

The Time Machine

The 1950's Shake, Rattle, and Roll!

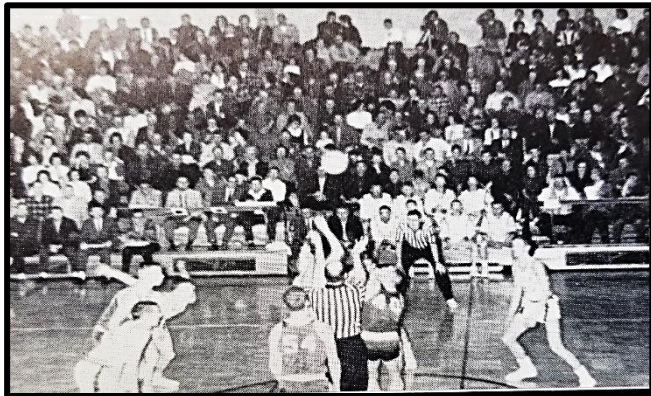
Article #22

"The Time Machine" is all fueled up and ready to head back to the future, to the golden times of the 1950's. World War II was fading into the rearview mirror, jobs were plentiful, and Elvis was the King.

On a local level WHS and its basketball team enjoyed some success at the very beginning of the decade. The 1950 squad, coached by Shirley "Whitey" Held (1945-50), was led by seniors Bob Hedstrom and Pat Merickel, both three-year starters. To recall details of Hedstrom's career refer to the "Time Machine" article #7, "The Cream of the Crop," (WPJ 3/16/23). After splitting the two regular season games with Brainerd, which resulted in Brainerd's only loss, Wadena lost to the Warriors 50-47 in the district title game rubber match. Both Hedstrom (64 pts) and Pat Merickel (59 pts) each broke the District 24 tournament scoring record of 54 points. Wadena finished 17-6.



In the next four seasons the head coach's office had a revolving door. Under coaches Russ Hadden (1950-52), Weldon "Buzz" Gray (1952-53), and Ed Hasbrouck (1953-55) Wadena would win only ten games that I know of as the 1954 team record was incomplete with scores of only 12 games. The following season, 1954-55, Wadena joined the new Mid-State Conference along with Aitkin, Crosby-Ironton, Park Rapids, and Staples.



That inaugural season, led by the Mid-State conference's scoring leader, junior Dick Shearer (13.9 ppg), the second leading scorer, senior Dale Skalisky (13.8 ppg), and the fifth leading scorer, senior Jim Rice (10.9 ppg), Wadena fared much better. However, the season got off to a slow start with WHS going 0-5 against district opponents. That was followed by a ten-game winning streak. The Indians finished 4-4 in the conference, good enough for third place behind co-champions Staples and C-I, and 14-7 overall after losing to Little Falls 69-67 in the quarterfinals of the district tournament. Staples defeated Brainerd 52-47 in the championship game. Brainerd appeared in seven District 24 title games in the 1950's and prevailed in their other six appearances.

The 1955-56 WHS team had a new coach, Harold Willis (1955-64), and one returning starter, senior Dick Shearer, having lost to graduation Dale Skalisky, Jim Rice, and Gene Goedel. Shearer would lead both the Mid-State and District 24 in scoring with 19 and 20 ppg, respectively. The two-time all Mid-State and all District 24 Shearer was possibly the purest outside shooter in WHS history. Shearer's stats in his last five games included 26 ppg, converting on 87% of 77 free throw attempts, including a 19/20 clinic against Crosby Ironton. Wadena finished fourth in the conference, won by Aitkin, and were defeated 94-77, again by the Flyers, in the district quarterfinals. Little Falls went on to beat Aitkin 63-51 to claim the title. Wadena finished the season at 10-11. Shearer went on to play basketball and tennis for the Concordia Cobbers.

The 1956-57 team went 3-18. Aitkin won its second consecutive conference championship but lost to Brainerd 61-59 in the District 24 finale. Wadena was winless against both their conference and district opponents. But there was a silver lining. Sophomores Sam Phillips and Bill Gaslin got the opportunity to log some significant playing time that would bear fruit during the last two seasons of the decade.

The start of the 1957-58 season was slow, but it ended with an impressive number of wins, including against Crosby-Ironton, Verndale, Staples, and Little Falls. Wadena finished 10-9. Both Gaslin and Phillips were named to the Mid-State

all-conference team. In conference scoring Gaslin (18 ppg) was second and Phillips (16 ppg) was third. In overall scoring Phillips (17 ppg) was fourth and Gaslin (16 ppg) fifth. Crosby-Ironton won the conference and Brainerd beat C-I to win the district.

The final season of the decade, 1959, was much like the first season, 1950. Two three-year starters who cut their teeth as sophomores on teams that both lost 18 times. Wadena's record from 1947-50 was 33-32 and from 1956-59 it was 29-32. Both teams, with their dynamic duos, had high expectations in year number three, and both had great seasons that ended with disappointing losses in the district title game. Wadena did manage to tie for the conference title in 1959, with Park Rapids and C-I, but lost in the district championship to Aitkin 73-68. For more information about the 1959 team refer to article #17, "WHS BB Top Teams 1959," (WPJ November 16, 2023).



One thing is clear, in the 1950's Brainerd and Crosby-Ironton ruled District 24 and C-I ruled the Mid-State conference. As you will see, when we visit other decades, that was common.

To learn more about the decade, the seasons, and the players and coaches, refer to your hardcopy of the "1900-59 WHS Basketball Scrapbook," To view an electronic version, go to the WDC web page at wdc2155.k12.mn.us and click on "Athletics/Activities," scroll down to "Wolverine History," and then click on the "WHS Basketball" link. Updated versions of both "WHS Basketball Scrapbooks," with enhanced picture quality, are in the works.

I don't know about you, but I've had a "rock'in good time, thank you, thank you very much!"

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Jebb Willis '74

