

The 1970 MHSAA title served as a fitting farewell gift for Detroit Pershing Coach Will Robinson, one of the most influential coaches of his – or any – era.



photo courtesy of Mike Schwendeman

Detroit Pershing's title teams of 1967 and 1970 left lasting impressions on the Michigan prep basketball scene; Will Robinson left even more of an impact on anyone who laced up a pair of sneakers for the veteran coach

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, the 1967 and 1970 Detroit Pershing teams will be honored halftime of the Class A Final.

The story of Detroit Pershing High School's 1967 and 1970 basketball seasons are striking illustrations of the magic of high school basketball. One is a tale of the expected: a team with budding superstars that, once it got out of its own backyard, was expected to win it all and then delivered. The second is a chronicle of the unexpected: a team of promise that stole a crown for its departing coach. Both are stories of kids playing ball in an era of racial tension for a coach who believed that his job involved more than just

athletics. In his eyes, it was essential to prepare his students for a world that often only saw skin color.

Peppered with an amazing array of talent, the 1967 Doughboys had the size, strength and the ability to overpower opponents. The team roared out of the starting gate with their eyes focused on the finish line – an MHSAA title. In the eyes of their coach, Will Robinson, the only team capable of stopping Pershing was the Doughboys themselves.

"Mr. Robinson put that team together to his liking, I believe," said Ralph Simpson, a 6-5 junior transfer from Southeastern whose father had also played for Robinson in the 40s. "We had a great team."

Along with Simpson, who would go on to star as a pro in the American Basketball Association before finishing his career in the National Basketball Association, the Doughboys boasted 6-8 high school All-American Spencer Haywood. At age 19,

Haywood would anchor the Gold medal team in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, then star at the University of Detroit before jumping into professional ball before his college eligibility had elapsed. Haywood's decision to leave college early altered the college and professional landscape, necessitating a clause commonly referred to as the "Hardship" rule in the years to follow.

His decision was a prudent one. His pro career began with Rookie of the Year and MVP honors during his single season in the ABA, followed by 12 years in the NBA where he would earn four trips to the All-Star game and one NBA championship ring.

Still, the team was far from a two-man squad. The Doughboys also featured 6-7 senior Jim Connally, who later played at Bowling Green, Wiley Davis Jr., a guard who joined Haywood at U of D, Granville Cook, later a player at Eastern Michigan, as well as regulars Lamarr Franklin and

Eric Witzke. Waiting in the wings, were 5-11 guard Marvin Lane and 6-0 sophomore John Lockard.

"We had a bunch of guys that could dunk the ball," noted Lane, who quarterbacked the Pershing football team and would later play major league baseball for the Detroit Tigers. "I believe five guys on that team ultimately played professional sports."

"In our case, the whole team had a demeanor that we took on," said Lockard. "Spencer would say, 'Tear it down,' and we would practice power dunks. We wanted to intimidate. To be honest, I think most of the opponents were beat before the game started. We would run through our pregame drills and look back to see the opponents, lined up, watching us."

"We did tear it down once, and it wasn't because we hung on the rim" recalled Haywood, laughing about the incident. "It was a dunk in warm-ups and delayed the game for about an hour. We wanted to put the fear in you."

Robinson knew he had a special team in the '67 squad. As with all his teams, he continued to emphasize the importance of discipline and hard work. He did his best to keep his players occupied and out of trouble late into the evenings. Players were expected to play more than one sport during the school year. There was no time for girlfriends, and certainly no slacking in the classroom. Education was the name of the game. Sports might provide an avenue to continue one's education, but it was not the only avenue available. He preached those values throughout his career.

A squad with this much talent presented its own set of problems. Perhaps the biggest challenge for Robinson involved keeping the team humble and focused for four quarters of basketball. He received some assistance from the prep writer Hal Schram of the *Detroit Free Press*, a.k.a The Swami.

Detroit Northwestern – not Pershing – carried the Swami's cherished No. 1 ranking in the weekly prep poll throughout the regular season. Featuring Curtis Jones, the team's leading scorer and a playground legend in later years, and all-city basketball selection, John Mayberry, (another future Major League Baseball player), Northwestern backed it up with a 63-61 victory over the No. 3 ranked Doughboys in a city league championship matchup of the undefeated. Jones nailed the game-winner with a shot from the top of the key before a sold-out crowd at Osborn High School. The gym seated just under 1,000, but a metro Detroit television audience numbered thousands more.

