

Coach "Okie" Johnson, Jim French, Otto Smith, Percy Richards, Mert Johnson and M.C. Burton prep for battle.



Muskegon Chronicle Staff Photo

Muskegon Heights rolled with the changes en route to three titles in the mid-'50s, and in the process changed athletic priorities in its own community

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 1954, 1956 and 1957 Muskegon Heights teams will be honored halftime of the Class B Final.

The times, they were a-changin'. America in the 1950s moved forward in fits and spurts. Television and Rock and Roll took the country by storm. Jonas Salk won science's race to conquer Polio. The successful launch of the Soviet Union satellite, Sputnik, shocked Americans and launched the Space Race. In the courts, the war to end racial discrimination was fought. In 1954, the Supreme Court handed down its landmark decision known as Brown vs. the Board of Education, outlawing racial segregation in public schools.

On the basketball court, the move toward what was then called "race-horse basketball" had begun. In Michigan, the shift away from two-handed set shots began with Coach Floyd Eby and the 1949

Coldwater champs.

At Muskegon Heights, Coach Oscar E. "Okie" Johnson had seen it all. A native of Cadillac, the veteran mentor had attended Western State Normal College (Western Michigan University) in the early 1920s, where he emerged as a star in football, basketball and track. Cut from the old cloth, when the term "coach" meant master of every sport, Johnson accepted the head coaching position at Mt Pleasant High School upon graduation. Fresh out of college, he led Mt. Pleasant to back-to-back Semifinal appearances in the MHSAA basketball tournament.

When Muskegon Heights went looking for an accomplished young leader to head the athletic programs at the high school, it selected the proven Johnson. It would be decades before they would need to conduct another search. Johnson guided Heights athletics from the fall of 1927 until the end of the 1963 school year.

At "The Heights," Johnson's teams found incredible success. Under his watchful eye, the Tigers earned at least a share of six mythical state football crowns in the 1930s and 1940s. On the basketball court,

his teams excelled as well, earning trips to the final rounds of the tournament in 1933, 1934, 1936, 1939, 1940, 1941, and 1944. His track and baseball teams turned out outstanding athletes, and Johnson's pupils dotted college rosters throughout the Midwest.

Despite seven trips to the final rounds of the basketball tournament, only one Heights team, the 1939 squad, had ever advanced to the championship game. Johnson's Tigers fell to Flint Northern, 37-27, in the Class A contest that season.

Heights remained very competitive. With an array of talented athletes, Johnson was an early advocate of the fast break and while his 1953 cagers ended the season with a 9-7 campaign, he expected a strong showing from the team in the coming year.

Unfortunately, just prior to the season opener, it was reported that Johnson would miss the season to repair a ruptured disk in the spinal column. As the cage season began, the team was placed in the capable hands of Johnson's assistant, C.P. Ziegler. Yet, in a surprising turn of events, Johnson suddenly announced that he had rejected the hospital stay to return to the helm. He

missed only the first four games of the season.

The team rolled through those opening games with ease. Seniors Mert Johnson, Jim French, Otto Smith and Lee Howell were joined by junior M.C. Burton on the starting five in the early going. Following Johnson's return, the Tigers upped their win streak to nine-straight, as Burton and Johnson quickly emerged as the big guns.

Heading into their game with longtime Southwestern Conference archrival Benton Harbor, the Tigers lost Howell to mid-year graduation. Searching for a replacement, Coach Johnson rotated Don Haan, Len Hartman and Jim McMurray into the vacant spot. Benton Harbor took advantage of the departure, and, using a zone defense, upset the Heights, 53-49, the lone loss on the Tigers regular-season slate.

Johnson's squad avenged the defeat in the season finale, as Burton established a new Heights single-game scoring record with 36 points in a 70-54 win.

The path to a Class A title, however, was far more challenging.

After downing Muskegon and Grand Rapids Central in the opening round, the Tigers squared off against Grand Rapids Christian for the second time during the season in the Regional final. The game was spectacular by all accounts, with the score tied on nine occasions, including five times in the final quarter before the Tigers escaped with a 42-40 win.

Next up was Kalamazoo Central, the MHSAA Class A champ in 1949, 1950 and 1951. The Maroon Giants jumped out to an early 17-9 lead in the early going, and remained in control, 20-15, at the intermission. The Tigers rebounded with a strong second-half to win, 44-39, before 6,500 fans.

Heavily favored Highland Park was next. Class A champs in 1952, the Polar Bears had advanced to the Semifinals in 1953. Led by George Lee, a future NBA player, and standout senior George Duncan, who would later rewrite the record books at Wayne State, Highland Park entered the contest undefeated.

