
Hoosiers in a Different Light: Forces of Change *v.* the Power of Nostalgia

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If attendance figures are any indication, the popularity of Indiana boys' high school basketball has declined since its apex in the late 1950s.¹ While the media continues to portray Hoosiers' love of high school basketball as a regional cultural phenomenon, the evidence suggests that this intense and intimate relationship between town and team is now more a matter of reputation than reality. If the rise of Indiana high school basketball during the first half of the twentieth century can tell us a lot about the state's cultural values, its corresponding fall during the second half of the twentieth century can tell us just as much. Although there are several reasons for the decline in this relationship between town and team, the growing influence of inner-city African Americans on the game—arguably more than any other factor—made it increasingly difficult for Hoosiers to use the game as a culturally cohesive force.

Filmmakers, journalists and television broadcasters have done much to propagate Hoosiers' love for basketball. They typically portray the close bond between Indiana boys high school basketball teams and their respective towns. Often juxtaposed against a late-twentieth century image of basketball played best and most passionately in America's inner cities, Hoosiers' love of the game is symbolically linked to the state's rural tradition. The 1986 movie *Hoosiers*, starring Gene Hackman, Dennis Hopper, and Barbara Hershey, exemplifies this portrayal.² The film employed every icon of Indiana high school basketball: small rural town, white farm boys turned basketball players, disciplinarian coach,

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over-involved townsfolk packed tightly into gymnasiums, basketball goals over barn doors, and, most importantly, a team that passed the ball at least three times before shooting, ran back cuts to the basket, set hard picks, learned to sacrifice individual fame for the good of the team, and played smothering man-to-man defense.

Milan High School's surprising march to the 1954 Indiana State championship inspired the movie. Under the tutelage of Marvin Wood, this undermanned team from a southern Indiana town of just 1,200 people slowed games down with deliberate passing in order to have a chance against the bigger, faster teams from larger city schools. It worked. Bobby Plump's last-second shot became the most famous moment in Indiana's sporting history from the moment it ensured Milan's 32-30 victory in the championship game against a heavily favored Muncie Central High School team. It also made Plump, a clean-cut farm boy with only modest God-given physical gifts, the unofficial poster boy for all that Indiana high school basketball represents. Coming from meager beginnings (he was raised in a farmhouse in Pierceville, Indiana, that did not even have electricity until 1948), he led a team of hayseeds to the pinnacle of Indiana sports.³

The morning after the upset the *Muncie Morning Star* described Milan's victory this way:

Those mighty mites from Milan, representative of one of the smallest schools ever to win the IHSAA crown, turned back the big Bearcats of Muncie Central in a breath-taking final game, 32-30.

Milan, a people's choice team since the tournament campaign started, won its first state championship by forcing the taller Bearcats to play the Milan game....

Refusing absolutely to match offensive strength with the Bearcats, Milan played a perfect cat-and-mouse game, holding the ball until able to get drive-in shots, shooting fouls with deadly precision, and waiting for a big chance that came when Plump hit the field goal that proved that the little teams from the little schools can win this greatest of state high school tournaments.⁴

The hoopla surrounding the exploits of the Milan Indians reveals the rather peculiar cultural significance of high school basketball in Indiana. Plump and his team became perfect symbols for the myth of Indiana basketball, in part, because they reconnected Hoosiers to their state's rural tradition. Milan's drive to the 1954 championship proved that amid the industrialization, modernization, and urbanization of the first half of the twentieth century, Indiana at its core still stood for values associated with its rural past: hard work, self-sacrifice, egalitarianism, discipline, and merit. That this team comprised of white farm boys defeated a relatively racially diverse team from an industrialized city like Muncie only added to the symbolic significance of this championship. Milan offered a tangible way for Hoosiers to re-imagine their state free from modernity's effects. Consider how Greg Guffey described the significance of Milan's championship in his 1993 book *The Greatest Basketball Story Ever Told*:

The pride is still there, because something great happened in 1954. Drive through many similar towns in southern Indiana and try to find that pride. There is resentment, bitterness, and talk about big cities and suburbs killing their way of life. No regrets hang over Milan. That title was so great because ten boys who had only the expectation of becoming the next generation of farmers won it. It was a community of people helping, mainly because no one knew any differently. It was their way of life...⁵

The large body of literature written about Indiana high school basketball by apologists for the tradition of the game often expresses this sort of nostalgia. It makes a direct connection between the play of the team and the community they represent. Quite simply, the players learned the values that made them so successful, such as discipline, self-sacrifice and teamwork, because of where, and by whom, they were raised.

The extraordinary support of boys' high school basketball in Indiana communities has perplexed folklorists of this Hoosier tradition for some time. Popular explanations have centered on the practical: the relatively few players needed to fill a team, a season conducive to the demands of farm life, and the low cost of supporting a team. Although the willingness of small Indiana towns since the 1920s to spend large sums of money to build huge gyms seems to argue against this last point, some of these explanations have merit.⁶ But, as already noted, there is much more to the story. As the cultural significance of the Milan championship suggests, the rise of high school basketball's popularity in Indiana can also be seen as an effort by Indiana communities to discover cohesive forces amidst modernity's tide of economic and social fragmentation. In this way high school basketball created a middle ground between the state's frontier past and its urban-industrial present and future. It incorporated the enduring values of the American tradition into a game with particularly modern qualities. It is a game, on the one hand, in which individual excellence, strength and speed can determine the outcome; on the other hand, it depends upon the sort of social cooperation applicable to a corporate industrial society.⁷

The rural tradition of the state is an important component in this unique relationship between Indiana towns and high school basketball, but even that does not go far enough in revealing the deeper cultural meanings of this phenomenon. To understand the deeper cultural significance of Indiana high school basketball, one must look beyond geographical and economic determinism to the motives behind the sort of intense personal engagement and community initiative involved here. Others have extensively explored how nations, states, cities, and towns have developed a sense of community and shared purpose through the support of athletic competition. At their best, these explorations reveal how an emotional attachment to an athletic team contains the explicit and implicit values, hopes and fears of a community. If fans are convinced of a team's representational quality, their attachment is that much more intense. This is what makes high school athletics unique. As H.G. Bissinger asserted in his examination of high school football in Odessa, Texas in the 1980s, "No connection in all of sports [is] more intimate than... the one between town and high school."⁸ Like Texas high school football, Indiana high school basketball earned its reputation because of the special relationship it fostered between town and team. The connection between Indiana towns and their local high school basketball teams intensified from the 1910s to the 1950s because people truly felt those playing the games were *their* boys. Those high school basketball players represented their community better than professional or college athletes ever could.

