



media information

1661 ramblewood drive · east lansing, mi 48823 · 517.332.5046 · fax - 517.332.4071 · www.mhsaa.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 12, 2002

Contact: John Johnson or Randy Allen

517.332.5046 or www.mhsaa.com

Greene-Coached Champions From River Rouge Honored In Legends Of The Games Program

EAST LANSING, Mich. – March 12 – A remarkable era in Michigan high school basketball will be honored when the 12 Class B Michigan High School Athletic Association Boys Basketball championship teams from River Rouge High School will be honored through the Association’s “Legends Of The Games” program at ceremonies at halftime of the Class B championship game of the 2002 MHSAA Boys Basketball Finals at the Breslin Student Events Center in East Lansing on March 23. The game will begin at 8 p.m. (EST).

In its fifth year, the Legends program promotes educational athletics by showcasing some of the great teams of past years. At least 42 members of teams from Greene’s coaching days (1942-43 to 1983-84) at River Rouge are expected to be in attendance to receive commemorative plaques and a banner to display at the school during the ceremony.

(The story that follows was written for this year’s MHSAA Boys Basketball Finals Souvenir Program by MHSAA Historian Ron Pesch of Muskegon)

Stop. Take a breath and count with me. Try to make the interval equal one second between the numbers, except substitute the words River Rouge for Mississippi. One-River Rouge, Two-River Rouge... that’s it... you got it Three-River Rouge, Four-River Rouge. Keep going... let me hear you... Seven-River Rouge, Eight-River Rouge...just a couple more...Eleven-River Rouge, Twelve-River Rouge.

Now pause and contemplate. You have just described an achievement that ranks as one of the seven wonders in the annals of Michigan high school basketball. Twelve. An even dozen. That’s the total number of Class B MHSAA titles won by the Panthers of River Rouge under the watchful and loving eye of one man – Lofton Greene.

Think about what it would take to accomplish such a feat. Talent? You bet. Dedication? Oh yeah. Luck? Absolutely. But that just scratches the surface. There is more, so much more, which is required. And that is where the story begins.

(more)

2-2-2 – River Rouge Honored In Legends Program

Born in 1919, Greene spent his early years on a farm near Barlow, Kentucky. In 1928, he moved to Jackson, Michigan and graduated from Jackson High School in June of 1936. Following graduation, Lofton returned to Kentucky, thanks to the efforts of a brother, who had talked to a college coach from Western Kentucky about his younger sibling. Greene enrolled and joined the basketball and baseball squads. After graduating with a degree in education, he accepted a teaching position in Kentucky, later moving on to New Buffalo, Michigan.

In 1943, Greene took a job with the River Rouge school district. He stayed for 41 years. Upon his arrival, the coach found a basketball program that needed attention. In his eyes, it mostly required organization. So he nurtured it, coaching the sport at junior high, freshman, junior varsity and varsity levels for a time.

When he was finished, Greene had done more than establish a basketball program at a high school. Thanks to his efforts, the city of River Rouge breathed basketball. The blue-collar town of 22,000 was always heavily dependent on the auto industry for its livelihood. Now it was reliant on basketball for its entertainment. Students learned the fundamentals of Lofton-ball – a fast-breaking offense and a tight pressing defense -- beginning in the fifth grade. The progression was steady for his pupils. By the time the kids from the district's four elementary schools merged into the system's lone junior high, they had little difficulty adapting to their new teammates. By the time they reached the high school, the kids had morphed into a well-oiled machine with a solid work ethic.

Greene has always credited his loss to Floyd Eby's Coldwater team in the 1949 Class B title game as his awakening to the "power of the press." His team returned to the finals again in 1951, falling to St. Joseph in a tight contest, 39-33. By the mid-fifties, Greene had turned the art of basketball into a science. Beginning in 1954, his abilities and the talent of his ballplayers was put on public display annually in the MHSAA basketball tournaments. For the next 19 years, Greene's teams missed the final round of the playoffs on only five occasions. With the success came immense pressure, but his teams handled it well. The city embraced the Panthers.

"The Rouge people really supported us," recalled Greene. "The Department of Public Works carried around big signs on their trucks with various sayings, like 'On to Lansing.' Service clubs would help us, donating money to rent buses (so the fans could travel to the final rounds of the tournament). It was quite a community effort. We would have 10 to 12 buses go up there for the games.

(more)

3-3-3 – River Rouge Honored In Legends Program

"Every one wanted to knock us off. Fans expected you to win. It wasn't an easy route. But we had some wonderful kids during those years. They came out to play. We emphasized, and they understood, you don't look ahead. You prepare for the game at hand."

