

Sept. 5, 2005

THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

What does Towson, Maryland and Hopkinsville, Kentucky have in Common? The average citizen would quickly shrug their shoulders and conclude nothing.

Hopkinsville is a small average rural community in Western Kentucky, primarily known for Tobacco, Edgar Cayce, Fort Campbell and in more recent years an enviable string of successes in attracting small to midsize commercial and industrial companies that have significantly reduced our dependence upon agriculture and captured the fascination of our peers and neighbors.

Towson, Maryland on the other hand is located in Baltimore County and is the home to Towson University. Founded in 1768 by Ezekiel Towson, it is a typical suburban city with small town charm; except Towson, Maryland is also the home of Black and Decker. The world's foremost toolmaker and a fortune 500 hundred company whose contributions to the community of Towson are unsurpassed.

Just ask Towson residents how they feel about Black and Decker.....and the citizens of Towson will beam with pride at every opportunity to talk about their very own hometown success story which has been responsible for positively transforming the lives of so many of the citizens of Towson.

Here is where the similarity begins, for Hopkinsville also has its very own Black and Decker and oh what an interesting story to be told.

1966 by all accounts was a normal year in Hopkinsville. The war in Viet Nam continued to dominate the national and local headlines, so consequently a short and rather dry article buried on the sports page of the local paper, announcing the hiring of a young new head basketball coach at Hopkinsville High School was hardly noticed.

Roy G. Woolum, a native of Eastern Kentucky and fresh from his first head coaching assignment at Estill County High was full of vim, vigor, enthusiasm and new ideas. But what could he have been thinking when he accepted this job. There were several negatives working against him.

- A lack luster basketball program which had never really lived up to its billing, for it was always overshadowed by Football, which was King.
- The huge uncertainties of intergration as the impending closure and merger of the local Black High School, which was recently announced, drew an emotional and negative response within the Black Community. The school would be closed in two stages with the sophomore class moving to Hopkinsville High School the first year.
- And finally they did not even have a gymnasium.

However as all true athletes can attest these were merely grown up distractions that really don't matter to a hill of beans when young boys come together with friends and new acquaintances to have fun and do what they enjoy doing best, Playing Ball.

With this same spirit and determination Coach Woolum opened Summer Basketball workouts for the 1966-1967 season.

The new school year for the recent transferees from Crispus Attucks began slowly without incidence and with the normal butterflies associated with the start of a new year. Perhaps this intergration initiative would work after all. But soon came the first test and set back. An assembly of all the sophomore students in the cafeteria to elect class officers resulted in voting strictly along ethnic lines and the subsequent walkout by black students in protest for what seemed to be an unfair process. The school officials moved quickly and positively to appeal to the new students and to avoid a lengthy interruption to the class schedule. Soon things were progressing back to normal.

That first season for Roy Woolum's tigers was a year of teaching, learning, adjusting supporting and building on a less than stable foundation. A successful year in many ways, the new coach and team earned the support and adoration from endearing fans and respect and recognition from peers and opponents who experienced the hard work and discipline of Woolum's scrappy Tigers.

At the post season banquet keynote speaker and Austin Peay Head Basketball Coach Fisher, described the tigers as being as good as Rupp's U.K. Wilcats, who also completed their season with a record of 13 wins and 13 losses.

Expectations for the 1967-68 basketball season were very high, and for good reason. Although several outstanding seniors had moved on due to graduation, the final closing of Crispus Attucks High School promised to bring the core of an inspring young Attucks squad across town to join forces with a bright young Tiger Team. In addition, coach William F. (Chief) Falls, head coach of the Attucks High School Wolves for the past 31 years had agreed to accept the assistants role with coach Woolum. Falls brought respect, knowledge experience and a deep understanding of the game of basketball. During the 1966-67 season Falls was recognized by peers and admirers across the state after logging his 500th Career Head Coaching Victory. An accomplishment and honor enjoyed by few.

