



For 31 years, the Detroit Public School League Ran Its Own Tournament in the Shadows of the MHSAA, Its Stars Achieving Legendary Status In Exile

**M**iraculously, Reggie Harding lived 30 years before a gunshot to the head cost him his life. An admitted drug addict, he had turned to crime to survive. But it's tough to disguise height, especially when many of your crimes are committed within a few city blocks of where you grew up.

Especially when your abilities with a basketball are legendary.

At 6-11½, Harding stood a full head taller than most of his high school opponents. Legendary *Detroit Free Press* sportswriter, Hal Schram, known as "The Swami" to his faithful readers, described him as the tallest schoolboy star in Michigan history. Blessed with exceptional mobility – and of course height – Harding was a handful. A *Parade* first-team All-American in 1961, the senior hit on over 60 percent of his shots, averaging 31 points and 20 rebounds per contest. Between 1959 and 1961, he led Detroit Eastern (now Detroit Martin Luther King) to three-consecutive Detroit Public School League crowns. Harding and his teammates also rolled to three straight City Championships, downing the best of the Detroit Catholic League schools.

There are some that still believe he was the finest prep ball player ever turned out by the Motor City. A three-time all-stater, Harding was drafted out of high school by the Detroit Pistons and logged four seasons in the NBA. Yet, as a prep athlete, few basketball fans outside the Detroit area saw him play.

Eastern's victory over previously unbeaten Detroit Catholic Central in the 1961 City

witnessed the event at University of Detroit Memorial. Scalpers were charging \$3 for a 70-cent student ticket and \$4 per \$1.25 adult seat before Detroit police shut things down.

It was Harding's final prep contest and he turned in a stellar all-around performance, scoring 19 points and pulling down 21 rebounds, both game highs. The big center tallied eight of those points in the final three minutes of play to seal a 56-53 win for the Indians. But that was the end of the road for Eastern and their coach Bob Samaras. Beginning with the 1930-31 season, the PSL had chosen not to compete in the MHSAA Tournament, thus the victory meant Eastern finished the season with a perfect 14-0 mark.

The loss was Catholic Central's first and last on the year. The Shamrocks snaked through postseason play and eventually emerged as king of Class A by defeating Muskegon Heights in the MHSAA title game.

Like many athletes before him, Harding did not have the chance to showcase his talent before Michigan's outstate fans. Over the years that list grew to include a parade of high-caliber basketball players and coaches.

According to newspaper reports, the City League was formed in the early 1900s. Comprised of three teams in the beginning, it expanded rapidly as new high schools were built. Detroit's fast growing population guaranteed large enrollments and a fine selection of athletes.

That showed in the early years of competition, as schools from Michigan's largest city claimed numerous mythical cage crowns. Based on their record, Detroit Eastern, for example, claimed a

Championship game was perhaps Harding's finest moment. A crowd of 9,200

state title in 1910, then played in a national tournament held in Madison, Wis.. Detroit Central claimed a state title or finished as runner-up each year from 1906 to 1913. With the start of tournaments to determine a state champion, the city schools backed up their claims of superiority by appearing in 12 of the first 14 Class A title games between 1917 and 1930. the first year of the MHSAA Tournament was 1925.

The City League also excelled in other sports, winning six straight state titles in track and swimming; four tennis crowns in six attempts and a golf crown

Many remember the departure from the MHSAA as spurred by the onset of the Depression and the need to conserve resources. According to veteran *Detroit Free Press* sports writer George Puscus, there were other factors at play for the PSL.

"Well, part of it was the fact that the large schools from Detroit had dominated the state competition in the early tournaments and they had the idea they would win it all the time. The argument was why bother," Puscus said.

Vaughn Blanchard, who served as director of health and physical education for the city league schools from 1929 to 1954, believed that there was an overemphasis on competitive athletics. He favored a withdrawal from outside competition and endorsed the development of a program of greater intraschool, intramural activity. Frank Cody, superintendent of schools and the board of education agreed. In their mind, Detroit city schools offered a broad range of competitive athletics, including competition in sports not offered by many outstate schools. A self-imposed exile was instituted.

With the break from the MHSAA tourney, the PSL devised a four-team playoff to determine the winner of the league's basketball title. In general, the structure of the tournament meant a team from the East Division and a team from the West Division would



Ed Haun, Detroit Free Press

**Reggie Harding (circled) and his Detroit Eastern teammates made a habit of collecting hardware in 1961. For all his legendary basketball talents, however, Harding could not defeat the city streets.**

meet in the final. In the early years, the victor would take home the Charter House trophy sponsored by S. L. Bird and Sons, a local business.

In those early playoff years, Detroit Southeastern was one of the dominant schools on the basketball court.

"Back when I was there, the league had already stopped going to the state (MHSAA) Tournament. But as students, we really didn't think about it," recalled Don Lund, a three-sport star from 1939 to 1941 for the Jungaleers, and later a great athlete at the University of Michigan. "By the time I played, that's just the way it was. We were just trying to win the league championship.

"Southeastern had a strong basketball tradition, winning the PSL and the state title in 1925 and 1926. We played for the title three times when I went there. In 1939 we beat Northeastern, in 1940 we lost to Highland Park, and in 1941 we beat Southwestern."

For the first time in league history, two East Side teams met in the league championship game in 1939. It was a classic double overtime affair.