High school basketball in Indiana from 1911 to the 1950s thus exemplifies Michael Kammen's concept of popular culture. For Kammen popular culture hit its apex in American society between 1885 and 1935, ultimately being eclipsed after World War II by mass culture as the centerpiece of American life. The difference between popular and mass culture hinges, for Kammen, "upon the more participatory and interactive qualities of the

former in contrast to the more spectatorial and passive qualities of the latter.”⁹ Popular culture demands “a greater degree of personal engagement” and initiative that often results in more local and regional variations than mass culture. While popular culture did not disappear with the advent of television in the late 1940s, the relative significance of events like a county fair, flea market, circus, parade, pageant, and high school basketball game waned in the wake of the more isolated, passive and homogeneous act of watching television. While I am not at this time going to enter the debate with Kammen on consumer agency in the context of mass culture, I think Kammen’s definition of popular culture is useful in understanding the peculiar nature of Indiana high school basketball in the first half of the twentieth century.

If the demographics of Indiana are taken into consideration, one might discover the reason why this relationship between town and team intensified for Hoosiers during the first half of the twentieth century. Indiana has long been regarded the most northern state with a southern tradition. Except for the very northwest portion of the state, the population growth of Indiana towns and cities at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century occurred mainly as a result of migration from rural regions and southern states.¹⁰ While searching for economic opportunity amidst the industrialized North, the preponderance of transplanted southerners might explain why so many Hoosiers looked suspiciously upon the dawn of modernity. Along with a belief in self-reliance arguably born in the American frontier experience, those from a southern tradition had an instinctive mistrust of outsiders and change, especially when they apparently came in one big package.¹¹ With the forces of change all around, Hoosiers searched for ways to define their communities around very traditional, pre-industrial values. This, in part, explains the rise of nativism in Indiana during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

The rise of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) in Indiana between 1915 and 1925 signified this impulse to recapture a pre-industrial sense of community that explicitly excluded all except white, Angle-Saxon Protestants. As Hoosiers felt increasingly alienated from the forces that controlled their lives, the Klan promised a way to assert popular control over community affairs. Historians have pointed to several factors contributing to the reemergence of the KKK in the North during the years surrounding World War I, including rapid technological and social changes, declining agricultural prices, high rates of immigration and migration, war and post-war nationalism, rapid urbanization, and the migration of large numbers of Southern blacks to Northern cities.¹² Kathleen Blee argues that these changes at the beginning of the twentieth century brought to the surface the racism and nativism that always existed among white Northerners. All it took to get approximately four million men and women to join the KKK’s racist and nativist crusade between 1915 and 1925 was for political and financial opportunists to tap into the fears that native-born white Protestants shared as a result of these rapid social changes.¹³

Between 1922 and 1925, Indiana produced the KKK’s largest statewide membership and greatest political victories. Estimates drawn from membership records reveal that between one-quarter and one-third of all native-born white men in the state paid the \$10 initiation fee to join the Klan during the 1920s. Membership probably peaked around

1923, with approximately 250,000 to 300,000 Klansmen in Indiana. A 1925 report revealed just under 166,000 Hoosier Klansmen, even after a 30 to 40 percent decline in membership. These figures do not even take into consideration the many women and children who also belonged to either the WKKK or Junior Klan.¹⁴ Despite the relatively small presence of the usual victims of the KKK's hateful politics—Catholics, Jews, foreigners, and African Americans—the Klan in Indiana enjoyed unprecedented popularity and power. As the 1925 membership report of the Indiana Klan reveals, those who joined the xenophobic organization represented a cross section of the state's native-born, white and Protestant population.¹⁵ Although this popularity was relatively brief, the Klan successfully seized control of the state's Republican Party in the mid-1920s.¹⁶

As Leonard J. Moore has argued, the Klan offered a way for the white Protestant majority to come together across class divisions and celebrate traditional values associated with the state's agrarian past amidst the alienation many experienced as a result of recent economic and social changes. In light of the impersonalization, isolation, economic and political concentration, and declining influence of the church and family, the rise of the KKK "expressed continued faith in traditional institutions and proclaimed the authority of the average person within the community."¹⁷ The Klan offered scapegoats for the diminished authority of the average person. Ironically, the xenophobic tactics of the Klan worked so well in Indiana because of its almost exclusively white, native-born, and Protestant population. The rhetoric and symbols of white supremacy used by the KKK offered something almost all could rally around in their effort to regain popular control over community affairs. The strength of the local Klavern represented an impulse to redefine a sense of community around a shared ethnic culture.

If the Klan was a social and political response to the effects of industrial capitalism, the popularity of high school basketball was a social and cultural response. People were drawn to the support of their local team for many of the same reasons they joined the KKK in such large numbers. The high school basketball team offered a measure of reassurance and sense of community at a time of great uncertainty and change. Consider this *Muncie Evening Press* editorial from the 1923-24 basketball season:

The basketball season is at hand. For some unknown reason—perhaps it is the appeal to the primitive instinct of fighting, maybe from the clan urge—the people of Muncie always agree upon the necessity of standing solidly behind the Central high school team in its contests with other city high school teams. We may disagree about everything else—and usually do about almost everything else—but when it comes to backing the high school five in basketball... we are a unit.

