

Barn Burners of all Barn Burners

March 20, 2024 - 70th anniversary of historic Milan game

This article is in celebration of the “barn burner of all barn burners”. The 70th anniversary of the 1954 Indiana state boys basketball championship game, the Milan Indians vs. the Muncie Central Bearcats.

It is the sports story of “David and Goliath” proportions of the 20th century. It is the only high school basketball game to have a major movie studio loosely make a motion picture about it, “Hoosiers.”

The date is March 20, 1954. It is Saturday night. Muncie Central was a school of thousands and Milan had a student body of 161, 75 of whom are boys. There were no “classes” in Indiana boys basketball.

Muncie Central had won an amazing four state championships; Milan had made it to the regionals twice before and the semi-state the year before.

Muncie Central’s front line was 6 feet 5 inches, 6 feet 4 inches, and 6 feet 2 inches. Milan had no starters over 6 feet 2 inches.

The final score was 32-30, Milan wins! But how they won is the magic.

Milan was behind 28-26 in the fourth quarter and Bobby Plump of Milan held the ball. What team, that is behind, does that? Milan did. They wanted to dictate the tempo of the game.

In my home at 327 Emerson Drive in Seymour - and this is the only flashback I remember - I was literally doing back-flips in the Living Room as only an excited 9 year old could do as Plump held the ball.

My mother came out of the kitchen next to the living room and said sternly to me, “If you don’t settle down, I am going to turn off the TV.” I tried to settle down. At least the television was not turned off.

Plump held the ball approximately four minutes and 11 seconds, then called a time out. The 15,000 plus crowd at Hinkle Fieldhouse in Indianapolis were in pandemonium.

Here are some suggestions how to find out about the final minutes of the game:

Go to the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame Museum in New Castle, Ind. and talk with Christopher May, the director. Get a copy of ESPN Classic’s broadcast of the game.

Drive to Milan and visit the Reservation Restaurant, see the photographs on the wall and talk with the locals. Or purchase a copy of “A Boy, A Ball, and A Dream” by Kerry Marshall or “The Greatest Basketball Story Ever Told: The Milan Miracle Then and Now” by Greg Guffey and Bob Hammel.

After seeing an article about Marshall’s book in the Jackson County Banner - complete with a telephone number - a few years ago, I phoned to order the book.

Mr. Marvin Wood, coach of the Milan Indians in 1954, answered the phone. He told me how special it was to get calls from so many people who remembered the game. Coach Wood was 26 years old in 1954.

For those of us who love the “underdog” in any contest - especially in the game of life - the Milan vs. Muncie Central games remains a watershed event of our magical childhoods in Indiana in the 1950’s.

Incidentally, on Saturday night, March 20, 2004, on the 50th anniversary of this heroic game, I took my three granddaughters - Lissa Gath, Allison and Joanna Fretthold - over to St. Mark Lutheran School in North Tonawanda, NY to shoot a few buckets. There I told them about the basketball game of monumental proportions - Milan vs. Muncie Central.

East & Southwest ... Greatest in Basketball

Located directly two counties east of Seymour, Indiana is:

Ripley County and Milan, Indiana, Hoosiers, and the 1954 Indiana HS Boys State Champions — Milan Indians & BOBBY PLUMP.

Located directly two counties to the southwest of Seymour, Indiana is:

Orange County and French Lick, Indiana, Boston Celtics, and their 3 NBA Championships with LARRY BIRD.