

WPJ “The Time Machine” Article #9  
“Looking Ahead and Looking Back”

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I must admit when I considered approaching the Wadena Pioneer Journal last fall, about writing an occasional article, I was unsure of myself. Yet I knew I had uncovered so many great stories over the past few years, it would be a huge mistake not to share them. As I write this summary of year one of “The Time Machine,” I can’t help but think about what is available for future trips to the past. Wadena High School basketball, 1900-80 is done. Football, 1900-69 is done and 1970-80 is next on my checklist. The research results from those efforts will be more than enough to keep the stories coming.

In the early 1900’s the only high school sponsored sports were football, basketball, and track. Because of that my plan is to research track & field, upon completion of WHS football, through 1980. If my passion for WHS sports history remains intact I will research wrestling and baseball. Cross country, tennis, and golf are on the list too. So many more stories, so little time!

Now that you know what the future may bring, let’s review where we have been.

-T. Edison Smith (’36), was a great athlete in high school and college, but he really made a name for himself because of what he did between the ages of 60-94. He golfed his age over 3,300 times. A world record documented and acknowledged by “*Golf Digest*.”

-Leland “Squeak” Johnson (’35), had a remarkable football career at WHS and was a great surprise as a walk-on for the legendary U of M head coach Bernie Bierman. The Gophers were busy winning national titles and Big Ten championships in those days. “Squeak” was a major contributor, when healthy, as he ran with both speed and power. The Gophers’ football team was 27-5 during “Squeak’s four-year tenure.

-Cleon Erckenbrak would have graduated from WHS in 1946, but he had other plans. After being a starter, as a soph. and a junior, on the WHS back-to-back undefeated football teams of 1943 and 1944, he enlisted in the U.S.Army Air Corps. At the time America was at war with Germany and Japan.

-Russ Askew (’34) was the starting center for the WHS basketball teams for five seasons, ending in 1934. He earned All-Conference honors as a freshman and as a senior. I had dubbed him, “The Center of Attention.” It took me some time to figure out what value he brought as a 5-year starter. Then it hit me. A “jump ball” after every made basket. This led to dozens of jump balls in every game. Russ must have been a leaper because he “controlled” most of the jump balls in the games where I saw the records. A huge advantage. The rule changed in 1938.

-Bob Hedstrom (’50), “The Cream of the Crop.” Upon completion of my research into the history of WHS basketball covering 1900-80, I came to some conclusions about players, teams, and coaches. In my humble opinion Bob Hedstrom was one of the four best WHS players in the modern era (post 1938 – no more jump ball after each made basket).

-Mr. Aus was a physical education and health teacher, as well as the WHS head basketball coach (1964-70). Upon graduation from Minot State College he spent two years at the University of North Dakota as a graduate student and a graduate assistant coach for the men's basketball team. After graduate school Mr. Aus coached high school basketball in North Dakota before coming to Wadena in 1964. His tenure at UND allowed him to learn from three future NBA coaches, two of which are enshrined in the NBA Coaches Hall of Fame. UND head coach Bill Fitch and UND star player Phil Jackson. UND assistant coach Jimmy Rodgers eventually became the Minnesota Timberwolves' first head coach. Jackson played for the NY Knicks and won numerous NBA titles coaching the Chicago Bulls and the LA Lakers.

Don't write me off until next fall. I just may invite you to hop in the "Time Machine" and take a day trip with me into the ever surprising past. In the meantime, I can be reached at [jebbwillis1955@gmail.com](mailto:jebbwillis1955@gmail.com).