

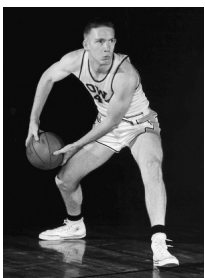
Remembering the glory and tragedy of Hugh Leffingwell

Written by Dan Kellams

Sunday, 06 February 2011 13:55 - Last Updated Sunday, 06 February 2011 15:27

When a Marion boys basketball player approaches 1,000 points for his career it's a remarkable achievement. Only six Marion players have achieved that milestone.

And when a new player reaches it, as Kasey Semler did Saturday, Marion old-timers start to think again about a bulky, blond kid who scorched the nets for the Indians more than half a century ago.



His name was Hugh Leffingwell, and he is still remembered by many as Marion's greatest basketball player. He is also remembered as the most tragic. But that part of the story comes later.

Semler, the Indians' point guard, scored 42 points Saturday to join the exclusive 1,000-point club at 1,005. He's averaging 22.9 points a game, one of the top marks in the state.

Amry Shelby notched 1,126 points just two years ago as he led the Indians to the state tourney, where they lost by a single point in the first round. Scott Benest had 1,013 in 1993, and was named to the All-Metro team as both a junior and senior.

In 1983, Todd Twachtmann, who was listed as a varsity player for four years, ended with 1,214 points and was named to the fourth All-State team. Gregg Anderson finished with 1,088 in 1973, when Marion won the Wamac championship and Anderson was named to the third All-State team.

Hugh Leffingwell scored 1,308. Of these, 1,282 came in his junior and senior years. The rest were scored in his sophomore year, when he was brought up late in the season from the

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freshman-sophomore team.

He did this before the 3-point field goal was instituted. Had it been in effect, his total would have been 150 to 200 points higher, for he easily could have made three such goals per game. (The 3-point shot started in the 1982-83 season, so it gave no help to Anderson and only a little to Twachtmann.)

Leffingwell graduated from Marion High School in 1952, when players wore trunks that rode higher on their thighs than boxer shorts, executed their pivots in shoes with rubber soles and canvas uppers and shot their free throws underhanded. (The underhand shot was required by their domineering coach, Les Hipple, despite the fact that opponents were almost universally shooting free throws like field goals, with one hand, overhand.)

A closer study of Leffingwell's scoring record provides some insight into the player he was. He holds both first and second place in Marion's all-time scoring records per season with 609 as a junior and 673 as a senior. He also holds both first and second place in average points per game at 24.4 as a junior and 25.9 as a senior.

He holds the Marion record for most free throws made in a season (143) and most field goals in a game (18). Had records been kept (or preserved) he would surely be among the leaders in field goal percentage, free throw percentage and rebounds.

He was named to the All-State second team as a junior and the first team as a senior. This was when there was only one such ranking of players. All-State teams were not chosen in various divisions according to school size as they are today.

Growing Up

What made Hugh Leffingwell so good? It was a combination of factors: his solid, 190-pound, 6-foot-3 body, his physical gifts, his intelligence, his coach and his teammates, but the reason that his contemporaries most often cite was his capacity for work. He was a demon about practice.

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His home was in what was once the Prescott Elementary School, on the corner of Fourth Avenue and Eighth Street. On the school's former playground, Hugh's father planted a steel pole on which he mounted a huge wooden backboard and basket. He paved the ground with a mix of oil and cinders to keep it dry and smooth, and rigged up lights so Hugh could practice after dark.

The last sounds neighbors heard at night, and the first in the morning, were the bang and rattle of Hugh's basketball. Out on that court, in all seasons, he taught himself every shot in the book and how to do them with either hand. If any playground upstart challenged him in a game of H-O-R-S-E, he would simply make one from anywhere with his left hand and the game was as good as over.

Hugh is remembered as a quiet boy in high school, popular but private and absorbed in sports. He did not date much. He was on the honor roll all four years, yet never seemed to take a book home. He was so modest that one of his teachers never realized he was one of the school's top athletes. To her, he was just this big, smart kid, well-behaved, peering through glasses with clear plastic frames that sat unevenly on his face.

Hugh is not remembered as having the on-court grace of Lloyd Olmstead, a Marion All-State player a few years ahead of Hugh, nor the all-around physical gifts of Ron Altenberg, a few years younger. But Hugh was a gifted athlete by any measure.

All-around athlete

Unlike many young basketball stars today, he played four sports. As a senior he quarterbacked his football team to a tie for the Wamac championship, demonstrating remarkable accuracy as a passer despite the fact that his receivers could have been no more than a blur of color. He was very near-sighted, and neither face masks nor contact lenses had been invented.

In track, he showed both power and grace, winning individual conference championships in the shot put, the discus and the football throw. In the summer, he was the pitching star of Marion's congenitally hapless baseball team, once striking out 15 batters in a seven-inning game.

