

Still a champ

Thompson helped West Louisville win state title in 1927

By Jim Pickens
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The train carrying West Louisville High School's girls' basketball team chugged into Owensboro tooting its whistle after the Cardinals won the 1927 state tournament in Lexington.

A cheering crowd of supporters greeted school administrators, coaches, fans and, finally, the conquering players as they stepped onto the platform at Union Station.

One of those players was Gladys Coomes, a 16-year-old sophomore forward.

And she's still with us.

Gladys Coomes Thompson, who turned 96 on Dec. 13, is the only surviving member of West Louisville's '27 state championship team.

That team will be recognized on the 80th anniversary of their accomplishment between games of tonight's 9th District Tournament girl/boy doubleheader at the Sportscenter.

Daviess County school board representatives Bart Darrell and Frank Riney, in conjunction with the Kentucky High School Athletic Association and The Trophy House, will unveil a new trophy honoring the 1927 state champions. The original championship hardware was destroyed in a fire caused by lightning at West Louisville High School in 1950.

Last Wednesday, Thompson sat with friends in the lobby of Carmel Home, a nursing home operated by the Carmelite Sisters, located on Old Hartford Road. She has lived there for several years.

"I come out (to the lobby) as much as I can," Thompson said. "Otherwise, you become cooped up in your room. I like being out here. I like being around people."

Thompson looked many years younger than her age, was resplendent in a snappy sweater and earrings, and held the rosary in hands that shot basketballs in the old West Louisville gym eight decades ago. (That's in part because she's trying to keep up with Carmel Home neighbor Martha O'Bryan Cowart, who turned 100 in January and was a member of the 1923 West Louisville girls' basketball state champions.)

Whenever basketball was mentioned in the conversation, Thompson's eyes lit up, as if it all happened yesterday.

"We were a good team because we worked hard and we loved basketball," Ms. Thompson recalled. "We all wanted to play, and there were a lot of excellent players. That made everyone work even harder.

"Our team had a great desire to win every time we stepped on the court. We knew we could depend on one another. We played good team ball and that's what led to our success."

Certainly, West Louisville was dominant at the local level.

The Cardinals ran roughshod through the 5th District Tournament, defeating Sacramento 53-7 in the March 4 semifinals behind team captain Marietta Clark's 18 points. Virginia O'Bryan added 14 and Gladys Coomes, a reserve forward, came off the bench to score 10.

In the championship game on March 5, West Louisville rolled past Hawesville 36-7 as Clark and O'Bryan combined for 19 points to lead the way. Coomes scored four off the bench.

In his report of the tournament, Owensboro Inquirer sports correspondent Birdie Gasser called the Cardinals "an A-No. 1 crowd of ball-tossers."

In her teenage years Gladys Coomes considered West Louisville High School, the gymnasium in particular, her home away from home. Little wonder, she and her family lived across the street.

"I was right there in the front door whenever the school was open," Ms. Thompson said. "Nothing was better than basketball- I liked to make them goals."

She has a fond recollection of her high school coach, Thomas Howard Ford.

"He was a real good coach; he knew what he was doing with us," she said. "He called me 'Gadge.' He used to say, 'Gadge, if everybody would do what you do, we wouldn't have any trouble.' I took that as a real compliment coming from him.

"I knew what he wanted, and so did most of the other girls. He worked us hard, but that's what made us better. He had our full attention. Anything he wanted out of us on the basketball court, he got."

The Cardinals' district championship earned them a train trip, via the L&N Railroad, to the 2nd Region Tournament in Bowling Green. There, West Louisville found the going a bit tougher, but the "Red Birds" managed to survive.

In the semifinals on March 11, Sonora led 13-12 entering the final two minutes of play, but the Cardinals scored three consecutive baskets to win 18-13.

The West Louisville contingent was forced to change jerseys before the game, after showing up with uniforms almost identical to those worn by Sonora.

In the regional championship game, West Louisville got the best of Graham, 17-12, with Clark, O'Bryan and Pearl Woodward scoring all of the Cardinals' points.

It was on to Lexington for the state tournament.

