

Remembering Bath County's "Dangerous" Dan Swartz

Noted Basketball Career Began At Owingsville High School

By Jon Mansfield - ©1999

The Owingsville Bobcats were 3-0 and ranked second in the state in November of 1950, when they traveled to Morehead to take on University Breckinridge. During this game their star center, Dan Swartz, collided with a Breckinridge player. The knee injury he suffered as a result, ended his high school career, as well as Owingsville High's hopes for basketball glory. Swartz would go on to have a stellar career in collegiate and professional ball, but he never quite lost the limp that resulted from that night's collision.

Dan Swartz was born in Olympian Springs in Bath County in 1931. One of 13 children born to Grace and Roosevelt Swartz, he spent much of his boyhood working on his family's farm. Though he was a natural at every sport he tried, it soon became obvious that Dan was born to play basketball. At six-foot-four, Swartz was a rugged rebounder and tough defender. It was, though, his uncanny shooting ability that made him special. Not only could he "fill it up" from around the basket, but he had phenomenal range, often stunning his opponents by raining in jump shots from 25 feet and beyond.

During his junior campaign in 1949-50, Dangerous Dan, as he came to be called, earned All-State honors by averaging 27.5 points per game, in leading the Bobcats to a 21-7 record. Though he missed virtually his entire senior season, Swartz was nevertheless heavily recruited by legendary University of Kentucky coach, Adolph Rupp. One story recently shared by Anthony Burns of the *Bath County News-Outlook* has it that Rupp even gave Dan a wristwatch telling him that every time he looked at the watch to be reminded that he was destined to play for UK.

Swartz went to UK on a full scholarship, but the marriage was never a happy one. At the end of his fresh-

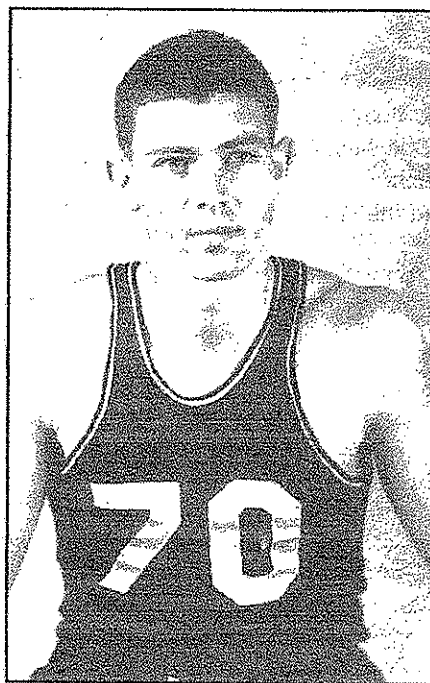
man year Dan, discouraged about his lack of playing time and, perhaps, a little homesick, transferred to Morehead State. It didn't take long for the new MSU coach, Bobby Laughlin, to realize that he had a bona fide star on his hands. Dan, arguably the greatest player in the history of the Ohio Valley Conference, earned All-American honors in 1955 and again in 1956. He capped off his magnificent career in 1956 by leading the Eagles to their first NCAA tournament appearance.

Morehead's record book is still replete with the name of Dan Swartz. He continues to hold 10 Eagle records, including highest scoring average for a season (28.6 in 1955-56), and highest scoring average for a career (27.5). He is the school's second all-time leading scorer, despite having played only three years.

