

Members of Irrigon 1955 district championship team return

By ANNIE FOWLER
Hermiston Herald

They strolled up to the high school wearing their still pristine letterman's sweaters, books of memories in hand, and tales as tall as 6-foot-6 center Joe Mann.

Two members of Irrigon's 1955 7-B District Championship team visited Irrigon High School on April 1, wanting to get another look at their trophy, and take a walk down memory lane.

"It's been so long since I've seen this," Mann said as his 83-year-old hands held the trophy.

Mann and Cliff Ballard, 82, were two of the six members of the championship team that Grant Schiewe coached. When they attended Irrigon, the high school was down behind the A.C. Houghton Elementary School.

"The last time we saw it, the gym floor was warped," Ballard said. "I think it had water damage."

The Morrow County School District still owns the old school building, built in 1921. The school colors were black and orange, and the mascot was the Comets, which dates to 1904.

The former teammates marveled at the new school and gym, which is grand in comparison to their old stomping grounds.

"The bleachers were only about three rows up," said Ballard, who lives in Desert Aire, Washington. "This is nice."

The 1955 district title was the first the Comets won and holds special memories for the players.

"There were only six of



Joe Mann, left, and Cliff Ballard pose Friday, April 1, 2022, with the 7-B District Championship trophy they helped the Irrigon Comets win in 1955.

us, but I don't remember that being a problem," said Mann, who made the trip from McMinnville.

Other team members included Ival Sullivan, who died in February, the late Dale Shingledecker, Ken Edwards of Pendleton and Sam Burke, whose whereabouts are unknown to his former teammates.

Mann was a junior center on the team, while Ballard was a sophomore, but had earned a starting guard position.

"I just fed him the ball," Ballard said of Mann.

An inquiry as to the lack of players on the team was hit with a hilarious reply from Mann. He quickly asked for it not to be printed, but it will forever be remembered.

The Irrigon Comets were

around from 1904 to 1959, when the students were sent to Boardman. Irrigon opened its own high school once again in 2006, and they became the Knights.

A season to remember

The Comets got plenty of press in 1955 with Mann at the forefront. In high school he was 6-6 and dominated play on the court. He got recognition from the East Oregonian on a weekly basis, and by The Oregonian after he scored more than 50 points in a game.

Irrigon went 6-9 during the regular season with two losses each to Ione, Echo and St. Joe's.

Mann scored 283 points in the Comets' first 15 games, and averaged 22.9 points in seven league games. At the

time, Schiewe was quoted as saying, "Joe has been more valuable to us because of his defense and rebounding than his scoring."

During the regular season, Mann scored 53 points in a 76-59 victory over Touchet, Washington. He had 50 points at halftime and played just three quarters. It was the Class B scoring record at the time.

The Comets were the No. 4 team heading into the 7-B District Tournament. The media labeled them the Cinderella team.

The underdog Comets opened district with a 56-48 win over Athena, then moved on to play Echo, which had beaten them earlier in the season 72-37 and 66-52.

But before we get to the game, there's a little story to be told.

"We had warm-up jackets back then, but not the pants," Mann said. "Echo had just gotten new warm-ups, and our athletic director went to Echo and bought their old pants for us. During pregame warmups, their players were taunting us, asking how we liked their hand-me-downs."

Mann went out and scored 46 points, and the Comets came away with a 71-55 victory.

"I liked them just fine," Mann said.

In the district championship game against Ione, 1,700 fans packed the Umatilla gym to watch one of the best small-school games played all season.

According to a well-preserved press clipping, "Irrigon and Ione staged one of the two of the evening's thrill-packed finals, a finish

that left the over 1,700 fans attending limp and wet."

Mann scored one bucket and made 2 of 4 free throws in the final 58 seconds to help secure the 58-54 win. He finished with 30 points.

"That was a cliffhanger," Ballard said.

In three tournament games, Mann scored 110 points.

The Comets then entered a three-game playoff series against Prairie City, with the winner advancing to the state B tournament.

Irrigon won the first game 66-62, then dropped the next two 61-57 and 79-62.

While Mann certainly was the star of the show, he and Ballard agreed that Edwards was the floor leader.

"Ken was always under control emotionally," Ballard said. "He would bring the ball down and we knew he would get things set up. He was a quiet guy that settled us down to do what we needed to do."

Empty pages

The scrapbook that preserved the 1955 season had several blank pages after the season was over.

Mann was a senior in 1956, but said they must not have been very good because he could not recall anything memorable.

The powers that be at Oregon Hoops History were able to help us out, and Mann was wrong.

Mann posted one of the all-time great seasons in 1955-56, scoring 719 points in 21 games (34 points per game). It also was the final season of the narrow key, which was widened from 6 feet to 12 feet the following year.

He also scored 53 points his senior year in a 61-59 loss to Ione. Shingledecker scored the other six points.

He finished his high school career with 1,859 points.

Mann also played football, and ran track and played baseball in the spring. He threw the discus and shot put and did the long jump in track, and was a pitcher and first baseman.

After high school, Mann went to Oregon State for one year and played on the rookie team. He then spent four years in the Navy, and returned to Oregon State when he was discharged.

He redshirted his first season back with the Beavers and coach Slats Gill in 1962-63. The Beavers went to the 1963 NCAA Tournament — a team that included Terry Baker and Mel Counts. They reached the Final Four, but lost to top-ranked Cincinnati 80-46.

"After that season, I didn't play again," said Mann, who got his college degree 30 years after he started.

After high school, Mann went on to play tennis at Everett Junior College, and later worked in the paint industry.

Ballard went to the state tennis tournament one year, but did not place. His biggest win came in a non-league match over Hermiston's Dave Griffin, who had been a district champion the year before.

It's been 67 years since the Comets won their district title, but the years do not wipe away the memories. After their visit, they might have a few new ones for their scrapbooks.

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