

I was on the phone talking to Oil City basketball coach Bob Lynch before the start of the 1971-72 season. It was my second year on the job at The Derrick, and I was interviewing him for a preview story on the Oilers, who were seeking their third straight Section 2 title.

The subject turned to Meadville, which had claimed every Section 2 title except two from 1951-69 (Titusville won in 1958–59) before the Oilers came along. Lynch was raving about the Bulldogs, who were led by 6-3 Biff Kress (1,000 points and 1,000 rebounds) and guard Jeff Davern. On and on he gushed.

Finally, I asked (meekly), “Well, can anybody beat them?”

“Yeah,” he snapped, “us.”

Oil City didn’t beat Meadville that season, losing 62-55 and 81-58, but the PIAA was introducing an expanded playoff system. Up until then only champions qualified for post-season play.

The Oilers defeated Erie Tech, 63-57, to advance to interdistricts as the Class A (there were only three classes back then) No. 3 team out of District 10.

That pitted the Oilers against Pittsburgh Westinghouse, coached by future Pa. Hall of Famer Fred Yee. The Bulldogs were just too much for the Oilers in that game at Westminster, coming away with a 73-44 victory.

Oh well. The Oilers surely will have other chances “to make states” in later years. Or not.

Who would have thought back then that Oil City wouldn’t qualify for interdistricts again – as the champion, runnerup or third-place team in District 10 – for another 50 years?

But they broke through the male version of the glass ceiling last Tuesday when they beat Grove City to assume themselves a trip to states.

They had a chance to rid themselves of another curse, but that didn’t happen Friday against Fairview, and they’ll have to wait another day for their first district championship since 1921 when they won their one and only.

It’s not that the Oilers have been “crummy” in basketball all those years. They haven’t. It’s just been a series of near-misses and woulda-coulda-shoulda’s.

In the 1930s and 1940s the Oilers were dominant under coach Hud Wells and won a number of league titles, but never District 10. In 1935 they had 6-10, 6-11 or 7-0 (depending on who’s measuring) Rich Ahrens, but with Oil City ahead in the first half of the D-10 championship, he left the game with a broken wrist and Sharon rallied to win.

In 1950, the year Dutch Burch was a senior (139 assists; school records of 757 career and 361 single-season points), the 18-3 Oilers lost to Hickory, 54-50, in the finals, a shock to everyone.

“Just what caused the collapse...is something which will be argued for many years. Boasting an average of better than 60 points per game...and having a decided height advantage (the 6-1 Burch, 6-3 Lou Kraft and 6-4 leaper Jim “Red” Blaney), the Oilers figured to win their first District 10 championship in 29 years, but fate ruled otherwise on that St. Patrick’s night,” wrote Joe Szafran in the now defunct Blizzard.

Then along came Lynch, a Franklin High School and Clarion University grad, and the Oilers made Meadville and the rest of Section 2 sit up and take notice.

Now, to take you back to the 1970s when the gyms were full on Tuesday and Friday nights for boys basketball. Cranberry and Rocky Grove were in the league along with Oil City, Franklin, Meadville, Titusville, Corry and Warren – soon to be joined by Hickory. (Swimming was Mondays and Thursdays and wrestling was whenever. The girls played their regular seasons in the fall before regrouping for playoffs in March.)

It was a Very Big Deal then to beat Meadville, which during its two-decade heyday from 1951-69 was sometimes going deep in the playoffs, although never winning it all. But the Bulldogs had been known to go toe-to-toe with Farrell when the Steelers were winning six big school championships from 1954-72.

So dominant were the ‘Dogs locally that they had a 47-game league winning streak in the 1950s and a 62-game winning streak at the House of Thrills, ended in 1970 by Franklin, 66-61, behind Bob Witherup’s 34 points and 14-for-14 from the line.

Meadville also had a night to forget in 1969 when Rocky Grove beat MASH at The Nest, 73-62.

As for the Oilers, they didn’t end any Meadville streaks back then – except for the Bulldogs’ run of 10 straight S-2 championships in 1970. They finished 21-3 in 1970 with their first Section 2 title since 1950 and 21-4 in 1971, losing in the District 10 championship game both years, first to Strong Vincent, 56-53, and then to McDowell, 41-38 – the first of what is now 16 titles for the Trojans.

These days, the Oilers would never be playing McDowell, whose enrollment is bigger than Oil City, Franklin, Cranberry, Rocky Grove and VC combined.

The 1972 Oilers were 18-5 and a typical Lynch team – scrappy. Long-ball shooting Lou Stack averaged 14 points. Former Little League star George Sterner, the quarterback of the football team and a 42-foot triple jumper in track, averaged 11 and many, many assists. Some were fancy and others were simple hand-offs to Kike Barszcz, a burly tight end in the fall who was deadly from the top of the key in the winter.

Lynch returned to his hometown to coach the Knights after the 1977 season. He was 137-60 at Oil City and would win 70 more games at Franklin.

I won't get into the woulda, coulda, shoulda's for Oil City since, so onto the here and now.

Sterner's wife, Cinda, has four children – Zack Sterner, Angela Remmick and the two current coaches at Oil City and Franklin, Bundy and Jason Fulmer, father of current Franklin star Easton Fulmer.

“George has had a huge impact on Bundy and myself, both as players and coaches,” said Jason, whose team just won its 10th District 10 crown. “I'm extremely lucky to have him as a step father. So is Easton as his grandfather.” He said George and Easton have worked out three times a week during the summer for the last two years.

Easton is now Franklin's all-time leading scorer, with 1,566 points, breaking the late Randy Lynch's record of 1,519 a week ago. And Randy's dad is Bob Lynch, coach of the '72 Oilers.

Small world, isn't it?