

Remembering - The 1965 Bridgewater – Raritan High School Boys Basketball Team –

The School's First Team to Win a State Champion

Bridgewater – Raritan High School has produced several teams that have gone on to win state championships in various sports. However, no championship has been more cherished than the first one in 1965 when the Boys Basketball team won the Group IV New Jersey State Championship. Kids from Bridgewater and Raritan had for decades attended Somerville High School. Then in 1959, the Bridgewater – Raritan High School opened its doors. By 1961, the school's sports teams began play at the varsity level. Then in 1965 the boy's basketball team began its climb to the top of the state rankings generating a great deal of excitement for the school. Throughout its run, the many local fans travelled to cheer them on in playoff games held in South Jersey. Today's older residents remember that fabulous season but there is scant documentation to tell the story to the next generation. The trophies and memorabilia for the 1965 team were accidently thrown in the trash by construction workers during a renovation of the field house. A banner that was once proudly hung from the rafters in the old gym is now gone.

The local residents had begun to get caught up following the H.S. basketball team the year before in 1964 as the team won all but one regular season game. In the 1964 playoffs, after victories over Westfield and Asbury Park, the Bridgewater-Raritan Falcons were defeated by an outstanding undefeated Trenton team. The team and the town looked forward to the next season as the Falcons had many starters returning and great hopes to take it all the next year.

The team was built around center Mike Grosso who would set Somerset County scoring records and later play in the ABA. "Big Mike" was a unique player as a 6 '8" center, he had the agility and shooting skills of a smaller player. Coach Joe Fisher chose to run the offense with Mike moving about the floor rather than the more traditional way of having the big man hang close to the basket. A Raritan kid, Mike lived at 33 Anderson Street. While he was a local hero billed even then as a potential All-American, Mike was never flamboyant and reserved. On the court, he always kept his cool even when the other team double teamed him in pressure situations.

The main ball handler of the team was guard Rich Doyle who lived on Loeser Avenue in Bridgewater. He was the disciplined ball player who strived for perfection. Rich brought the ball up court against the best of opponent's full court presses and could sink a jump shot with consistency.

One forward for the Falcons was Andy Martin, who lived on Washington Valley Road (by the intersection of Chimney Rock Road) in Bridgewater. He was aggressive, vocal, and always looked out for his teammates. If there was a scuffle in a game, Andy was always the first guy to get into it and stand up for his teammates. Often opponents would try to muscle out mild mannered Mike Grosso, but Andy Martin would be sure to give it back. Andy had a fade away jump shot that often found the net. Andy recalled that years after he played that Coach Joe Fisher told him that he was a "pain in the ass" to coach, but he was the first guy you wanted on your team if you wanted to win.

The other forward was the calmer, quiet, 6' 6" Mike Janczewski. He lived in Bridgewater in the Thomae Park Section on Carber Street. As a sophomore, he was the only starter who was not a senior. He fit well with the other players as he was a smart player always in the right location whether it was on offensive or defense.

The final starting spot at guard was earned as the season evolved by Steve Fulop who lived at 90 First Avenue in Raritan. Steve was left handed - this gave the Falcon team an advantage in that they could bring the ball up on either side of the court. Steve Fulop was an excellent defender and would lead the team in assists. An all-around athlete Steve was the quarterback on the football team and an exceptional baseball player.

The team was indeed that - "a team" – as the players complimented each other. The glue which molded and managed these five different players into a championship unit was Coach Joe Fisher who himself was a championship basketball player for Dunellen in the late 1940s. Reserve player Anthony "Bucky" Bendetti said Coach Fisher really understand the game of basketball. He knew all about various offenses and defenses. One effective strategy that he utilized was when an opponent was beating them with a certain type of play or shot – he had the Falcons change their defense to break the rhythm of what had previously been successfully working for their opponent. Bucky also recalled how Coach Fisher made the practices a lot of fun.

While the team had a superb starting five, it was not very deep in talent. After the starting five, most of the other players did not play much when the game was on the line. However, the full team was still a very close unit.

After a successful regular season of 19-3, the team looked forward to the playoffs. While they lost 3 games they had gotten better as the season progressed. The playoff bracket showed it would take six wins to be the Group IV State Champions.

