

Legend
of the

Fennville FLASH

A small town boy small in stature still casts a shadow and a legend as tall as any prep athlete this state has ever seen

Not long ago, I came across an article written by Hal Schram, the legendary prep journalist for the *Detroit Free Press*. It was penned during the winter of 1977, and Schram had decided to look back at the history of Michigan High School basketball and pick his top 20 high school players from the past quarter century. "The Swami" had followed the high school circuit since the 1940's.

Schram began with a larger list, paring the roster from 44 to 20. The sports writer went one step further and decided to single out one member of the squad for the ultimate honor – "the greatest of them all."

As one would expect, final selections included many of the state's most memorable names: Earvin "Magic" Johnson; Dave DeBusschere; Chet Walker; Spencer Haywood; Ralph Simpson, Rudy Tomjanovich; Campy Russell. Their exploits are legendary, and even the most casual fan of basketball could agree they belong on the list.

However, looking back from the millennium, Schram's choice for state's greatest player is stunning. "The Swami" himself admitted at the time that his No. 1 pick would surprise many.

Hal's top pick never played professionally in either the NBA or ABA. That can be overlooked, as the criteria was simple – the state's greatest prep player.

But when I state that Schram's selection played ball at a Class C school, that his teams never advanced to the final rounds of the tournament, and that he stood a mere 5-7 1/2 and weighed only 160 pounds in his prime, most basketball fans shake their head in disbelief.

But those are only physical attributes. Ask Richie Jordan himself. Schram's pick as the state's greatest high school ballplayer, Jordan will tell you that it doesn't matter what race, religion or how tall you are. He'll state that anything is possible with imagination and hard work.

Many may dispute Swami's selection, but few will debate Jordan's talents as an all-around athlete. A four-sport star at Fennville High School, he earned 16 letters during his prep career. He is considered by many to be

the finest student-athlete ever turned out by the state of Michigan.

The family lived in Bangor when Jordan started school. On the playground one day, Richie wandered over to a high jump pit, where the older kids were practicing their leaps during recess. Much to his delight, he was offered the chance to jump by one of the older kids. The bar was lowered, and Jordan took his shot.

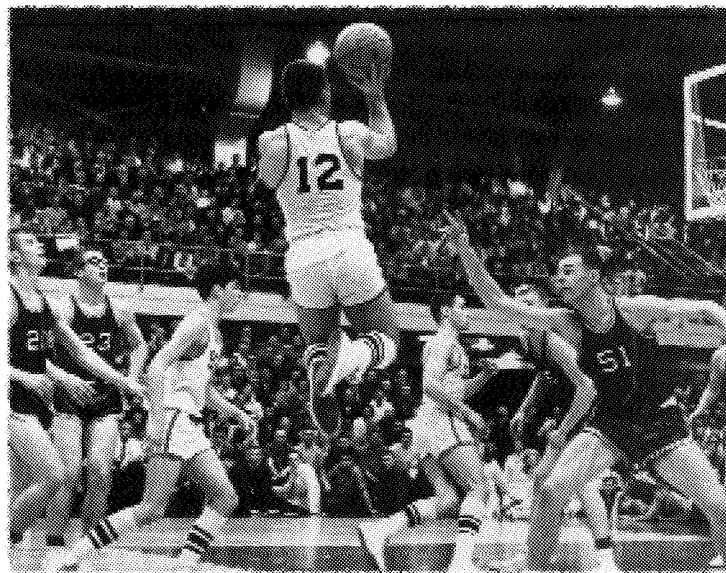
"I easily jumped over the bar and the older kids made comments on how easy I jumped. They kept moving the bar up until it was as high as my head. A crowd started to gather and I cleared the bar. The older kids made me feel real special."

Before entering the third grade, the Jordan family moved to Fennville, a small town in west Michigan.

"Fennville was a wonderful place to grow up and I have the best of memories," recalled Jordan. "We had a group of kids who played together and loved each other from the 3rd grade on."

