

A team on a mission: Wildcats reunite 50 years after state championship

By Kory Carpenter, Record Sports Editor | Posted: Thursday, June 16, 2016 10:00 am

Terry Cain's goal was simple.

The Wright City boys basketball Head Coach walked into his first team meeting and relayed the message to his players.

"I was a freshman when he came here, and he told us he came here for one reason." Florence Blanks recalls. "To win a state championship."

It was the fall of 1962.

Fifty-four years after that speech, Blanks and a handful of teammates reunited in Wright City last weekend to celebrate the 1966 Missouri Class S state title.

For a small school without a conference affiliation, the state championship in Columbia was never on the players' minds.

But a close playoff loss to eventual state champion South Iron in 1965 changed things.

"We should have won state the year before," said Blanks, one of two seniors on the team.

David Gerdeman, a junior captain on the 1966 team who now lives in Innsbrook, agrees.

"We probably played them (South Iron) as well as anyone else in the playoffs," he said. "So our expectations the next year were pretty good."

Wright City returned all but one player from the 1965 team, and the Wildcats featured a balanced and experienced roster.

"I always thought our schedule helped us because it was always good," Gerdeman said. "We weren't in a conference, so we just picked up whoever we could pick up. We went into St. Charles County and played those larger schools, and that helped."

According to Gerdeman, his role on the team was simple.

"I shot layups or free throws," he says with a laugh. "Nothing else."



Defeated Springfield Greenwood in championship game

Tim Cappel, a junior on the team who is now a retired lawyer in Huntington Beach, Calif., remembers it differently.

“David was the captain and he was the leader of the team,” Cappel said. “He guided the team, and his passing was phenomenal. Greg Nieman (Class of 1967) said you could watch David’s eyes and you’d know where you ought to go. And if you were there, he would pass you the ball.”

Cappel was a self-proclaimed role player for the Wildcats.

He scored 16 points in the 62-52 semifinal win over St. Joseph, and added five more in the championship game.

Wright City defeated Springfield Greenwood, 55-45, thanks to a combined 32 points from Blanks and Nieman.

“Greg and Florence were the strong guys who scored inside, and the rest of us provided supporting roles,” Cappel said. “It was great.”

But it wasn’t always easy.

In the round of 16 against Brunswick, the Wildcats found themselves down 14 points at halftime and 17 in the third quarter.

“Getting down 17 points in the third quarter back then, when there wasn’t a 3-point line, was a lot of points,” Gerdeman says. “It was a different game back then, but we scored a lot of points. We pressed more than a lot of teams did.”

Wright City came back to beat Brunswick, 77-70, and scored 83 points in the quarterfinals against Cainsville to advance with a seven-point win.

“The games in Columbia were good ballgames,” Gerdeman says. “But nothing extraordinary like that comeback happened.”

Despite each player having different roles on the team, Gerdeman, Blanks and Cappel know where the success of the 1966 team started.

“Terry Cain was the catalyst,” Blanks said.

Gerdeman called Cain a “player’s coach.”

“I think he read the team perfectly because he had been around the team so long,” Gerdeman said. “Then we had (Assistant Coach) Rex Barnes, who the players really liked, as well. But he was the guy who would come in and say, ‘What are you doing out there?’”

Cappel called Cain and Barnes “Yin and Yang.”

“Coach Barnes was the hard coach who was always pressing us, and Coach Cain was more of our friend,” Cappel remembers. “You need someone to push you, but you need someone to support you, as well. So it was a great combination.”

Cain left Wright City following the school year, and the players dispersed around the country.

Blanks joined the Army before returning to Wright City.

Gerdeman played junior college baseball and basketball, and later became the Wright City head basketball coach.

He spent 23 years as a head coach at Wright City, Winfield and Fort Zumwalt North.

“I was the only one that went into coaching. The rest of them went into bigger and better fields,” he says with a laugh. “I think a lot of the success we were able to have at Wright City carried over for me.”

Gerdeman coached the 1987 Wright City team that advanced to the Class 2 final four, eventually finishing fourth.

“We had a lot of good teams and won a lot of regionals, but that’s not winning a state championship,” he said. “There’s a big difference between winning the last game and losing the last game.”

Cappel attended law school at Duke University, retired from law in 2001, and helps run a specialty coatings business based out of Kansas City that has allowed him to travel the world.

“Your character and relationships can take you anywhere you want to go,” he said. “And that all started in Wright City.”

The team from 1966 is beginning to dwindle.

Cain passed away in 2000, and three players have died, as well.

“Sometimes you lose those friendships as you get older and go different places, but to come back and renew those relationships is something very special,” Cappel said. “It’s a great part of growing older.”

Eight of the 13 players returned last weekend to reconnect.

Saturday morning, most of the group met at the Warren County Historical Society to watch film of the championship game.

Afterward, Blanks remembered his coach.

“Terry Cain had a mission and he worked hard,” Blanks said. “He took a bunch of country boys and made basketball players out of us.”