

photo courtesy of St. Joseph Herald-Palladium

## *Covert stood tall on the hardwood for two magical seasons, casting an imposing shadow on Class D basketball in 1965 and 1966*

*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 1965 and 1966 Covert teams will be honored halftime of the Class D Final.*

**O**n the inside, they sported a front line that measured 6-4, 6-6 and 6-8 – previously unheard of in Michigan's smallest classification. On the outside, they could bury an opponent with their shooting ability. For two seasons, their accomplishments on the basketball court altered the composition of Class D basketball and their success in the MHSAA boys basketball tournament forever altered the sports landscape of the little town of Covert. Today, prep fans across Michigan

look upon the school and the city as a perennial basketball power come March. It is hard to believe that wasn't always the case, considering the two-year run that but the Bulldogs on the map in 1965 and 1966.

While the school's small enrollment prevented the formation of a football program until 1969, the athletic program did excel in track, winning a handful of MHSAA Class D titles beginning in the mid-1950s. The basketball team, however, had never advanced beyond the Regional round of the MHSAA tournament.

Following college, Ron Clark, a former athlete at nearby Coloma High School, took his first teaching and coaching position at Covert. He moved up to varsity head coaching position in 1962 and felt that with a family attitude, solid discipline and the right group of athletes, the school's fortunes on the basketball court could

change. While working with the eighth-grade squad that season, he found a group of kids he thought could help make the transition.

"As a coach, I could see the potential of these young men," recalled Clark. "They were very coachable and had great character."

The change in the basketball program exposed itself to the basketball universe in the spring of 1964. Clark had continued to tinker with mix. Team rules were enforced, solid play was rewarded, and the team took flight. A couple of those kids, Jim Sarno and Maurice Armstrong, had been called up to the varsity squad. Now sophomores, both brought an unusual feature to the Class D team – size. The squad advanced to the final round of the MHSAA tournament for the first time in school history. Led by all-state senior Mark Patterson, the



Bulldogs lost in the Quarterfinals to eventual champion Britton-Macon. Covert finished the year with a 20-3 record and the underclassmen returned with invaluable tournament experience.

When the 1965 season arrived, the team established the goal of being the first "State Champions of Covert High School." While it was not unusual for a Class D school to surface with a single standout athlete, and solid surrounding cast, life was a little different for Coach Clark. With Sarno, a center now standing 6-8, and Armstrong, 6-6, and another junior, 6-4 Richard Johnson, at the wings, Covert's frontline shattered the height deficiency most Class D squads faced, and they quickly became the talk of the area. The Bulldogs standard lineup also included sharp-shooting "quarterback" Bernard Woods, another junior, and senior point guard and defensive specialist, Anthony Taft. James Abrams and Ron LeVay, two more juniors, lent support off the bench. All were outstanding athletes.

An early season loss to Fennville and all-everything guard Richie Jordan was the team's only misstep during the regular season. A second meeting between the schools – this one a 98-69 win by Covert – illustrated how the team had gelled.

**While frontliners like Armstrong (below) gave Covert the luxury of height that many Class D teams lacked, the Bulldogs were far from one-dimensional. If teams tried to pack it in, Covert would simply turn to sharpshooters like Abrams (left).**

Ranked third in the state polls, Covert rolled through the District and Regional and again returned to the tournament's final round.

In the Quarterfinals, the team buckled down in the final minutes of play and rolled to a 77-62 win over a solid but much shorter team from Dryden. The win set up a Semifinal showdown with top-ranked Barryton. Word of Covert's unusual height continued to spread across the state in anticipation of the Semifinal matchup. In at least one instance, the advantage took on epic proportions.

"We were staying in a hotel outside of Lansing," recalled Fred Lindsey, a reserve on the 1965 squad, "and we were listening to a sports show on the radio talking about the tournament. The sportscasters were talking about Covert and how we were exceptionally tall for a Class D team. The commentator said Covert's front line was taller than the University of Michigan front line, which at that time was Oliver Darden, Bill Buntin and Cazzie Russell. The radio broadcast also said that Covert even had three reserves, Ron LeVay, Danny Davis and Fred Lindsey, who are 6-5. Much to our surprise!"

While each stood over six foot, the trio would require platform Chuck Taylors to achieve the sensationalized altitude.

Such talk meant little in the physical battle with Barryton. The team featured its own all-state candidates in guard Dave Grof and forward Jim Coady, and a solid 6-5 center in Dave Armock. Unable to dominate inside in the early going, Covert turned to the outside. Richard Johnson poured in 14 points on a series of soft jumpers in the first 20 minutes of play, but Barryton held an eight point margin, 49-41, early in the third quarter. Even without the services of Coady, who was sent to the bench with five fouls at the 3:28 mark of the third quarter, Barryton still led, 55-48, with a minute remaining in the third.

