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# Sports

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On the Record

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Wright City's 1966 Boys  
Basketball Team Remains the  
Only State Championship  
Team in School History

*Story by Tim Schmidt • Record Sports Editor*



Tim Schmidt Photo.

**MAGIC OF 1966** — This banner sits high on the north end at the Wright City High School gymnasium displaying the players and coaches from the 1966 Class S state champions, still the only team in school history to win a state title.

# 40 Years Revisited

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**F**lorence Blanks vividly remembers the trip to Columbia for the 1966 state basketball tournament.

It wasn't a scene out of "Hoosiers," but players were out of their normal surrounding.

"We had fun," Blanks recalled. "It was a poor boy going into the big city and staying at motels. It was something new."

It's something that hasn't been matched by any other athletic program in 40 years at Wright City. Blanks was one of 13 players on the boys basketball team that won the Class S championship, which remains the only squad to win a state title in school history.

On Friday night, members of the 1966 squad were invited back for the annual alumni basketball game and to reminiscence about the thrilling season from 40 years ago, their first time together in 10 years.

Blanks was one of the former players on hand, along with Bill Linnenbringer, Tim Cappel, Glenn Luckett, Glenn Nierman, Robert Wright, Steve Oberlag, Larry Twiehaus (manager) and Rex Barnes (assistant coach).

"It seems like it was just yesterday," Blanks said. "Forty years go by fast. It hasn't seemed like it was that long ago."

The memory of that unforgettable 27-7 campaign still  
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# Revisited

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lives on whether it's looking at old stories or pictures from that time. Also, the championship banner still hangs high on the north end of the high school gymnasium.

"I don't think it was something we expected," Cappel said. "I think we always thought we were a pretty good basketball team. We had two great coaches (Head Coach Terry Cain and Barnes). We all knew each other all through grade school. I think what happened, we just jelled in that year."

Of the players interviewed, all said without a doubt that Cain, who is now deceased, was an important reason for the Wildcats' run to the state title. Cain's widow, Nellie Cain, and daughter, Tammy Kraatz, were in attendance on Friday. Two other players, Irvin Owens and Roger Sydnor, also have passed away.

Cain started coaching at the school when Blanks and Linnenbringer, the only two seniors on the team, were freshmen. Unfortunately, the 1966 season ended up being the final year at Wright City for Cain, who was also the principal and took a similar job at North Callaway in Auxvasse.

"Terry Cain was a wonderful guy," Blanks said. "He was the most wonderful guy I've ever met."

"The key to winning that state championship was Terry Cain along with the players. His idea of playing basketball got us to where we got to go."

A rigorous regular-season schedule also helped. Back then, schools were divided into three enrollment classifications — Class S (small), Class M (medium) and Class L (large). Due to Wright City's small school size and close proximity to the St. Louis metro area, most of its opponents were in the two higher classes. But it also served the Wildcats well when they entered the postseason having won 19 of 26 games. Another big difference from the 1966 era to now has been the addition of the 3-point shot.

"When we got to the state tournament, we were playing smaller schools," Linnenbringer said. "We were better prepared in coaching and better prepared because we played bigger schools."

It led to the basketball team cruising through the playoffs virtually at ease. With the towering frontcourt of Greg Nieman (6-foot-5, 16.1 points), Blanks (6-foot-1, 15.1 points) and Cappel (6-2, 10.2) combining to average 41.4 points, guards and co-captains Dave Gerdeman (9.7) and Linnenbringer (8.8) were able to dish off at will and operate the powerful offense.

Juniors Irvin Owens and Steve Oberlag were also capable role players as each averaged six points coming off the bench. Roger Sydnor, Mike Sydnor, Butch Wright, Glenn Luckett, Glenn Nierman and

Richard Cox filled out the roster.

In seven of the eight playoff games reported, Wright City averaged just under 80 points and had a winning margin of 24 points.

"They were excellent," Barnes said. "They really

were. They ran the offense, they played good defense. Everybody fit a part, even the sixth, seventh man would play a role. They were just an excellent team."

