

## **“The Time Machine”**

### **WHS Basketball’s Top Teams 1940-80**

#### **Article #17**

Our most recent journey in “The Time Machine” found us in the 1920’s and the 1930’s visiting the most successful WHS basketball teams of that era. Under new coach Mr. Kuefler, during his three-year teaching and coaching stint from 1920-23, the Indians went undefeated, followed by two consecutive trips to the Minnesota State Basketball Tournament. In the 1922 tournament, after beating Sleepy Eye, Wadena lost in the semifinals to Madison, 35-34 in OT. In the 1923 state tournament Hopkins clipped Wadena 17-16 in the quarterfinals. A great three-year run indeed.

Wadena’s most successful team ever, won their first two games by one point each before falling 26-20 to Bemidji in the 1936 state tournament. That reminds me of a favor I requested in article #16. Remember, 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. In case any of you had a thought that maybe you have one somewhere in the attic, or maybe you think a friend or relative might have a copy, but you were not motivated to follow through, let me provide an incentive. I will reward the first person who can help me fulfill my request with a nice crisp \$100 bill. No gimmicks. Cash on the barrel head, and you get to keep the book! Please contact me (jebwillis1955@gmail.com) if you can help.

Now, let’s review our itinerary going forward as we travel backward. We will visit the most successful teams since the jump ball after every basket was eliminated, effective the 1938 season. Our first stops will be the 1943 and the 1959 seasons. Subsequent stops will be in the 1974, 1978, and 1980 seasons.

#### **1943 District 24 Champions**

The year before WHS was crowned the 1943 District 24 champions, they finished 6-18. They were young and inexperienced. The highlight of the season was beating #2 seed Brainerd, 25-22 in the quarterfinals of the District 24 tournament. They started one senior, two juniors, one sophomore, and one freshman. Their two best players were the soph, Dick Schmitz, and the frosh, Bruce Wilcox. This would bode well for the next coach, Arthur Sand. The Rushford Minnesota native had just earned a history degree from St. Olaf College and would be teaching and coaching football and basketball during the 1942-43 school year. Sand would experience the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat, but not in that order. Allow me to explain. That fall of 1942 the football team defeated Sebeka 7-0 in the opener. The win was described by the WPJ as an upset. The next two games were lost to Long Prairie and Staples. Then something strange happened. As WWII was well underway shortages and rationing were commonplace. The “Minnesota State Tire Rationing Board” issued a directive to all public schools that school buses could be used only to transport students to and from school. Nothing else, including athletic events. WHS finished the season 1-2, with four games not played. There’s the “agony.” Now for the “thrill.”

In the decade of the 1940’s Crosby-Ironton played in the District 24 title game every year except 1949. In the nine title games C-I won eight times, losing only to Wadena 33-25, in 1943. Wadena still had a young team, but they were no longer inexperienced. In the quarterfinal round, #3 seed Wadena snuck by #6 seed Little Falls, 34-32. To get to the championship game Wadena had to play #2 seed Aitkin in the semifinals. For some unknown reason Aitkin chose to stall. My theory is that over the course of two seasons the youngsters from Wadena kept getting better and better. By the time the playoffs arrived Wadena was the team to beat, and Aitkin knew they could not play with them in a traditional game. Like I said, that’s my theory. The first points of the game were scored halfway through the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter. Led by Dick Schmitz six points, WHS won 12-8. The Brainerd Dispatch said this of the junior Schmitz, “...as impenetrable as the Rock of Gibraltar on defense and rebounds.” In Wadena’s 33-25 victory over C-I Schmitz led all scorers with 10 points and was also the top rebounder. Bruce Wilcox, Jr. added 8 and Jack Browne had 7. I wish we knew how Wadena and C-I did in the

two regular season games. This District 24 championship was the first since 1936. The next one would be 31 years later.

The 1943 Region 6 tournament was held in Glenwood, of all places. I played in that gym. Think Wadena's auditorium, only smaller. FYI, we thumped the Lakers that night and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> period we were 12 for 12 from the floor, but I digress. In the first round of that regional tournament Alexandria defeated Wadena 35-25. In the championship game Alexandria defeated Elbow Lake to earn a berth in the state tournament.

With Schmitz and Wilcox both back for the 1943-44 school year, and a new coach, Mr. Robert Mower, they put up a respectable 15-6 record but lost to C-I 38-37 in the District 24 championship game.