Middletown

Up first was Middletown who had a 13-5 regular season record. The game was held at the Asbury Park Convention Center. The attendance was 2,000. This would turn out to be the only easy game for the Falcons. They jumped out to a commanding 43-17 lead with 4 minutes left in the half. Coach Joe Fisher saw that this may be the only chance to have the players other than the starting five to get a chance to play in the playoffs. So with this big lead he put in the second team. The second team gave it their all, but the Middletown team that was initially getting trounced before against the starting five quickly ran off a 21-3 run against the Falcon substitutes to close the gap to 8 points. Coach Fisher put the starters back in the game and the Falcons widened the lead for a win. The only drama in the game was whether or not they would hit 100 points. With just five seconds left and their point total at 99, Mike Grosso slammed a dunk home to the delight of the crowd. Final score was 101 – 77. That night saw all five starters score in double figures. Mike Grosso led the way with 43 points and an amazing 45 rebounds.

Trenton

Next game would be against Trenton, the team that had defeated them in the playoffs the year before. The location of the playoff games were supposed to be at neutral locations, however this game for some strange reason was played at Trenton. Here the Falcons fell behind by 7 points midway through the second quarter and the packed crowd at Trenton anticipated a rout. However, as would be their trademark in the playoffs, the Bridgewater - Raritan team would ignite midway through the game to take a lead that they would hold. Here they first came back to take a one point lead at halftime. Then with five minutes left in the third quarter and the game tied they ran off 11 straight points. Trenton would reduce the lead to just 5 points with 5 minutes to play, but Andy Martin and Mike Janczewski responded by hitting jump shots to put the Falcons up for good. Final 63-50.

Neptune

After the second playoff win the team was gaining momentum with the local community. Many who were not even basketball fans started to follow the team and attend the games. The third playoff game was against Neptune who was undefeated 24-0. This game was held at Rutgers in New Brunswick. The small gym on College Avenue campus was packed to capacity of 2,500. Those who attended brought their new found enthusiasm for Big Mike and the boys with them. One Falcon banner simply said "Annihilate Neptune". But a creative banner said "Neptune 24-0" with a number one boldly written on top on the zero. Neptune came out with a full court press from the start, but the ball handling of complimentary guards Rich Doyle (right-handed) and Steve Fulop (left-handed) foiled the Neptune team. With six minutes remaining, Neptune had a chance to get back in the game when ace ball handler Rich Doyle fouled out. Neptune quickly called time-out - then came out charging and scored the next basket reducing the lead to just 8 points. Some thought a collapse might be at hand. However, Andy Martin was switched to guard and was able to beat the full court press by passing up to Mike Grosso who scored for the Falcons. The final score would be 81-72. This game was the finest game of the season for Steve Fulop who scored 16 points and did a superb job of ball handling against an aggressive Neptune defense.

Scotch Plains-Fanwood

The fourth playoff game, the states quarterfinals, was against Scotch Plains-Fanwood at Princeton's University's Dillon Gym. In this contest things did not look good early as the Falcons fell behind 17-10 in the first quarter. They would quickly rebound and closed the gap to 18-17 by the end of the first quarter. In this playoff game it was Mike Janczewski who stepped up and had his best game of the tournament as he shot 10 for 15 with many of his baskets coming in key situations. The Falcons held just a four point lead with 3:31 to play when Grosso hit 7 straight points to enable the Falcons to pull away with the win. The final was 81-74. The leading scorer of the game, as usual, was Mike Grosso with 32 points. Mike also had 31 rebounds.

Camden – Semi-final

After the win over Scotch Plains, the local community was now in frenzy over the basketball team. The next game, the semi-final, was against a 23 -1 Camden team - and surprising once again the game's location which was supposed to be at a neutral site was at Camden. The local people traveled by the

thousands to this game. Thus the crowd that night was close to evenly split between Bridgewater-Raritan and Camden. Andy Martin recalls that this was a great boast to the Falcons to have nearly as many fans at an away game as the home team did. The Camden crowd that night was loud and cocky. They repeatedly chanted "C.H.S. we's the best!" This echoed in the ears of the Falcon fans so much that to this day, 47 years later, the fans who attended the game still recall the chant. The Camden basketball team seemed to tap the energy of their fans and came out smoking - taking an 18-12 lead. But Bridgewater slowly inched back. By halftime the score showed Camden ahead by 2. But the big story at half was that Camden had effectively shut down Mike Grosso, who was held to just one field goal and 5 total points. After the half the Falcon team began to get it together as Mike Grosso came alive in the second quarter. The third quarter remained close until 4 minutes left in the quarter when the Falcons went on an 8 point run and broke the game open for good. Camden's only response to the Falcon outburst was to fall apart turning the ball over 9 times on bad passes, walking violations, and offensive fouls. When the Falcons took a 13 point lead into the fourth quarter, the once chanting Camden fans were quiet. The Falcons won by 13. Grosso led all scorers with 29 points.