That indicates that basically there is nothing wrong with us. If the merchant is willing to leave his store, the physician to take abrupt departure of his patients, and the manufacturer to forsake the gods of the iron wheels in order to "root" for a crowd of boys in their "teens" who are striving to place more basketballs in a ring than the boys who oppose them from some other community, that indicates a solidarity of interest that is not to be lightly discounted.¹⁸

Besides the unsettling image of doctors abandoning their patients at a time of need to catch the tipoff, this editorial underscores the sense of community found in supporting the local team. While the correlation between the rise of the Klan and high school basket-

ball in Indiana is striking, social scientists would be careful to point out that these two different forms of civic involvement do not necessarily express the exact same thing. While both the Klan and high school basketball built “social capital” (social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them) for those concerned with the fragmenting effect of modernity, social scientists such as Ross Gittel, Avis Vidal and Robert D. Putnam would distinguish between the “bonding” and “bridging” nature of these institutions. According to these scholars, the Klan was, and still is, a classic example of bonding social capital. These organizations create social networks that look inward to reinforce exclusive identities based on ethnicity, religion, class, education or politics. This sort of social capital is especially useful for mobilizing solidarity.¹⁹ Supporting the local boys’ high school basketball team, on the other hand, might be considered a prime example of bridging social capital, a civic activity that looks outward and encompasses people across diverse social cleavages. This sort of capital has more residual benefit for everybody living in a given community in that it strengthens feelings of connectedness and trustworthiness even between strangers. Certainly the above quote from the *Muncie Evening Press* indicates this particular characteristic of Indiana high school basketball.²⁰

If viewed this way, the popularity of Indiana high school basketball does not look nearly as pernicious as the rise of the KKK. In the context of urbanization, industrialization, and mobilization, it is understandable why Hoosiers were looking for both kinds of social capital: both are crucial in creating a strong sense of community. But the line between bonding and bridging social capital should not be drawn too clearly, especially in the case of the Klan and high school basketball in Indiana during the 1920s. At a time when well over 90% of the state’s population was white, native born, and Protestant, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine where the bonding ends and the bridging begins.

Especially back in the 1910s and 20s Indiana high school basketball, like the Klan, culturally expressed racist and nativist ideology. The values displayed by the local team were often *exclusively* associated with the state’s white, Protestant, and native-born culture. For one thing, the make-up of the teams competing in the IHSAA mirrored the state’s predominantly white, native-born, Protestant population. The fact that most young men in Indiana at the beginning of the twentieth century learned basketball in YMCAs, a Protestant organization that early in the twentieth century excluded African Americans, Catholics, and Jews, reinforced the relative homogeneity of most teams. Klan-influenced school boards of the 1920s and IHSAA Permanent Secretary Arthur Trester went further to insure the exclusiveness of Indiana high school basketball. School boards in cities that had relatively significant black populations—Indianapolis, Evansville, and Gary—opened segregated all-black high schools that Trester determined ineligible to play in IHSAA-sanctioned games and tournaments. In a rather bizarre twist of logic, Trester concluded in 1927 that, although a creation of public school boards, all-black schools could not play in IHSAA sporting events because they were not open to all students.²¹ If Trester applied this principle consistently, all-white schools in these cities also would have been excluded. Incidentally, this order also applied to the growing number of parochial schools in the state, thereby also eliminating a large number of Catholics from competition.

Trester’s order only acted to reduce even further an already small number of African Americans and Catholics competing in IHSAA high school basketball games. Forcing the

segregated all-black schools in cities like Indianapolis, Gary and Evansville to play outside of the IHSAA meant that those African Americans competing in the IHSAA from 1927 to 1941 came from towns and cities with relatively small black populations. In communities with too few African Americans to justify a segregated school system, blacks went to the same public schools as whites. Even so, the number of African Americans playing in IHSAA games from 1911 to 1942 was incredibly small.

Some schools went a step further to insure that its varsity basketball team remained lily-white. In 1927 Anderson High School created an "Advisory Basketball League" for Native American students. This amounted to an intramural league composed of teams representing the local tribes, the Mohawks and Iroquois. The Advisory League acted to prevent Native Americans from playing on the varsity team, the Anderson Indians, ironically named in honor of the historical presence of Native Americans in the area.²²

Because of Indiana's homogeneity, the YMCA's influence, and various efforts at racial, ethnic, and religious segregation, IHSAA-sanctioned high school basketball remained a sacrosanct whites-only institution until World War II. However, it is difficult to prove that those supporting the team exclusively attached the values exhibited by the players to a white, native-born, Protestant culture. Besides an occasional reference by the press or high school yearbook to a particular player as a "young white hope," people rarely referred to the team's race, ethnicity, or religion because they did not have to: all the players were white and Protestant. For chapel services held before big games to allow fans the opportunity to pray for victory, school officials in these towns simply assumed the Protestantism of both fans and players.²³

However, on the rare occasion diversity did appear on the basketball court, fans sometimes clearly expressed their racism. When Connersville High School visited New Castle during the 1913 season with an African-American guard on the team, for example, the crowd displayed "very bad sportsmanship" by "hissing the brilliant play of the colored man." Though a *New Castle Daily Courier* article chided the fans for deriding the "colored man," it attributed his "brilliant playing" to excessive physical contact and "little tricks... not allowed under the rules." In the paper's backhanded compliment, it kept the image of a black basketball player detached from the values of the white and Protestant culture. The paper, more than likely unintentionally, placed the Connersville player in the role of trickster trying to subvert the social order basketball represented. Through rugged play and cunning, he violated the rules and thwarted the efforts of the rule-abiding New Castle team.²⁴

While local papers sometimes portrayed African Americans as physically aggressive, student-produced high school yearbooks could express a belief that cultural outsiders lacked the physicality to succeed on the basketball court. The 1919 Anderson High School yearbook, for example, nicknamed the team's center, Arthur Dykins, "Jew" merely because of his "Jewish looks. In the short description of Dykins, the annual stated "*in spite of his looks* he is some jumper at center, getting the tip off from every center that he has played against this season...."²⁵ The student-produced annual implied that Jews did not possess the physical strength to jump like Dykens. While the New Castle paper represented an African American as inferior because of his animal-like strength and willingness to subvert the rules, the Anderson student publication implied Jewish inferiority due to their supposed rejection of physical activity alto-

gether. During the great influx of European immigrants at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, many Americans believed in the physical incompetence of Jews. Drawing upon a historical tradition of Jewish life in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe *shtetls*, anti-Semites evoked images of orthodox Jewish men devoting their life to the study of the Talmud and valuing the intellect over the physical. As historian Peter Levine has shown, many of the newly arriving Jewish immigrants and their children embraced America's love of sport, but at a time when physical fitness, strength, and ruggedness were considered important qualities for "true Americans", the stereotype of Jews shying away from physical activity persisted and had a marginalizing effect. As the reference to Dykins as "Jewish looking" in this context suggests, Hoosier culture believed Jews did not possess the right stuff to be good high school basketball players nor, by extension, good Americans.²⁶ Americans glorified physicality, especially in men, but only if displayed in socially acceptable ways.

