



The 1939 Cranberry Berries. Top row (from left): Laura Clark, Winifred Shunk, Elaine Kiser, Mary Daugherty, Eva Jane Cook, Kathleen McCloskey, Georgia Sutley and Ruth Frank; middle row: Miss Harter, Rita Smith, Jean Sadler, 6-3 Norma Vogelaar, Mary Allen, Imogene Craig, Jane Leicht and Jeanne Hughes; bottom row: Peggy Hennessy and Jeanne Stewart

While perusing the Internet last spring (2020), I found a couple of interesting items in columns written by the late Jack Mays, the former News-Herald sports editor.

The first: former Derrick correspondent June Caldwell told him that Cranberry won both the boys and girls District 10 basketball championships in 1938. I thought: They had a District 10 basketball tournament for girls in 1938? I was skeptical.

So, for the first time ever, I ventured over to the Berry Bush – the Cranberry High School yearbook, 1938 edition.

Berries' first juggernaut

There were nice write-ups on both teams, and the one on the boys reported they did win the District 10 title (Class B). But nothing about a D-10 championship was said about the girls – although they did have a

16-0 record after trouncing Youngsville, 43-4, in their final game – a tournament contest played at Franklin.

The team was coached by a “Miss McHenry” – no first name given – an art and home economics teacher. She was in her first and only year of coaching and was in charge of quite the juggernaut. The Berries claimed the UAVL (Upper Allegheny Valley League) title and outscored their opponents, 671-244.

The team was led by forward Emily Burgi, who scored – and get this – 321 points! In 1938! What’s more, the Berries fielded a player named Norma Vogelaar who stood 6-3! And she was just a sophomore.

The Cranberry girls continued to do pretty well, but in 1940, a blurb in the yearbook said, “...due to the school’s being Class A in scholastics, there is an uncertainty as to whether there will be a girls team next year.”

I don’t know what that means, but there was no girls basketball team listed in the 1941 Berry Bush.

And so it went with the on-again, off-again state of girls hoops through most of the 20th century, or until the 1970s when its roots took hold.

Franklin’s Little Tractor that could

That leads me to a second item Mays once had in a column. Franklin had a girls team in 1926-27 nicknamed the “Little Tractor” that was unbeaten and invited to play in a national high school tournament in Wichita, Kansas. The Little Tractor, coached by Zelma Rude, outscored foes 562-132, but was beaten by Oklahoma in the tourney. Franklin dropped girls basketball in the 1930s. It reappeared again in 1953 and then was dropped in 1957 before resurfacing for good in 1974, Mays wrote.

Katie Koontz: All-American

That’s the time when Oil City’s teams led by Jodi Gault, Peg McDougal, Melinda Hale, Roxie Dale and Trish Erickson among others were dominating locally. It was at that time that I received a letter from a former resident extolling the 1955 First Seneca Tartans, an Oil City girls basketball team not associated with the high school.

The star was Katie Koontz, an OCHS cheerleader, who was named to an All-American team picked by the Central States Basketball Association.

Koontz, described by The Derrick as “pretty, young” also excelled in tennis (junior champion) and swimming.

The Tartans beat St. Benedict, the Pittsburgh Catholic Class A champ, 54-49, in the city’s Department of Parks tournament semifinals for their 71st straight victory over a three-year period. Koontz netted 29 and Margie Danzer added 19. First Seneca went on to win the event as Koontz and Sis Mooney were named to the all-tournament team.

Earlier in the season, the Tartans walloped the Warren YWCA “six,” 105-27, behind Danzer’s 31 and 28 by Koontz. Mary Burchanowski added 19 and Mary Walentoski 10.

The team was coached by Bob Bidwell.

Back to the Berry boys

Getting back to Cranberry, its boys teams won consecutive D-10 titles and multiple league championships through the early 1940s, mostly under the coaching of Howard Smith. Willie Hricsina scored a school record 179 points for the 1938 Berries. Jack Stack broke that record with 252 points in 1941; he bettered his own mark with 343 in 1942.

