

“The Time Machine”

WHS Basketball’s Top Teams to 1940

Article #16

It is that time of the year when the gridiron cleats are cleaned up and stored in the equipment room, to rest and look forward to next August. Many a student-athlete will now turn their attention to their cager footwear.

I thought we would start our 2023-24 “Time Machine” basketball scrapbook tours with a big picture approach. In article #14, “Undefeated WHS Football Teams” we uncovered seven teams from 1900-80. Let’s do something similar with basketball, only different.

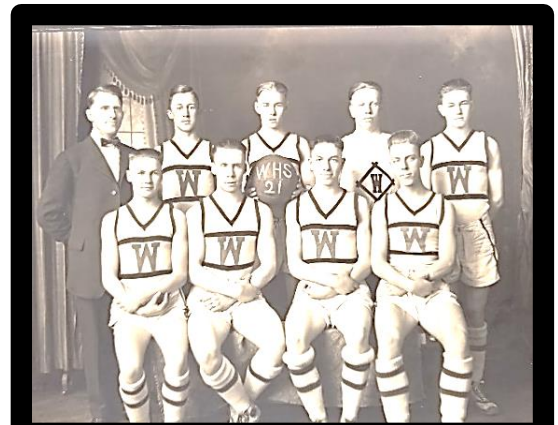
There may be only one undefeated Wadena basketball team, but there are many other notable ones to discover over the 80-year scrapbook coverage period. I think it best to split our trip into two 40-year legs. In article #15, “The Rule Change that Changed the Game,” we saw in the 1920s a new football rule allowing the offense time to huddle in between downs. That completely changed the game of football. Over the years basketball has had its share of significant rule changes. None have had a greater impact than eliminating the jump ball after every made basket. The new rule went into effect for the 1937-38 season. Given the timing of that rule change, leg one of “The Time Machine” tour will cover the period from 1900-40. In the pending article #17 we will see what 1941-80 has in store for us. Buckle up, leg one next.

In the fall of 1920 Mr. Kuefler was hired to teach at WHS and to be the next basketball coach. His tenure as Wadena’s coach was only three years. I can say he had a great run even though there is very little information available.

For the 1921 season their record is unknown, though I estimate they played about 12 regular season games. And they were not invited to the “by invitation only” state tournament, which was how one earned a trip to the state tournament in those days. In the WPI, dated December 10, 1970, it states that the 1921 Wadena basketball team was undefeated. The 1922 and 1923 teams, after winning district 6 both years, were invited to the state tournament, suggesting strong records both seasons. In 1922 Wadena defeated New Ulm 27-17 in the quarterfinals of the state tournament, before losing in the semifinals to Madison 35-34 in OT. Red Wing (19-0) defeated Madison 34-27 in the championship game. The 1923 team, in the quarterfinals, lost 17-16 to Hopkins. That year Aurora (17-2) defeated Austin 24-14 in the title game.

Carol Parker has the distinction of being on all three teams highlighted in this story, while Donald McKinnon and Joe Rice were on the two state tournament teams. Rice was captain of the 1923 squad.

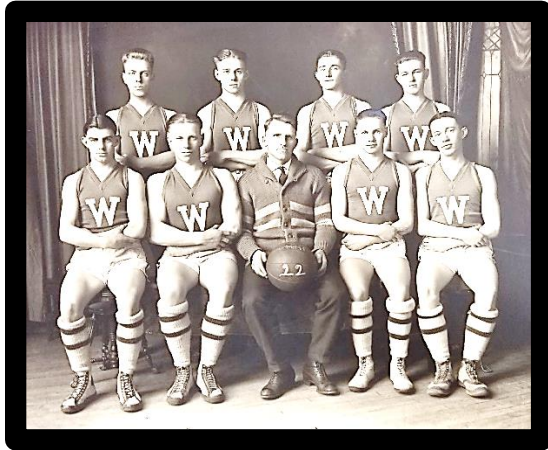
1920-21



Back: Coach Kuefler, Merritt Dodds, Vern Wright, Clair Walker, Carol Parker
Front: Marion Blaha, Carl McDowell, Harold Kruger, Bill Stevens

Undefeated (record unknown)

1921-22

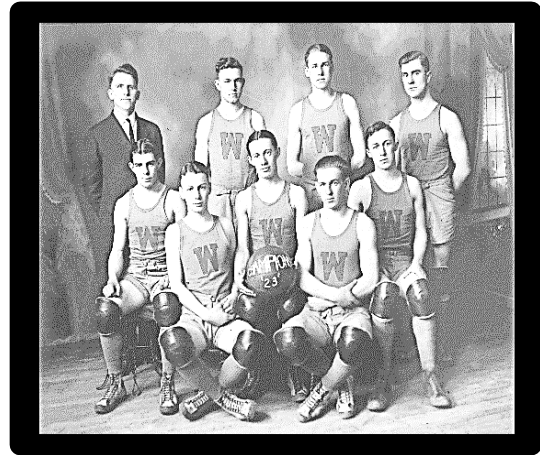


Back: Bill Stevens, Vern Wright, Maurice Merickel, Carol Parker
Front: Donald McKinnon, Clair Walker, Coach Kuefler, Marion Blaha, Joe Rice