So high school basketball did not only act as a middle ground between Indiana's rural past and industrial future, it offered an extremely homogeneous state a way to build social capital around an ethnic identity. High school basketball took off in Indiana during the first half of the twentieth century precisely because it encompassed the qualities of both bridging and bonding social capital. It could only do this because of the homogeneity of the state's population and the segregation of IHSAA competition.

In this historical context African Americans planted the seeds of change and cultural resistance in Indiana. While across the state the presence of African Americans remained relatively small, enough lived in the cities of Gary, Indianapolis and Evansville to support the all-black high schools of Gary Roosevelt, Indianapolis Crispus Attucks and Evansville Lincoln. Trester's aforementioned policies excluded these schools from official IHSAA competition until 1942. This, of course, does not mean they did not play basketball. But because young people primarily learned basketball during the first three decades of the twentieth century in YMCA and public school physical education programs, two almost exclusively white organizations, young blacks in these cities learned the game largely outside institutions of social control. As Nelson George writes, "basketball was the by-product of a very rational, very rigid, very white world of values and institutions" during the first decades of the game's existence.²⁷ African Americans in the inner-city of Indianapolis, for example, developed their basketball skills on the playgrounds of the Lockfield Gardens housing project and at the all-black Senate Avenue YMCA.

In the 1920s African American educators around the nation began efforts to organize athletic associations around the web of all-black colleges and high schools spawned by the 1896 *Plessy* decision allowing public facilities to be "separate but equal."²⁸ Young African Americans now had an official venue to develop their athletic skills and influence the way the game of basketball was played. Crispus Attucks and Gary Roosevelt opened in 1927 and 1928 respectively, and so did not join this network of all-black high schools until the late 1920s and early 1930s. Trester's policy essentially relegated the two schools to playing other all-black schools. Because Indiana had so few all-black high schools, Attucks and Roosevelt played several games outside the state. Both teams traveled to Chicago, St. Louis, Louisville, Dayton, Detroit, and even Oklahoma just to fill up their schedules.

Roosevelt in the 1930s even more so than Attucks, stood outside of Indiana's cultural mainstream. While Indiana maintained a predominantly rural, Protestant, and white tra-

dition, Gary, located in the northwest corner of the state along the shores of Lake Michigan, was industrial, urban, and racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse. Constructed as a United States Steel Company town at the turn of the twentieth century, Gary did not even exist during the state's relatively recent frontier past. Gary immediately attracted a large number of foreign-born workers, in large part because U.S. Steel advertised job openings in European newspapers in an effort to attract cheap, unskilled workers.²⁹ African American workers started coming to Gary and U.S. Steel during World War I in response to the war related labor shortage. U.S. Steel increasingly depended on African American workers during the 1920s after federal immigration restriction laws went into effect. African Americans made up more than twenty percent of the workforce at Gary's U.S. Steel plant by 1928. In 1930, African Americans accounted for nearly eighteen percent of Gary's 100,000 inhabitants. These demographics stood in stark contrast to the rest of the state.³⁰

While Attucks attempted to break the color barrier in the 1930s by playing more and more rural Indiana high schools, Roosevelt accepted its life outside of the IHSAA. By the early 30s Roosevelt's boys' basketball team began playing in the newly organized National Interscholastic Basketball Tournament (NIBT) for all-black high schools from around the country. Almost without notice from Gary's mainstream press, Roosevelt won the 1933 NIBT by defeating the Henderson Institute of North Carolina, 37-6, in the championship game. The following year the NIBT moved to Gary's 7,000-seat Municipal Auditorium. The African American community in Gary enthusiastically supported the NIBT. Despite the obvious difficulties in attracting fans from teams scattered across the nation, tournament games were well attended. Over 12,000 spectators came to watch the 1935 tournament. That year 3,000 watched Roosevelt win the championship game for the third straight time.³¹ With a relatively small contingent of fans from far-off schools and the general lack of support from Gary's white population, this number is impressive in the context of the less than 20,000 African Americans living in the city at the time.

Like towns and cities throughout Indiana, African Americans living in Gary gained a sense of community from supporting their local high school basketball team. The local black newspaper, *The Gary American*, reported that almost each regular season home game "taxed the capacity [roughly 1,200] of the Roosevelt gym."³² In pleading for support of the 1934 NIBT, the paper expressed its belief that high school basketball offered tangible and intangible benefits to the African-American community:

It is a community project for community development. It is training boys of the community to play a game of basketball and ultimately the game of life fairly and honorably. It is teaching boys of this community to think themselves out of precarious situations. It is our responsibility. Let US put our shoulders to the wheel and buy a season ticket, or at least a ticket to some of the games and make the tournament a success.³³

But what is so significant about the Gary Roosevelt teams of the 1930s is that it is almost completely absent from the annals of the Hoosier basketball tradition. While being an incubator for black basketball style, sending players both to the collegiate level and the Harlem Globetrotters, and winning the NIBT five times, Gary Roosevelt of the 1930s has been largely ignored by promoters of the Indiana high school basketball myth.³⁴

Influenced by the democratic fervor and interracial cooperation of America's World War II effort, the IHSAA desegregated boys' basketball in 1942. As a result, both Roosevelt and Attucks played in the state tournament for the first time in 1943. In the decade that followed, both teams steadily grew accustomed to playing in Indiana's basketball mainstream. Each had to adjust to a more structured, slower paced style of game played by most teams. It took a while. Attucks, maybe because they played some small, rural IHSAA schools like Ellettsville, Smithville, and Paragon as early as the 1930s, experienced success in IHSAA play earlier than Roosevelt. By 1945 Attucks advanced to the finals of their sectional tournament. Still, even during the 1940s the true basketball powers from around the state would not agree to play either team. To make matters worse, both teams had to endure intensive scrutiny by referees, opposing coaches and fans. Interested in avoiding racial conflict, school administrators at Attucks encouraged a less aggressive style of play.³⁵ However, after naming Ray Crowe as the new basketball coach in 1950, Attucks teams started displaying the sort of emotion and intensity that led to more victories.³⁶