"That loss did something to our team. It lit a fire under us," said Simpson, who scored 19 points in that contest. "We absolutely knew it was going to be a tight ball game. We knew Jones real well. He was small, but a great one."

"We didn't play at our maximum," stated Haywood, who finished with 18 points and 14 rebounds. "Afterward, I made up my mind that regardless of what it would take,

"We wanted to put the fear in you," Spencer Haywood (right) would say of himself and his 1967 teammates. More often than not, they did.

there were not going to be any other let-downs. We were going to do what ever it took."

As if it were scripted, Northwestern and Pershing met again in the opening round of the MHSAA Regionals. As Pershing promised, the result differed.

Both Haywood and Simpson scored 29 points, while Cook added 14 as the Doughboys downed Northwestern, 77-71, before 1,000 fans at Detroit Redford, in another locally televised game.

Following the win, Pershing cruised all the way into the Semifinals, as 15 players saw action in the team's 89-59 trouncing of Warren Fitzgerald in the Quarterfinals at Eastern Michigan.

Two nights later, Haywood hit 35 points, Simpson 23 and Connally 14 in an 84-78 win over Detroit Catholic Central in the Semifinals, setting up the title game with Flint Central.

The Indians went in with the intent of stopping Haywood, and in doing so, they helped Simpson into the record books. Haywood spent the night ripping down rebounds and feeding passes to Simpson. The budding superstar overwhelmed the Indians with a Finals record 43 points in the 90-66 win.

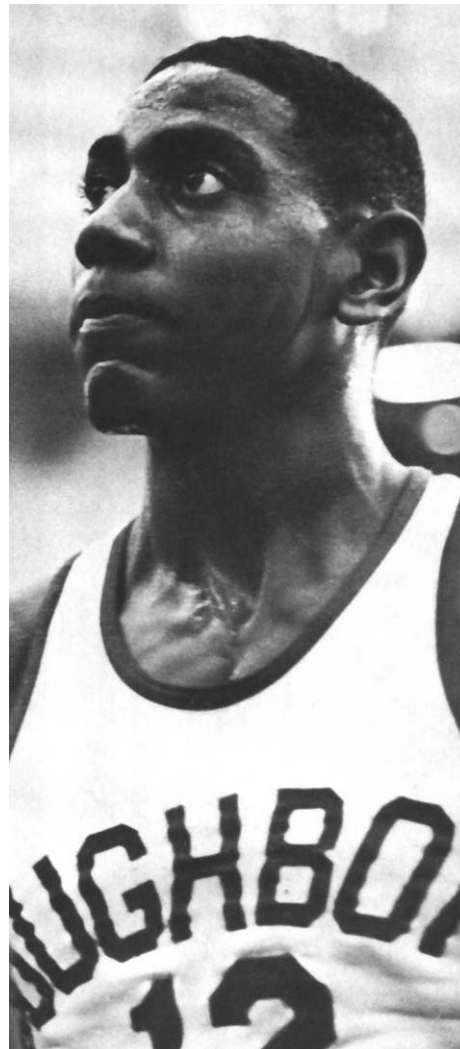
"One superstar helped make another here Saturday night," proclaimed Schram in account of the game the next day.

The final margin was somewhat deceptive. With just under six minutes to play, the Doughboys clung to a six-point lead before exploding, led by Simpson's 14 fourth-quarter points.

"My thought was if you come after me, I'll just throw it out to Ralph," recalled Haywood, who despite being double and triple teamed, still finished with 24 points including 14-18 shooting from the free throw line. "I was the captain. After that loss to Northwestern, we decided that if a guy got hot, we would go to him. No ego. What was incredible is that Ralph's shots never hit the rim. They were beautiful shots."

"It was a huge growing spurt for me," continued Haywood. "I came into the season with All-American honors (as a junior) and started the season with certain expectations, but I learned to accept what was happening. After that Northwestern loss, I would do whatever it took to win. We were not going to lose. Never again."