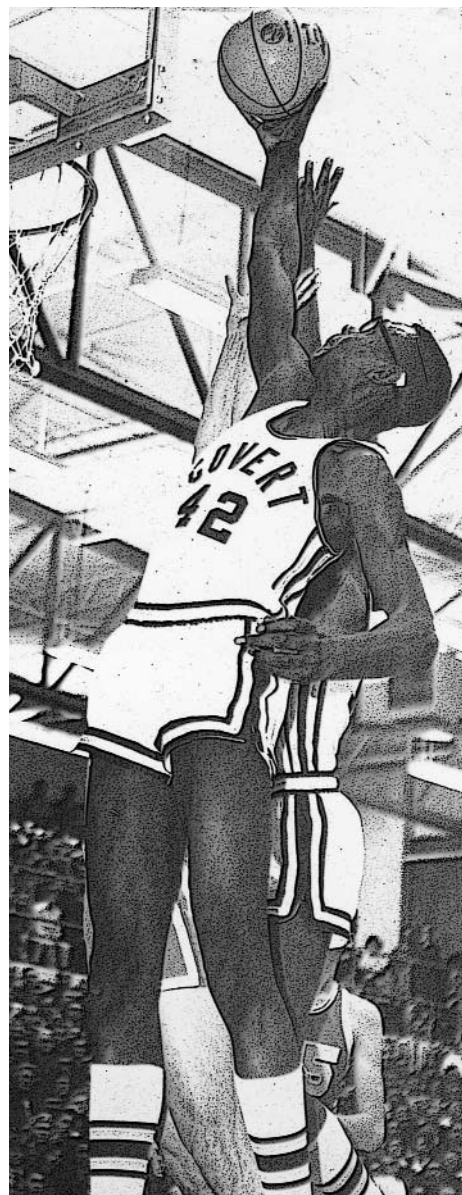
That's when Covert turned to its big center. Two free throws and a bucket by Sarno in the final minute of the frame cut the Barryton lead to three points as the quarter ended. A three-point play by Armstrong to open the fourth knotted the score, 55-55. Although Armstrong was forced to leave with five fouls at the 3:07 mark followed by Woods with 1:46 remaining, Covert managed to escape with a 75-67 victory. Sarno delivered 18 of the team's points during the 27-12 run in the final nine minutes, including four free throws in the

final 60 seconds to seal the win. He finished with 28 points to lead all scorers, while Johnson ended with 20.

The following day, Clark and his Bulldogs accomplished their preseason goal. Facing a fierce and inspired squad from Perkins, the Bulldogs grabbed the school's first MHSAA basketball crown with a 76-72 triumph. Sarno was named to the all-tournament team, and the town celebrated like never before.

"Five hundred autos formed a parade for us," recalled Abrams about the team's incredible return home.

Indeed, the team was met by the procession of cars at the Paw Paw exit on I-94 and escorted through the cities of Lawrence, Hartford, Watervliet and Coloma



on their way to the Covert High School gym. A crowd of 800 met the team and congratulated it on the victory, its 22nd straight.

With the pinnacle of tournament experience behind them, and the loss of only Taft to graduation, the Covert family returned to the spotlight in 1966. Armstrong, Johnson, Sarno, Abrams and Woods, now all seniors, comprised the starting lineup. They charged through the regular season with a flawless record and, riding the state's longest winning streak, rolled into the tournament ranked No. 1.

The team continued its march to Lansing through District and Regional play. According to Coach Clark, the team's ability to remain in the hunt for a second consecutive MHSAA title could also be attributed to the efforts of team doctor E.V. Sergeant.

When a bone chip was discovered in Sarno's shooting wrist during Regional action, the doctor fashioned "a lightweight but firm cast" for the all-state center. When Richard Johnson came down with a strep infection and high fever prior to the Quarterfinal, Sergeant was able to treat the forward and allow him to play in the team's match with Grosse Pointe University High School. Before a crowd of 1,200 at Marshall High School, Johnson delivered with 19 points including 9-of-13 shooting from the floor, as the Bulldogs stopped University High, 74-61. Woods led all scorers with 21 points while Sarno scored 19.

Johnson lasted only four minutes in the team's Semifinal match with Freesoil. Suffering with fever, Johnson left the floor and LeVay stepped in to contribute 10 points as the Bulldogs overpowered the Pirates, 88-70. It was the first loss in 22 games for Freesoil. Armstrong delivered his finest tournament performance to date, scoring 22 of his game-high 26 points in the second half and snagging 18 rebounds in the victory. Holding a comfortable lead late in the contest, Clark was able to insert subs Clarence Baber, Quenton Mingo, Oscar Peterson, and Sylvester Dobbins into the lineup.