Trailing Northeastern by five points, Southeastern knotted things up at 26 with 90 seconds remaining in regulation on a bucket by Lund. The sophomore hit another basket with seven seconds left to give his team the lead, but it was waved off because he was fouled before the shot. Instead, Lund sank a single free throw to push the Jungaleers ahead, 27-26. On the ensuing possession, Northeastern quickly pushed the ball upcourt. Forward Johnny Wiostowski was fouled as he setup for a shot. Following a timeout, he nailed the single charity toss to send the game to overtime.

Tied 30-30 at the end of the extra frame, the crowd of 5,000 at the Naval Armory roared their approval as the teams began the second three-minute overtime. Lund, who finished with a game-high 13 points, sank another free throw to open the scoring, however a bucket by Roy Gomillion gave the Falcons a 32-31 lead. With 50 seconds to play, Southeastern's Emil Hison, who had replaced All-City center Harvey Pierce, scored the game winner. Pierce had fouled out with four personals in the first overtime.

By the mid-40s, the balance of power had begun to shift. Detroit Miller was the city's newest high school, having been admitted to the prestigious PSL in 1933. Previously used as a junior high, it is recognized as the state's first predominately black high school. The team, under coach James Chapman, was battling for the league championship by the spring of 1935.

But it was coaching legend Will Robinson who really got the ball rolling at Miller after taking over the reigns of the program in 1944. Under his guidance, the Trojans appeared in the PSL title game six consecutive years from 1946 to 1951, winning four titles in a row from 1947-1950. A host of great athletes, including Lorenzo Wright, Charlie Fonville, Bob "Showboat" Hall, Eugene Lipscomb, Jim Johnson, Robert Taylor, Charley Primus and Levi Davis helped to cement the school's reputation as a hotbed of athletic talent.

In 1946, Robinson and his previously unheralded Miller squad announced to the



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 coaching Detroit Pershing.***

rest of the league that they were a force to be reckoned with in the future. Southwestern, making their seventh consecutive appearance in the league playoffs provided the opposition. Before a sellout crowd of 14,793 at Olympia Stadium, Al Barnett, the Prospectors' 6-7 center scored with five seconds left in overtime to clinch the title for Southwestern, 30-28.

Despite starting only one player that stood over 6-0, Miller rolled to a 12-0 mark in 1947. Notorious for a tenacious full-court press, the Trojan's lineup of high school All-American Sammy Gee, Harold Blackwell, Clarence Norris, Frank Robinson and Gene Hamilton ranks among the state's finest. Miller dismantled Northern 52-21 for the league title, then defeated Detroit St. Joseph 37-34 in the first ever City Championship game.

"A crowd of over 16,000 watched us play in that one," Robinson proudly recalled. "It was a record in Michigan for a high school basketball game at the time."

In 1948, the MHSAA Tournament was again unified after 16 years of separate Upper and Lower Peninsula competition, but the PSL chose to forge ahead on their own.

"Back when I was coaching, George Mead headed up athletics in the Detroit Public Schools," explained Will Robinson, an administrative assistant and longtime scout for the Detroit Pistons. "At the time I think he believed the schools in the PSL were too good for the rest of the competition around

the state."

Miller trounced Cooley, 44-29, in the 1948 championship, but was forced to relinquish the title due to using an ineligible player. The player, a substitute, saw only a couple minutes of action in the contest.

"There is no question, Miller had some great teams," stated Puscus, who covered the PSL extensively after joining the staff of the *Free Press* in 1946. "I'm sure they could have won state titles if they had played in the tournaments."

The Trojans downed coach Eddie Powers and his Northern squad in another all-East final at Olympia Stadium in 1949. In 1950, they squared off against a rising power in Frank "Ace" Cudillo's Cass Tech team for the 1950 crown. Miller again emerged victorious for their fourth consecutive crown, but would fall to the Technicians in 1951. Cudillo's squad, featuring Gatewood and Godfrey, scored their 25th win in a row en route to the 1952 title.

In 1953, after a five-year layoff, the City Championship game pitting the PSL champion against the city's Catholic League titlist was resumed. In 1955, a third prong was added to the path for recognition, as the 16-team Metropolitan tourney debuted. The series of games was perceived by some as poor substitutes for the MHSAA Tournament. Add to the mix "The Swami's" weekly ratings of the state's top teams, and confusion reigned. Fans couldn't help but wonder how the PSL, now numbering 20 teams, would do against outstate squads. Strong sentiment was building within the city limits for a return to statewide competition.

The mid-50s saw the emergence of Detroit Northwestern as the dominating squad from the West Side. Between 1952 and 1961 the Colts, led by coach Ed Demerjian, challenged for the league crown on eight occasions, winning titles in 1954 and 1957. From 1959 to 1961, the focus was on Harding and Eastern.

By 1960, the debate on returning to the MHSAA had reached an apex. A 27-member Citizens Advisory Committee was assembled to debate the subject. In late April of 1961, the two-year study was brought to the Board of Education for a decision.

Despite opposition by Superintendent Samuel Brownell, and the Detroit Education Association, the board voted 4-3 to accept the recommendation of Citizens Advisory Committee to rejoin the rest of the state in tournament play beginning in 1962.

"At one time, they may have been superior," said Puscus, reflecting on the board's action, "but when they returned I think they learned that the rest of the state knew how to play."

In that 1962 campaign, Northwestern, Eastern and Pershing all advanced to the quarterfinals. Pershing, coached by Will Robinson and featuring Ted Sizemore and Mel Daniels, lost to eventual Class A titlist Saginaw in the semifinals.

"Looking back, I think we would have had reasonable chance against outstate schools," said Lund, contemplating the impossible. "But you have to be thankful for what you got."

— Ron Pesch