Radford and Regina Coomes had six children. Hugh, the oldest, played boys' varsity ball at West Louisville, and Gladys gladly followed in her brothers' footsteps on the girls' side. There were two other brothers, Harold and Sturman, and a youngster sister, Hazel.

"We lived on a farm and everybody had their chores to do," Ms. Thompson recalled. "We raised tobacco mostly, and some corn. We had a cow that I had to milk, wearing a straw hat and overalls. I remember daddy had two mules and three horses."

Radford Coomes took ill with tuberculosis when Gladys was a teenager, however, and passed away while she was still in high school.

"He got to see me play a few times, but not many," she recalled.

Her father's death was a pivotal moment for them all.

"That was hard times when Daddy died," she recalled. "I remember Mama started working part-time in the school cafeteria, and I worked part-time for the school janitor, Joe Wheeler. It was tough to make ends meet after Daddy died."

Basketball helped Gladys Coomes make it through a difficult period in her life.

"If it hadn't been for basketball, I don't know what it would have been like," she said. "I poured myself into the game as much as I could."

The state tournament was held at Alumni Gym on the campus of the University of Kentucky, where Adolph Rupp would not arrive for another three years.

At state, of course, the competition was keener still.

In the March 18 opener, West Louisville survived Hazard Baptist Institute, 12-11.

On March 19, Clark scored 10 points as the Cardinals held off Waddy 13-11, and Clark scored nine more points in a 12-9 semifinal victory over Reidland.

That set up a championship game matchup against Georgetown, which held a 17-16 lead in the waning seconds. With the clock about to expire, however, Marie Asher made a free-throw to force a three-minute overtime period.

In OT, Clark worked inside for a layup to give the Cardinals a two-point lead. Georgetown had a chance to force a second overtime in the final seconds, but could make just one of two foul shots.

The final was 19-18. West Louisville had secured its second state championship in four years; and the last by an Owensboro area girls' team to this day.

A postgame banquet in Lexington was arranged for the girls and the West Louisville entourage by Owensboro native Arthur Bibb, proprietor of, as fate would have it, the Kentucky Cardinal Restaurant.

Upon arriving in Owensboro by train, the state championship delegation was cheered before being "sped away in cars to West Louisville for a big reception," the Owensboro Inquirer reported.

After high school, at the height of The Great Depression, Gladys Coomes worked at a cigar factory in Evansville for about five years. She says she made good money, but was obligated to send most of her earnings home to her mother and her younger siblings.

She would soon return to live in Daviess County and never leave. While in Evansville, however, she signed up for a basketball league and came away disappointed.

"It wasn't any good," she recalled. "They played girls' rules over there, where some of the players couldn't cross halfcourt. That's not real basketball. We ran the full court at West Louisville, and that was a whole lot more fun."

The KHSAA sanctioned girls' high school basketball from 1918-32, but did not sanction it for the next 42 years (the public reason reportedly being that the sport was too demanding for females). The Kentucky State Legislature revived girls' high school basketball in time for the 1974-75 school year. West Louisville High School ceased to exist in 1954.

Today, however, the hoop sport is in the blood of Gladys Coomes Thompson as much as ever.

"Do I still love basketball?" she asked rhetorically to someone inquiring about her current interest in the sport. "I watch it every time it's on TV. And I don't care who's playing. If there's a game on TV, I'm going to be watching it.

"Basketball is the love of my life."

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Photograph by Jenny Sevcik

Caption:

Gladys Coomes Thompson, 96, is the last surviving member of the 1927 West Louisville High School girls' state championship basketball team. The Kentucky High School Athletic Association will honor the 80th anniversary of the state title win between games today in the boys' and girls' 9th District Tournament at the Sportscenter.

October 15, 2008

Dawahares/KHSAA Hall of Fame
ATTN: Nominations
2280 Executive Drive
Lexington, Kentucky 40505

Members:

I write this letter with great pride in support of Gladys Coomes Thompson for nomination for induction into the Dawahares/KHSAA Hall of Fame. By way of history, you have seen from her nomination form and accompanying materials that Gladys Coomes Thompson was a pioneer in women's athletics in Kentucky. She embodies everything that the Kentucky High School Athletic Association and our schools, through their athletic programs, have tried to create. As you are fully aware, girls' high school basketball in Kentucky high schools was stopped in 1932. Thereafter, it was revived in the mid 1970's and, guided by the KHSAA, the benefits to young women all over Kentucky have been phenomenal. Gladys Coomes Thompson was a partner in that effort in that she helped establish the history upon which Kentucky girls' basketball as we have it today was built and will help it continue to grow.

