

River Rouge Coach Lofton Greene built a basketball dynasty spanning three decades that is simply

Untouchable

A remarkable era in Michigan high school basketball will be honored this weekend when the 12 MHSAA Class B Boys Basketball championship teams from River Rouge High School are recognized through the Association's "Legends Of The Games" program during ceremonies at halftime of the Class B championship game Saturday.

In its fifth year, the Legends program promotes educational athletics by showcasing some of the great teams of past years. At least 42 members of teams from Greene's coaching days at River Rouge are expected to be in attendance to receive commemorative plaques and a banner to display at the school during the ceremony.

Stop. Take a breath and count with me. Try to make the interval equal one second between the numbers, except substitute the words River Rouge for Mississippi. One-River Rouge,

Two-River Rouge... that's it... you got it Three-River Rouge, Four-River Rouge. Keep going... let me hear you... Seven-River Rouge, Eight-River Rouge...just a couple more...Eleven-River Rouge, Twelve-River Rouge.

Now pause and contemplate. You have just described an achievement that ranks as one of the seven wonders in the annals of Michigan high school basketball. Twelve. An even dozen. That's the total number of Class B MHSAA titles won by the Panthers of River Rouge under the watchful and loving eye of one man - Lofton Greene.

Think about what it would take to accomplish such a feat. Talent? You bet. Dedication? Oh yeah. Luck? Absolutely. But that just scratches the surface. There is more, so much more, which is required. And that is where the story begins.

Born in 1919, Greene spent his early years on a farm near Barlow, Kentucky. In 1928, he moved to Jackson, Michigan and

graduated from Jackson High School in June of 1936. Following graduation, Lofton returned to Kentucky, thanks to the efforts of a brother, who had talked to a college coach from Western Kentucky about his younger sibling. Greene enrolled and joined the basketball and baseball squads. After graduating with a degree in education, he accepted a teaching position in Kentucky, later moving on to New Buffalo, Michigan.

In 1943, Greene took a job with the River Rouge school district. He stayed for 41 years. Upon his arrival, the coach found a basketball program that needed attention. In his eyes, it mostly required organization. So he nurtured it, coaching the sport at junior high, freshman, junior varsity and varsity levels for a time.

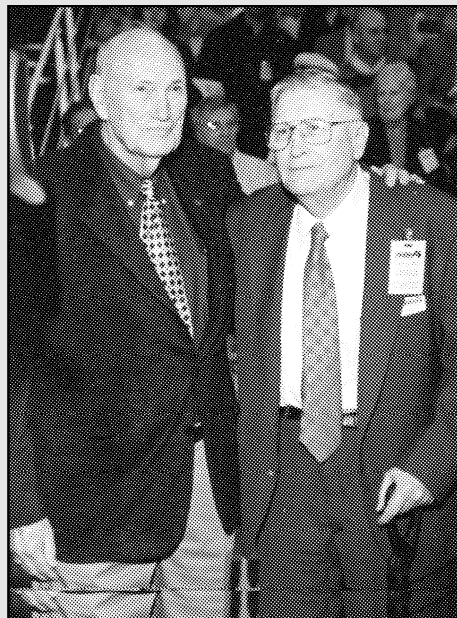
When he was finished, Greene had done more than establish a basketball program at a high school. Thanks to his efforts, the city of River Rouge breathed basket-

Legends of the Games

ball. The blue-collar town of 22,000 was always heavily dependent on the auto industry for its livelihood. Now it was reliant on basketball for its entertainment. Students learned the fundamentals of "Loftonball" – a fast-breaking offense and a tight pressing defense beginning in the fifth grade. The progression was steady for his pupils. By the time the kids from the district's four elementary schools merged into the system's lone junior high, they had little difficulty adapting to their new teammates. By the time they reached the high school, the kids had morphed into a well-oiled machine with a solid work ethic.

Greene has always credited his loss to Floyd Eby's Coldwater team in the 1949 Class B title game as his awakening to the "power of the press." His team returned to the Finals again in 1951, falling to St. Joseph in a tight contest, 39-33. By the mid-fifties, Greene had turned the art of basketball into a science. Beginning in 1954, his abilities and the talent of his ballplayers was put on public display annually in the MHSAA basketball tournaments. For the next 19 years, Greene's teams missed the final round of the playoffs on only five occasions. With the success came immense pressure, but his teams handled it well. The city embraced the Panthers.