In the 1940's the coaching positions of football and basketball had a revolving door. Most turnover was due to military obligations. Sand was the 2<sup>nd</sup> of five coaches. In the late summer of 1943 Arthur Sand had to leave Wadena for his induction into the U.S. Army.

Next stop, 1959.

#### **DISCLAIMER / DISCLOSURE:**

Our remaining stops have special meaning to your "Time Machine" pilot. My father, Harold Willis, coached the 1959 team. I, the pilot, played on the 1974 team. The pilot's little (6'5") brother, Brad, played on both the 1978 and 1980 teams.

#### **1959 Mid-State Conference Champions (t)**

In 1955 Harold Willis took the Ortonville Trojans to the Minnesota State Basketball Tournament. They beat Renville 66-64 behind the 5'8" Jack Blink's 32-point performance. Blink was injured late in that Region 3 championship game and would not be available for the state tournament. His teammate, the 6'8" Richard Pederson, missed most of the regular season due to injury but was back in time for the playoffs. The Trojans finished the regular season at 9-11. With the big man and the playmaker both healthy they won the District 11 and Region 3 championships. With Blink on the sidelines, they were defeated by Bemidji in the state tournament quarterfinals.

While this was the most successful team Willis would ever coach, it was not the best team he would ever coach. That honor would belong to the 1958-59 WHS team led by Bill Gaslin and Sam Phillips. Both were three-year starters, and All Mid-State Conference, All District 24, and All Region 6 selections. Gaslin led the conference and district in scoring, averaging over 20 points per game. Phillips was 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> respectively with a 17 points per game average. Both were selected multiple times to the WCCO All-State Team of the Week. Gaslin was also on the 12-man All-State Team of the Year.

After leaving Ortonville for Wadena in 1955 Willis was now starting his 4<sup>th</sup> season as the Indians head coach. Expectations were high with many prognosticators, including Morgan Mundane, picking Wadena in District 24 and in Region 6. Wadena started the 1958-59 season with a 10-game winning streak. For the remainder of the regular season, they went 4-4. In the District 24 quarterfinals they beat Pine River 54-53. In the last 30-seconds of the game, and down by that one point, Pine River missed five consecutive tip-in attempts. No wonder Coach had so much gray hair. In other quarterfinal action Staples nipped C-I 52-51, Aitkin handled Verndale 74-59, and Little Falls eliminated Brainerd 58-49. This rarely ever happened, but this year neither C-I nor Brainerd would be in the District 24 finals. Friday night, in the semi-finals, Wadena defeated Little Falls 68-59 and Aitkin beat Staples.

Wadena and Aitkin were the District 24 preseason favorites, so they were right where they were supposed to be, in the title game. Wadena had defeated their Mid-State Conference opponent twice in the regular season, winning 62-61 at Aitkin and in early February, 81-73 at Wadena. It is difficult to beat any team three times in

one season and that held true in this case. Aitkin built a 3-point lead by the end of the first quarter and maintained a 5-point lead at the end of quarters 2, 3, and 4, winning the District 24 championship 73-68. Gaslin and Phillips each dropped in 25 points with support from Brust, Knutson, and Uselman, but it was not enough.

Hey, what about the Mid-State Conference title?

For a five-team conference it might not be hard to believe that two teams could end up tied for first place. In 1959 the Mid-State had a three-team tie at 5-3, Wadena, C-I, and Park Rapids. Staples finished in fourth place at 4-4 and Aitkin was dead last at 1-7. Huh? That's right, you read earlier that Wadena and Aitkin were the District 24 preseason favorites. Recall that Wadena beat Aitkin 62-61 at Aitkin, early in the season. The preseason favorites were right where they were supposed to be at that time. Something changed for Aitkin as the season progressed. Whatever it was, it got fixed by tournament time.

Wadena's first outright conference title would be 15 years later. If not for a fuel shortage and our MN state government, Wadena would probably have been tied with Little Falls for that conference title. I will explain in the next "Time Machine" article #18.

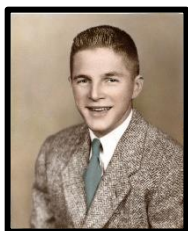
Tune in next time for the 1974 team, Mid-State Conference and District 24 champions.

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Still looking for 1936 WHS Yearbook (\$100 prize)

Also looking for 1943 WHS Yearbook (negotiable)



**Harold Willis**  
1955-63



**1958-59 WHS Indians**