During the 1940s Principal Russell Lane of Attucks prioritized sportsmanship over winning. He instructed the team to play like gentleman—"no arguing with officials, no belittling opponents, no behind-the-back passes or Globetrotter antics."³⁷ Lane viewed basketball as an opportunity to convince the state of the respectability of African American culture.³⁸ Though Crowe wanted his players to be respectful, disciplined and fair, he also wanted them to win. He believed victories fostered respect as much, if not more, than good sportsmanship. Crowe thought that trying to play a more restrained, regimented, and passive style of play embraced by his predecessor, Coach Fitzhugh Lyons, only worked against his players' strengths. As a result, he encouraged a more creative and aggressive style of play. To do this he turned to the poorer and hungrier "west siders", like Willie Gardner, Hallie Bryant, Bailey Robertson, and Bailey's younger brother, Oscar, rather than the middle-class "north siders" Lyons preferred.³⁹

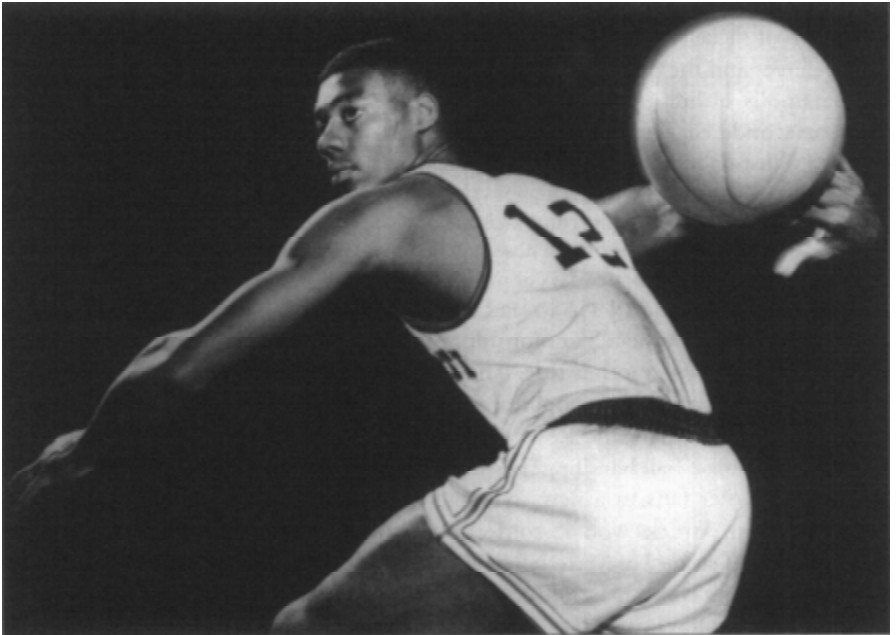
In his first season as coach, Crowe led Attucks, the state's highest scoring team, to an 18-1 regular season record and sectional, regional, and semi-state titles. Though losing the first game of the state's final-four tournament, many now recognized Attucks as a state powerhouse. In fact, many in Indianapolis supported Attucks' march to the state finals in 1951 because, as incredible as it might seem, they would have become the first high school from the state's largest city to win the championship in the tournament's 40-year history. By this time both of Indianapolis's daily newspapers, the *Star* and *News*, covered Attucks games extensively and editorialized that the entire city should get behind the team. The city's black newspaper, the *Recorder*, remained dubious of this support. While welcoming fans of all colors, it attacked those in Indianapolis, presumably including the *Star* and *News*, who supported black athletes but opposed civil rights initiatives. Exemplifying this hypocrisy, the *Star* and *News* came out against the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that declared segregated schools unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection clause.⁴⁰

Milan made its improbable march to the state championship the same year as the *Brown* decision. While Milan stunned the state, Attucks continued to build on its success. From 1951 to 1954 the school won three of four Indianapolis sectional titles and averaged

almost 21 wins a year. The young, tall, and gifted sophomore guard, Oscar Robertson, led the team in scoring during the 1953-54 season. He was so good the *Star* picked Attucks as the favorites for the 1955 state title. The team lived up to its promise, becoming the first high school team from Indianapolis to win the title. That Attucks had to beat Gary Roosevelt in the state championship game to win the title added to the cultural significance of this victory.

The two Indiana high school boys' basketball championship games of 1954 and 1955 represent a seismic shift in the cultural history of Indiana. The 1954 game between Muncie Central High School and Milan High School in many ways represented the state's past, while the 1955 game between Indianapolis Crispus Attucks and Gary Roosevelt represented its future. As the nation experienced the aftershocks of World War II, the pall of the Cold War, and the tumult and promise of a nascent Civil Rights Movement in the wake of the *Brown* decision, Hoosiers witnessed the dawn of a new day. If Milan's 1954 state title reinforced the traditional values high school basketball represented, the 1955 championship game challenged them.

Since 1946, an increasing number of black players had played on teams making it to the finals, but it was still remarkable that two all-black high schools from Indianapolis and Gary found themselves pitted against each other in the final game just twelve years after the IHSAA desegregated. Unlike Milan's close 32-30 victory over Muncie Central in the



Oscar Robertson, seen here as a University of Cincinnati Bearcat, challenged some of the cultural assumptions of Indiana high school basketball with his dominating play for the Indianapolis Crispus Attucks Tigers of the mid-1950s. The racism he experienced while playing high school basketball influenced his decision to leave Indiana to play college ball. *Courtesy Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society*

1954 title game, Attucks easily defeated Roosevelt in a high-scoring contest, 97-74. Comprised of players who learned the game outside institutions of social control, Attucks and Roosevelt played a fast-paced style of game in which the ball was relentlessly pushed up the court and easy scores were the reward for aggressive, trapping defense. Of course, Attucks's biggest advantage was having one of basketball's all-time greats, Robertson, running the offense.

