

Kings of the Bluegrass

The Kentucky Boys' High School Basketball State Tournament began in 1918. For 14 years there were 18 regions that encompassed the tournament. Since 1932, there have only been 16 regions thus the term "Sweet Sixteen" was coined. Kentucky is one of only two states (Delaware is the other) that still play a state tournament without a class system that divides large and small schools into separate tournaments.

Of the 16 regions, Region 1 is made up of the high schools in the Jackson Purchase. This area of Kentucky is comprised of 8 counties with a combined land area of 3,400 square miles. This region is bounded by the Mississippi River to the west, the Ohio River to the north, and the Tennessee River to the east. Historically, this region has been considered the most "Southern" of Kentucky. The area was originally part of Kentucky when it began its statehood in 1792. However, the land was not under definitive US control until 1818 when it was actually purchased from the Chickasaw Indians by Andrew Jackson hence the "Jackson Purchase."

In the 1930s, the Purchase became more mobile when bridges were built across the 3 bordering rivers. The Purchase was driven by agriculture. However, the coming of the Great Depression forced families to move north to Detroit with the boom of the automobile industry. In 1944, the Kentucky Dam's construction was completed, and the first generator went online two weeks after the gates closed. This provided more economic growth for the area, and several of those who migrated north in the 30s came back to the area to work at the new industries.

Located about 10 miles due south of Mayfield, Kentucky, was a small town of about 100 people. Under the influence of tobacco farming and subsequent trade and political interests, the community was named Cuba in 1854. Graves County was, and for the most part still is, one of the world's major producers of dark fired tobacco. To paint a good picture, Cuba's population at this time was 25% less than the population of Gracey, Kentucky now. During the 30s and 40s, electricity and running water were not available to the residents of Cuba. Each family of the town was involved in agriculture. In the fall, they cut tobacco; in the winter, they killed hogs; in the spring, they planted crops. The only stable purchases of these families pretty much were salt, sugar, and coffee.

Cuba was a true community. Others helped others. They would spend days building houses and barns together. These workdays were social events. No community member ever paid for labor. Located in the center of Cuba was Wagoner's General Store where boys played basketball on the dirt court and shot at a goal made out of a bicycle tire rim attached to some wooden boards.

Along with the start of the depression in 1933, a special group of boys were born in the Jackson Purchase. From 1946-47 because of low enrollment in grades 7-12 in the Purchase, the Kentucky Department of Education closed some rural schools and consolidated kids to a central location. Cuba school was one of those central schools, and their student enrollment was around 130 kids, K-12.

As nine year olds, Charles Kenneth Floyd and Howard Crittenden became best friends. As a young boy, Floyd entertained himself playing with doodle bugs and his father accordingly

nicknamed him Doodle. Howard simply went by Howie. They both lived in Pilot Oak which was located 3 miles from Cuba school where they would walk together to school every day. On this walk, they always dribbled and passed a basketball because there was a stretch of black top; thus the chemistry began.

Doodle was an enormous baby at birth; he weighed in at 15 pounds. He had 5 older brothers, and 1 older sister. He lived on a 45 acre farm. He didn't have a choice not to be tough. Doodle was tall, big-boned, and strong. He was not totally devoted to academics rather he treated school as a social place. He had somewhat of a "Huck Finn" mentality. Doodle would also walk roughly 8-12 miles a day just by doing chores. This provided excellent training for what was to come of his early basketball career.

Howie was the youngest of 10 children. The Crittenden's moved to Detroit in 1942. At school in Detroit, Howie excelled at PE and started developing basketball skills mainly his set shot and dribbling. The Crittenden's returned back to Pilot Oak in 1945. Howie was a good student, quiet, polite, and thin. Both Howie and Doodle shared the same affinity for basketball and both were extremely competitive.