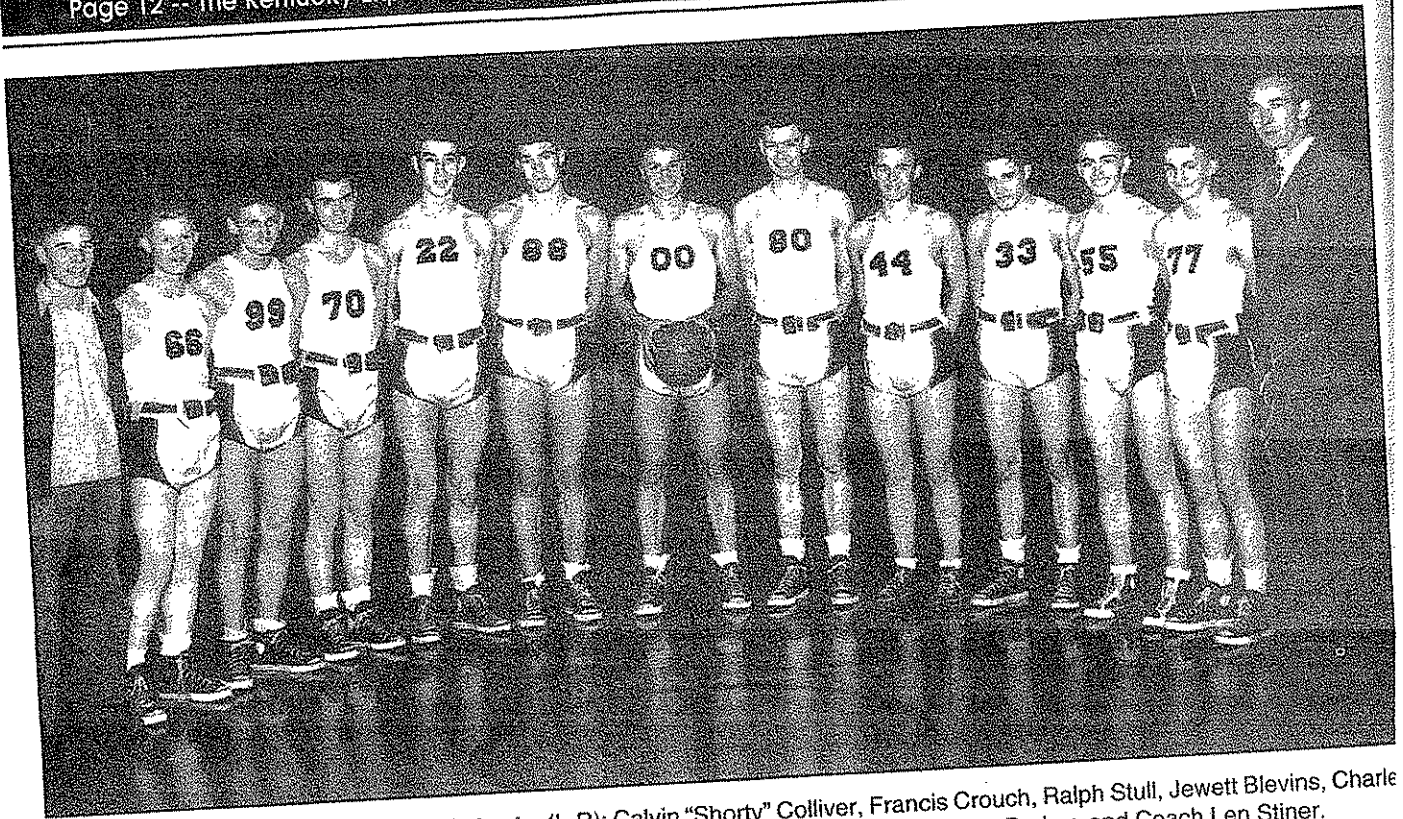
The Boston Celtics selected Swartz in the fourth round of the 1956 National Basketball Association draft, but the Bath County native spurned the NBA in favor of the National Industrial Basketball League (NIBL), which operated under the auspices of the Amateur Athletic Union. The outstanding players of Swartz's era, who opted for AAU ball, did so for two important reasons; first, they could maintain their amateur status and remain eligible for the Olympic Games; second, many teams were sponsored by corporations which provided jobs for players, often at salaries comparable to what could be earned in the NBA.

Although, great players like Clyde Lovellette, Elgin Baylor, K. C. Jones,

and Cazzie Russell played in the NIBL at some point in their careers, no one ever dominated the league the way Dan Swartz did. He earned All-League recognition while playing for the Wichita Vickers in 1958-59, and then went on to win back-to-back "Most Valuable Player" awards in 1959-60 with Wichita, and 1960-61, while a member of the Cleveland Pipers. Perhaps, the greatest moment of Dan's AAU career, however, came in 1959, when he was named



Owingsville High's "Dangerous" Dan Swartz was truly one of Kentucky's sports legends.