Despite the greatness of Robertson, the unique and highly entertaining style of play, and the compelling story of two all-black schools competing for the most coveted championship in Indiana sports, the 1955 championship game did not capture the interest or imagination of basketball fans from around the state like the 1954 final. Wilson "Jake" Eison, who scored 31 points for Roosevelt in the 1955 title game, remembered that unlike in 1954, most fans of the teams that had lost in the Saturday afternoon semi-final games left Indianapolis before that night's championship game.⁴¹ Andrew W. Ramsey, Attucks teacher and *Indianapolis Recorder* editorialist, remembered hearing racial epithets both before and during the game.⁴² Attucks players, coaches, administrators and fans were especially disappointed when city officials decided not to honor the team with a victory parade. The *Recorder* reported they had been flooded with calls from African Americans disappointed with the decision not to have a parade. This slight stood in stark contrast to the estimated 40,000 cheering fans who greeted Roosevelt on a five-mile parade to Gary's City Hall in honor of the team's runner-up finish.⁴³ Suffering the indignation of racial slurs from opposing fans and players, enduring the intensified scrutiny of referees and the press, and finally receiving only a lukewarm celebration by whites in Indianapolis ultimately made Robertson bitter. Reflecting back on his experience, Robertson wondered,

[W]hat right did those white people have to treat us so poorly? To be honest, there are things about Indianapolis that I remember that no one should have in his memory. The bigotry and racism I saw was not always done in ignorance. Some of it was intentional. Those experiences have tarnished what should have been some of the better days of my life.⁴⁴

Robertson returned in 1956 to lead arguably the best high school basketball team in the state's history to another championship. Attucks completely destroyed every team they played on their way to another title. Their regular-season victory over the state's tenth-ranked Michigan City High School team, 123-53, provides clear evidence of their dominance. In this particular game Robertson set a new city-county scoring record with 45 points. With his size, ball handling, passing, rebounding, and shooting touch, Robertson introduced Hoosier fans to a new style of basketball many now associate with Earvin "Magic" Johnson. Attucks won 45 consecutive games over the span of the 1955 and 1956 seasons, easily defeating Lafayette Jefferson High School, 79-57, in the 1956 title game. Lafayette Jefferson's coach, Marion Crawley, later said,

I don't think we could have beat them if we'd had some players from up the road [from Purdue University]. My boys played as near to perfect as they could and they still lost by 22 points. I don't believe I've ever seen a more dominating team.⁴⁵

For African Americans in Indianapolis, the achievement of the 1955 and 56 Attucks basketball teams was a conscious-raising experience, as the *Recorder* editorialized:

The achievement [of winning the tournament] in itself is glorious enough, but its implications concerning the entire picture of racial segregation are of absolutely world-shaking importance. It is not illogical to suppose that, if such a great team was potentially present all along and secreted only because of senseless discrimination, similar greatness is potentially present in other fields. The Attucks Tgers (sic), in other words, help back up the Negro's cry, "Give me a chance, I'll prove my worth!"

... There are people walking every street today who fail to achieve their own God-given glory, partly because of discrimination from the outside, but also because of lack of application inside. The Tigers did not break records on every hand simply because they were given a chance. Individual superiority had to go hand-in-hand with hard, grueling work and self-sacrificing teamwork to produce the team.⁴⁶

Most Hoosiers did not share the hope inherent in the success of those Attucks teams. While one could argue that Attucks's run in the 1950s (Crowe compiled a record of 154-14 from 1950-56, while Attucks won state titles in 1955, 1956, and 1959) was just as inspiring as Milan's 1954 title, it has largely been ignored as a representative story of Indiana high school basketball until very recently.⁴⁷ In fact, once African Americans were given a chance to influence the nature of a game that meant so much to Indiana, the relationship between predominantly white communities around the state and high school basketball forever changed.

In the decade that followed the championship seasons of Milan and Attucks, African Americans in cities around the country, not just Indiana, started changing the way the game of basketball was played. Robertson, who learned the game on the playgrounds of the Lockfield Gardens Housing Project in the 1940s and 1950s, took his considerable skills to the University of Cincinnati and then the National Basketball Association (NBA). Along with Robertson, such African Americans as Elgin Baylor, Walt Frazier, "Connie" Hawkins, Walt Hazzard, Bill Russell, and Wilt Chamberlain, among others, emerged out of America's cities to revolutionize the game.

This revolution negatively affected the relationship between Hoosiers and basketball. From the 1960s on, it became increasingly difficult to keep the faith that basketball was played best by young white men who learned the values of discipline, teamwork, obedience, and self-sacrifice in small-town Indiana. While Hoosiers still loved their basketball, the image of the farm-boy ballplayer began to lose its social and cultural significance. One only has to look at the declining attendance at IHSAA boys' basketball tournament games over the last forty years of the twentieth century to see the reduced social significance of high school basketball in Indiana. IHSAA records show attendance peaking at around 1.5 million spectators for all tournament games in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Since then total tournament attendance has fallen dramatically. In 2000 only 387,710 attended state-wide tournament games. This trend quickened after the IHSAA decided 1997 would be the last year for the single-class state tournament. Since 1997 attendance has dropped by half.⁴⁸ Like almost all other state high school basketball tournaments around the nation, teams in 1998 began competing in classes, or divisions, according to the size of the school.⁴⁹

The push to do away with the single-class tournament sparked a public debate within the state matched in intensity only by the firing of Indiana University's men's basketball

coach, Bob Knight, in 2000 for repeated acts of insubordination and abusive conduct. Those who fought mightily to preserve the single-class tournament did so by resurrecting images of Milan and rural, small-town Indiana. They compared class basketball to Lyndon Johnson's Great Society; how the disappearance of a single-class tournament amounted to another example of a regulating agency foolishly trying to make winners of us all. Former Brooklyn Dodger pitcher, close friend of Jackie Robinson, and Indiana high school basketball player Carl Erskine even said,

I'm hooked on a tradition of a single-class tournament in Indiana because to me we live in a subsidized age. We look to government and other sources to subsidize almost anything so that it appears to be something it isn't. To make it more palatable. To have less of the old harshness of life, that you either win or lose.⁵⁰

One also heard echoes of a familiar Hoosier cry to give the little guys from small towns a chance. Marvin Wood, coach of Milan's 1954 team, in defense of a bill that would have put the question of class basketball to a state-wide referendum, told the state legislature that he believed in "the idea of... giving the small school a chance."⁵¹

The fact that small, rural high schools could no longer effectively compete with the larger, urban schools prompted the decision to do away with the single-class tourney. This only underscores the fact that basketball had changed from a small-town, rural game to an urban game. As a result, it had become increasingly difficult for communities from greater Indiana to build their social capital around it.

