

**“The Time Machine”**  
**WHS Basketball’s Top Teams 1940-80**  
**1974**  
**Article #18**

Old business, remember I am in search of a copy of the 1943 and the 1936 WHS yearbooks. I will reward the first person who can help me fulfill my request for the 1936 yearbook 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.

We are currently in the process of visiting the most successful WHS basketball teams since the jump ball after every basket was eliminated, effective the 1938 season. Our most recent stops were the 1943 (District 24 champs) and the 1959 (Mid-State Conference champs (t)) seasons. Today we visit 1974, and eventually we’ll check out the 1978 and 1980 seasons.

**DISCLAIMER / DISCLOSURE:**

I played on the 1974 WHS basketball team. I know more about this team than any WHS football or basketball team, from 1900-1980, that I have researched. I will be writing this article not as a summary of researched information, but rather as a story being told by one who lived it.

**1974 District 24 and Mid-State Conference Champions**

In November of 1970 there was a changing of the guard for Wadena high school basketball. The previous basketball season would be Mr. Aus’ final one. His last team was made up of some very good football players. While they could win 8 of 9 regular season football games that fall, they could manage to win only 2 of 19 basketball games that winter. A young teacher from Battle Lake had been hired to see if he could turn things around. Lowell Roisum would begin his tenure with a team very similar to Aus’ last squad, a bunch of very good football players that finished the 1970 football season at 8-1. At the end of Roisum’s first year, the 1970-71 basketball season, they were 2-16. Welcome to Wadena basketball coach.

In the fall of 1971 seniors Dan Sweere and Donny Schmidt suffered significant injuries on the gridiron. They were likely to be the starting guards on the basketball team. Schmidt missed the entire season and Sweere came back late in the season at less than 100%. That opened the door of opportunity for a junior, Frank Kohoutek and me, a sophomore. We finished the season 5-17. Baby steps.

The 1972-73 season started out with four straight wins, two by a single point. In our 13<sup>th</sup> game senior guard Frank Kohoutek sustained a season ending injury. Coach called up sophomore guard Roger Olson from the “B” squad resulting in a backcourt occupied by two left-handers. Roger got valuable playing time in the remaining 11 games. Olson should have been in 9<sup>th</sup> grade at the time. He was 16 when school started his senior year and he did not turn 17 until mid-December. My theory is that his mom could not take another year watching him at home. Think “Dennis the Menace!” Sorry Rog, it’s just my theory.

We ended up with an overall record of 12-12 and we were playing very well in February. In our second to last game, we went to Melrose (Region 6 champs 1970-74, State champs 1974) led by former Gopher and San Antonio Spur, Mark Olberding. With three minutes left in the game we led 52-51. The Dutchman scored the last 10 points of the game to win 61-52 behind the 6’7” Olberding’s 39 points and 17 rebounds.

In the last regular season game, we (9-10) traveled to C-I (13-6) and thumped the Rangers 63-55. In the District 24 playoffs we crushed Backus, upset Motley, and got beat 59-41 by C-I in the semi-finals.

All eyes were focused on the next year. Six of our seven top players would be seniors. The 1973-74 season arrived as scheduled. It yielded a 20-3 record, and the Mid-State Conference (11-1) and District 24 Championships. The first ever outright conference title and the first district title since 1943. Let's pick apart the season. First, the three losses were at Little Falls (gm 5), at Crookston (gm 15) and at the Concordia fieldhouse versus Melrose (gm 22) by a combined 58 points. No nail biters in those losses. At the end of the season those teams were ranked #3 (AA), #9 (A), and #1 (A), respectively. Wadena was ranked #11 (A). Melrose won the class A state tournament and beat the AA champs, Bemidji #5 (AA) to claim the overall state championship and end the season with a perfect 27-0 record.

At the end of the regular season Wadena was on top of the Mid-State Conference with an 11-1 record, losing only to Little Falls by 16 points in game #5. The Flyers ended with a 10-1 record for second place and C-I was third at 8-3, losing twice to Wadena and once to Little Falls. During the Christmas Holiday break Wadena and Staples would be hosting Redwood Falls and Montevideo on consecutive nights. Little Falls was scheduled to play at C-I. Shortly before the break, and due to the energy crisis, all school activities scheduled over the break were cancelled and could not be rescheduled. That is why LF and C-I played only 11 conference games rather than 12.

Little Falls came to Wadena on Friday, February 8<sup>th</sup> for the rematch. Wadena was 12-1, Little Falls 13-0 and ranked #1 in class AA. The Flyers had a balanced team, as we did too, but they were led by the 6'5" junior, Frank Wachlarowicz. He was built like an NFL tight end. He went on to play basketball at St. Johns and broke the record as the leading scorer (2,357) in the history of Minnesota collegiate basketball, a record that stood for 39 years. But that Friday night would belong to the Indians, led by the four senior starters, each scoring in double figures, winning 56-52.