With this backdrop its easy to see why fans and sportswriters alike rated the 1967-68 Tigers High among contenders in the second region. Home games were relocated from the old Koffman Jr. High Gym to the recently vacated Attucks High Gymnasium which was much larger and better suited for High School Basketball.

The 1967-68 season started with the excitement and promise of the pre season. In an early away game at Trigg County, Junior Bobby Parker scored 25 points and grabbed 26 rebounds to lift the Tigers to an impressive road victory. However just as things seemed to be going so good for the young coach problems surfaced. The challenges of consolidating two squads with so much talent and potential was more than the team could absorb. Internal differences among players eventually reached a boiling point resulting in a mid-season dismissal of two seniors and the benching of two others for disciplinary reasons. Woolum announced, that for the balance of the season his starting line up would be juniors and sophomores. "We might as well start getting ready for next season he commented as he paced the locker room floor."

The balance of the season was rewarding for the new team, but not much fun. An eleven game losing streak was ended with a victory in the final game of the season against Greenville High School. Although the record did not reflect it, there was something unique and special building within this squad. By the end of that dismal season we had somehow gained strength and determination which would carry us into the new season.

One Million Dollars, that was the price tag for the brand new 5000 seat gymnasium which was nearing completion on the campus of Hopkinsville High School. At least now, we would have our very own home. It was simply beautiful, and like none other in this region of the state. It was appropriately dubbed "The Palace" by an admiring under classman, the name stuck and The Palace it became.

Opening night of the 1968-69 season was an unnerving event. The Palace was packed to the rafters, however by some accounts, fans came to see the New Gym first and the Tigers second. Our season opened against a Highly recognized team from Earlington with a 5 and 0 record and ranked in the top 10 in the state. Gee Woolum, you sure know how to pick em.

From the opening tip off until the final horn it was a hard fought contest of lead changes and heroic plays. However as the final horn sounded the entire gym erupted as a little known Tiger Team out lasted the powerful Yellow Jackets to win by four points. We won, we won, we won could be heard throughout the gym as excited fans cheered.

Now finally, Hopkinsville High had its Team. Five determined young men.....Henry Parker, Melvin Woodard, William Bird Averitt, Wendell Lynch, four black boys and a 6 foot 6 inch white kid named Richard Decker, whom from this date forward would affectionately be referred to simply as Black and Decker.

Some how now the vision seemed more clear, this team was destined to change more than just statistics in a record book. As the season progressed the hard work and team spirit paid high dividends. Ending the regular season with an eight game winning streak for a total of sixteen victories; the most in the history of Hopkinsville High School Boy's Basketball team.

The red hot Tigers breezed through the 8th district tournament causing excited fans to began to chant, state, state, state, state, state; for you see no Hopkinsville High School Basketball Team had ever earned a trip to the Kentucky Boys State Basketball Tournament. Later that week-end our draw for seeding in the second regional was DA JA VOW, South Hopkins High School. The only team whom had beat us twice during the regular season and on the first occasion by 25 points. Although well concealed, we could tell that Coach Woolum was concerned. This time however we had an added advantage, we were playing in The Palace. Final score HHS by 4 points. During the semi-final game we coasted by a good Webster County Team whom we had beaten twice during the regular season.

This now set the stage for the biggest game of our careers. The regional finals paired the Tigers against a Union County Team whom just happened to boast the best record of any team in the commonwealth 32 wins 1 loss. This unselfish and highly talented team was the product of a school system merger, similar to what had taken place in Hopkinsville a year ago, except in this case, it worked. The Union County Braves also boasted one of the highest winning margins of any team in the state, thereby causing one Evansville, Indiana sportswriter to pick the Braves to win the Kentucky Boys High School State Tournament.

The crowd was so large that Saturday night in March of 1969 that many unhappy fans were turned away at the door because the Gym was filled to capacity. Union County brought over 20 buses filled with screaming, hollering and loyal fans. This was truly the moment that hopes and dreams are made of.