Jordan Hall of Fame Bound

It was announced earlier this week that Rich Jordan will be inducted into the National High School Sports Hall of Fame this summer. Jordan becomes the first athlete from Michigan to be inducted into the Hall of Fame.



File Photo

Fennville's Richie Jordan is set to release one of his patented jumpers during a stellar prep career.

Like so many kids, he imagined himself duplicating the feats of his idols. Many have similar dreams, but few worked as hard as Richie to achieve them.

By the time he reached high school, Jordan had evolved into a stellar all-around athlete. His drive to excel worked around the clock. Through the years he accumulated new sports heroes and studied their movements in his mind.

"I was at the 1962 finals game where (Saginaw High School's) Ernie Thompson scored 42 points against Benton Harbor. I went home and worked on my double clutch for days after that.

"I loved all those guys and respected their talent," said Jordan, "but I wanted to be better than all of them."

His hard work paid off with stellar athletic performances. An all-state halfback in football in his junior year, Jordan averaged a whopping 35.6 points in 16 basketball contests and was a unanimous first team All-State selection at guard in the winter of 1963. In the spring he excelled on the baseball diamond, and in track and field.

Jordan continued his rigid regime of weightlifting and working out. Word of his athletic exploits trickled out of Fennville. In the fall of 1964 he rushed for 1,246 yards on 86 carries, and tallied 25 touchdowns, to cap an outstanding gridiron career. His total of 5,132 career rushing yards was tops in the state at that time, and the mark still ranks in the top ten. Again, he reaped all-state accolades.

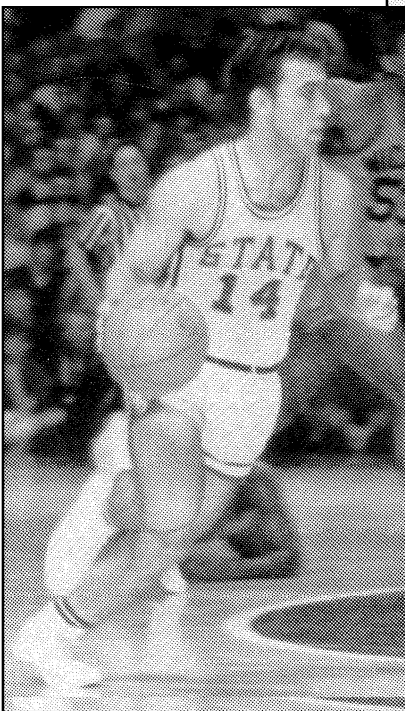
But the basketball court was where the Jordan legend was defined. His vertical jump was phenomenal, and he could dunk with both hands. Scouts reported that he was lightning fast and excellently coordinated.

Under Coach Ray Feher, Fennville returned a solid squad for the 1964-65 season. Beside Jordan, the Black Hawks featured outstanding play from 6-0 center Chuck Green and forwards Harry VanLonkhuyzen and Bill Barron.

Early in 1965, the Kalamazoo Gazette sent a photographer to Fennville to snap photos of Jordan for a feature article on the Black Hawks' upcoming cage contest in Kalamazoo against Hackett High School. Fennville entered the game with a 3-1 mark, the only mar being a 95-93 loss to Saugatuck in which Jordan scored 54 points and VanLonkhuyzen tallied 32. The newspaper printed a shot of Richie dunking the basketball, and the image caught the imagination of many. An overflow crowd packed the 2,200 seat Irish Gymnasium to watch the matchup.

Jordan and his teammates trounced the favored Irish 99-73, as Richie scorched the nets for 47 points. A rematch, scheduled for Fennville's gym, was paired with a Kalamazoo Central/Lansing Sexton game and quickly moved to Western Michigan University's Read Field House

A crowd of 5,000 was expected for the Thursday evening twin bill.



MSU Files

Jordan played basketball briefly at MSU before concentrating on baseball, leading to a chance with the Pittsburgh Pirates.

Normally, the contest between the smaller schools would serve as the opener for the Class A game, but in this case, the prep phenomenon from Fennville was the real attraction. Wearing No. 12, Jordan carried a 43.7 average into the contest. The Black Hawks were 12-2 on the season.