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But he practiced basketball all year long, and his skills in that sport always outshone what he demonstrated in others. When he burst onto the scene as a junior, his scoring prowess shocked opposing coaches, who scrambled to devise a defense that could slow him down.

"We used everything on Leffingwell but nothing stopped him," said Monticello Coach Leo Cabalka. "We used a man-for-man, jammed three men around him in the pivot, tried a zone and man-for-man, a zone combination and everything else."

Under Coach Hipple, Marion ran its regular plays and Leffingwell cut around his teammates' screens to score. He was sharp-elbowed and relentless under the boards, scoring many points by grabbing rebounds and putting back shots his teammates missed.

As the second meeting with Monticello approached, Coach Cabalka listened to fans who suggested that the only way to stop Leffingwell would be to foul him every time he shot. Cabalka so ordered it. As a result, Hugh went to the free throw line 17 times and made all 17 of his attempts, thus setting a state record. As an added measure, he made 12 field goals, setting a Wamac single-game scoring record of 41 points. (He later scored 42, his personal high.)

He had several strings of games in which he never missed a free throw, once making 24 in a row, and another time making 28, which was considered a state record. In one extraordinary game he made every field goal he attempted -- he went 14 for 14. It was a national record, the University of Iowa sports information department said later.

Leffingwell's scoring totals were due in part to the fact that he played on very good teams under a very good coach. Opponents couldn't concentrate on defending against Hugh alone. In one tournament game, Hugh was stymied at first, but teammate Russ Seeks broke through to make six of his first seven shots. The opposing team made adjustments and Hugh went on a rampage for 31 points.

There were 19 and 18 games in Hugh's two regular-season schedules (compared to 21 today), but Hugh's teams went deep into the state tournament, affording him additional scoring opportunities. In his junior year, the Indians went to the finals of the substate tourney, posting a

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5-1 tournament record.

When he was a senior, the Indians went to the quarterfinals of the state tournament, thus finishing among the top eight teams in the state. (Although teams played in one of three brackets according to school size in the sectional, district and substate tournaments, the state finals consisted of 16 teams from schools of all sizes competing for a single championship.) His two teams each lost only one regular-season game, thus compiling a two-season record of 47-4, for a winning percentage of .922.

'Sensational Six'

When Leffingwell entered the University of Iowa, he joined the most talented group of freshmen the school had ever recruited. Their names were Carl "Sugar" Cain, Bill Logan, Bill Seaberg, Milton "Sharm" Scheuerman and Bill Schoof. They are remembered today as The Fabulous Five.

They compiled the best three-year conference record in the history of Iowa, won two Big Ten titles and went to the final four in the NCAA tournament twice, reaching the championship round as seniors. The numbers of all five players have been retired. If it were not for a cruel disease, Hugh Leffingwell would have been part of all that.

"They would have had to change the nomenclature," said Bob Schulz, who was the freshman coach at Iowa. "They would have been the Sensational Six. Hugh ranked among the top five or six guys, maybe among the top five," Schulz said. "He was so good. He could have played on any Division I team in the country."

Hugh excelled in practice and in the freshman exhibition games played before the varsity contests. Teammate Scheuerman, who later coached at Iowa, remembered him as a "scoring machine." He, like the other freshmen, would be important factors when they became sophomores and were eligible for the varsity.

That summer, Hugh worked hard on his game, running quarter-miles at the track, shooting on

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his home court and working out in the Marion gym. He was no longer the bulky kid, but lean and muscular at 190 pounds.

Hugh experienced an even more extraordinary physical change that summer: his eyesight improved. His vision became so keen he could play without glasses. His new, sharp vision must have seemed like a miracle to Hugh. But it was, in fact, a curse.

The curse

When the 1953-54 basketball season opened, Hugh was in the starting lineup for Iowa. But he was not scoring or playing well. He dropped to the third string. By January he was so listless he was hospitalized for tests. The doctors found leukemia, an incurable cancerous disease of the blood. It was not known at the time, but a radical change in eyesight is often an early symptom of leukemia, which can cause a swelling that changes the shape of the eye.

Although the doctors offered no hope, Hugh stayed in school and attended classes. He told people he felt fine and hoped to play again next year. He wanted to become a coach.

That summer in Marion he hung out with his old friend Don Roby, who had just gotten out of the Marines. They drank beer, went to ballgames, played pool and Ping Pong. "We hoped for a miracle cure," Roby said.

In August, Leffingwell turned 20. As autumn arrived, he became weak and emaciated. He died on Oct. 4, 1954. Two Marion ministers spoke at his funeral, which was attended by the Iowa basketball team.

Hugh Leffingwell is remembered today not just for his greatness as a player but also for the tragedy of his death, which ended his career just as it was entering its most glorious stage. He is the only Marion player in the Iowa High School Basketball Hall of Fame. This honor is a tribute as much to what he would have become as it is recognition for what he did.

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