



Coach Jack Pratt addresses his 1967 cagers. Standing at far left is Paul Staroba and seated at far right is John Sperla. Seated, from lower left are Joey Keaton, Mike Abbott, Bob Boudreau, Jerry Killian and Mike Killian. The manager is Dan Isaguirre.

The Flint Journal

Legends of the Games

Flint St. Matthew stood as tall as any program in the city's illustrious hoop history during back-to-back Class D title runs in 1967 and 1968

In an effort to promote educational athletics by showcasing some of the great teams of past years, the Michigan High School Athletic Association instituted a program called "Legends Of The Games" in 1997. This year, 1967 and 1968 Flint St. Matthew teams will be honored halftime of the Class D Final.

Ask for directions to the state's high school hoops capital and odds are you'll find yourself headed toward Flint. After all, the city can lay claim to perhaps the state's richest assortment of stellar teams and individual talent. The city's success in the annual MHSAA tournament runs long and deep.

The city's first MHSAA title dates to 1933, when Flint Northern won its first of nine Class A titles No. 1 amongst Michigan's largest class. The city controlled the Class A crown three times in the 1970s

and for five consecutive years in the 1980s. Flint Central won three Class A crowns from 1981-83, followed by back-to-back titles for Flint Northwestern the following two years.

Flint area basketball alums have peppered collegiate and professional rosters over the years, but one of the city's most amazing stories comes from Class D. The Panthers from little Flint St. Matthew conquered prep athletics in the MHSAA's smallest class with some big-time talent during the 1966-67 school year. The mighty Matts rolled to a perfect 23-0 mark on the basketball court. The team's quest for back-to-back cage crowns during the winter of 1967-68 was a thrill ride for all involved while the success of the squad's star forward captured headlines across Michigan.

The class of '67 at St. Matthew came from all corners of the city, and its economic makeup was diverse. It was no secret

that the basketball team was a talented lot. The Church Street club had all the makings of a champion. Together since the 5th grade, the team was expected to make a serious run at the Class D crown.

Team leadership could be found with the seniors, center Paul Staroba, forward Mike Abbott and guards Bob Boudreau, Jerry Killian and captain Joey Keaton.

Under the tutelage of Head Coach Jack Pratt, the Panthers had reached the MHSAA Quarterfinals in both 1959 and 1961. Pratt's team earned its first MHSAA crown in 1962.

"Well, 1966-67 was one of those years where the kids were athletically talented and totally dedicated," recalled Pratt. "They had great attitudes and ability. We were undefeated in football in the fall of '66."

The lineup also featured junior John Sperla, a compact scoring machine, equally adept at feeding the ball to his teammates and rebounding.

"John was a team player and was very proficient at the game," added Pratt. "These were the days before the three-point shot when you had to go to the basket. John would go around anyone; he never took poor shots."

Hal Schram of the *Detroit Free Press* ranked the squad No. 1 in Class D throughout the season. The lofty expectation did not derail the St. Matts' Express to Lansing, as the squad found little trouble along the way. The Panthers knocked off rival Flint St. Mary in the District title game, 82-52. Boudreau and Keaton, usually noted for their defensive skills, led the way with 19 and 16 points when Sperla, the usual scoring leader, ran into early foul trouble.

Five Matts finished in double figures in the team's 20th straight win, a 77-53 thumping of Owosso St. Paul in the Regional Final, as Sperla ended with 28 points, 17 rebounds and seven assists. An *Associated Press* all-state selection, Staroba, who would later star on the gridiron at the University of Michigan and play in the NFL, added 10 rebounds and 10 points in the game. Jerry Killian and Keaton each finished with 14 points, while Abbott added 11.

Wins over Bay City St. Joseph in the Quarterfinals and Freesoil in the Semifinals placed the Panthers on center stage at Michigan State's Jenison Field House, gunning for the school's second Class D title in five years. Ewen, led by 6-9 Terry Conrad, provided the opposition.

Sperla scored eight points as the Panthers opened up a 20-10 lead in the opening frame. Paced by Bob Franti, Ewen knotted the game at 25 before the Panthers pulled away, 41-29, one minute into the second half. Sperla ended with a game-high 29 points, while Boudreau finished with 20. Staroba added nine points, and Abbott, (who's son Jim would make his own mark years later at Flint Central in baseball and football, then as a pitcher in the major leagues) had seven in the 75-67 victory.

Sperla, who finished with 636 points in 23 games in 1967 – the third highest total in Flint area at the time – was the only returning starter in 1968. He knew the odds were long that the Panthers would return to Jenison in 1968.

Indeed, while the Panthers attack featured Sperla, Brian MacDonald – the squad's seventh man in '67 – and a third senior, Jerry Kerperian, the Matts suffered five early season losses. The team needed to find its own identity.

"I was trying to figure out how not to do so much," stated Sperla. "I saw a lot of box and ones. My teammates had to figure out how to step up. We were 10-8 heading into the tournament."

Averaging 31 points per contest, Sperla

matched his normal output in the team's District win over crosstown foe Flint St. Mary, and the squad advanced to the District title game against Genesee.

Sperla didn't start, and saw limited action after reporting late, but the senior still scored 25 points against Genesee. MacDonald, Kerperian, and Joe Grades all finished in double figures as the Panthers ran away with a convincing 81-64 win over the Wolves.