The Heights rallied back from an early deficit and knotted the score at 20-20 at the half. The Tigers opened up a 10-point lead following the break, and still held a 38-30 advantage as the game entered the final frame. A furious fourth-quarter rally allowed the Parkers to knot the score at 47-47. Fouled twice in the waning seconds, Hartman, substituting for the injured Smith, hit two of four shots from the charity stripe

for a 49-47 Muskegon Heights victory and the school's second title shot.

"Our team was supposed to lose in the Semifinals," recalled M.C. Burton, "and when we upset the top-seeded Highland Park, with their two consensus all-stars, it was hailed as a fluke. Likewise, the sports writers predicted that we would surely lose to No. 2 seed Flint Northern in the Final on Saturday."

Instead, the Tigers capped a 20-1 season with a thrilling 43-41 overtime victory over the Vikings – ironically, their opponent in the Class A Final back in 1939. Burton, solidifying his status as one of the state's premier players, scored 22 points. Mert Johnson scored nine, including the game-tying field goal from the right of the free throw circle in regulation. Tied 41-41, as the teams entered the extra frame, a pair of missed shots by the Tigers gave Flint Northern the ball with 2:22 remaining. Electing to stall for the final shot, all-state guard Bob Failing finally drove to the basket for the game-winning shot with four seconds left. However, Failing was called for a charge, sending Johnson to the foul line. After a Heights timeout, Johnson calmly

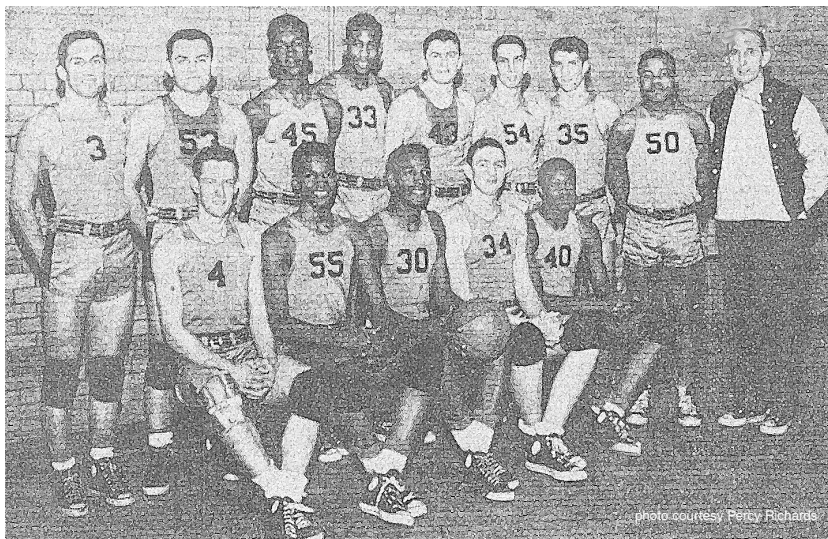
people of all races, colors and creeds jammed the downtown intersection of Broadway and Peck on Sunday afternoon to welcome home their champions.

"That's when it happened," said Mert Johnson. "It was like someone hit the light switch. When we won the state title in '54, the focus in the Heights changed from football to basketball."

The city-owned Baker Street courts served as the laboratory for the transition. Day-in and day-out on these asphalt slabs, alumni and underclassmen, many of whom had known each other since grade school and junior high, would practice the game. Large crowds began to assemble and cheer the action and the athletic abilities of the young men: M.C. and his "little" brother, 'Big Ed' Burton; Ossie and Willie McCarty; Lee Howell's brother, Kenny, the last of the long line of Howell siblings; Ron Robinson; Pete Pelotes; and many others honed their skills and basketball knowledge.

While the team lost Johnson, Smith, French and the Haan twins, Don and Tom, to graduation, the Tigers were still a favorite to repeat in 1955. Burton, McMurray and Hartman were joined by M.C.'s brother Ed and a number of other underclassmen, but the team was upset in the Quarterfinals by Benton Harbor. The elder Burton ended his three-year high school career as the Tigers' all-time leading scorer, with 1,141 points. An all-state selection again, he would excel on the court and in the classroom at the University of Michigan. In 1977, *Detroit Free Press* writer Hal Schram named M.C. to his list of Michigan's top 20 prep basketball players from the previous 25 years.

