

A golden moment for '62 Regis champs

Written by Tom Fruehling

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When the Regis Fight Song was played Saturday night at halftime of the Xavier boys basketball game, it was as if time stopped 50 years ago.

There at mid-court in sport coat and tie was Coach Bob Jennings, now 84, pumping both fists for the crowd just like he did when his high school basketball team won the 1962 state championship.

At his side yet again stood Dick Breitbach, 75, his once-young assistant.

Bob's kid brother Don, younger by seven years, was acknowledged along with late brother Jim as unofficial aide de camps who helped their big brother by scouting and whatever was asked.

"Let me tell you," Don had been saying a few minutes earlier, "Bob always was, and still is today, my idol."

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It was the same for the players, now all retired from various careers, who returned Saturday to relive and celebrate that magical year when Cedar Rapids Regis (in only its fourth year as a high school) was crowned as the best basketball team in Iowa.

There was just one class back then. Big city schools and teams from towns without stop lights all competed for one title. To win it was a big deal.

When Regis pulled it off by beating little Laurens, 76-64, before a sellout crowd at the old Iowa Fieldhouse in Iowa City it was the first time for a Cedar Rapids school since Washington won 46 years before in 1916.

It wasn't exactly one of those mythical tales in which a tiny team out of nowhere slays a bunch of giants. Not like the Cobden Apple Knockers of southern Illinois, who'd made a run in their state tournament a few years sooner.

The Regis Royals came into the tourney ranked second behind cross-town rival Jefferson. Still, when the trophy was claimed, it was discovered the school didn't have a trophy case to put it in.

Bob Jennings remembered his team started the season off slow, losing a few games early.

"We had several football players," he said, "and it took them awhile to get going. But they came on like gangbusters, and we didn't lose a game after December."

Team captain Denny Phillips, a retired conservation officer from Spencer, said the squad had tremendous team chemistry before such a concept was even in vogue.

"We'd all played together for years," he said Saturday. "And we kept talking about winning state when we were seniors."

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"We were very, very close. I can say even today that if I ever needed anything, the ones I could count on were these guys and my wife."

Besides camaraderie, they also had a beloved coach.

"If Bob told them to run through a wall, they'd do it," said Don Jennings, who like his two brothers is a retired longtime administrator in the College Community school district.

And they had a system that confounded opponents. Bob had been hearing about colleges using a pressing defense, and he figured he had the athletes to make it work.

"They were all tough kids who really worked hard. We didn't have a lot of great shooters, but they loved to play defense," he said.

Of the group, the star scorer was junior Jim Cummins, who along with Phillips was a rarity in those days because he'd started as a sophomore. An All-American in his final year at Regis, Cummins went on to Northwestern and later was a highly respected NBC news correspondent before dying of cancer a few years ago.

While Phillips and Cummins did much of the scoring, guys like Jim Wagner, Joe Schmitz, Jim Roberg and Dave Fish perfected the zone press defense.

"At the start of the year," Phillips said, "Coach told us he was going to teach us how to press and we'd win the state. Other teams had never see it and didn't know how to handle it."

To win the title, they had to win eight straight in the postseason.

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The Royals first beat Vinton and hometown opponent St. Patrick's. They then upset Jefferson, 47-42, in front of 13,500 fans at the Fieldhouse.

Next was Iowa City High with future Iowa football star Gary Snook, followed by the Clinton River Kings, tiny Olds with scoring machine Gary Olson, Sioux City Central and finally Laurens in the finale.

“Those were great kids,” the old coach said Saturday as if it all happened yesterday.

“Hard-nosed. They really hit the boards. And quick. With the press, we drove other teams crazy.”