

Saints Boys Class C State Hoops Team Runner-up 40 Years Ago

By David Latva

Forty years ago, the St. Ignace Saints boys basketball team posted a 21-2 overall record, won the Michigan Huron Shores Conference (MHSC) title, and captured the district, regional, quarterfinal, and semifinal match-ups before dropping a controversial game in the Class C state championship contest in Jenison Fieldhouse at Michigan State University. The team was coached by Gene Shank.

This fall, the Class of 1969 celebrated its 40th reunion and Coach Shank and his wife, Diane, were present. Coach Shank brought along two scrapbooks full of basketball articles and photographs from his tenure in St. Ignace as head coach from the 1965-1966 season to 1970-1971. The books and pictures brought back many great memories.

Mr. Shank came to St. Ignace for the 1964-1965 school year as a teacher and assistant coach under Steve Schoenherr, before taking over the program for the 1965-1966 season. He compiled a 14-5 mark in his first year.

During the 1966-1967 campaign, the Saints were 8-8 in the regular season, but turned things around to win the district title after defeating Oway and Rudyard. They defeated Harrison 58-56 in the first round of the regionals, but fell to Gaylord 69-57 in the Class C title game.

In Coach Shank's third season, St. Ignace compiled a 13-3 regular season before capturing the district crown with victories over Alpena Catholic Central and Petoskey St. Francis. The team recorded wins over Boyne City, Grayling, and Harrison for the regional championship.

The St. Ignace team made its first trip to the quarterfinals and battled Wakefield in the first tournament game played in the Cheboygan High School gymnasium. The Cardinals edged the Saints 70-68 to end the season with an 18-4 overall record.

The Saints posted a 17-2 mark during the 1968-1969 season while winning the conference title and the districts with a win over Munising before defeating Ontonagon in the regional semifinal. The team lost to Houghton 57-54 in the regional finals.

St. Ignace recorded a 15-1 regular season mark during the 1969-1970 season with the only setback coming at the hands of Gaylord. The Saints defeated Rudyard 89-54 and Munising 79-58 for the district crown, then upended Houghton 78-60 and Bessemer 74-67 for the regional title. The Saints downed Charlevoix 80-70 in the quarterfinals, and shocked Pontiac Catholic 76-72 in the semifinal contest at the Lansing Civic Center.

Saints statistics in quarterfinals: Leo Donovan, 28 points; John McKinnon, 24 points; Jeff Savard, 11 points; Roger Schlehuber, nine points; Lynn Closs, eight points.

Saints statistics in semifinals: Leo Donovan, 32 points; Jeff Savard, 16 points; Roger Schlehuber, 12 points; John McKinnon, 11 points; Lynn Closs, five points.

In the Class C championship game before 15,000 fans at Michigan State University, the Muskegon Christian Warriors (MCW) and the Saints battled for four quarters before MCW pre-



The 1969-1970 St. Ignace boys basketball team with the "hardware" the Saints earned during the season. The Saints compiled a 21-2 overall season, winning the Michigan Huron Shores Conference title. The team was named Class C Upper Peninsula Team of the Year, captured district and regional crowns, and was runner-up at the Class C state finals. Team members include (front, from left) Rick Holle, Paul Davis, Ed Lester, Lynn Closs, Mike Bishop, Don Erno; (back) Head Coach Gene Shank, Howard Gustafson, Rick Powers, John McKinnon, Leo Donovan, Jeff Savard, Roger Schlehuber, Brian Stark, and Rob Winkelman-manager. Missing from photograph are Assistant Coach Ralph Swanson, players John St. Louis and Bob Taylor, and managers Chipper Huskey and Greg Seppanen. (Photographs courtesy of Gene Shank)

vailed 52-51, but the game ended in controversy.

Muskegon Christian led 16-12 after the first quarter and increased the margin to 32-20 at halftime with a 16-8 advantage in the second quarter.

In the low-scoring third quarter, the Saints held a 7-6 offensive edge before storming back in the final period to outscore the Warriors 24-14 and cut the margin to 52-51 with six seconds on the clock.

The Warriors missed the rim of a one-and-one free throw situation. With no time running off the clock, the Saints took possession. Lynn Closs passed the ball to Leo Donovan and the senior started to drive to the hoop, but was knocked down. No foul was called, and the ball fell to the floor as time expired.

Saints statistics at finals: Leo Donovan, 15 points; Jeff Savard, Ed Lester nine points; John McKinnon, eight points; Lynn Closs, Roger Schlehuber, four points; Mike Bishop, two points.

"I was very fortunate to have the talented players during my tenure of five years at St. Ignace," said Coach Shank. "Diane and I had many great memories during our stay in St. Ignace."

The Saints received a hero's welcome in their home town and stopped at the north anchor pier on the Mackinac Bridge for a team photograph with St. Ignace Mayor Ron Walker, school superintendent Lee Richlen, secretary-manager of the chamber of commerce Norman Hedrick, and Prentiss "Moie" Brown Jr.

Coach Shank totaled a 96-25 record in five years for the Saints that included three conference titles, four district crowns, two regional championships, two quarterfinal appearances, one semifinal contest, and one state final game.

Coach Shank and Mrs. Shank, who taught elementary school in St. Ignace, moved on to Petoskey for the 1971-1972 school year and later returned to Ludington, where they both retired and still reside. The Shanks' son, Thad, is the Ludington Orioles boys varsity basketball coach.



The 1970 state finals in the Jenison Fieldhouse at Michigan State University against Muskegon Christian included St. Ignace players (from left) Lynn Closs (11), Roger Schlehuber (41), John McKinnon (25), and Leo Donovan (45) against the Warriors.



The St. Ignace Saints 1970 Class C state runner-up team with the trophy at the north anchor pier on the Mackinac Bridge. Pictured (from left) are superintendent of schools Lee Richlen, Coach Gene Shank, St. Ignace Mayor Ron Walker (in white topcoat), Norma Hedrick of the Chamber of Commerce, Prentiss "Moie" Brown, Jr.; team members include Brian Stark, Rick Powers, Roger Schlehuber, John St. Louis, Mike Bishop, Paul Davis, assistant coaches Ralph Swanson and Russ Lorente, Rick Holle, Lynn Closs, John McKinnon, Howard Gustafson, Jeff Savard, Leo Donovan, Don Erno, managers Rob Winkelman and Chipper Huskey, Bob Taylor, Ed Lester, and Greg Seppanen.