The 1950-51 Owingsville High School Bobcats. (L-R): Calvin "Shorty" Colliver, Francis Crouch, Ralph Stull, Jewett Blevins, Charles Harding, Dan Swartz, Jimmy Davis, Sammie Donohue, Earl Roberts, Frank Lyons, Sonny Barker, and Coach Len Stiner.

to the team to represent the United States in the Third Pan American Games.

The 1959 games were held in Chicago, marking the first time that the United States had ever hosted the event.

Swartz averaged 10.2 points per game, as the U. S. team cruised to a 6-0 record and a gold medal, winning their games by an average margin of nearly 40 points. The only other double figures scorers for the U. S. team were a couple of young fellows named Oscar Robertson and Jerry West. Dan's best game came in a 114-46 pasting of Cuba, in which he scored a game-high 19 points.

Swartz gave up his amateur status in 1961, when he joined the upstart American Basketball League. The league was founded by Harlem Globetrotters owner, Abe Saperstein, as a rival league to the NBA. The ABL attracted a considerable amount of talent, which included a number of former MBL players, a handful of

NBA converts, and several stars blacklisted by the NBA for perceived transgressions while in college (including Bill Spivey, of Kentucky, and Iowa's Connie Hawkins). The ABL was nothing if not innovative. It became t

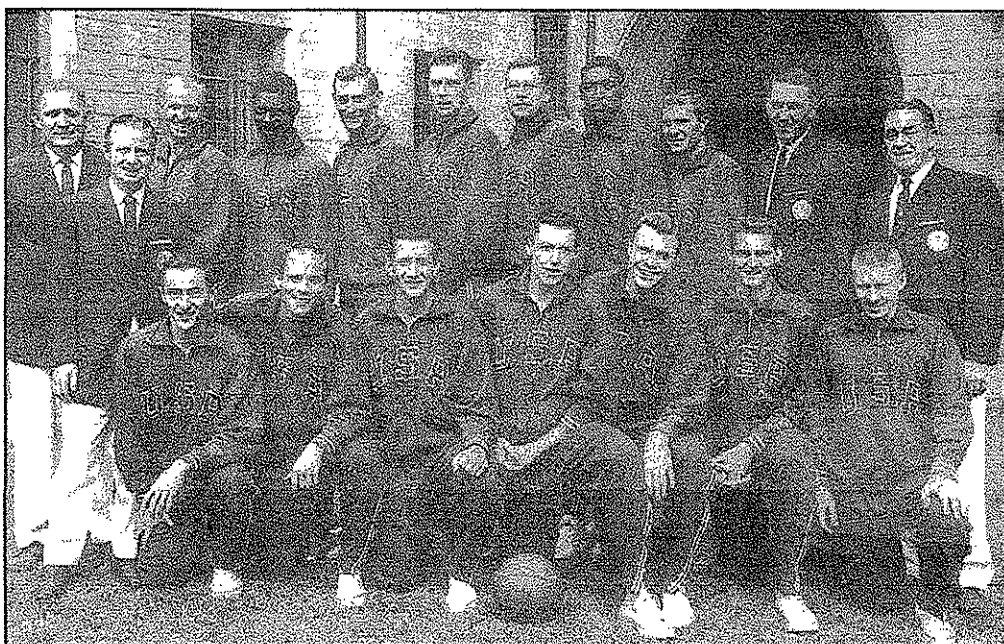


The 1950-51 Owingsville Bobcats were cheered on to victory by (L-R): Ollie Virginia Richards, Mary Louise McVey, Dorothy Myers, Donna Gail Dotson, June Donohue, and Mary C Richards. (All photos courtesy of the author.)

...and know the love of the parent, until we become parents ourselves. --Beecher

first professional league to employ a three-point field goal, and featured professional basketball's first African-American coach, John McClendon, of the Cleveland Pipers. Swartz, playing for the Washington Tapers (the team moved to New York during the season), quickly established himself as one of the league's most outstanding players. He averaged almost 25 points and pulled down 9 rebounds a game for the 1961-62 season. Showing the same sweet shooting touch that had made him a star at Owingsville High, Dan shot 42 percent from three-point range and over 90 percent from the free throw line, en route to earning first team All-ABL honors.