By tipoff of the second game, a capacity crowd of 8,825 had crammed into the field house. Suffering from a case of stage fright, Fennville trailed 39-30 at the half. Hackett held the game's feature attraction to a mere 13 points in the first half on six of 13 shooting from the field.

The Black Hawks trailed by as many as 18 points during the third quarter, but pulled within 13 points, 60-47, as the game entered the final frame.

Fennville switched to the press to open the fourth, creating turnover after turnover by the Irish. Jordan caught fire, delivering a sensational 24 points in the last eight minutes, including the game winner with 57 seconds to play to lead the Black Hawks to a 76-72 victory. No. 12 added a pair of free throws at the end to seal the win, and established a new field house record with 49 points.

"Yes, there is a Richie Jordan!" clamored the *Kalamazoo Gazette* the following day. "No overrated talent, this authentic 5-7 1/2 package of marvelous athletic ability from Fennville High School."

Basketball fans from around the state clamored for a tournament run by Fennville in hopes of seeing Jordan perform in the confines of Jenison Field House on the campus of Michigan State – home to the annual boys state basketball championships.

While the Black Hawks were by no means a one-man squad, injuries were by taking their toll by tournament time, as Coach Ray Feher lost Barron to a leg injury. VanLonkhuyzen, who was averaging over 23 points per contest, was playing, but he suffered from a lame hip.

The Black Hawks rolled through the districts defeating Middleville, 97-85, in the final to advance to the regional tournament in Battle Creek. Jordan suffered an ankle injury with two minutes to play in the third quarter of the contest, but returned to action midway through the final frame. He finished with 46 points while VanLonkhuyzen added 33.

As Jordan entered the regional contest with Bridgman, he

trailed Mel Peterson of Stephenson by 11 points for the state's all-time single season scoring mark. With most of the starters hurting, there was concern on the Fennville side. But when Green sprained his ankle on the opening tip, Jordan knew his team was in trouble. Bridgman gave Jordan free reign to shoot, avoiding the double and triple teams that the Fennville star had seen much of the season to concentrate on controlling the board and balanced scoring. Jordan took full advantage, shattering Peterson single season record by scoring an incredible 60 points. Still it was not enough as the Bees overcame two 13-point deficits to end Fennville's dreams of a title by a score of 101-91.

Jordan shot 25-of-51 from the field and 10-of-14 from the charity stripe in the contest to finish as the state's all-time career scoring leader, with 2,210 points.

To no one's surprise, Jordan once again earned all-state honors. In April he was named prep All-American by *Coach & Athlete* magazine, earning the distinction of "smallest" on the squad.

"Weep not for him, however," stated the article, announcing the honor, "as he can dunk the ball and with his 44.4 season's scoring average, he has scholarship offers from 58 colleges and universities."

Richie finished out his unbelievable prep career by batting .550 on the baseball field, and by leading his track team to a third place finish at the state meet. On May 20, 1965, the city of Fennville honored the prep hero and his teammates for their outstanding athletic careers and their contribution to the community.

Jordan spent two years with the Michigan State basketball program, earning a letter in 1967, then walked away from basketball to concentrate on baseball with the Spartans. Following graduation, he landed a contract with the Pittsburgh Pirates, but a shoulder injury ended his pursuit of a major league career.

Today, the "Fennville Flash" is known as "Mr. Jordan" by his students at Cardinal Mooney High School in Sarasota, Fla. A strength and conditioning coach, daily he preaches the merits of weight training and the benefits of hard work to his students.

Married and the father of three, he has enjoyed coaching and watching his children participate and excel in athletics.

He cherishes the memories of his youth, and the friends he made along the way.

"All my teammates and I felt very special," said Jordan, now 53, "but we also were very humbled by the admiration we were shown. We all felt an obligation to our community to conduct ourselves in a way that would reflect kindly on our small town. I'm still very proud that we all understand that."

—Ron Pesch

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