While the emergence of the black

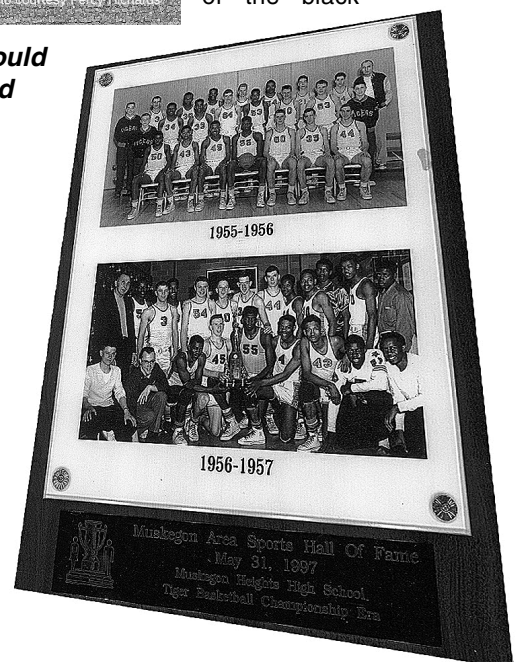


The 1954 team (above) got the ball rolling, but it would not be long until the 1956 and 57 squads (right) had etched images into the school trophy case as well.

stepped up and drilled both shots to propel the Tigers and their long-time coach to the school's first-ever basketball crown.

With 423 points, Burton eclipsed Mert Johnson's single-season scoring mark set a year earlier, while Johnson ended his senior season with 315 points. Both received all-state accolades and, thanks to their play in the state tournament, each were given a berth on the Associated Press all-tourney team.

Still, perhaps most amazing was the scene that awaited the team upon their return home. A police escort, with sirens screaming, met the team bus at the city limits, and guided the team to the central business district. There, a throng of 5,000



In 25 Years, They Are Best Prep Cagers



Heights' M.C. Burton (inset) was named as one of the Detroit Free Press' 25 best high school players by prep guru Hal Schram, a.k.a., "The Swami."

Hal Schram's Top 25

1952: Frank Yonasa Sr., Detroit St. Andrew
 1953-54: George James, Saginaw
 1954-55: George Lee, Highland Park
 1955: M. C. Burton, Muskegon Heights
 1956: Dave DeBusschere, Detroit Austin
 1957: Chet Walker, Benton Harbor
 1958-59: Reggie Harding, Detroit Easton
 1960-61: Willie Hill, River Rouge
 1962: Mike Jordan, Farmington
 1963-67: Spencer Hayward, Detroit Pershing
 1968-69: Ralph Robinson, Detroit Pershing
 1970: Rudy Tomjanovich, Westland
 1971-72: Lindsay Hutcheson, Detroit Eastern
 1973-74: George Brownell, Pontiac General
 1975: Robert Hamilton, Detroit Pershing
 1976: Larry Flegal, Detroit Central
 1977: Tom Laskowski, Detroit Central
 1978: Bruce Finckes, Ferndale
 1979: Stuart Nelson, Detroit Bishop
 1980-81: Earle Johnson, Lansing Everett

BY HAL SCHRAM
 Free Press Sports Writer

They tell you that when a sports writer looks back instead of looking ahead, he's in trouble. But there's one thing about being in the past: I found it a lot easier.

In this week of re-creating a peek into the past — the next 25 years of Michigan high school basketball — and covering the best 25 Michigan high school players of the past quarter century, the probability is included above of players who, at any point, would do well to be on the Top 25.

When going to these 25 players, I was right from the start. Remember Mike Jordan of Farmington? Well, actually from a high school standpoint, he was the greatest of them all. It's also true that Mike Jordan was not the only player to be on the list. Chet Walker, Larry Flegal, Spencer Hayward, George Brownell and all the others — they, even those of former's Earle (Biggie) Johnson.

Here are a few of the things — mostly as a high school player — that Mike accomplished back in the mid-1950s.

- During the 1954-55 season he scored 800 points, a state record, averaging 44 points a game.
- At 5-10-75, he was a specialist at the top.

● He was an offensive wizard at the top of the game. Michigan's Head Coach, Coach Hamilton, says in his book "The Michigan Basketball Story" that Mike was playing for Benton Harbor at the time.

● I recall an early season game in March, 1955 when Bill Robinson, then coach at Detroit Pershing, told him coach at the Michigan High School Coaches' Association meeting in Kalamazoo: "I think we're going to show you something tonight."

Robinson and Pershing did just that as Spencer Hayward set up Mike Jordan. For a while nothing happened and the crowd laughed and cheered their way to a state championship. There was silence, and then, who should be on the list? You're probably right.

● Another name who has followed high school basketball to this state for as long as I have will recall the exploits of such names as Spencer Hayward, Earl Hill, Mike Hill, Leighton Robinson, Ray Flegal, Wayne Smith, Don Hill, John and Ralph Robinson, Tom Laskowski, C. C. Brown, George Lee, Oscar Brown, Larry Thompson, Ron Smith, Fred Thompson, Bill Schaeffer, Tom Laskowski, Mike Hill, Earl Hill, Ed Hill, Fred Thompson and Earl Hill.

● Every one was an All-Michigan — all of them played a big role in Michigan high school basketball during the past 25 years.



with a 45 points in a 76-59 victory. Once again, however, the Tigers saw their dream of an undefeated season crushed. In their conference rematch with Benton Harbor, sophomore Chet Walker drilled a shot from the top of the key in the final seconds to beat Heights, 52-50, at Bolt gym. It ended a Tiger home winning streak or three-plus years, and it would be the team's only loss at Bolt in more than five years to come.