James Webb (Jimmie) was another classmate of Doodle and Howie who had a like-mindedness for basketball. He grew up an only child living halfway between Pilot Oak and Cuba. His dad was a trucker and a farmer so he had to do his fair share of daily chores which involved milking cows, suckering tobacco, hauling wheat, just to name a few. Riding a bus to school in morning, Jimmie forfeited the bus ride after school to stay and play basketball.

Jack Story began teaching and coaching at Cuba in 1942 after he moved back from Detroit. In the district final that year, the Cubs lost by one point which was the closest they had ever come to a state tournament appearance. Story then joined the Navy in 1944. After World War II ended in 1945, he went back teaching and coaching at Cuba along with working the third shift at Shawnee plant in Mayfield. Story only slept for 3 hours a night. He taught Civics and Math in the morning and coached physical education and basketball in the afternoon. He was a strict disciplinarian and a stickler for details.

So when Jimmie, Doodle, and Howie were in the 7th grade in 1947, they began playing basketball with Raymon McClure and Joe Buddy Warren during recess and lunch. All five boys handled the ball well and each had a specific gift. Coach Story noticed the boys playing basketball one day in October from his classroom window. He laughed and said to himself aloud, "Well, I be damned." He met with them in the following days. He told them of what it meant to be a team and gave them a run-down of basketball in the state. Story instilled a mindset in those 7th graders that they were capable of winning a state tournament if they started to prepare. And that they did!

In 1948, the now eighth graders began to discover their roles. Doodle was a shifty big man who was ambidextrous with a killer swooping hook shot. He could nail the shot from 20 feet out and the deep corner was a favorable spot for him. Howie had phenomenal handles with the basketball. Jimmie constantly moved without the ball and was a deadly set shot and talented scorer. Raymon was a tenacious rebounder, tremendous shot blocker, and a great passer; Joe Buddy was a complimentary ball handler who was scrappy and could jump out of the gym. Each boy understood that their offense started with their defense. Even though Howie was the

floor general, there was no stand out leader on and off the court. Each boy put the team above himself.

In the neighboring county that year, a small school also provided inspiration for the boys. The Brewers School of Marshall County completed an undefeated season, and they marched through the state championship and brought home the title. They are the last team in the KHSAA to complete an undefeated season. The Cuba boys idolized that team and set the goal of winning the state championship before their high school careers had begun. During their 8th and 9th grade years they practice with Coach Story every day from 12:30-3:00.

High School basketball was quite different back in the 1940s and 50s. Some of the major rule variations played a vital role in how the game was played. Of course, there was no 3-point shot until 1987. When a foul was committed, the player had the choice of shooting a free throw, or his team got to take the ball out of bounds at mid court. If a player was fouled in the act of shooting, he had two choices as well. He could shoot both free throws; or he could elect to shoot one foul shot, and have his team take the ball out of bounds again. If the game was tied at the end of regulation, a 3-minute overtime would follow. If the game was tied at the end of the first overtime, the second overtime would be sudden death meaning the first person to score won the game.

Much like today the junior varsity games took place before the varsity contests. In Cuba during 1949-50, more people would come to watch the JV than the varsity. Cuba's gym could seat 450 spectators but as many as 500-550 would crowd in for each game. Games would start at 7:00 but they lined up outside beginning at 5:00. As sophomores, Cuba was upset in the

regional tournament by the little school of Cayce. Two starters were out because of injury and sickness, and Doodle had an off game.

The boys entered their junior year taller and stronger. They opened the season 14-0. They then lost to an Illinois powerhouse in Paducah's annual Christmas tournament. Their second loss of the season came to the #1 team in Kentucky, Clark County. The boys ended the regular season 27-2 and after district tournament play they were 30-2. Now the Cubs set their sights on making their first state tournament. They narrowed out Paducah Tilghman in their first round of the regional tournament, 51-46, in a physical matchup. Doodle fouled out with blood on his uniform. They rolled through the rest of the regional tournament by way of their defense and rebounding.

