament and Illiana Christian took home the tourney trophy.

The 1967 team was probably the best in that streak finishing with a record of 29-3.  They beat Catholic League powers, Hales Franciscan, St. George, and Leo and topped the century mark with four 100 point games.  They surpassed the 80 point mark nine other times.  (Remember, there was no three-point in 1967.)

You may ask, “How did Luther fare in the State Tournament that year?”

They never even played a game.

Why?  Because in 1967, Luther North was not a member of the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) and therefore, unable to compete for the Illinois State Championship.   Most private schools (including the Chicago Catholic League) were not members of the IHSA either back then.

Only member schools competed for the state title in those days.  And there was only ONE state champion too. Those were different times.

Much like the movie Hoosiers, all member schools competed for one state title. Smaller schools began tournament competition first with District Tournaments.  The District Champ would advance to the Regionals the following week and begin play against the larger schools.

The only team to ever win an Illinois State title by advancing from the District Tournament level was Hebron in 1952.  Alden-Hebron is currently a member of the NAC.  You might want to take a peek at their trophy case on a road game to see if the illustrious 1952 IHSA Championship trophy is there.  I know the Hebron water tower is painted like a huge basketball to commemorate the accomplishment.

Did many a private school miss a chance at a State Championship by not being a member school of the IHSA?

The obvious answer is, “Yes.”

Whether the 1967 team would have had a shot at the State Championship remains only a debate at this time, but this author thinks we could have made a good run at it.

(Incidentally, the 1967 State Champions were the Pekin Chinks who hailed from Pekin Illinois a town about ten miles south of Peoria and according to local lore  about the same latitude as Peking, China, ergo the nickname.  The school and town folk considered it a name of honor and respect.  Due to differing opinions they have been known as the Pekin Dragons since 1980.)

There was a PSL Conference Tournament at the end of the season each year which was a big deal at the time albeit not quite as big a deal as having a chance at the State Championship. It never was established whether the PSL tournament champion or the regular season champion was considered the actual conference winner so both winners could lay claim to the title.

The 1967 team won the PSL regular season title with an undefeated record of 14-0 but were bounced by Timothy Christian in the PSL tourney title game by the score of 77-68.

The 1968 team took a hit on the graduation losing eight payers and some standout stars, but was still a formidable opponent to contend with.  Luther North and the Private School League joined as members of the IHSA that year.  The PSL tournament was rescheduled as a pre-season event held around Thanksgiving time at Concordia in River Forest and the Wildcats won the first PSL November classic.

The 1968 team also won the Luther North Invitational Holiday Tourney in December beating perennial Chicago Public league power, Morgan Park 71-69.

Luther finished second in the PSL regular season however, losing out to Timothy Christian. But this time, the Cats got to play in the State Tournament.

In our inaugural appearance in the IHSA State Tournament, we were paired with the defending 1967 Regional Champs and neighboring Catholic League foe, St. Patrick for round one.  Luther North was not even given a chance.

Wildcat fans filled the stands and cheered loudly for what turned out to be a nip and tuck barn burner. Luther North pushed the Shamrocks into overtime before ultimately losing a heartbreaker 59-58.  We ended up the season with a record of 22-5.

That same year, the LHN Sophomore team was Co-Champions of the PSL.

All signs pointed to another good season in 1969.  Indeed, the Wildcats finished in a three way tie for the PSL title that season along with Timothy Christian and Chicago Christian.

In the IHSA regional, the Cats beat West Leyden 88-75 to advance to the semi-finals and face first seeded East Leyden who at that time had a solid hoop program.  The Cats stunned the Eagles by a score of 70-56 to advance to the Regional title game and face our conference rival and nemesis, Timothy Christian.

Timothy was considered one of those smaller schools at the time and needed to win the District tournament to advance to the Regional. They advanced to the finals beating Ridgewood 67-40 and St. Patrick 56-55.

The Trojans shared the PSL Crown with Luther, but led the season series that year two games to one.  We were eager to even the score with the Trojans and looked forward to meeting them with the Regional title on the line. Friday night March 7, 1969 was an all PSL State Regional final at York HS gym in Elmhurst.

Down 30-23 at halftime, the Wildcats rallied to tie the score at 46, but the Cats were in some foul trouble. Timothy regained the lead on a bucket by George Huisman and never looked back en route to 66-53 triumph to advance to the Hinsdale Sectionals the next week.  The 6’8” All Area center Huisman had 29 points on the night.  (A month earlier he had 34 in a 72-52 win over the Wildcats.)

Ambrose Ratcliff led the way for Luther with 17 points. Lester Madison added 16 and his younger brother Earl chipped in with 11 points before fouling out.

The next week, in the Hinsdale Sectional, Timothy Christian came within a point of upsetting Lyons Township of LaGrange (a much larger school) losing 67-66. LaGrange lost the Sectional Title game to Proviso East, the eventual 1969 IHSA State Champions.

But that night wasn’t our night and the Regional Final ended the Wildcat run with a record of 22-5.  The 1970 team finished with a record of 11-14 to end the string of twenty-win seasons.

The 1967 and 1969 teams are honored in the Luther North Athletic Hall of Fame. Here’s a summary of those four seasons of glory for Luther North hoops in the sixties:  (See next page)

Jeff Howard

LHN Cass of 1970

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **SEASON** | **WINS**  | **LOSSES** | **ACCOMPLISHMENTS** |
| 1965-1966 | 23 | 7 | PSL Co-Champions (Chicago Christian) |
|  |  |  | PSL Tourney 2nd Place |
|  |  |  | Luther North Invitational 2nd Place |
| 1966-1967 | 29 | 3 | PSL Season Champions |
|  |  |  | Walther Invitational Consolation Champs |
|  |  |  | Luther North Invitational Champions |
|  |  |  | PSL Tourney 2nd Place |
| 1967-1968 | 21 | 5 | PSL Tourney Champions |
|  |  |  | Luther North Invitational Champions |
|  |  |  | PSL Season 2nd Place (Timothy Christian) |
| 1968-1969 | 22 | 5 | PSL Tourney 2nd Place |
|  |  |  | Luther North Invitational Champions |
|  |  |  | PSL Tri-Champions (Timothy & Chicago Christian) |
|  |  |  | IHSA Regional Finalist |
| **TOTAL**  | **95** | **20** | **83 win %**  |