

I stand corrected.

For years I believed – and told anyone who would listen – that Oil City never won a district championship in boys basketball.

I found out differently this week.

The first state championship tournament was in 1920 with one class – “A.” There were eight teams, but “districts” as we know them were not designated. The list of participants included one school that is located in this area – northwestern Pennsylvania. That would be Farrell.

The next year, in 1921, Oil City was the only northwestern Pa. team; the year after that it was Franklin.

The first year with designated districts was 1924 – eight of them. Greenville was the District 8 (northwest Pa.)

The first time we see a “District 10” was in 1931. Farrell again. DuBois represented District 9. And so it went with the evolution of the PIAA tournament: a few more districts, more classes, girls, until we are where we are today, more than 100 years later. But getting back to 1921 and 1922 when Oil City and Franklin “went to states.”

Actually, they both went to Grove City College. (The finals, and maybe semifinals, too, were held at Penn State.) The Oilers won their NWPa. crown before an estimated 2,000 fans by beating, Kane, 46-43, in a five-minute overtime. They returned to Grove City for their first state tournament game against McKeesport, but the Tigers beat them, 35-28, and they finished with an 18-6 record.

McKeesport would go on to win the state title with a 24-21 decision over Williamsport. The next year, Franklin also beat Kane for NW Pa. honors. The Nursery, as they were known then, also defeated Kane, 21-17, for the right to take on Wilkinsburg in the state tournament. But Wilkinsburg would end Franklin’s season with a 26-17 victory. Wilkinsburg, however, lost in the next round to Harrisburg Tech, 25-14, in a state semifinal at Penn State’s Armory.

Even though neither win for Northwestern Pennsylvania honors was designated as a district championship, they were referred to that way in newspaper accounts – then and over the years.

Now, for some details of each school:

Oil City

Bill Fountain was the Oilers’ coach – actually, he was coach of about everything back then. The team’s stars were guards George Chacona and Fred “Pete” Fox. Center Ellis Hall and forwards Harold Peterson and John Foley rounded out the starting five.

Kane featured a 6-5 player who “made things difficult for the smaller” Oil City guards, according to The Derrick account. The Wolves were ahead at halftime and after three quarters. The two teams were tied at 38 before the OT.

Kane took a three-point lead, but the Oilers went ahead to stay on a basket by Hall “from the side of the floor” and another by Chacona “from the center of the gym.”

In those days, teams had designated foul shooters, and Oil City's “DFS” was Hall, who was only 8-for-21 before Chacona gave it a shot. But he missed his only attempt. The 6-5 center kept Kane in the game, canning 11 of 19, including 8 of 10 after intermission.



A sad footnote to this Oiler team: Hall died in December 1921 of typhoid fever and other

complications. He was a freshman at the University of California at Berkley, where he was enrolled in the school of dentistry. The Cowell Avenue resident, who had just turned 20, left behind a wife, to whom he had been secretly married in high school. The marriage was announced after he graduated from Oil City, where he was president of the senior class and a mainstay in dramatics in addition to hoops.

Franklin

As with Oil City, Franklin was supposed to play its state quarterfinal game at Grove City College, but Wilkinsburg refused. So, the game was rescheduled for Pitt's Trees gym, which is practically in Wilkinsburg's backyard.

The News-Herald made a big deal of Wilkinsburg's size advantage – not so much height-wise, but weight-wise. The younger Franklin squad – which averaged 17.5 years old and had zero seniors – tipped the scales at 142.25 pounds per player. The smaller dimensions of Trees played well to that and negated Franklin's superior speed.

Some people, maybe many, didn't think Franklin belonged in the tourney. The Nursery started the season 0-7 and finished 8-11 after the loss to Wilkinsburg.

The team was led by King Richardson, who would become a prominent member of the Franklin community as an adult and a standout in YMCA-type basketball leagues. As a 17-year-old on this team, he weighed 120 pounds. But he was the DFS for coach Bob Atticks, and at one point in a game against Brookville made 14 straight free throws.

Richardson was the lightest player; the heaviest was guard Richard Kirker (175). The center, Ralph Buck, was 155, and everybody else was 135-145.

The team had quite a following: a band was hurriedly recruited to greet its return following the victory over Kane, some walked nine miles from Mercer to Grove City to attend, and a throng of Franklin fans took the train to Pittsburgh to see the Wilkinsburg game.

But the Nursery would not return to the tourney in 1923. Franklin's next trip to the state event wouldn't come again until 1984 – although, in the last 30 years, the Knights have been *very* successful with seven District 10 titles, two state crowns and a 26-17 record in PIAA interdistrict play.

As for Oil City, 1921 represents the Oilers' only district title. They've won several league crowns, especially under coach Hud Wells in the 1930s and 1940s, but never a District 10 championship. And their only other interdistrict trip came in 1972.

Two more footnotes -- and late additions: Oil City would reach the finals of the 1923 tournament, but lose Erie Central, 30-28, on a basket in the last 25 seconds. Central being in the tournament was controversial -- although I'm not sure why.

Meanwhile, Franklin was in a tizzy since Hanlon Brothers was receiving radio reports of the games as they were in progress. The News-Herald said it was "almost as exciting as if they had been watching the game."