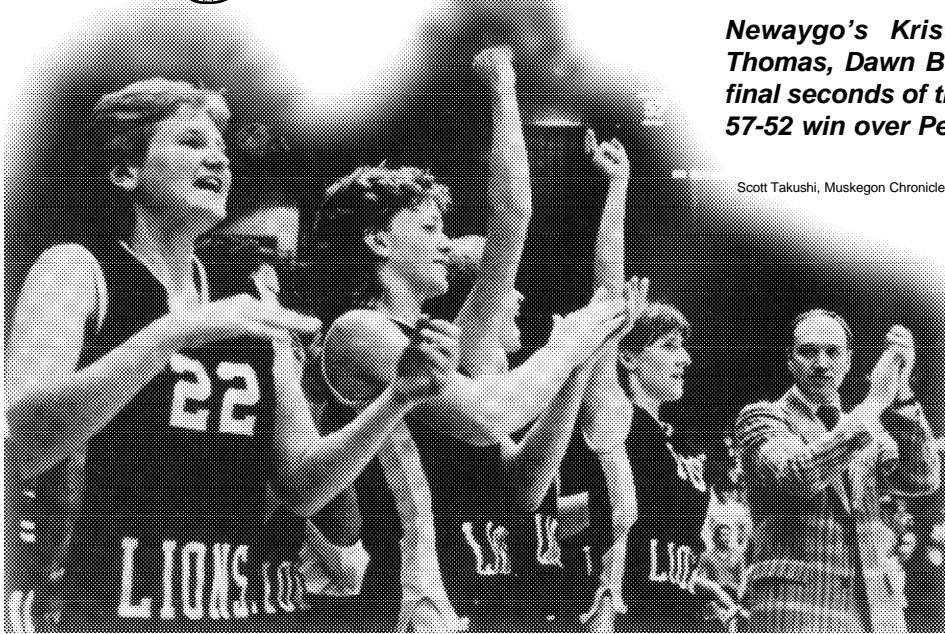


Newaygo's "Little Lions" Were a Fairy Tale Before Their Time, As Consecutive MHSAA Titles in 1984 and 1985 Elevated Their Status to "Lion

Legends of the Games



Newaygo's Kristin Long (22), Keri Thomas, Erica Thomas, Dawn Bulk and Coach Stan Thomas enjoy the final seconds of the 1984 Class C championship game, a 57-52 win over Pewamo-Westphalia.

Scott Takushi, Muskegon Chronicle

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, which honors its fourth girls basketball school at halftime of the Class A Final this weekend.

Smitten. Is there a better term to describe the city of Newaygo's love for its girls basketball teams of 1984 and 1985?

The small community northwest of Grand Rapids embraced their squad of "Little Lions" as they traveled the previously uncharted trail of the MHSAA playoffs. It was a magical journey for all involved. Crowds swelled as the dream of a title approached. For many, it was their first exposure to girls playing basketball, and they had found a stunning collection of tour guides.

Thanks to the efforts of this special group of girls, memories flowed forth from the little village: reminiscence of a boys basketball team that reached the MHSAA semifinals in 1951; long lost tails about a state championship track team in 1929. The thrills were endless for all involved. They clung to each other with love and respect. With teamwork, and a never-say-die attitude, the players and their coach represented all that is good about high school athletics.

Newaygo's rise to the top of the girls Class C cage circuit coincided with the arrival of coach Stan Thomas. A second-team all-state selection in 1961 at Newaygo, Thomas returned home following college and took the reigns of the girls program in 1979. He quickly earned a reputation for turning out solid teams. His oldest daughter, Jacki, earned all-state honors for the Lions in 1981, and Thomas' team advanced to the quarterfinal round of the state tournament in 1983.

Junior Keri Thomas, the third of Thomas' four daughters, and senior guard Dawn Bulk co-captained the team in the fall of '84. Kristen Westcott, Sonja Beckman and Sheryl Frye also returned for their final year of varsity ball. They were joined by juniors Sandy Wagner and Doreen Berger, and sophomore Kristen Long. Freshman Erica Thomas or ET, as she was known by her teammates, rounded out the roster. She was the youngest of the Thomas children.