It was the first PSL school to win an MHSAA title since the league rejoined the Association in 1962, following 31 years of sponsoring its own championships. The achievement meant the world to many of Robinson's former players, as well as the alumni of the other Detroit schools. It was



Pershing High School

the realization of a long-standing dream for those who had been denied the same chance during their playing days.

For Robinson, who earlier in the day became the first African-American to receive the Michigan High School Coaches Association Coach of the Year award, it was his first MHSAA title, but it would not be his last.

During the 1970 season, after 28 years of service to the youth of the Detroit Public Schools, Robinson had accepted the head coaching position at Illinois State University. Named the first black head coach of a Division I school, Robinson would head off to the world of big-time college athletics. His departure would come with the end of the Pershing's 1970 basketball season

While Robinson had every hope of going out a winner, few expected much from the Doughboys, who had missed out on the Detroit Public School League playoffs with an 8-4 regular-season record. Mid-year graduation of their top two players, Paul Seal and Walt Williamson, (both destined for the gridiron at the University of Michigan) had altered the makeup of the team. This, combined with the fact that Pershing's bracket of MHSAA tournament included No 1-ranked, undefeated Ferndale, seemed to insure an early exit from the tournament.

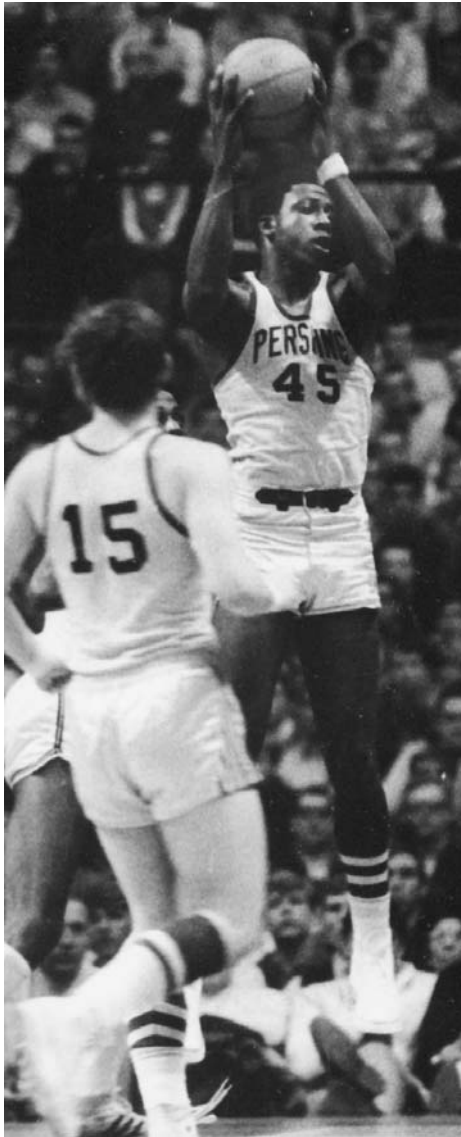


photo courtesy of Mike Schwendemann

Calvin Harper came up big during Pershing's 1970 tournament run including 24 points in the championship game.

Hairston, two of the top ballplayers in the nation, and drew a crowd of 12,700 to Crisler Arena in Ann Arbor. Pontiac Central won, 76-73, and after clearing the huge hurdle few expected problems for the Chiefs as they continued their march to the Class A crown.

Pershing downed Dearborn Fordson in the Quarterfinal round, then knocked off Midland in Semifinals on Friday, 82-71. Despite the win, according to point guard Mike Schwendemann, the team's mood was quiet after the contest.

"The starters all knew that we did not play that well," recalled Schwendemann. "At the team meeting, coach made us all aware that we were not that good and the Final would be much tougher."

The 1970 season marked the end of, for the time being, the three-week tournament format which culminated with the Finals at Jenison Field House. In 1971, the Semifinal and Final rounds were split over two weekends, with Semifinals played at various sites on Saturday, followed by the Finals at Crisler Arena the following Saturday.

Following the team meeting that Friday, Robinson had Assistant Coach John Parker gather his top six players and have them pack their clothes. They were to spend the night in a dormitory at MSU with Ralph Simpson, who was now playing for the Spartans. Robinson wanted no distractions for his team on the night before his final game.