One must be careful, though, not to blame the decline of Indiana high school basketball only on race. As Putnam argued in *Bowling Alone*, civic engagement has been on the decline during the last three decades of the twentieth century for any number of reasons, including more time and economic pressures, mobility and suburban sprawl, and television. All of these forces have caused a decline in social participation, which includes going out on Friday nights to watch the local boys' high school basketball game. However, I contend that Putnam fails to appreciate the impact of diversity on this trend toward social passiveness. In fact, though he does not emphasize it in his thesis, his own research shows a correlation between a state's relative homogeneity and the extent of its social capital. Putnam correctly points out that if people stay socially engaged, they are more likely to be more tolerant and accepting of those from different races, religions and ethnic groups.⁵² Common sense tells us that contact comes before acceptance: Putnam provides the evidence to support common sense. But how do we force contact? Staying at home to watch a NBA game played almost exclusively by African Americans is not interracial contact. Putnam tries to demonstrate that there is a correlation between high social capital and tolerance for gender and racial equality, but the states that rank high in both categories lack real diversity—Vermont, North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and Montana.⁵³ The data might be telling us that tolerance is easy when you do not have to practice it. Indiana high school basketball might have provided an excellent opportunity to build bridging social capital throughout the turbulent 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, but Hoosiers decided to leave it in the realm of bonding social capital. When confronted with the growing influence of African Americans on basketball, Hoosiers started to abandon the game as a unifying social force.

Although Hoosiers quit coming to the games, they have not completely quit believing in the myth of Indiana high school basketball. Over the last fifty years, fans of Indiana basketball have looked for icons that can reconnect them to their small town and homogeneous past. This is why in some ways the 1954 Milan Indians and the occasional “great white hopes” of rural Indiana, such as Rick Mount from Lebanon (Indiana’s Mr. Basketball in 1966) and Damon Bailey from Heltonville (Mr. Basketball in 1990), have actually gained cultural significance with the passing of time. These icons of Indiana basketball serve as cultural links to a past that is growing more and more distant.

Thirty years after Mount’s high school playing career, Phillip M. Hoose claimed Mount’s jump shot was “to small-town Hoosierland what Earl Monroe’s spins or Julius Erving’s dunks were to the cities: a perfect visual expression of the experience. There were long flat spaces and seasons and thunderstorms in Rick’s jumper.”⁵⁴ In this romantic depiction, Mount’s play becomes an allegory for Indiana small-town life. Frank DeFord of *Sports Illustrated* considered Mount so representative of Indiana high school basketball (and therefore Indiana) that he wrote a cover story on him during his senior year at Lebanon High School. The piece focused not only on the considerable basketball skills Mount possessed, but also how he represented a backwater town and its values. While many in Lebanon were offended by DeFord’s portrayal of them as hicks, the article revealed an emerging perception that Indiana high school basketball represented the pride of a rural, small-town region whose cultural significance was on the decline:

But oh! will they talk of Rick Mount when he *is* gone! What he did was to make Lebanon special, and not many places pop. 9,523 ever get a shot at being special. They will remember Rick for that, no matter what he accomplishes somewhere else in all his college and professional games. He’s been so good to them. He’s been so good for Lebanon, Ind.⁵⁵

Indicating this significance, 41,046 fans, more than double the national record for attendance at a high school basketball game, packed the RCA Dome (previously called the Hoosier Dome) in Indianapolis to watch Bailey lead his Bedford-North Lawrence team to the 1990 state championship. The total attendance of 76,034 at all three final four games that year also broke the state and national record. In 1989 total attendance for all three state finals games played at Market Square Arena (a facility that seated approximately 18,000) totaled only 32,354. Since Bailey’s run in 1990, total attendance at the state final games has steadily declined until less than 29,000 attended in 2000.⁵⁶ Like Plump and Mount, Bailey was the small-town boy who made good through hard work, self-sacrifice, and discipline. Former Director of the Indiana High School Basketball Hall of Fame, Ron Newlin, said of Bailey, “His hold on our collective imagination has been unparalleled. What he and that team accomplished ranks alongside Milan’s victory in 1954 as a myth about what we want to believe is possible.”⁵⁷

Yet, while hope springs eternal for some Hoosiers, for most, attending Indiana high school basketball games in half-empty cavernous gymnasiums has become a ritual void of its cultural and social significance. The pre-1960s American ethos of white athletic superiority has now given way to a common perception that African Americans, with their natural athleticism, dominate the game. While both views are based on racist assumptions, the change has robbed the community building component from Indiana high

school basketball. The recent changes in Indiana basketball culture, such as the introduction of class high school basketball and Indiana University's dismissal of Bob Knight, another icon of Indiana's past, merely reflect this cultural transformation. Putnam and other social scientists might bemoan the lost sense of community in American life over the last four decades of the twentieth century, but we must be careful not to romanticize the past. As Indiana high school basketball reveals, all did not share equally in the pre-1960s social capital Putnam and others celebrate.