Gladys Coomes Thompson, as you know, was an integral part of the 1927 West Louisville High School state championship team. West Louisville High School closed in 1954, but still operates as an elementary school within the Daviess County school system. The championship trophy was lost when the school building was destroyed by fire in 1950. In 2007, the Kentucky High School Athletic Association partnered with me to create and present a replacement trophy for West Louisville School and the trophy was formally presented at the 2007 Ninth District Girls' Basketball Tournament. Gladys Coomes Thompson is the only surviving member of that great West Louisville High School team. Reading the article which was written about her and the trophy presentation, one can easily see that Gladys Coomes Thompson, now in her mid 90's, is still passionate about basketball and about the lessons she learned participating in Kentucky high school athletics. Every girl who walks by the trophy case at West Louisville Elementary is reminded of the determination, dedication and the character of Gladys Coomes Thompson.

While Gladys Coomes Thompson's athletic abilities alone justify and support her induction into the Kentucky High School Athletics Association Hall of Fame, it is her pioneering spirit, that she still holds today, which makes girls' athletics in Kentucky high schools the important thing that it is and the great experience that you work so hard to ensure continues.

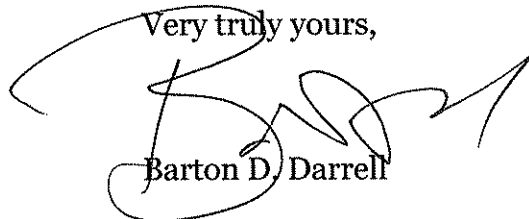
There are many challenges ahead for the Kentucky High School Athletic Association but with your leadership, we will meet each one. I believe an important component for progress in Kentucky athletics is continued connection between the past and the present for our students and their families. I was reminded of Gladys Coomes Thompson, oddly, at this year's Kentucky High School Athletic Association state golf tournament, which took place in Warren County during the week of October 7th. I volunteer for that event each year but this year I saw something that made me realize how much I wanted Gladys Coomes Thompson to be recognized. A Kentucky High School Athletic Association legend and Hall of Famer, Howard Crittenden, the star player of the Cuba Cubs which won the Kentucky State Tournament in the 1950's, was also a volunteer. During the girls' state tournament, Howard's assignment was to drive the girls from the ninth green to the tenth tee in a golf cart. One of the young ladies got into the golf cart with Mr. Crittenden. Mr. Crittenden asked the young lady where she resided and she responded that she was from Mayfield. Mr. Crittenden, as you know, played in Graves County with the Cuba Cubs and responded to the young lady that he was originally from Graves County. The young lady asked his name and Mr. Crittenden responded that, "I am Howard Crittenden." The young lady, no more than sixteen years old, immediately stunned, recovered and with excitement said, "Oh, my! You're the basketball legend!"

Those of us who were there immediately seized upon the importance of the connection between the youth and the more senior who have participated and have done wonderful things for Kentucky high school athletics. The fact that a high school girl playing golf would be so excited about meeting a basketball legend from the 1950's emphasizes the importance of connecting the present and the future with the past of our great athletic association.

As Ms. Coomes Thompson is in her advanced years, it is my hope that the Kentucky High School Athletic Association will recognize this great woman, athlete, pioneer and partner of the Kentucky High School Athletic Association, by inducting her into the Dawahares/KHSAA Hall of Fame. She is a very important athletic figure in Daviess County and I would like for young people who meet her to have that jaw-dropping experience the young lady from Mayfield did when they realize they are meeting yet another Kentucky legend.

I appreciate your consideration of this very important nomination.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Barton D. Darrell". The signature is stylized and somewhat cursive, with a large initial "B" and "D".

Barton D. Darrell

BDD/nla