"Coach did not want us up all night in the hotel, running to other rooms and not getting proper rest," recounted Schwendemann, recalling Simpson's explanation for their relocation.

"He did not come to Lansing to lose his last game," continued Schwendemann. "Coach had a saying, 'Almost isn't right,' and he lived this saying everyday. If you played for Will Robinson, you'd better believe in the saying as well."

On game day, Robinson, who was being inducted to Michigan High School Coaches Association's Hall of Fame, spoke to the crowd of 500 gathered for the banquet.

"I know we're the underdog," he stated in reference to the title game. "I know few think we can win it...but I've got a feeling."

To the amazement of all involved, in his final high school contest, Robinson and his Doughboys pulled off one of the greatest upsets in Finals history, 86-81 over Pontiac Central. Senior guard Phil Paige, who scored 13 of his 19 points in the second quarter, helped Pershing rebound from an early 10-4 deficit for a 39-34 lead at the half.

The margin had dwindled to two points, 76-74, with 2:02 to play, when Hawkins nailed both ends of a one-and-one free throw situation. Hawkins added a tip-in seconds later for an 80-74 Doughboy lead. Bubbles finished with 28 points, and

Harper's workmanlike 24 points from the inside helped seal the win. The junior delivered 11 short-range field goals, including a series of easy layups and tip-ins from the low post. Darrell Jeter, pulled up from the JV in the second semester, came off the bench to add 13 points and 11 rebounds. Russell led the Chiefs with 23 points before fouling out with 18 seconds to play.

After 28 seasons at the helm, Robinson's final prep game represented perhaps his single greatest coaching effort. With two MHSAA crowns in nine years of competition, he began his next adventure.

— Ron Pesch

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**THE
DOMINANT
DOUGHBOYS**

Expected to be in attendance today are the following members of the 1967 and 1970 Detroit Pershing Championship Teams

1967

- Allen Burton**
- Melvin Christian**
- Jim Connally**
- Wiley Davis Jr.**
- Spencer Haywood**
- Leroy Holmes**
- Don Jenkins**
- Marvin Lane**
- John Lockard**
- Dennis Murray**
- Ralph Simpson**
- Jules Walker**
- Don Williams**
- Eric Witzke**

1970

- Reginald Blackshear**
- Arthur Douglas**
- Clifford Frye**
- Calvin Harper**
- Darrell Jeter**
- Vanley McGowan**
- Raymond Mitchell**
- Phillip Paige**
- Michael Schwendemann**
- Paul Seals**
- Mike Vicari**
- Walt Williamson**
- Solomon Witherspoon**

Head Coach Will Robinson
Asst. Coach John Parker
Asst. Coach Freddie Prime

"If you followed his guidelines, you'd be a winner in life"

Even at 93, Will Robinson still has a huge amount of basketball in him. The legendary coach of perhaps the greatest high school team to ever play ball in the deep history of Michigan high school hoops, Robinson's voice still races when he speaks of the sport he loves.

Sent to Detroit by the superintendent of schools in Chicago in 1944, Robinson's people skills were the reason for the move. Racial tensions in Detroit had erupted into three days of rioting during the summer of 1943, and members of the Detroit school system had asked for help in calming the tense environment.

He moved from DuSable High School, a recently opened school in Chicago, to Detroit Miller, an old junior high converted into a high school. Located on Dubois Street on the city's lower east side, the building lacked athletic facilities. As a member of the athletic staff, Robinson was extremely disappointed with the facilities and inquired about returning to Chicago, but was told directly by the superintendent that he would not find work in the huge Chicago school system if he did not accept his assignment.

Accepting his new role as a mentor in Detroit, Robinson focused on the mission of teaching his lesson plan for a successful life. That featured academics first and foremost, learning about the world both inside your neighborhood and outside its borders, and avoiding trouble outside of school. Athletically, that meant learning the fundamentals of the game, and practice, practice, practice.

