

Stagen documents century of basketball history

By Tom Batters
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Larry Stagen read through the old, yellow newspaper carefully and searched for a piece of his treasure the way an archeologist digs through miles of desert looking for an ancient fossil.

His treasure, a complete history of the Washington Community High School boys basketball program (all 100 years of it), came together slowly.

He found bits and pieces here and there - a short write-up in the "gossip" column from a 1908 newspaper that was torn and musty, a partial box score from an old high school yearbook that had not been taken off the shelf in decades.

Stagen, who taught at WCHS for 33 years before retiring in 1993, spent 10 months on the project.

He worked long hours (sometimes seven days a week) scouring through old newspapers and statistics. If he did not find what he was looking for, he bundled up his notes and made a road trip to look through another high school's records.

When he finished the book in 2002, he had compiled complete statistics for all but 19 games. There have been 2,317 games played in the program's 100-year history.

"When I was done, I was astonished that there were only 19 games that were unaccounted for," he said. "It gave me a tremendous feeling of accomplishment. There isn't another high school around that has a book like this. I am glad I was able to do it and I hope people use it for many years to come."

Mysteries and puzzles

Stagen designed his own charts and invented his own methods for gathering and recording information.

But, there was much more to this project than the mere gathering of long-forgotten scores and point totals. Stagen often faced what he calls "mysteries and puzzles" that he had to solve before he could move forward with his research.

For example, after he discovered that Forrest Moyer held the record for most points in a game (56 points against Pontiac in 1908), he went to Pontiac to double check his records with theirs.

"I could find the number of baskets that Moyer made, but I could not find any free throws listed anywhere," he said. "That baffled me. I thought for sure he would have shot at least one free throw."

Stagen researched the rules of basketball for 1908 and discovered that, back then, one player from each team was designated as the free-throw shooter.



The record books: Larry Stagen, who lives in Morton, spent many hours compiling a complete history of the Washington Community High School boys basketball program.

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"That information made a big difference," he said.

The rules for 1908 also stated that after every basket, the teams would meet at halfcourt for a jump ball. "Moyer was a center, so he would win the jump ball and score a lot," he said. "One time, they beat Brimfield 102-2."

The Holy Grail

Until a few years ago, Stagen said, many people thought the all-time single game scoring record belonged to John Norris, who scored 46 points in 1916.

"I wanted to substantiate that claim, but I could not find documentation for it," he said. "Then, one day, I was in the Washington Library and the librarian brought me this old book and said, 'Have you seen this? I thought you might be interested in it.' That changed everything."

That book was called "Nautilus," which was a monthly student publication from the early 1900s. It contained complete box scores, total statistics and much more valuable information.

"That was a gold mine! I could not believe it," he said. The "Nautilus" books for 1916 proved that Norris did, in fact, score 46 points in 1916, but the book also proved that this was not the all-time record, as many people had believed.

"That is where I found Forrest Moyer's stats for 1908," he said.

Stats and stories Stagen said his research helps to tell many stories that otherwise go untold.

"I learned a lot while I was doing this," he said. "Did you know they used to play their games in a regular building, not a gymnasium? They used to put chicken wire over the windows so they would not break.

"And, they used to travel by train and

stay overnight at the houses of the visiting team's players.

"And, they did not have much money back then, so sometimes the games were canceled because they could not afford to make the trip ..."

Not done yet

Stagen plans to update the book every year, which he said is a "major chore."

He recorded every single player's statistics, including points, rebounds and assists, and he documented where each player ranks all-time in each category.

He also compiled complete team records (for example, WCHS is 80-88 against Morton over the last 100 years).

"I'll have to go through every stat and update it each year," he said.

He said he always welcomes new pieces of information or photographs that people might have for him to borrow. "Who knows? Maybe there are some people out there who can help me with some of those 19 games I have yet to find," he said. "If anybody has any of the old 'Nautilus' books, I sure would love to see them."

Stagen said the book is best viewed on a computer disk. He has several copies available for \$10 each. All proceeds go to the high school athletic department.

The book also can be downloaded for free at: www.wacohi.net

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