Indeed, in 1957, the Tigers were the media's preseason No. 1, and they rolled to a perfect 20-0 mark. McCarty missed the opening games due to a football injury, but returned in time to replace Howell in the starting lineup when Howell was lost to mid-year graduation. This time, the team never missed a beat, vanquishing Benton Harbor, 67-44, at home in early February, and again a month later by 14 points on the road before 3,200 fans, 63-49. It was the closest anyone would come to knocking off the Tigers in the regular season.

Peliotes, the team's starting guard, went down with a leg injury in the final Benton Harbor game but was ably replaced by Lloyd Swelnis as the team headed for the tournament.

Eager to witness the Quarterfinal showdown with Traverse City, at least 1,500 fans had to be turned away at the gates of the fieldhouse at Central Michigan College. Inside, an overflow crowd of 5,200 packed the facility to watch as Burton destroyed the Trojans' hopes for a Semifinal berth, posting an amazing 44-point, 31-rebound performance in the Tiger's 79-52 win.

In their third meeting of the year, Muskegon Heights again thumped Benton Harbor and future NBA great Chet Walker in the Semifinals, 74-52.

One night later, Johnson's machine disposed of Detroit Austin, led by another future NBA star, Dave DeBusschere, 61-49. Burton crowned his prep career with 25 points, while the sharp-shooting junior, Robinson, added 21. Both earned selection to the annual all-tournament team and all-state recognition. Burton ended his prep career with 1,143 points, breaking his brother's career record by two points. He would go on to play pro ball with the Harlem Globetrotters and later, in the NBA.

With the win, the Tigers extended their win streak to 27 in a row. With their third championship trophy in four years in tow, they again returned home to a huge welcome in the central business district.

The die was cast, as the Tigers remain a constant threat come tournament time.

— Ron Pesch

athlete played a huge role in the success of Heights on the court, it meant little to Coach Johnson.

"Okie wanted to win," Ed Burton emphasized. "Outside the gym, of course there was discrimination. But not on the team. The high school was probably 80 percent white, with 20 percent all other minorities back then. Yet when I was looking at the team photo the other day, I noticed the mix was exactly 50-50. Okie's main concern was having five guys on the floor who could win."

"The color of your skin was never an issue," recalled Ron Zimmer, a member of both the '56 and '57 squads.

Prior to the 1956 season, Muskegon Heights had played its home games at the junior high, with seating for only a few hundred fans. After a season-opening road win over Grand Rapids Central, the Tigers christened their spacious new home, C.F. Bolt Gymnasium, with a 56-44 victory over Grand Rapids Union before a packed house of 1,700. Ed Burton, now a junior, lit up the scoreboard with 35 points in the team's home debut.

In game nine against Holland, Burton shattered the school's single-game mark

Johnson's crew cruised through the preliminary rounds of the tournament with ease. A 40-33 victory over Grand Rapids Creston, coached by Okie's son, Bob Johnson, sent the team to the Quarterfinals for the third straight season.

This time a 70-61 win over Saginaw Arthur Hill, followed by a 61-54 triumph over Detroit Catholic Central set the stage for a championship showdown with Hamtramck. Trailing the Heights, 55-45, late in the final quarter, the Cosmos managed to rally within 57-54 with 45 seconds to play. But free throws by junior Kenny Howell and sophomore Ron Robinson sealed a 63-53 win for the Tigers. Burton, who was later named all-state, led the team with 23 points, but Howell, Robinson and Willie McCarty also finished in double figures. Sophomore Ossie McCarty, Willie's younger brother, chipped in with eight. The squad's lone graduating senior, playmaker Leon Smith, ended with six for the Tigers (20-1).

"On the bus trip back home after we won the state championship, we all made a vow that the next year we would not lose a game," remembered Peliotes, then a junior. "And we didn't."

WELCOME BACK

Expected to be in attendance today are the following members of the 1954, 1956 and 1957 Muskegon Heights teams:

<p>Dan Barberini Floyd Cook Jr. Leonard Hartman Ossie McCarty Don Sanborn Paul VanOveren Gordon Johnson (Representing Coach Oscar "Okie" Johnson) Cleo McCarty (Representing Willie McCarty) Fred Myles (Representing Lieutenant Myles)</p>	<p>Roland Bingham Dean Danigelis Nate Hunter Pete Peliotes James Schotthey Dan Wright</p>	<p>Ed Burton David Fox Steve Jackson Percy Richards Bob Slezak Ron Zimmer</p>	<p>M.C. Burton Richard Hansen Mert Johnson Ron Robinson Otto Smith</p>
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