Coach Rob, as he was known to many, had bounced around the country. At the age of 33, had already seen a lifetime of hurt. Born on June 3, 1911 in Wadesboro, N.C. and raised in Ohio, William Joseph Robinson had experienced success as a stellar athlete. Raised by his grandparents following the death of his own mother and father, Robinson was the first black student to quarterback a Steubenville Wells High School team. He led the squad to an undefeated, untied and unscored-upon season in 1930. A 14-letter winner in five sports at Steubenville, still he felt the sting of racism early and often. A hero on the gridiron, he was treated as a second-class citizen away from the field. A second-place finisher in the Ohio high school golf championship, Robinson was barred from the country club dining room.

Following high school graduation, he coached at a segregated black school in West Virginia, not far from Steubenville, but the position was unpaid. When told that he could not earn a salary without a college degree, he gained admission to West Virginia State. There he played football, baseball, basketball and gymnastics before graduating in 1937.

"Blacks had tough going at that time," he stated. He vowed to do everything he could to help others overcome the hardships they would face.

His career path led from West Virginia to Pittsburgh to Chicago and then Detroit. After 28 years, he returned to Illinois as a college coach. Throughout the years, he scouted talent for the Detroit Tigers, the Detroit Lions and the Detroit Pistons. Until recently, he continued his work with the Pistons, working as an assistant to the team president. He is forever grateful for the opportunities and honors that have come his way.

"I'm but two generations removed from slavery," he would point out.

"He showed no favoritism," recalled Charlie "King Snake" Primas, a star player at Miller in the days when the team won four consecutive city titles. "Looking back over the years, that was the best thing to happen. If you didn't succeed academically, it didn't matter how good you were athletically – you didn't play. We were trailblazers. He would say, 'Everybody's watching you.'"

"He was tough – had high expectations of us academically and athletically," recalled Marvin Lane, a member of the 1967 team and later a major leaguer with the Detroit Tigers.

"If you followed his guidelines, you'd be a winner in life" emphasized John Lockard, a sophomore in 1967 and later a basketball star at the University of Michigan.

Despite a lack of a home field, Coach Robinson started a football team at Miller. Basketball games were played at the Brewster Recreational Center, located about a mile away from the high school. The close-knit community supported the teams, and Robinson's athletic squads quickly became powerhouses. By 1946, the basketball team had arrived, earning six consecutive city basketball titles

But due to a longstanding decision by the administration of the Detroit Public School League, the majority of Robinson's teams were never able to showcase their talent before a statewide audience. Athletic teams from the PSL did not participate in the MHSAA sponsored statewide tournament between 1931 and 1961.

"There is no question, Miller had some great (basketball) teams," stated George Puscus, who covered the PSL extensively for the *Detroit Free Press*. "I'm sure they could have won state titles if they had played in the tournaments."

The athletic talent of his players grabbed the national sports spotlight. Sammy Gee, Robert "Showboat" Hall, Primas, all of whom played for the Harlem Globetrotters, as the NBA was still segregated; Dorie Murrey, Mel Daniels, Spencer Haywood, Willie Iverson, Ralph Simpson, and Robert "Bubbles" Hawkins, NBA and ABA ballplayers; Gene "Big Daddy" Lipscomb, Glen Doughty, Paul Seals and Calvin Harper who spent time in the NFL; Ted Sizemore and Marvin Lane, major league baseball players; Lorenzo Wright,

1948 Olympic gold medalist in the 400-meter relay in London.

But most importantly, over 300 of his pupils used athletics as a springboard to a college education.

"In Coach Rob's eyes, everybody was somebody," continued Primas. "Your background didn't matter."

"He's such a fantastic man," emphasized Ralph Simpson, now a minister in the Denver area. "The things he taught to get me through life, I still carry with me. He had a capacity to help young men. God gave him something special to help kids like me."

In 1962, the PSL returned to the fold, and teams and spectators from around the state were finally able to witness Robinson's talented teams play the game he loves. Those who watched and listened with care also were introduced to his lesson plan for a successful life.

— Ron Pesch



Photo by Les Pooch, Detroit Free Press

Will Robinson (center) was a coaching icon in Detroit whose proteges also fared well. At left is Detroit Northeastern Coach Winfield Henry, and at right is Detroit Northern Coach Robert Taylor, both of whom played for Robinson at Detroit Miller. At the time of this 1965 photo, Robinson was a couple years away from his first MHSAA title with Pershing.