While the team was expected to do

well, a lack of height (no one on the roster exceeded the 5-7 mark) was a considered a real detriment to postseason success. As anticipated, the team rolled to a solid 18-2 mark in the regular season behind aggressive play and a knack for creating turnovers. Bulk and Keri Thomas emerged as the team's top offensive threats, and the team advanced through the districts, regionals and quarterfinals with relative ease.

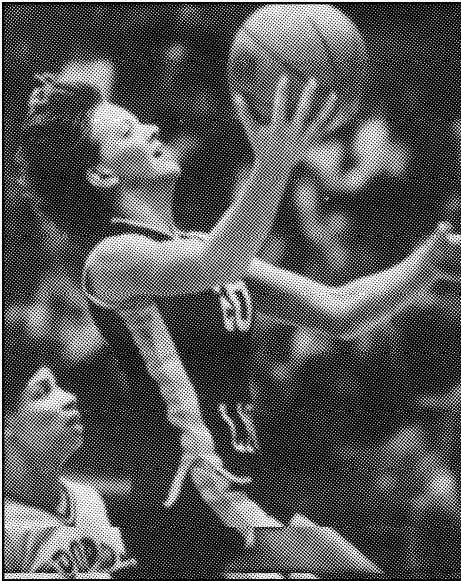
Once again, the Lions faced a size disadvantage as they headed into the semifinals against Flint Academy at Western Michigan University's Read Field House. In an ironic reversal of roles, the Lions struggled with turnovers, coughing up the ball nine times in the opening quarter, and 19 times overall.

Deadlocked at 8-8 at the end of the opening frame, Academy opened up a 22-17 lead with 1:44 to play before the half behind a pair of baskets from their top scorer, Sandy Westbrook. Newaygo battled back with seven points, including the final two by Frye at the nine second mark, to grab a 24-22 edge at the half.

Westbrook, who missed much of the third quarter after picking up her fourth personnel foul, returned to action in the final quarter and guided the Eagles to a 46-42



1984 Champions



Scott Takushi, Muskegon Chronicle

Keri Thomas drives for two during the 1985 Final vs. Detroit St. Martin de Porres.

lead with 4:09 remaining in the contest. Again, the Lions responded to the challenge.

Keri Thomas delivered two points on a reverse layup, drawing a foul on the play. Thomas nailed the shot from the charity stripe, and narrowed the lead to a point, 46-45.

Keri added another free throw at the 3:19 mark to knot the score at 46, and then the Lions went into a stall, chewing up a full two minutes as the Academy remained in a zone and refused to foul. Bulk decided to go for the lead but traveled, and Newaygo was forced to give up the ball. The Eagles gained control, yet were unable to score. Fouled on the ensuing possession, Keri Thomas scored on the front end of a one-and-one with 1:10 to play to put the Lions up 47-46. Academy missed on two opportunities within the final minute, while Bulk added a free throw with two seconds remaining for the 48-46 win and the school's first trip to the finals.

A crowd of 2,930 showed up at Read Fieldhouse the following night for the championship match against Pewamo-Westphalia. Once again, the Lions found themselves trailing as the game neared the halfway mark. Down 21-15, they rallied for a 23-21 lead, behind four buckets by Bulk within 35 seconds. With the solid play of two seniors, Lynda Rademacher and Michelle Wieber, the Pirates grabbed a 39-37 lead late in the third, but buckets by Westcott and Bulk gave Newaygo a 41-39 edge at the end of the quarter.

Sandy Wagner, who finished with 11 points, opened the final frame with a basket from the outside, followed by another by Bulk from the top of the key for a six-point margin. The Pirates cut it to four, 45-41, with six minutes to play before the Lions went into their stall offense. The move paid off with another basket by Bulk and a quick

layout by Keri Thomas on a steal to give Newaygo an insurmountable 49-41 lead and ultimately, a 57-52 win.

Following graduation, only four members of the '84 team – the Thomas sisters, Wagner and Long – returned. Four others – Lori Mauter, Tammy Morton, Amy Saum and Amy Schenk – joined the veterans to defend the title. The Lions posted a 19-1 mark in the regular season, winning the Newaygo County Athletic Association crown along the way.