Cuba was the 4th Graves County team to make the state tournament. They traveled to Lexington on State Highway 80 and up 31W. They were described by the radio as: "the unknowns, the underdogs, and little Cuba from way down yonder in Graves County." Games would be held in Memorial Coliseum which had just opened in 1950. Twelve thousand would pack the gym for Cuba's first game vs. Covington Holmes. Cuba trailed the entire game but tied it up in the 4th quarter, 34-34, and went on to win, 38-37. Cuba started to gain the support of all the fans except the team they were facing.

Cuba's quarterfinal opponent was Lexington University High. Again University held as much as a 10 point lead in the first half. By the end of the 3rd quarter Cuba only trailed 45-43. Then Cuba started the 4th quarter with a burst of energy and gained a 10 point lead with 3 minutes left. At that point, Howie was able to basically dribble out the clock. Keep in mind, he had a

phenomenal ball handling ability and the rule about having a choice to take the ball out of bounds if you were fouled. University would repeatedly foul Howie, and Cuba kept electing to take the ball out of bounds.

In the semifinal game, Cuba grinded out a victory against a strong, physical Whitesburg, 65-62. Cuba only went 6 deep. Howie and Doodle would play these entire games and the other would rotate. Waiting for Cuba in the state final that same evening was their nemesis, Clark County. The Cubs were too tired to put up a fight. They lost 69-44. The Cubs finished 36-3 on the entire season, but in their mind it was a complete failure. They were too short sighted to realize that they had gained the fancy of the crowd and the entire state.

During the offseason, the Cuba teammates set a goal to build their endurance. That summer, they would chase rabbits and would race to Mayfield and back which was a total of 10 miles. When school began, they would meet in the morning and race the bus to school which was a 3 mile jaunt. They also stopped smoking. They were bound and determined not to let their lack of stamina play a role in them not attaining a state title in their senior season.

Starting in the 1951-52 season, the Cuba Cubs began the season 19-2. Their first loss came to Wickliffe, 52-51, where Raymon had sore ankles and Howie and Jimmie were suffering from the flu. Their second loss came to Louisville DuPont Manual, 48-41, with a student enrollment of over 3000. Next on the tough regular season schedule was a showdown verses Selmer (the #1 team in Tennessee). The game was highly publicized even Ed Diddle came to recruit potential players. The game was held in Mayfield's gym which at capacity was 1750. Once that many tickets were sold, they closed the gates. It's said that 5000 tickets could've been sold for the

contest. Jimmie Webb caught fire that game scoring 15 in the first half. Cuba's lead was 40-23 at the half; the Selmer crowd was stunned. The Cubs went on to improve to 20-2 on the season collecting a 69-50 victory.

Later that season, Cuba participated in the Louisville Invitational Tournament where they handily beat powerhouses such as Male and Campbellsville. They lost in the championship game to Manual once again by 12 points. They then lost their next matchup to Allen County by 1 point because they were missing 4 starters due to sickness and injury. They went on through the rest of the regular season, and only encounter one more loss which was to Allen County by 9 points.

Cuba entered district tournament play with a record of 27-5. They rolled through that tournament with wins over Farmington, Wingo, and Symsonia. The average margin of victory was 32 points. In the opening game of the regional tournament, they stomped Clinton, 74-29, and then whipped Symsonia again 61-34. In the finals, they met Wickliffe again who had handed them one of their losses on the regular season. They played a great defensive game and avenged their loss to win 54-42. The Cubs had again earned their ticket to the state tournament.

Unlike the Cub's junior season, this season had been a real struggle. As seniors, they had suffered many injuries and illnesses. On the other hand, they had a gained a valuable asset in Bill Pollock (transfer from Mayfield) as well as underclassmen Jimmy Brown and Harold Roberts. This time they were going to the state tournament in better shape and with a deeper bench. Kentucky high school basketball fans watched with a heightened sense of anticipation.

