

WPJ “The Time Machine” Article #7

“The Cream of the Crop”

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Upon completion of my research of the history of Wadena High School basketball, covering 1900-80, I could not help but wonder, who was the best player and who had the best team during that 80-year span. Even as I pondered that, I knew that those questions could not be answered, but they do make for interesting contemplation. There have been significant rule changes over the decades that have made comparisons meaningless. Despite that, in the “1960-80 WHS Basketball Scrapbook” (available at the historical society) I have a section devoted to recognizing some of the top players. From the collection of those top players, I picked the four that, in my opinion, are the “Cream of the Crop.” Three of the four have numerous statistics to support their selection. The fourth player has few documented stats, but the ones I discovered speak volumes. Let’s go back to the 1948-50 seasons to see what made Bob Hedstrom so special.

Joe Krause ('55) wrote a couple of great books about growing up in Wadena (“Life in the Slow Lane,” and the sequel, “More Life in the Slow Lane”). Included in the sequel were his fifteen top memories of high school, college, and professional sports. Many of his best sports memories involved his brother-in-law, local football legend John Campbell ('56) (WHS All-Conference, Gopher All Big-10 and Steelers All-Pro). Of those fifteen most memorable sporting events, that he witnessed in person, number one on his list was a WHS basketball game, against Brainerd, dominated by Bob Hedstrom. Here is what Mr. Krause said about Hedstrom when recounting the big game against the Warriors in December of 1949:

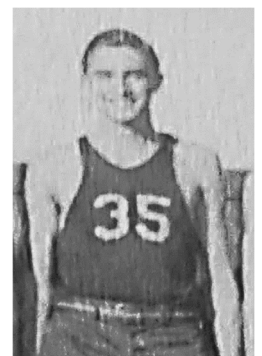
*“The six-foot three-inch Hedstrom was a complete basketball player who would dribble the ball up the court against the press, and could take the ball inside, or shoot a jumper from 10-20 feet.”*

We will hear more about that Brainerd game in a moment.

In Bob’s sophomore season of 1947-48 the roster was lean. The best players were mostly juniors and sophomores. In addition to Hedstrom there was another 10<sup>th</sup> grader, Pat Merickel, who was an outstanding athlete. This season would be a rebuilding year and provide a solid foundation for the two years that would follow.

The 1949 season was a turn-around year for Wadena. A fresh start as they were joining the powerful Central Ten conference which included Aitkin, Alexandria, Bemidji, Brainerd, Crosby-Ironton, Detroit Lakes, Little Falls, St. Cloud Tech, and Staples. However, this would be Wadena’s only year competing in the Central Ten conference.

Wadena had a good year finishing 12-8 overall, 7-3 for second place in District 24 behind Brainerd, and tied with Brainerd for third place in the Central Ten, at 9-6.



Hedstrom was named to the Central Ten all-conference team, as a junior. Impressive for an underclassman competing in such a tough conference. Equally impressive is the fact that only five players were named to that all-conference team. In all, three seniors, Hedstrom, and a sophomore from Brainerd. With both underclassmen being in District 24, the junior and the sophomore would meet again twice next year and possibly a third time if they met during the district tournament. Hedstrom was also named to the five player All-District 24 team as a junior.

The following year Wadena had every right to expect a stellar season with the seniors Hedstrom and Merickel providing a one-two punch that would be difficult to stop. The first big test was December 16, 1949 when Wadena (4-0) would play host to Brainerd (6-0). This would be Wadena's biggest game on the biggest stage since 1943 when Wadena beat C-I for the district title.

Behind 37 points from Wadena's 6'3" pivot and 15 points from Pat Merickel, Wadena thumped Brainerd 61-54. Joe Krause states, *"The Sunday Minneapolis Tribune followed that Friday game with a headline on the high school sports page proclaiming, "Wadena Rises as a Region Six Threat."*

Brainerd finished the regular season at 19-1 as they later avenged their only loss by beating Wadena on their court. Wadena finished at 15-5. Time for the 1950 District 24 tournament. Wadena won their first two games as did Brainerd, setting up the rubber match contest to determine who would advance to the Region 6 tournament.

While Hedstrom had scored 49 points in the first two games of this district tournament he was held to just 15 points in the title game. He found himself in early foul trouble and played in only about half of the contest. His teammate Pat Merickel picked up the slack by scoring 24 points in a tough 50-47 loss. Wadena finished the season at 17-6. A great WHS career came to a disappointing end. But what a career it was. Let me review the highlights.

As a junior Hedstrom was one of five players selected to the Central 10 All-Conference team. A two-time All-District 24 selection. He scored 37 points against one of the best teams in the state for Brainerd's only regular season loss. And these last statistics I have not yet mentioned. He broke the District 24 tournament single game total points record with 31 against Pillager, and the district three game total points record with 64.

Bob Hedstrom went on to Macalester College to play basketball and get a business degree. After college he joined the military and later returned to Wadena and was a successful businessman and very active in the community, as a member of the Wadena Volunteer Fire Department, the Wadena Lions, and the Elks club. He passed away in 2016 at the age of 84 and was laid to rest in the Wadena cemetery.

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Until next time!