1922 State Tournament Participant

Lost in semifinals to Madison 35-34 OT

1922-23



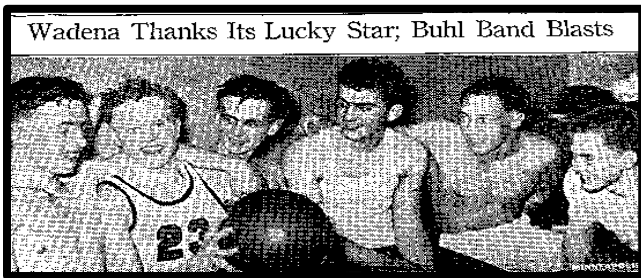
Back: Coach Kuefler, Carol Parker, Milton Gaslin, Carl Spooner
Front: Donald McKinnon, Kenneth Hezzelwood, Joe Rice, Ed Lehman, Merritt Dodds

1923 State Tournament Participant

Lost in quarterfinals to Hopkins 17-16

The 1930's were filled with success on the field and in the gym. Wadena was blessed with great athletes and one heck of a coach, Anton Chermak. From 1934-37 WHS faced perennial powerhouse Crosby-Ironton each year in the district 24 title game. The local boys were district champions in 1934 and 1936. The 1934 team included 5-year starter Russ Askew and sophomore starter Eddie "Skip" Miller. Wadena was defeated by Alexandria 20-17 in the region 6 semifinals. Miller would go on to lead Wadena to the 1936 state championship game against Bemidji. In the 1936 region tournament they beat Moorhead 25-20 and Morris 26-18. In the subsequent state tournament Wadena met a tournament favorite, Sleepy Eye, in the quarterfinals. With the score tied at 18 and time about to expire, Bill Browne took a shot from mid-court, nailed it, and now Wadena was the underdog tournament favorite. In the semifinals a very tough Buhl team was the next challenge. Wadena was able to squeak out a 28-27 victory. Their final obstacle would be the Bemidji Lumberjacks. The two schools had met the previous fall in a football contest, or no contest, as Bemidji dominated 47-0. I wonder if that was on the minds of the fans, athletes, and coaches of each team. My guess is it was. The magical tournament run came to an end with the 'Jacks winning the championship 26-20. Wadena's 1936 basketball team has been the most successful in school history, not just through 1980, but to date.

Unfortunately, I do not have the full season record for this 1936 team. I know they were 9-1 in their conference and 6-1 throughout the post season. I also know that the following year, the 1937 team played 20 regular season games. The most wins by any WHS team, through 1980 are 20 (1974), including post-season. I am confident this 1936 team had about 10 regular season games that we don't know about. When you couple that with the games we do know about, they had at least 15 wins and 2 losses. That means they needed to win 6 of the 10 games in question. I am confident they won 21 or more total games to hold the WHS record for most wins in one season.



Bill Browne post buzzer beater, with teammates.

1933-34



Back Row: Sam Pierce, Phil Schiller, Glen "Red" Garr, Warren Johnson (mgr), John Grogan, Bill Prettyman, Frank (Wiener) Merickel
Front Row: Leland "Squeak" Johnson, Harry "Swede" West, Russ Askew, Wallace "Red" Smith, Eddie "Skip" Miller

1934 Dist 24 Champs
 Wadena 35 Brainerd 20
Region 6 semi
 Wadena 17 Alexandria 20

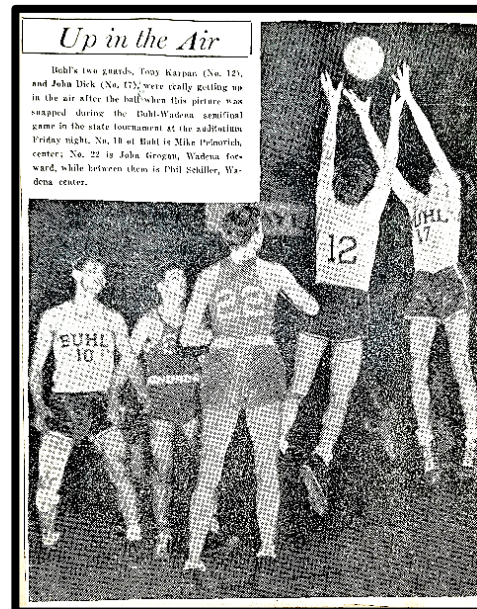
1935-36



Back Row: Ass't Coach Schunert, Glen Garr, John Grogan, Eddie Miller, Bill Browne, Phil Schiller and Head Coach Chermak

Front Row: Frank Merickel, Bill Prettyman, and Bill Breid

1936 State Tournament runner-up
 Wadena 20 Bemidji 26



1936 State Tournament semi
 Wadena 28 Buhl 27

I have a favor to ask of you valued readers. I am in search of a copy of the 1936 WHS yearbook. The Wadena County Historical Society and WDC high school are both missing that year in their rather comprehensive collections of WHS yearbooks. I would love to be able to take pictures of one and perhaps find out the season record for the basketball team, among other things. Please contact me (jebbwillis1955@gmail.com) if you can help.

This concludes leg one of our “Time Machine” tour. Leg two, 1941-1980 is being planned even as you are reading this article. Leg two will provide a more comprehensive view of past success. The following championship teams are likely stops:

1943 District 24

1959 Mid-State Conference

1974 Mid-State Conference, District 24

1978 District 24

1980 Mid-State Conference

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