"The Rouge people really supported us," recalled Greene. "The Department of Public Works carried around big signs on their trucks with various sayings, like 'On to Lansing.' Service clubs would help us, donating money to rent buses (so the fans could travel to the final rounds of the tournament). It was quite a community effort. We would have 10 to 12 buses go up there



Gary Shook, Otsego

Lofton Greene (left) and former Coldwater Coach Floyd Eby were reunited at the 1999 MHSAA Finals, when Eby's 1949 Coldwater team was honored through the "Legends" program. Eby's squad defeated Greene's River Rouge team in 1949, the first trip to the Finals for a Greene-coached Rouge squad. In defeat, Greene was introduced to a brand of basketball that his teams would later implement regularly.

for the games.

"Everyone wanted to knock us off. Fans expected you to win. It wasn't an easy route. But we had some wonderful kids dur-

ing those years. They came out to play. We emphasized, and they understood, you don't look ahead. You prepare for the game at hand."

Drawing his squads from the families that lived near the massive Ford Motor Company facility that dominated the city's landscape, Greene never was concerned about background, race or religion. He wanted basketball players, pure and simple. He was equal opportunity before it ever existed. Perhaps one of his assistants coaches, Joe Enright, stated it best.

"Greene doesn't see color in a person. He tells them what to expect and what he expects of them. Almost the entire community has dealt with Greene in some way and knows him to be fair, regardless of color. Every kid calls him Mr. Greene."

The athletes responded well. Numerous players went on to play some college ball over the years: Bill Kilgore at Michigan State; Malcolm Moulton at Holy Cross; Willie Betts at Bradley; Lou Hyatt at University of Detroit to name but a few. Ken Wilburn found some success as a professional athlete, but the majority are remembered as hard working, solid high school cagers. Following graduation, most found success by applying the lessons they learned while students at Rouge.

Thirty years after the final title in 1972, their accomplishment remains the standard by which all others are judged. Count to twelve, pause and contemplate – will we ever see such an amazing run again?

— Ron Pesch

Ron Pesch is the historian for the MHSAA

GREENE'S TEAMS THROUGH THE YEARS

School	Season	W	L	School	Season	W	L
Center, Ky.	1940-41	11	14	River Rouge	1963-64	24	1
New Buffalo	1941-42	5	12	River Rouge	1964-65	24	2
River Rouge	1942-43	12	5	River Rouge	1965-66	22	4
River Rouge	1943-44	8	9	River Rouge	1966-67	12	7
Military Service	1944-45	-	-	River Rouge	1967-68	16	6
River Rouge	1945-46	8	4	River Rouge	1968-69	25	2
River Rouge	1946-47	9	11	River Rouge	1969-70	22	3
River Rouge	1947-48	18	4	River Rouge	1970-71	25	1
River Rouge	1948-49	21	3	River Rouge	1971-72	20	5
River Rouge	1949-50	14	5	River Rouge	1972-73	10	11
River Rouge	1950-51	23	1	River Rouge	1973-74	16	5
River Rouge	1951-52	11	5	River Rouge	1974-75	20	3
River Rouge	1952-53	15	2	River Rouge	1975-76	24	4
River Rouge	1953-54	22	2	River Rouge	1976-77	18	4
River Rouge	1954-55	17	5	River Rouge	1977-78	17	6
River Rouge	1955-56	19	4	River Rouge	1978-79	20	4
River Rouge	1956-57	14	6	River Rouge	1979-80	19	7
River Rouge	1957-58	20	4	River Rouge	1980-81	19	7
River Rouge	1958-59	24	2	River Rouge	1981-82	13	12
River Rouge	1959-60	14	6	River Rouge	1982-83	7	14
River Rouge	1960-61	23	2	River Rouge	1983-84	8	15
River Rouge	1961-62	25	1	Totals	41 Seasons	739	231
River Rouge	1962-63	25	1				