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1. Indiana High School Athletic Association *Yearbooks* from 1950 to 2000 show that paid attendance at IHSAA boys' basketball tournament games peaked at over 1.5 million in the early 1960s and have steadily declined to under 400,000 in 2000.
 2. *Hoosiers*, 1 hr., 55 min., Orion Pictures, Santa Monica, California, 1986.
 3. Greg Guffey, *The Greatest Basketball Story Ever Told* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 118-19.
 4. *Muncie Morning Star*, 21 Mar. 1954, 1.
 5. Guffey, *Greatest Basketball Story*, 19.
 6. See Donald E. Hamilton, *Hoosier Temples: A Pictorial History of Indiana's High School Basketball Gyms*, (St. Louis: G. Bradley Publishing, 1993); David G. Martin, "Gymnasiums or Coliseum? Basketball, Education, and Community Impulse in Indiana in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Hoosier Schools: Past and Present* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998); Howard J. Savage, *American College Athletics*, Bulletin Number 23 of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (New York, 1929); and Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), 213, for a sense of the enormous gymnasiums Indiana towns and cities constructed during the 1920s and beyond.
 7. Timothy P. O'Hanlon, "School Sports as Social Training: The Case of Athletics and the Crisis of World War I," *Journal of Sport History* 9(1): 5-29 (Spring 1992).
 8. H.G. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 15.
 9. Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 76-77.
 10. Frank, Carolyn, "Politics in Middletown: A Reconsideration of Municipal Government and Community Power in Muncie, Indiana, 1925-35" (Ph.D. diss., Ball State University, 1974), 48. Frank looks at census report from the early twentieth century to determine that most of the influx into the north-central region of Indiana came from the rural regions of Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia.
 11. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: American's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).
 12. Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 17-23. See also Seymour Martin Lipset, "An Anatomy of the Klan," *Commentary* 40 (Oct. 1965): 74-83; Guy B. Johnson, "A Sociological Interpretation of the New Ku Klux Klan Movement," *Journal of Social Forces* 1 (May 1923): 440-45; Paul L. Murphy, "Normalcy, Intolerance, and the American Character," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 40 (Summer 1964): 444-59.
 13. Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 18.
 14. "Ernst and Ernst Report," D.C. Stephenson Collection, Indiana Historical Society; Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-28* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 46-50.
 15. Unlike other organizations like the Rotary Club or the Chambers of Commerce, the KKK offered membership to almost everyone in the community. Skilled and unskilled workers, clerks, low-level

- white-collar workers, independent businessmen, civil servants, and professionals joined the Klan in numbers roughly proportionate to their representation within the state's population. The only variation was that low-level white-collar and skilled blue-collar occupations joined in slightly greater numbers, while unskilled laborers, maybe due to the cost, joined in slightly lower numbers. The \$10.00 initiation fee may have prevented some from the lower class to join. For unskilled workers at the time, this amounted to a quarter to half of their weekly wage. Only the very elite, those possessing the real economic power within these communities, chose not to join the local Klaverns. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, 61-70.
16. In 1924 Edward Jackson, the hand picked candidate of the Klan's Grand Dragon, D.C. Stephenson, became Indiana's governor. Several mayors, county prosecutors, judges and police officers from around the state also belonged to the Klan. George Dale, editor of the *Muncie Post Democrat* and notorious anti-Klan activist, made a habit of outing those local officials in Muncie who belonged to the KKK. According to Dale, almost the entire Muncie police force from 1923 to 1925 joined the Klan. In addition to Muncie's Chief of Police and County Sheriff, Dale alleged that Muncie's mayor and eight city councilmen "banded together to do anything the Klan wanted done." "A Klu Klux Klan Police Force," *Muncie Post-Democrat*, 15 Jun. 1923, 1.
 17. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, 101.
 18. *Muncie Evening Press*, 3 Jan. 1924, 4.
 19. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 22.
 20. Ross Gittell and Avis Vidal, *Community Organization: Building Social Capital as a Development Strategy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 8.
 21. Phillip M. Hoose, *Hoosiers: The Fabulous Basketball Life of Indiana*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Guild Press of Indiana, 1995), 149-50.
 22. *Anderson High School X-Ray, 1927*, 107.
 23. Reports of these services appeared regularly in Indiana newspapers. Two such examples can be found in the *Muncie Morning Star*, March 6, 1924, 9 and March 2, 1928, 5.
 24. "Connorsville Is Victor in Game," *New Castle Daily Courier*, 8 Mar. 1913.
 25. *Anderson High School X-Ray*, 1919, 91 (emphasis added).
 26. Peter Levine, *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3-10; See also Donald Mrozek, *Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983); T. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).
 27. Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 15.
 28. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
 29. John Moody, *The Masters of Capital* (New Haven, CT: Chronicles of Americans, 1919), 98-99.
 30. John F. Potts, "A History of the Growth of the Negro Population of Gary, Indiana" (Master's thesis, Cornell University, 1937); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population*, Part I (Washington, 1930), 715, 720.
 31. See *The Gary American* of March and April, 1934 and 1935.
 32. "Roosevelt Whips Pulaski 34 to 27," *The Gary American*, 15 Jan. 1933, 4.
 33. "Make the Basketball Tournament a Success," *The Gary American*, February 23, 1934, 3 (emphasis in original).
 34. For example, Opal "Shag" Courtney, 1932 graduate, went on to play for Kansas State, Virginia State, and the Harlem Globetrotters.
 35. Randy Roberts, *But They Can't Beat Us: "Oscar Robertson and the Crispus Attucks Tigers* (Champaign, IL: Sports Publishing Inc., 1999), 46-51 [see also review on page 149—ED.].
 36. *Ibid.*, 46.

37. Ibid.
38. For an examination of how black leaders in Indianapolis used Crispus Attucks basketball as a political tool, see Richard B. Pierce, "More Than a Game: The Political Meaning of High School Basketball in Indianapolis," *Journal of Urban History* 27 (Nov. 2000) 3-23.
39. Roberts, "But They Can't Beat Us," 47.
40. *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), supplemented by *Brown v. Board of Education*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955).
41. Interview with Wilson Eison, 26 Jan. 1997.
42. Roberts, *But They Can't Beat Us*, 110.
43. "City Hails 1st and Greatest State Champs; Parade Is 'Out'," *Indianapolis Recorder*, 26 Mar. 1955, 1.
44. Kerry Marchall, *A Legend in High School Basketball* (Indianapolis, IN: High School Basketball Cards of America, 1992), 56.
45. Hoose, *Hoosiers*, 149.
46. *The Indianapolis Recorder*, 24 Mar. 1956, 1.
47. Roberts, *But They Can't Beat Us*, is the best example of the recent focus on the impact of Attucks on Indiana high school basketball and Indiana history.
48. IHSAA *Yearbooks*, 1950-2000.
49. Kentucky, Hawaii, and Delaware still have single-class tourneys.
50. William Gildea, *Where the Game Matters Most* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 90.
51. Ibid., 141.
52. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 355-63.
53. Ibid., 356.
54. Hoose, *Hoosiers*, 224.
55. Frank DeFord, "The Pride of Indiana," *Sports Illustrated* (14 Feb. 1966): 28.
56. IHSAA *Yearbooks*, 1989-2000.
57. Phillip Hoose, "The Big Dance," *Indianapolis Monthly* (Mar. 1996): 96.