

Art 12 - Who was Verl "Gus" Young? WHS 1928



Sometimes when I hop into the "Time Machine" I have no destination in mind. Just going for a joy-ride, see the sights, window shopping. When I was working on the "1900-49 WHS Football Scrapbook" I stumbled onto this interesting WHS alum. The paragraph below was the caption for this (poor quality) picture of Gus Young.

"Assistant coach 'Gus' Young of Carlton will be accompanying the Carlton College football team when it stops in Wadena Friday night for a workout, at the athletic field, for its game the next day with N.D. State at Fargo. Coach Young is the son of Fannie (Askew) Young of Wadena."

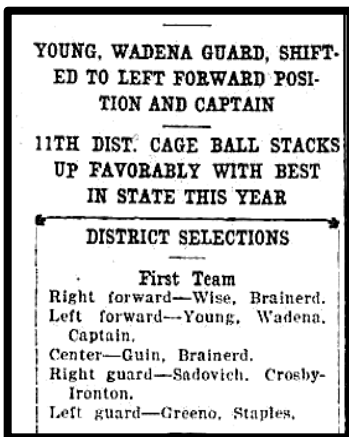
I felt the need to do some digging, so I did. The more I tried to discover who were the relatives of Gus Young, the more complicated it became. Here are some of the last names I came across while searching: Askew, Harrison, King, and Stuntebeck. With a high degree of certainty, I can state that Gus Young's mom, Fannie (Askew) Young, was a grandaunt (siblings of one's grandparents) of Harry Harrison.

Now that we have some idea of Gus' family let's try to track his very interesting life and career. Born in 1910 and a WHS graduate in 1928, he was very active in sports, playing football and basketball for WHS and most likely town team baseball in the summer.

By the end of this story, you will surely agree that Gus Young had a colorful career. He has been described as an irrepressible sort of person, full of optimism, ideas, and daring.

1924-28 Wadena High School

Mr. Young was a four-year participant on the WHS varsity football and basketball teams. In football he went from being an end to a running back to a quarterback. During that time the outcomes of only 9 games are known, winning seven and losing two.



During Young's WHS basketball tenure the team won about half of their games. The most telling fact I discovered, relevant to Young's individual abilities, came in the 1928 District 11 basketball tournament. Wadena was eliminated by C-I in the semifinals. The Rangers were defeated by Brainerd in the championship. A five-player all-district team was named, and Young was on it. An additional honor, one I had never heard of, is that he was named the team captain. I think being named the captain of any "all-star" team is the same as earning the "Most Valuable Player" honor. Given that Wadena lost in the semifinals and Young is recognized as the honorary captain of the all-district team, well that tells me all I need to know about Young's basketball abilities.

Our next stop, Northfield.

1928-32 Carlton College

Young enjoyed much success at Carlton College where he competed in football, basketball, and baseball. He led the Knight's basketball team during a three-year stretch where they suffered only one loss. He was inducted into the Carlton Hall of Fame in 1978.



1932-39 Teaching and Coaching

Upon graduation from Carlton, Young wasted no time finding employment in the teaching and coaching fields. His stops included Warroad, Buffalo, Hutchinson, and Austin. His past success as an athlete and now as a high school coach opened a door at his alma mater.

1939-42 Carlton College

Young was hired as an assistant football coach. It was during this stint at Carlton, in the fall of 1940, that the Knight's football team stopped in Wadena on its way to Fargo to take on the Bison. The Knights had left Northfield a day early, to use the WHS football field for one last practice.

1942-49 Businesses

Upon leaving Carlton after a three-year run as an assistant football coach, it is most likely that he returned to his restaurant and bowling alley businesses. In seven years, he would resurface in St. Peter.

1949-56 Gustavus

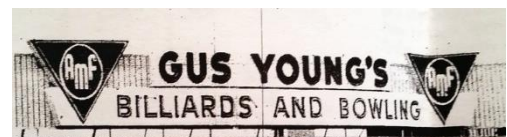
Young accepted a teaching assignment and assumed the Gusties head basketball coaching position. At that time Hamline, led by Joe Hutton, was the dominant small college basketball program. In Young's first five seasons the Gusties were runners-up to Hamline three times. In Young's final three seasons the Gusties won three conference titles.