Things were much tougher in the Regional Semifinal, as the Panthers trailed Chesaning Our Lady of Perpetual Help, 47-37, at the intermission. Sperla gunned in 16 of his game-high and school-record 41

mark to 43-points with one from the charity stripe as the Panthers snatched an 84-81 win, and collected their ticket to the Quarterfinals.

Sperla scored 42 points in the Panther's 87-64 win over Peck to head to the Semifinals. Pratt cleared the bench in the team's contest with DeTour, as Sperla topped the 40-point barrier for the fourth straight game, another record shattering performance. The senior boosted his campaign total to a Flint-area best 794 points for the season, with a 44-point display against the Raiders, extending his streak to 46 straight games in double figures.

The MHSAA title contest pitted the Panthers against unbeaten Vanderbilt. The Yellow Jackets built an early 13-7 lead and contained St. Matthew for much of the first half, yet Sperla and the Flint squad rallied for a 32-28 lead just before the break and a 12-point lead after three quarters before sealing the win, 71-69. St. Matts withstood hot shooting in the final quarter by Vanderbilt, and two free throws by MacDonald gave the Panthers a 71-67 lead with 10 seconds left before 12,678 fans at Jenison Field House.

Seniors MacDonald and Kerperian contributed 12 and 10 points, while Sperla, who had 23 at the half, finished with 36 points. The total capped an incredible tournament

run by the 5-11 forward. Sperla's feat established a three-game Final round record. The total of 122 points has stood the test of time, equaled only once in 35 years (by Antoine Joubert of Detroit Southwestern 1983).

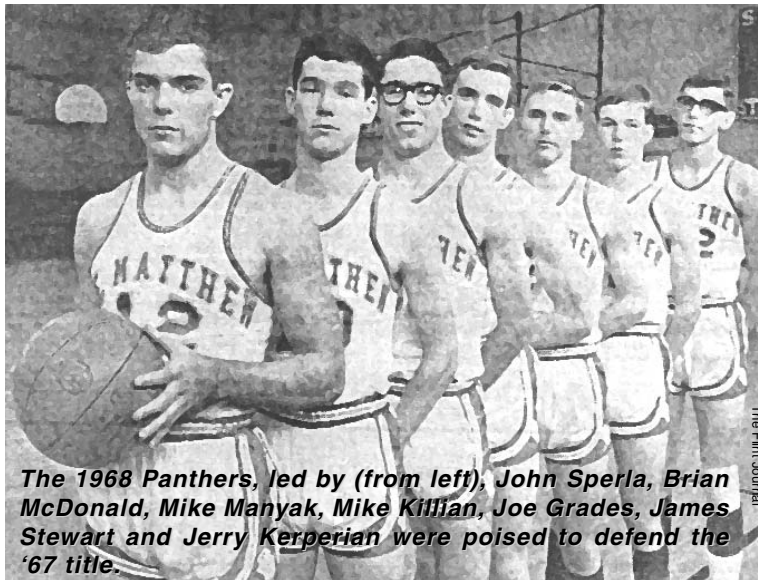
"The championships were a neat thing to be part of," said Sperla, the first Flint cager to finish with over 800 points in a season. "That first year it was expected. But we never were supposed to win it in '68. It was a case where just a lot of guys stepped up."

Two years later, St. Matthews closed its doors, as Flint Holy Redeemer, St. Agnes, St. John, St. Mary, St. Michael, and Mount Morris St. Mary consolidated to form Flint Powers Catholic.

MacDonald, who later became the head coach of the boys basketball team at Powers Catholic, agreed with Sperla's assessment of the two squads, but with a little added notation.

"We weren't expected to repeat, but John made us believe in ourselves that second year," emphasized MacDonald. "That was the difference."

— Ron Pesch



The 1968 Panthers, led by (from left), John Sperla, Brian MacDonald, Mike Manyak, Mike Killian, Joe Grades, James Stewart and Jerry Kerperian were poised to defend the '67 title.

points in the third quarter, winning the battle with Chesaning's Gary Krzciok (30 points) and helping St. Matthew advance, 88-77.

The win meant a Regional Final matchup against Mt. Morris St. Mary, which had dealt the Matts two of their eight regular-season defeats. There would not be a third as Mike Manyak provided the Panther heroics in this contest. Once again, St. Matthew found itself trailing at the half, 36-33, but responded to the challenge. A wild final stanza saw six lead changes in a two-minute span before the Panthers shot ahead 72-67 with a less than 90 seconds play. Still the Shamrocks rallied back to send the game to overtime when Bob Callahan canned a pair of free throws to knot the game at 73-73 with eight seconds remaining.

Thanks to another Callahan free throw, the teams remained deadlocked at the end of the first overtime. Despite losing three starters, including the leading scorer Dan Roesner to fouls, St. Mary appeared to be in the driver's seat, leading 81-78 with less than a minute to play in the second extra session. But Sperla deposited his 17th field goal of the game with 43 seconds remaining to pull the Panthers within a point. Manyak's steal of a Shamrock pass and breakaway with 24 ticks left on the clock led to three-point play and an 83-81 Matts lead. Sperla upped his single-game high

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