From the opening tip off the Tigers took control of the game and exploded with a first half performance that left the Union County Braves completely stunned. The half time score Tigers 43, Braves 32. In the locker room Coach Woolum was so emotionally charged that it sounded like a pep rally. "We will not only go to the state tournament, he shouted, we're going to win the whole damn thing". The locker room erupted into a frenzied pitch that can only be described as, Insanity.

As fate would have it, the second half was exactly the opposite of the first half, and by the end of the third period Union County owned a 1 point lead. The fourth quarter was evenly matched and filled with lead changes on into the final minute, when Bird Averitt stole pass at mid court and called a time out with 30 seconds remaining with the score dead even at 60.

When play resumed, with time running out, yours truly faked and dribbled down the lane for a lay up, which amazingly rolled off the front of the rim into the outstretched arms of none other than Big Richard Decker who gently tipped it back in to give the Tigers a slim two point lead with 8 seconds on the clock. A quick time out by the Braves and two failed shot attempts later the Hopkinsville High School Gym completely came to pieces. It can only be described as Mass Pandemonium.

**THE IMPOSSIBLE HAD JUST BEEN ACHIEVED
BLACK AND DECKER WAS GOING TO STATE.**

Two weeks later we headed to Louisville Kentucky for the boys state basketball tournament. The Sweet Sixteen. The first time in the history of Tiger Basketball.

We performed well. We won our opening round game against a determined team from Hazard, Kentucky. A game in which William Bird Averitt was discovered. Playing an unbelievable game, Bird dazzled the crowd in Freedom Hall with his unique skills and his uncanny southpaw style of dribbling and scoring. He single handedly lifted the Tigers to victory with an astounding 35 point performance.

"It's a Train, It's a Plane, No It's Super Bird" read the headlines the following morning in the Louisville newspapers. That same afternoon the Tigers played well but lost by 20 points to a powerful Louisville Central Team, who would go on to win the tournament for the first time on Saturday night. But somehow losing was really not losing, for we accomplished far, far more than we had ever dreamed when set out on this journey. Four black boys and one white boy had now become Men.

As the bus cruised down the parkway on Sunday morning towards home it was time relax and reflect. For in many ways it really did seem like a dream; in a few short years things had changed so much.

- The fear and uncertainty that followed the announcement at Attucks High School that at the end of the next school year the school would be closed for good and all students would be transferred to the cross town white school.
- Meeting strangers who at times seemed as curious and unsure of this arrangement as you were.
- The elections which seemed to result in attitudes of separation and division.
- The internal strife with the team which threatened to destroy and undermine all that we worked to accomplish.

Yes it really was a dream, but a dream with promise and purpose. A dream that was destined to change people and change lives. In three short years much had been accomplished. The unknown, the foreseen, the unforgettable.

The strangers during integration were now friends, comrades and associates. The internal strife within the team was now a distant memory. And the election, yes, the election, in two short years the impossible. The ballots were collected and counted. Students were nominated to four class officer positions, students were elected to four class officer positions. Two white and two black.

As the bus was escorted into the parking lot at Hopkinsville High School I could not believe my eyes. What was going on? All the cars. Why were all the people here? The parking lot was full; full of people, all kind of people, full of smiling faces, full of outstretch arms, full of warm embraces, full of kind words and sincere gestures, full of Love.

Hopkinsville had come out in numbers to welcome home Black and Decker.

So I guess it's true. Sports like Love can transcend all things, even difficulties and adversity. It opened doors in Alabama and Mississippi, in 1960 it cast the spotlight on a bash young man from Louisville, Kentucky named Cassius Clay and the rest is history. It cause the name of Branch Ricky to become synonymous with opening doors and fostering change. And now it's brought an entire community together in a small town in Western Kentucky.

If someone should ask, what does Towson, Maryland and Hopkinsville, Ky. Have in common?

NOW YOU KNOW, THE REST OF THE STORY.

Wendell Lynch
September 5, 2002