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March Madness?

Basketball players at St. Joseph in Oil City were so mad in March 1941 that they went out and won their second Catholic high school state championship in three years.

The Hilltoppers of coach Joe Connors weren't considered good enough for an invitation to the annual tournament in Williamsport, and were selected begrudgingly when for whatever reason a team from Allentown withdrew.

So off the Irish went to Williamsport and eventually found themselves in the championship game against Hazleton St. Gabriel, coming from behind for a 36-33 victory. St. Joe trailed 23-16 at halftime.

Baskets by Bill Eckert and Jack McNerney in the final seconds rallied the Hilltoppers. Or in 1941-speak "Eckert on a follow-up dropped the ball through the nets from the side. McNerney stood out near mid-court and let go a long one. The two goals spelled victory."

St. Joe (the forerunner to Venango Catholic) beat teams from Bradford (31-13) and Williamsport (34-21) to reach the finals. Meanwhile, St. Gabriel upset a Johnstown squad – the pre-tourney favorite – in the first round and then eliminated Harrisburg Catholic, 31-30, setting the stage for the March 22 title tilt.

Eckert and erstwhile football great Forrey Hall were named to the all-tournament team, giving the Irish five picks since 1939.

In 1939, St. Joe overcame both height and depth disadvantages to beat Pittsburgh Central Catholic, 26-22, in the title game. Don Feeney made the all-star team and Tony Czlonka was picked as an alternate.

Connors coached both state championship teams.

St. Joe lost to Johnstown, 32-26, in the 1940 finals, but George "Blaze" Kelly and Eckert were named to the all-tourney team. Kelly also won a medal for scoring the most points in the tournament.

There was a three-way tie for scoring honors in the 1941 event between Eckert, Hall and John Russ of Harrisburg Catholic. Eckert won the toss for the medal.

Eckert, Feeney, Kelly, McNerney and Hall were all holdovers from the 1939 team. The '41 squad participated in a national Catholic tournament in Chicago after winning states.

St. Joe lost to Johnstown, 32-26, in the 1938 final. The 1942 team, coached by Bernie Harkins, was ousted in the first round.

This photo was taken just before the team left for the national Catholic tournament in Chicago in 1941. Pictured are (front row, from left) Joe Reinsel Sr. and Bill Eckert Sr., who volunteered to drive the team to Chicago; coach Joe Connors, John Krensavage, Franny McGraw, Bill Kintz, Bill Eckert, manager Phil Stewart and Jack McNerney and (back row) Forrey Hall, Red McGurn, Red Rodgers and Tom McGurn. Jack Eckert, son of Bill Eckert Sr., contributed the photo to The Derrick after this story was published. Jack Eckert believes the team won its first game before dropping the second.