The Wildcats steamrolled through the regional tournament held at Hannibal, win-

ning their first four playoff games rather handily. Following a 77-70 win over Brunswick in the first game of the state tournament at Kirksville, Wright City soon found itself trailing 42-28 for the first — and only time — at halftime in the playoffs to Cainsville.

However, Cain switched to a 1-2-1 zone with the three tallest players manning the top three positions on the press, much like what John Wooden did at UCLA. Cainsville couldn't get the ball across halfcourt on five straight trips and the Wildcats scored 11 points in 1 minute, 27 seconds to turn the tide into an eventual 83-76 victory.

Moving to Brewer Field House in Columbia for the semifinals on March 4, Wright City advanced to the championship game with a 62-52 win over St. Joseph (Farmington). One night later, playing against tournament favorite Springfield Greenwood, the Wildcats' 35-29 third-quarter lead was trimmed to two with

a minute remaining. But they responded by scoring the final eight points and held on 55-45 to complete their magical run.

Also at the state tournament, Wright City was awarded the sportsmanship trophy.

"That is just an indication of having really fine kids," Barnes said.

It was the culmination of a superb season, highlighted by first-class basketball players and a great coaching staff and support system. Forty years later, the state championship means much more than that one final victory.

"What you remember is the friendships and the people that you played with," Cappel said. "The achievement was spectacular, but what it is always about is the people. The coaches, the way we cared about each other and the way we played together, that is what is most important."

*(Editor's Note: Some information from The Wright City Editorial published bimonthly, in March 1966 contributed to this story.)*



Tim Schmidt Photo.

**BACK TOGETHER AGAIN** — Members of Wright City's 1966 boys basketball team gathered on Friday to celebrate its 40th anniversary of winning the state championship, the only one in school history. Representing the 1966 squad are, from left: Back row — Glenn Luckett, Rex Barnes, Glenn Nierman, Tim Cappel, Florence Blanks, Robert Wright, Larry Twiehaus and Bill Linnenbringer. Front row — Darla Smith, Karen (Burris) Wright, Nellie Cain, Tammy (Cain) Kraatz and Mary Sue (Bote) Sitton.

### Road to Columbia

The 1966 Wright City boys basketball team won all eight playoff games en route to winning the Class S state championship, which remains the only squad to do so in school history. Here's a look back at the Wildcats' playoff run:

#### Regionals

First Round Wright City 116, Sherwood Day 39  
 Second Round Wright City 86, Williamstown 60  
 Third Round Wright City 78, Providence 51  
 Final Wright City def. Hannibal McCooey, score unavailable

#### State Tournament

First Round Wright City 77, Brunswick 70  
 Second Round Wright City 83, Cainsville 76  
 Semifinals Wright City 62, St. Joseph (Farmington) 52  
 Championship Wright City 55, Springfield Greenwood 45

Source: *The Wright City Editorial, 1966*

### Boxscore

Class S State Championship  
 Wright City 55,  
 Springfield Greenwood 45

WRIGHT CITY	FG-FGA	FT-FTA	REB	PTS
Greg Nieman	7-9	3-4	5	17
Tim Cappel	2-5	1-1	6	5
Florence Blanks	7-17	1-3	8	15
Dave Gerdeman	2-4	1-2	4	5
Bill Linnenbringer	1-3	0-0	5	2
Irvin Owens	4-6	3-4	7	11
Steve Oberlag	0-1	0-0	0	0
Totals	23-55	9-14	35	55
SPRINGFIELD GREENWOOD				
Craig Luna	1-7	0-1	5	2
Tony Dustman	2-12	0-0	5	4
George Thompson	4-15	1-4	14	9
John Williams	8-22	3-4	8	19
Bill Sanford	4-7	3-4	3	11
D. Stombaugh	0-1	0-0	0	0
Chris Millsap	0-0	0-0	0	0
Totals	19-64	7-13	35	45
Wright City	14	4	17	20-45
Greenwood	12	5	12	16-45

Held March, 1966, at Brewer Field House in Columbia