In 1978, Young was inducted into the Gustavus Athletic Hall of Fame. He had a colorful eight-year career at Gustavus and as coach was an irrepressible sort of person, full of optimism, ideas and daring. It was during his reign that Joe Hutton's Hamline Pipers were dethroned as the perennial champions of the MIAC. It took Gus a season to get acquainted and then three years as runners-up before he became the league's dominant personality with a three-year championship run - - 1954, 1955, 1956. His overall conference record was 82 wins and 34 losses. His teams played colleges from 20 different states, and he believed that sports had a great part to play in the development of a boy's character, so his teams always looked and acted the part of a gentleman.

1956-68 Businesses

After a great run at Gustavus Young appeared to have gone back to taking care of business, or in his case, businesses. His restaurants and bowling alleys would occupy his time until the opportunity of his career would eventually present itself.



1967-69

The American Basketball Association began play in 1967 and established its league offices in Minneapolis. Former Minneapolis Lakers superstar George Mikan served as the ABA's first commissioner. The Twin Cities received one of the ABA's eleven original franchises – the Minnesota Muskies. The Muskies, led by rookie center Mel Daniels, were outstanding and posted the second-best record in the league at 50-28. But Minnesotans ignored the team at the box office. The Muskies moved to Miami after the ABA's inaugural season ended in May 1968

Minnesota got another shot at the ABA just a month later. The owner of the 1968 league champion Pittsburgh Pipers, Gabe Rubin, sold a majority interest in his club to Minnesota attorney William Erickson. The Pipers had a superb roster of players, including the league's reigning MVP Connie Hawkins.

Minnesota hired a new General Manager, Vern Mikkelsen. An Askov native, Hamline University alum, and Minneapolis Lakers NBA All-Star, Mikkelsen was well known to Minnesota basketball fans. The GM then hired a new coach, Jim Harding. He was a collegiate coach, known for winning records and short tenures at a string of small schools. Harding had been equally successful in coaching tenures at two other colleges, but he left behind a trail of NCAA violations and endless turmoil, the latter a pattern that followed him to the professional ranks. Harding was a drillmaster and self-

described perfectionist, putting the Pipers through exhausting practices, banning soul music in the locker room, and raging on the sidelines.

Behind the scenes, Verl "Gus" Young was hired to be the team's Director of Special Promotions. This was the perfect job for Young. He loved showmanship. In his typical fun-loving manner, he introduced fancy warm-up drills with multi-colored basketballs, a tuxedo-suited pep band, half-time variety shows that featured a 100-voice male chorus, and spotlighted flag ceremonies. He was a basketball impresario.

The season got off to a good start in terms of wins and losses, however there was friction between coach Harding and his team as well as his GM. By the time the ABA All-Star weekend arrived coach Harding had taken disciplinary action against several players for various reasons. In each case the impacted players appealed to Mikkelsen and in each case the GM overruled the coach.

Harding sought support by going to the Pipers founder and co-owner Gabe Rubin. Rubin stood by the decisions of his GM. Harding was furious and eventually got into a late-night physical altercation with Rubin, at the hotel, on the night before the ABA All-Star game. The fracas left both men visibly bruised and scratched. The Pipers fired Harding shortly thereafter.

Minnesota's record stood at 26-19 at the all-star break. Mikkelsen decided to turn over the keys, to the Pipers' locker room, to their Director of Special Promotions, Wadena's own Verl "Gus" Young. However, injuries would be a strong headwind for the second half of the season. Connie Hawkins would miss 25 games after a mid-season knee surgery. Without Hawkins the team lost five of its first six under Young. By the middle of February, they had been knocked out of first place, relinquishing the top spot for the first time that season. They did make a couple of forays back into first place, but the slide continued the rest of the year. They finished the regular season in fourth place with a 36-42 record before being eliminated in the opening round of the playoffs by Miami, the former Minnesota Muskies.

A tale of two seasons. With Connie Hawkins the Pipers went 26-19. Without Hawkins, Gus Young's Pipers went 10-23. After the 1968-69 season the Pipers moved back to Pittsburgh, Connie Hawkins signed with the NBA's Phoenix Suns, and my guess is that Verl "Gus" Young went back to his restaurants and bowling alleys. It would take Minnesota 20 years to have another professional basketball team, the Timberwolves, in 1989.

Verl J. "Gus" Young died October 31, 1977. He was laid to rest in St. Peter, Minnesota.

Jebb Willis
jebbwillis1955@gmail.com
WCHS Volunteer