Bloomfield – Championship Game

That set the stage for the championship game which was to be held at Convention Hall in Atlantic City. The residents of Bridgewater and Raritan were all the rage about their high school's team. The game was held on a Saturday evening which allowed thousands of local people the opportunity to trek down to Atlantic City. Dozens of buses were booked to bring the crowd to the game. On that Saturday afternoon downtown Raritan was deserted as business owners and residents packed up for Atlantic City. With thousands arriving early in the day for the evening game many met each other there. Local sportswriter Nap Torpey described the scene *"With beautiful weather both Saturday and Sunday, the Atlantic City boardwalk looked like Somerset Street in Raritan or the Somerville Shopping Center. A person couldn't walk 20 steps without seeing a Somerset Countyite soaking up the sun while strolling along the beachfront. A great many that made the trip Saturday stayed over and returned Sunday afternoon."*

The championship game, like several previous games, saw the Falcons behind early in the game. At the end of the first quarter they trailed 18-13. They would rally back to even the score. As the game progressed, the lead changed hands several times. Going into the fourth quarter Bloomfield led by 2. But at the start of the fourth quarter Andy Martin hit two free throws and Mike Janczewski hit a short jumper to take Bloomfield's lead away for good. Bloomfield did threaten late in the game as they closed the score to 3 points with 2:19 remaining. Then Bloomfield came down on a 2 on 1 fast break with only Steve Fulop back. Bloomfield appeared to play the 2 on 1 to perfection as a pass underneath allowed the shooter to avoid the lone defender and take an easy shot from under the basket. However, from seemingly out of nowhere, Mike Grosso who had been charging back blocked the shot. Coach Joe Fisher said "There's no question about it. That play was the big one. If the kid made the shot we'd have just a one point lead." The Falcons retained the ball and their opponents needed to foul to stop the clock. But it was Mike Grosso that they had to foul and he hit 5 straight foul shots in the final 2 minutes to keep the Falcons safety ahead. As the clock ticked down the Bridgewater-Raritan fans started going insane in the stands and when the final buzzer rang there was a state of pandemonium. Many ran on

the court. Mike Grosso swung the coach around like a top. Many players, coaches, and fans hugged each other. As a final gesture, the 12 players carried their coach off the court.

The final score was 63-55. Grosso led all scorers with 28 points. This game was a bit unique for him as half of those points were from the foul line as the Bloomfield defense choose to guard him tight resulting in numerous fouls. And as it had been in each tournament game for the Falcons, one player rose to the occasion to play their best game. For the final, it was Andy Martin who had his best game scoring 19 points. The defensive standout was Rich Doyle. Bloomfield star Doug Welle had scored 15 points in the first half. At halftime coach Fisher, always the strategist assigned Rich Doyle to guard Welle. Doyle responded successfully as he held Welle to just 2 points in the second half.

That night many of the people from Bridgewater and Raritan who had traveled to the game partied liked champions in Atlantic City. But most of the players, emotionally exhausted after their intense playoff run, simply stayed in the hotel and played cards together.

Aftermath

After high school, Mike Grosso would excel in Basketball at the University of Louisville and later play 1 year in the ABA before a knee injury ended his career. Today Mike works in marketing for a Louisville Radio Station.

Andy Martin, after a brief stint in college, served with honors in Vietnam earning the Silver Star. Then he became a high school gym teacher in Jersey City. Today he is retired and lives in Jersey City. His Vietnam story will appear in the next issue of The Breeze. If any old friends would like to contact Andy his email is asmartinjr@comcast.net.

Mike Janczewski would attend Harvard and Duke and become a doctor. Today he is a professor at The University of Colorado School of Medicine. If any old friends would like to contact Mike his email is MichaelJ@ejobin.com.

Steve Fulop would excel in baseball at Trenton State College. He then worked as a sales rep at Efinger's Sporting Goods. Sadly, Steve passed away in 2009.

Rich Doyle caught some national fame when he played in the finals of a nationally televised poker tournament in 1980. For many years he owned his own construction company. Today his whereabouts are unknown. If anyone knows where he is, let him know that his old teammates would like to hear from him.

Coach Joe Fisher continued teaching and coaching for many years. He became athletic director at Bridgewater Raritan High School East from 1980-1987. He retired in 1993. Today he lives in Piscataway. If any old friends would like to contact Joe Fisher please do so through Andy Martin.

For more information, photos, box scores, and articles about the 1965 Bridgewater – Raritan High School Basketball Championship Team logon to www.raritan-online.com