The following season, Swartz finally joined the Boston Celtics, which still owned his NBA rights. It would be a bittersweet year for Dan. Though, he would be a part of the team that won the 1963 NBA championship, his contribu-

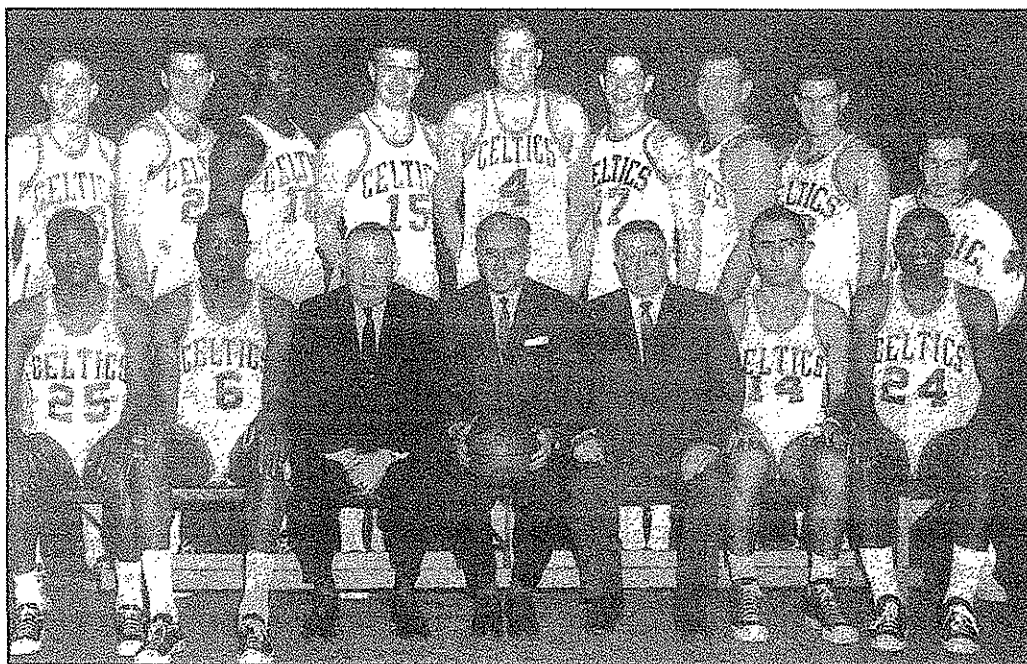


The 1959 U.S.A. Pan-American basketball team of which Dan Swartz was a member. Kneeling (L-R): William Evans; Adrian Smith; Leo Byrd; Robert Jeangerard; Richard Boushka; Jerry West; and Gary Thompson. Standing (L-R): Warren Womble, assistant coach; William Dye, manager; Jack Adams; Oscar Robertson; Donald Goldstein; Burdette Haldorson; George BonSalle; Robert Boozer; Dan Swartz; Fred Schaus, head coach; and Thomas Farrell.

tion was severely limited by his ailing knee. Swartz's tremendous career is all the more remarkable, given the fact that he was in almost constant pain from the injury he had suffered in high school.

Dan retired after the 1963 season and returned to his native Bath County, where he became active in local politics. He served for many years as county sheriff, and acted as a field representative for Representative Scotty Baeslar from 1991 until his (Dan's) death in 1997. When my father told me of Dan's passing, his words struck me as a fitting eulogy for the man they once called Dangerous Dan. "He was," my dad said, "the finest ball player I ever saw."

Jon Mansfield, 1101 Iroquois Drive, Mt. Sterling, KY 40353, shares this story and photos with our readers.



Dan Swartz was a member of the 1963 Boston Celtics, the World Champions that year. Front row (L-R): K.C. Jones; Bill Russell; Walter A. Brown, team president; Red Auerbach, head coach; Lou Pieri, treasurer; Bob Cousy; and Sam Jones. Standing (L-R): Frank Ramsey; Gene Guarilia; Tom Sanders; Tom Heinsohn; Clyde Lovellette; John Havlicek; Jim Loscutoff; Dan Swartz; and Buddy LeRoux, trainer.