

He's listed at anywhere from 6-10 to 7-feet tall while tipping the scales at 254 pounds. Whatever. He is, by far, the tallest player in Oil City High School's history of relatively short basketball players.

Venango County boys teams haven't had many really tall players over the years. Cranberry had a couple back in the 1960s and 1970s, but that was when it wasn't that unusual – 7-1 Wilt Chamberlain had already played and dominated for Overbrook High School in Philadelphia and was by that time a star in the NBA. The 1930s was a different story.

Rich Ahrens was no Wilt Chamberlain, though. Ahrens played on the jayvees as a sophomore before cracking legendary coach Hud Wells' lineup as a 19-year-old junior in 1935-36. But he was no scoring machine. Just as a for instance, normal-sized Butch Lauer led with 16-5 Oilers with 208 points.

Still, Ahrens was good enough to earn a basketball scholarship to Long Island University, where he played for Clair Bee, one of the top coaches of the day. Ahrens was at LIU for a year and a half, during which time the Blackbirds rolled to a 25-2 record in 1938 and went unbeaten in 1939.

Oil City had good but disappointing seasons in both 1936 (16-5) and 1937 (17-2), coming up empty in their quest for a District 10 title.

A broken wrist probably prevented them for winning it all in 1936. After claiming their fifth section crown in six years, the Oilers took on Sharon on March 13, 1936, at Grove City College and jumped out to a 7-0 lead.

That's when disaster struck.

Late in the second quarter, in a scramble for a rebound, Ahrens emerged with an injured wrist. Later it was learned the wrist was broken.

Wells was forced to take his big man out of the game, and Sharon not only began to control the boards, but was able to get more shots off unhampered by the imposing Ahrens who could reach for the sky around the hoops.

With Ahrens seeing limited action, the Tigers outscored the Oilers in the middle quarters to take command before a comeback bid by the Oilers in the fourth fell short in the 36-25 loss. Sharon outscored the Oilers 16-7 in the second quarter when Ahrens went down.

Oddly, the Oilers accomplished all that they did despite losing four contributors – starting guards Harry Siegall and Ed Sibble along with Nate Schoch and Ernie Cartwright – at midterm because their eligibility ran out. Wells rated the speedy Siegall as one of his top five players in his 28 years as coach. Not only could he score, but he was an outstanding playmaker.

Oil City's bid for a D-10 crown also fell short despite the 17-2 record in 1937. That second loss would come in the playoffs to Erie East, 38-26, a month before Ahrens' 21st birthday. (Obviously eligibility requirements having to do with age were a lot different back in the day.)

Ahrens would go on to live an interesting life. Not only did he play basketball at LIU, but he was a star on the semi-pro level locally for many years – during which time he'd be known to have 22- and 33-point games – and quite an attraction.

Even before he played for OCHS, Ahrens would take his talents elsewhere. Reported The News-Herald in its Dec. 11, 1934, edition as Ahrens' team, the Franklin Eagles, was about to take on the Sterling Oils of Emlenton:

“The antics of the seven-foot Ahrens, when teamed with his but slightly shorter teammate Floyd (Stinky) Davis, are worth the price of admission. Ahrens, by standing on his toes, can drop the ball from his fingertips into the basket at the regulation height without jumping.”

Basketball wasn't his only game, though. Employed by the Oil City School District as a custodian, the affable Ahrens was an avid fisherman and a baseball player of note, even pitching in the Washington Senators farm system in the early 1940s.

Ahrens died on April 2, 1983, in the Oil City Hospital after an extended illness.