**RIVER
ROUGE
Under
Lofton
Greene**

MHSAA

1954

1955

1959

1961

1962

1963

1964

1965

1969

1970

1971

1972

Champs

The Championship Seasons

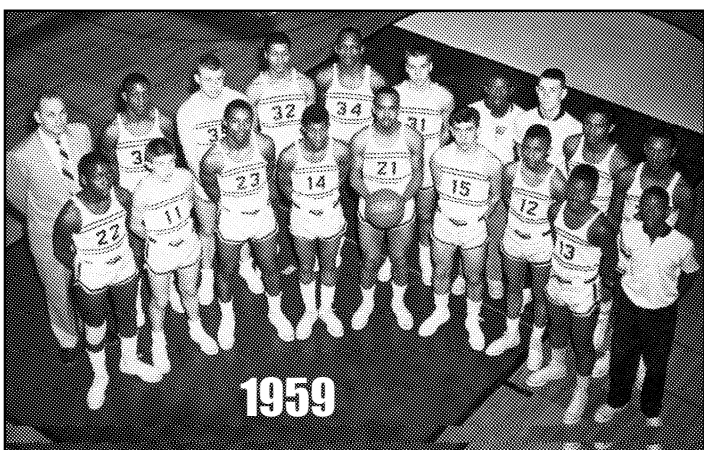
1954 - After visits to the MHSAA Finals in 1949 and 1951, Coach Lofton Greene found that the third time was indeed the charm, as River Rouge pressed, pestered and ran past a big Holland Christian team, 56-53. Jack Belken and Blanche Martin led the victors in the contest. It was the first of the school's 12 titles under the legendary coach. Christened the "Mighty Mites," the Panthers had tripped up Ludington and its 6-6 all-state center Pete Tillotson in the Semifinals on Friday, 54-52 at Jenison Field House in East Lansing to earn their third trip to the finale in six years.



1955 - Rouge captured its second consecutive Class B title behind the play of all-tourney selection Herb Wood and Blanche Martin. Wood netted a pair of free throws with four seconds to play to seal a 51-48 win over Buchanan. Martin ended with a game-high 21 points, while Wood, who missed all but three regular season games due to an operation, finished with 16.

1959 - Runners-up in 1958, the Panthers scrambled to a come-from-behind victory over Holly, 52-47. The win negated a 28-point, 21-rebound performance by Holly's George McDaniel. The 6-6 center poured in 10 points in the final period, as the Bronchos pulled within one, 48-47, with a minute to play. Everett Griffith finished with 14 points for the Panthers, including four straight foul shots at the end of the contest to seal the Rouge victory.

1961 - Greene's squad delivered a 79-44 rout of Holland Christian in the Class B Final. Led by 6-5 freshman Willie Betts, the Panthers dominated the second quarter, outscoring the Maroons, 21-8, for a commanding 39-21 halftime lead. Rouge had four players finish in double figures, led by Jon Roman with 17 points.

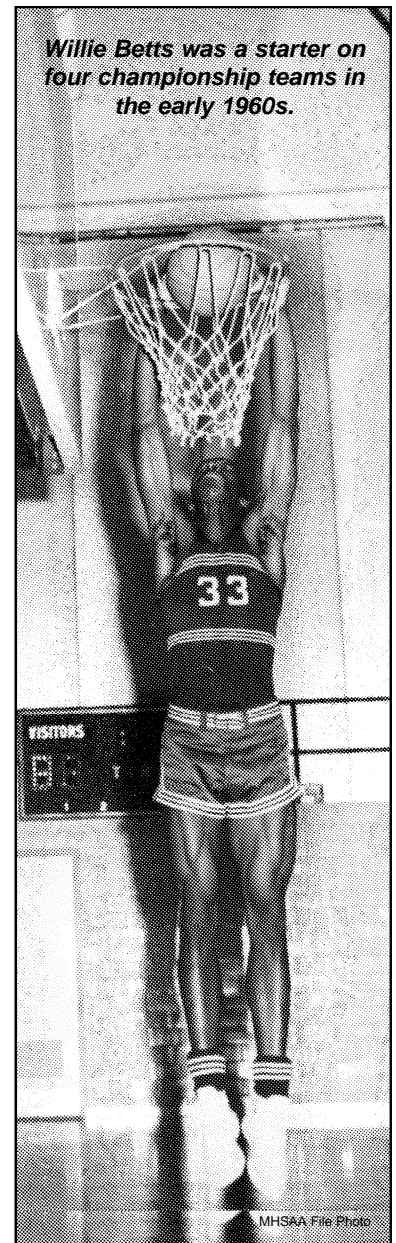


1962 - Led by a stellar all-around game by senior Ken Wilburn, Rouge crushed East Grand Rapids, 69-36, for the Class B crown. Wilburn led all scorers with 26 points, including 13 in the third period to blow the game open. The 6-5 forward collected 15 rebounds and escaped with 11 steals, earning the praise of Greene. "Wilburn played his best game ever today," noted the legendary mentor. "He was terrific on defense." Napoleon "Nap" Hudson, a stocky 5-6 speedster who created havoc for the opponents and caused numerous turnovers by the Pioneers, added 16 points.