In the first round, Cuba faced Corbin who had an outstanding talented big man by the name of Jerry Bird. Bird looked like he was going to beat the Cubs single handedly in the first quarter, but then Jimmie Webb caught fire and hit 6-6 shots in the second. Down 47-44 at the start of the 4th quarter, Doodle took over the game. He scored 6 straight baskets, and Joe Buddy added 2 for good measure closing out the game 60-53. Next up was Henry Clay.

Cuba led in the first half pretty much all the way by a margin of more than double digits. But before the half was over Webb had fouled out and Raymon left the game due to a sprained ankle. However, Pollock and Roberts performed admirably off the bench. Henry Clay did pull within 2 points in the third quarter, but the Cubs went on to win the game by 14 points. That set the semifinal stage: Cuba vs. Hindman on one side; and Clark County vs. Manual on the other.

Hindman and Cuba put on an excruciating semifinal battle. They were tied at half, tied after the third quarter, and consequently tied at the end of regulation. For the first 3-minute overtime, no one scored; so they moved into a sudden death double overtime. Webb collected the tip and passed the ball to Howie, who dribbled around at the top of the key. From there, he rifled it to an open Doodle, standing near the baseline in the deep corner. In the most dramatic moment of the tournament, Doodle faked the start of his windmill shot then put up a 15-foot, one handed push shot. Coach Story was spotted gasping on the bench, not wanting Doodle to shoot the shot. The shot caught nothing but net. The horn blew; the stadium went berserk. In the middle of the mob on the floor, Coach Story turned to Doodle and said, "Don't you realize we could have lost the game if you had missed from there?" Doodle smiled and replied, "But, Coach, I didn't aim to miss!"

Manual edged out Clark County, 54-53, in the other semifinal. The final was set to be played at 8:45 that evening back at Memorial Coliseum. Manual had two big men that stood 6'8" and 6'7". In fact, the smallest person in their starting five was as tall as Doodle who was the Cub's tallest player. They had reason to be confident they would beat the Cubs for a third time that season.

Even so, the Cubs still thought they would fulfill their dream. Yet as the game began, it looked like last year's disappointment all over again. Manual jumped out to a 9-3 lead in the first four minutes. The two teams battled to a 16-9 Manual advantage at the end of the first quarter. Quickly in the second quarter, the Cubs got doubled up 20-10, but they battled back to cut their deficit, 30-24, at halftime.

In the locker room, the Cubs huddled circled around Story. He told them: "this is the last time you all will ever play basketball together. After five years of playing together, this is the last time. So, tonight, you just do what you will please." Without saying another word, he walked out. After the door shut, the boys sat in silence for a few moments before Doodle angrily said, "I be damned if we're gonna let Manual beat us!"

From the moment the ball hit the floor in the 3rd quarter, it was all-systems-go for Cuba. They quickly trimmed Manual's lead to 1 point, traded baskets with Manual for the next few minutes, and took their first lead, 41-40, halfway through the 3rd. And by the end of the quarter Cuba had jumped to a 46-42 lead.

Cuba managed to hold a lead, 50-46, with 6 minutes left. Cuba went into stall mode for the next 3 minutes where the crowd eagerly watched Cuba elect to take the ball out of bounds

instead of shooting foul shots when fouled. In the middle of the stall, Webb saw an opening and made a driving layup to put the Cubs up 52-46 with 2:45 remaining. Manual then made two quick baskets to trim the lead, 52-50. Then the teams traded baskets to make it 54-52. Doodle made another bucket to give Cuba a 56-52 lead with less than a minute to play. With Manual unable to score on the next play, Howie collected the ball and went into stall mode again.

In the book *When Cuba Conquered Kentucky*, it described the close of the game like this:

The waning moments were sweet. While Manual went after Howie with increasing desperation, he retreated down long paths of trial and experience. He led Manual across worn patches of country clay and creaky country gym floors. He led it down miles of dusty country roads and through all those winter days and summer nights of practice at home in Graves County. He led them farther than Manual could follow.

And with 18 seconds left, Howie found Jimmie Webb on a back door cut to make the final score Cuba 58, Manual 52. Cuba's dream season was complete.