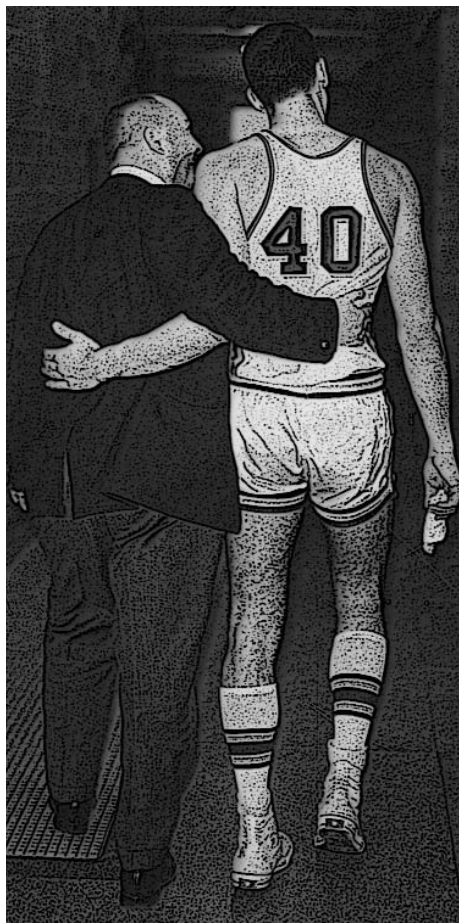


photo courtesy of Mike Schwendemann

***Few players get to leave their prep career the way Jim Sarno did in 1966, arm in arm with Clark, back-to-back championships behind them.***

The victory marked the 47th consecutive win by Covert – a new Lower Peninsula record – and propelled the team into its second Class D Final.

"Most of us grew up together since kindergarten. We grew up as brothers," remarked LeVay. "We knew this would be our last game together. We had to win."

The opponent was Trout Creek, also undefeated in 25 contests. Ranked second in the press polls, the Anglers featured 6-5 center Bob Gale, a high-scoring senior

averaging 33.9 points per game during the regular season.

Again the Bulldogs pulled together and turned in another stellar team effort in their 84-70 win over Trout Creek. The win negated one of the top individual performances by a player in Finals history as Gale scored 40 points and added 18 boards to single-handedly keep the Anglers in the game.

Covert, in turn, delivered another top-notch fourth quarter performance, scoring 16 points in a 2:13 span, then turned to a defense designed to slow Gale and seal the win. Four of the starting five finished in double figures for the Blue and Gold, with Sarno leading the charge with 23 points. Armstrong, named to the Associated Press All-Tournament team, scored 22 for the Bulldogs. Bernard Woods also added 22, marking his fifth consecutive 20 point performance, while James Abrams chipped in 10 points. Johnson, still slowed by his strep infection, returned to the lineup and added eight.

"We all were very good players," said Sarno "yet our coach, Mr. Clark, easily convinced us to play for each other selflessly and not selfishly."

Again, the surrounding area turned out en masse to celebrate the achievement of the returning champs. For a second time, the champions were greeted by a motorcade, however this time the team was transferred to a township fire truck for the glorious last leg of the ride into town.

"I, as coach, will never forget the looks in the players' eyes after the game as reality set in as to what they had just accomplished. Now, 40 years later, it is still as vivid as it was in 1965 and 1966. We always talk and remember those wonderful times."

— Ron Pesch

Ron Pesch is the historian for the MHSAA. To submit story ideas and potential statistical records, write to Pesch at 1317 Lakeshore Drive, Muskegon, MI 49441.

## LITTLE BIG MEN

***Expected to be in attendance today are the following members of the 1965 and 1966 Covert Teams:***

***Head Coach Ronald Clark; James Abrams - G; Clarence Baber - G; Greg Gelesko - F; Herman Hawkins; Fred Hill - F; Fred Lindsey - F; Ronald LeVay; Quenton Mingo - F; James Sarno - C; Anthony Taft - G; Billy Wilborn - G; Bernard Woods - G; Phillip Leonard - MGR; Greg Peterson - MGR***

### Notes:

- In 1965, Clark spent the hours outside game time in a Lansing hospital with a stomach virus during the Semifinals and Finals. Thanks to scouts, JV coach Rodney DeYoung, who handled practices, he was still able to keep the team focused.
- Covert went on to win Class D track titles in both the 1965 and 1966 seasons as well.
- The 1966 MHSAA Final was played on the same day Texas Western turned the world of college basketball upside down by playing five African-Americans in its upset victory over Kentucky in the NCAA Final.