Still, few basketball experts gave the Lions the chance to get out of the regionals of the tournament. But Newaygo emerged with convincing wins over Mason Country Central and Middleville Thornapple-Kellogg to advance to the quarterfinals against league rival and surprise winner, Morley-Stanwood, a team it had defeated in two previous meetings during the regular season.

Despite some nervousness over facing the Mohawks for the third time, Newaygo jumped out to a quick lead. This time Erica Thomas gave the Lions the early momentum, scoring the game's six opening points. Newaygo rolled to a 30-10 halftime lead and a 47-30 win en route to a birth in the semifinals round.

"Being in the Final Four is what we wanted," said ET's sister Keri following the game. "The rest is gravy now."

The semifinal game with Benzie Central pitted teams of similar size against each other. Keri Thomas, named to the Associated Press Class C all-state squad for the second consecutive year, scorched the nets for 26 points to lead the defending champs to the final round with a 59-35 win over the Huskies. Erica Thomas shut down Benzie's Dionne Walker, holding the all-stater to four baskets on the night. Walker, who had averaged nearly 25 points per contest, added five of six free throws, to finish with 13 points.

With the win, Newaygo and their collection of devout fans would face top rated Detroit St. Martin de Porres. Featuring 6-3 junior center Daedra Charles, the Eagles were heavy favorites in the contest. Regardless, more than 1,000 fans made the trip to Read Field House in Kalamazoo to cheer on this band of overachievers.

Five hours before the big show, coach Thomas had gathered his squad together at the Comstock High School gym, the site of their semifinal victory, for some free throw practice. The move would pay dividends later in the evening.

Trailing 10-8 at the end of one quarter of play, the Lions again rallied and hit the locker room for the half-time intermission with a 22-15 lead. Newaygo opened up a

10-point lead, 34-24 at the third buzzer before de Porres made their move. Four baskets at close range by Charles and a pair of buckets and a free throw by Kazara Goins kept the Eagles in the game.

Trailing 44-40, de Porres' Dawn Douglas delivered a three-point play to pull the team within one, 44-43. On Newaygo's inbounds pass, Erica Thomas was fouled. With 11 seconds to play, the pressure was immense as she headed to the line for a one-and-one situation. The sophomore had hit only one of six free throws during the contest. Once more, her shot failed to drop. But Thomas chased down the rebound, and was fouled again.

"I just looked at the clock and thought 'if I don't make both of them, de Porres was sure to go down the court and get it to their big center, and she'll score,'" said Thomas after the game.

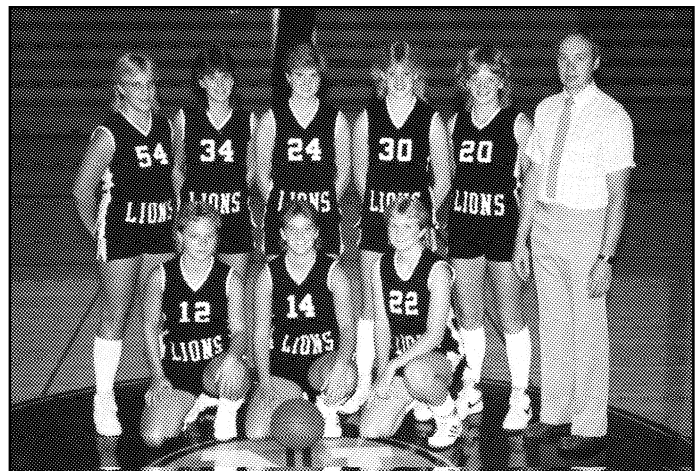
The drought at the line ended for ET, as she connected on the first shot. Pandemonium tumbled to the floor from the stands as Thomas sank the second shot, ensuring an upset victory and a second consecutive crown for the Lions.

"We figured we were the underdogs, said coach Thomas following the 46-43 win. "But we played with intensity and thought we could set the pace in the beginning. We played with our hearts all season and that's what brought us here."

The victory celebration continued on through the night and into the next day, as the community honored the team at the high school on Sunday afternoon. All eight members of the varsity squad spoke and expressed their gratitude for the support they had received throughout the season. But few in attendance could truly believe what had happened. They had witnessed a rare occurrence: back-to-back titles. More importantly, they had watched a classy collection of young ladies unite a village.

— 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.



1985 Champions