1963 - Despite three strong quarters, Hudsonville Unity Christian proved to be no match for the Panthers in the final minutes of play as River Rouge pulled out a 59-49 win. It was the third straight title for Greene's squad. Led by all-state senior Bill Dunson, who finished with 16 points, and Boice Bowman, who added 15 markers, the Panthers struggled throughout to break open the game. Unity Christian, ranked second to Rouge in media polls throughout the season, pulled within two points, 38-36, at the outset of the fourth quarter. But shots by Bowman, Dunson and Larry Brazon pushed Rouge out front to stay, 47-38.

1964 - All-stater Willie Betts earned the distinction of becoming the first (and only) player in Michigan history to be a part of four MHSAA championship basketball teams, as the Panthers grabbed the fourth of five consecutive Class B crowns with a 86-67 win over Lakeview. Fred Hudson led the Panthers in scoring with 31 points. The victory marked Greene's 100th tournament win.

1965 - The Panthers posted an unprecedented fifth consecutive title with an 87-65 victory over South Haven. Frank Price led the winners with 28 points. Leading by only two points, 54-52, at the end of three quarters, the Panthers surged with 33 points in the last period of play. The 87 points established a new high for points scored in a Class B Final, topping Rouge's total of 86 set in the 1964 contest. Sam Campbell added 16 points as the Panthers hit 48 percent of their shots in the second half. (NOTE: Price's daughter, Franthea, led Rouge to its first MHSAA girls basketball crown in 1984.)



1969 - After a three-year layoff, River Rouge was once again atop the heap in Class B, downing Kalamazoo Hackett, 83-50. The Panthers had lost in the Final in 1966 then missed the final round in both 1967 and 1968. Greene and his team responded with one of its most dominating exhibitions of basketball. Rouge's 6-4, 250-pound forward, Dwayne Johnson, ended with 23 points. Teammate Rod Wimpfrey added 16, but more importantly held Hackett's explosive Bob Calligton to nine points in the contest. Calligton hit 31 in the Semifinals one night earlier.

1970 - River Rouge snagged its 10th Class B title with a 76-66 thriller over Saginaw Carrollton. The Panthers had opened up a 50-33 lead early in the third period when four personal fouls sent Rouge's top ball handler, Marvin Dunson, to the bench for a rest. Suddenly, the shooting of Carrollton's Don Kubia and Red Jones, as well as an impenetrable defense, allowed the Cavaliers to rally to a 64-63 lead midway through the fourth. Then, as quickly as it started, the momentum shifted again, this time in favor of the defending champions. The Panthers went on a 15-2 run, including eight points by Al Boswell and six by senior Malcolm Moulton.

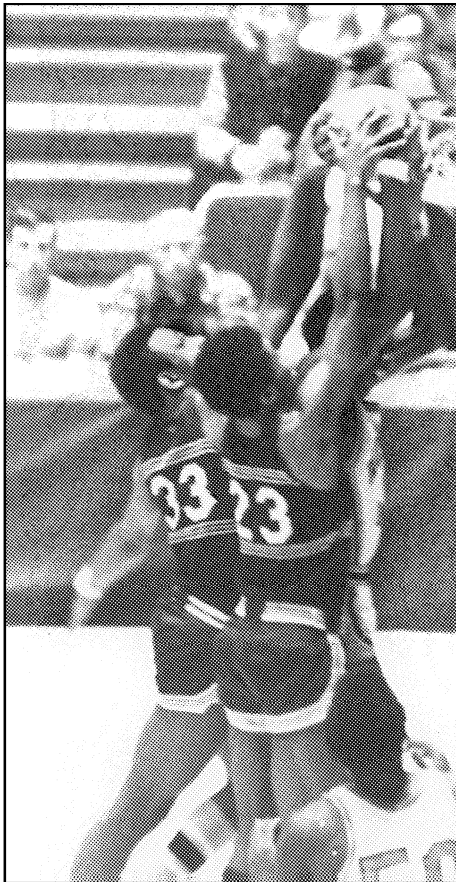


Photo courtesy of Carlton Reeves

Byron Wilson (33) and Carlton Reeves (23) crash the boards during the 1971 Final.

Moulton finished with 27, establishing a new Rouge single-season scoring mark of 537 points. Kubiak ended the contest with 19, while Jones scored 15.