That Little Falls game kicked off an eleven day stretch versus three top ranked teams, the last two on the road. We were bound for (#9-A) Crookston on Saturday, February 16. However, Crookston had played the night before at (#5-AA) Bemidji and got crushed 86-63. You already know how we did against Crookston, losing 65-39. Bemidji sent a scout to that Saturday game, since Wadena would travel to Bemidji in just three days. That scout formulated his opinion of our team based on our worst performance ever. With much confidence he told Bemidji head coach, Jack Louma, that the Lumberjacks would have nothing to worry about as far as Wadena was concerned.

Tuesday, February 19 arrived and were on our way to Bemidji. They beat Crookston by 23 points four days prior. Crookston beat us by 26 points just three days ago. Yet eleven days ago we beat the #1 rated (AA) Little Falls squad. Which team was going to show up for Bemidji? Another balanced attack resulted in a 69-61 victory, behind four starters hitting double figures and led by Rick Grewe's 24 points. There were no layup points in that total. Had there been a 3-point line back then he would have had over 30 points. Grewe was "en fuego!"

Prior to the win over Little Falls, we had beaten Staples for our second victory over the Cardinals, and after the Bemidji game we defeated C-I for our second win against the Rangers. Our last game of the regular season was against Detroit Lakes. We needed a win to claim the conference title. Little Falls finished 10-1 in the conference and a loss against DL would put us at 10-2, good for 2<sup>nd</sup> place. We had beaten DL in game #9, at Wadena, 78-52. The task at hand, on the Lakers home court, would prove to be much more difficult as we needed to go to overtime for the 56-52 win, led by the sharpshooter, Rick Grewe, and his 22-point performance.

Tournament time found us opening with Menahga and a 61-31 victory. In our third win over Staples, in the district semi-finals, we cruised to a 70-44 thumping. Crosby-Ironton, as usual, found its way into the District 24 title game. It was an interesting game with us up by 17 at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter. C-I rallied in the final stanza, however we hung on for the 60-52 win. Our third victory over C-I that year.

The Region 6 tournament was at the Concordia fieldhouse, and the place was packed to the rafters. Rumors had it that Notre Dame head coach, Digger Phelps, was in the crowd. I assumed he was there to watch me. Others thought he might be there to watch the Dutchman Olberding. They were probably correct.

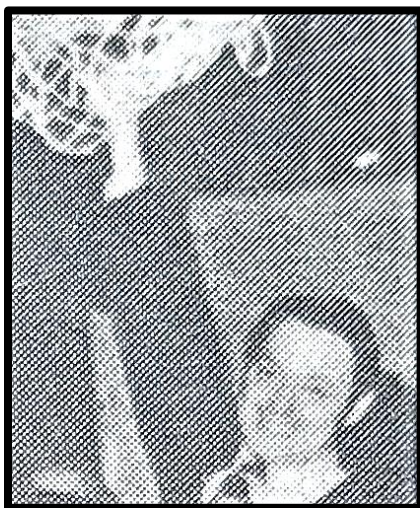
The game did not go well. We had Olberding in a bit of early foul trouble, but we were unable to take advantage of his time on the bench. So, our third loss of the season 52-36, put us at 19-3. The next night we beat Cyrus in the third-place game to finish with 20 wins.

Teamwork was the secret sauce. In 23 games, on average, 3 players put up double figures. In one game all five starters hit double figures, and in nine games there were four players that put up double digits. Each starter led the team in scoring at least once, and each of the four senior starters led all scorers at least twice. All five starters were named "all-conference" or "honorable mention." Based on the season statistics from the Aus and Roisum teams of the 1970's, this team had more assists than any other team.

It was a great season and a nice way to finish a high school career. Our team got along like we were best friends, and we were, and still are today.

I hope you have enjoyed following me down memory lane. It has been my pleasure to show you around.

Jebb Willis  
jebbwillis1955@gmail.com



Coach Lowell Roisum



Row 1: Ross Tappe, Duane Steffens, Gary Skalman,  
David Freer, Doug Lindner, Keith Luna

Row 2: Kirk Baden, Randy Kern, Ross Brune, Bill Burns,  
Roger Olson, Tommy Merickel, Dennis Frost, Steve  
Brown, Chuck Luna, Lowell Roisum

Row 3: Rick Grewe, Jon Wensman, Tom Hamerlinck,  
Duane Vandenberghe, Jebb Willis, Bruce Erickson