1971 - Three crucial turnovers in the final three minutes by Muskegon Heights allowed River Rouge to pick up its third Class B crown in a row, by a score of 71-65. Leading by a single point, 60-59, the Panthers converted on two of the three errors, for a 64-59 lead. Al Boswell finished with 25 points and 16 rebounds before fouling out with 1:39 to go, but the Rouge lead was simply too much to overcome. The win marked coach Lofton Greene's 500th career victory and the Panther's 11th state title in 18 years. Tom Johnson bagged 23 points to lead the Heights scoring attack.

1972 - After 16 appearances and 11 titles by River Rouge and Greene, the Class B crown had, in the words of Detroit writer Joe Falls, "become almost their divine right each March." Muskegon Heights had lost to Rouge in the Final one year earlier, but it appeared that the Tigers had finally turned the tables on the perennial powerhouse. Leading 64-57 with only 58 seconds remaining on the clock at Jenison Field House, this game appeared to be over. But, in perhaps the most amazing comeback in tournament history, the turnaround started with 45 seconds remaining. Ralph Perry's easy lay-up cut the Heights margin to five points. Fouled on the play, Perry missed the free throw, but teammate Byron Wilson pounded home the rebound and the Panthers trailed by three. An errant inbound pass kept the dream alive. Leighton Moulton sank a 22-foot jumper with 23 seconds remaining, and the Panthers trailed by a point, 64-63. The Tigers were called for traveling on the change of possession and Rouge had its chance. Moulton, the leading scorer in the contest, was again called upon. He drove toward the basket and was fouled before the shot. "The clock read: 0:02. If Moulton missed the first, it would have been all over," wrote Falls, capturing the scene in characteristic clarity. "All of it rested on his lean, lithe shoulders...and the delicate touch in his finger. He stepped to the line while the crowd quieted. The pressure was immense. Moulton looked up, let it go-and swish. Now utter bedlam. Moulton broke toward the center of the court, thrusting his fist into the air. He jumped and danced and was mobbed by his teammates...He'd tied it. Rouge could do no worse than go into overtime. But now he had another chance," continued Falls, "the chance to win it. He made the most of it by dropping in his second free throw...That's when the tears started coming out of Lofton Greene's eyes, if you can imagine that."

— Ron Pesch

GLORY DAYS

Scheduled to be present at the ceremony are:

- Boice Bowman** – Guard – 1962, 1963, 1964
- Jesse Brim** – Guard – 1955, 1956, 1957
- Abdul Raheem Khalid (W.B. Brim)** – Guard – 1957, 1958, 1959
- Willie Burgess** – Guard – 1961, 1962
- Cedric Dawson** – Forward-Guard – 1963, 1964, 1965
- Rudy Diozegi** – Center – 1953, 1954
- Alfred Driscoll** – Center – 1948, 1949
- Richard Frazier** – Guard – 1954, 1955
- Paul Greene** – Center/Forward – 1961, 1962
- Everett Griffin** – Guard – 1958, 1959
- Tony Guarino** – Forward – 1948, 1949
- Theodore Harrington** – Guard – 1947, 1948
- Fred Hudson** – Forward – 1962, 1963, 1964
- Willie Johnson** – Forward – 1971
- William Kilgore** – Center – 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968
- Robert Lyons** – Forward – 1959, 1960
- Blanche Martin** – Center – 1954, 1955
- Clem McIver** – Guard – 1965
- Wendell Mitchell** – Guard – 1971
- Leighton Moulton** – Forward – 1970, 1971, 1972
- Jack Peer** – Guard – 1954, 1955
- Walter Popyk** – Guard – 1957, 1958
- Marvin Popyk** – Guard – 1964, 1965
- James Price** – Forward – 1961, 1962
- Carlton Reeves** – Forward – 1970, 1971
- Charles Reid** – Forward – 1966
- Charles Richardson** – Forward – 1954, 1955
- Park Richardson** – Forward – 1959, 1960, 1961
- Bob Shearon** – Forward – 1954
- Rolando Shorey** – Forward – 1964, 1965
- DeWayne Smith** – Guard – 1953, 1954
- William Stanley** – Center – 1955, 1956
- George Stevenson** – Center – 1959
- LaMonte Stone** – Guard – 1982, 1983, 1984
- Eddie Tolbert** – Guard – 1962, 1963
- Rudolph Tucker** – Forward – 1952, 1953, 1954
- Eugene Virgiles Jr.** – Forward – 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971
- Dennis Wilke** – Forward – 1955, 1956
- Esly Williams** – Guard – 1960, 1961
- Roger Wimpfrey** – Guard – 1971, 1972
- Tommie Wood** – Guard – 1963, 1964
- William Young** – Forward – 1954
- Head Coach Lofton Greene**