Drawing his squads from the families that lived near the massive Ford Motor Company facility that dominated the city's landscape, Greene never was concerned about background, race or religion. He wanted basketball players, pure and simple. He was equal opportunity before it ever existed. Perhaps one of his assistants coaches, Joe Enright, stated it best.

"Greene doesn't see color in a person. He tells them what to expect and what he expects of them. Almost the entire community has dealt with Greene in some way and knows him to be fair, regardless of color. Every kid calls him Mr. Greene."

The athletes responded well. Numerous players went on to play some college ball over the years: Bill Kilgore at Michigan State; Malcolm Molton at Holy Cross; Willie Betts at Bradley; Lou Hyatt at University of Detroit to name but a few. Ken Wilburn found some success as a professional athlete, but the majority are remembered as hard working, solid high school cagers. Following graduation, most found success by applying the lessons they learned while students at Rouge.

Thirty years after the final title in 1972, their accomplishment remains the standard by which all others are judged. Count to twelve, pause and contemplate – will we ever see such an amazing run again?

The Championship Seasons

1954 – After visits to the MHSAA Finals in 1949 and 1951, Coach Lofton Greene found that the third time was indeed the charm, as River Rouge pressed, pestered and ran past a big Holland Christian team, 56-53. Jack Belken and Blanche Martin led the victors in the contest. It was the first of the school's 12 titles under the legendary coach. Christened the "Mighty Mites," the Panthers had tripped up Ludington and their 6-6 all-state center Pete Tillotson in the semifinals on Friday, 54-52 at Jenison Field House in East Lansing to earn their third trip to the finale in six years.

1955 - Rouge captured its second consecutive Class B title behind the play of all-tourney selection Herb Wood and Blanche Martin. Wood netted a pair of free throws with four seconds to play to seal a 51-48 win over Buchanan. Martin ended with a game-high 21 points, while Wood, who missed all but three regular season games due to an operation, finished with 16.

1959 - Runners-up in 1958, the Panthers scrambled to a come-from-behind victory over Holly, 52-47. The win negated a 28-point, 21-rebound performance by Holly's George McDaniel. The 6-6 center poured in 10 points in the final period, as the Bronchos pulled within one, 48-47, with a minute to play. Everett Griffith finished with 14 points for the Panthers, including four straight foul shots at the end of the contest to seal the Rouge victory.

(more)

4-4-4 – River Rouge Honored In Legends Program

1961 – Greene’s squad delivered a 79-44 rout of Holland Christian in the Class B final. Led by 6-5 freshman Willie Betts, the Panthers dominated the second quarter, outscoring the Maroons 21-8 for a commanding 39-21 halftime lead. Rouge had four players finish in double figures, led by Jon Roman with 17 points.

1962 – Led by a stellar all-around game by senior Ken Wilburn, Rouge crushed East Grand Rapids, 69-36, for the Class B crown. Wilburn led all scorers with 26 points, including 13 in the third period to blow the game open. The 6-5 forward collected 15 rebounds and escaped with 11 steals, earning the praise of Greene. “Wilburn played his best game ever today,” noted the legendary mentor. “He was terrific on defense.” Napoleon “Nap” Hudson, a stocky 5-6 speedster who created havoc for the opponents and caused numerous turnovers by the Pioneers, added 16 points.

1963 – Despite three strong quarters, Hudsonville Unity Christian proved to be no match for the Panthers in the final minutes of play as River Rouge pulled out a 59-49 win. It was the third straight title for Greene’s squad. Led by all-state senior Bill Dunson, who finished with 16 points, and Boice Bowman, who added 15 markers, the Panthers struggled throughout to break open the game. Unity Christian, ranked second to Rouge in media polls throughout the season, pulled within two points, 38-36, at the outset of the fourth quarter. But shots by Bowman, Dunson and Larry Brazon pushed Rouge out front to stay, 47-38.

1964 – All-stater Willie Betts earned the distinction of becoming the first (and only) player in Michigan history to be a part of four state championship basketball teams, as the Panthers grabbed the fourth of five consecutive Class B crowns with a 86-67 win over Lakeview. Fred Hudson led the Panthers in scoring with 31 points. The victory marked Greene's 100th tournament win.

1965 - The Panthers posted an unprecedented fifth consecutive title with an 87-65 victory over South Haven. Frank Price led the winners with 28 points. Leading by only two points, 54-52, at the end of three quarters, the Panthers surged with 33 points in the last period of play. The 87 points established a new high for points scored in a Class B game, topping Rouge’s total of 86 set in the 1964 contest. Sam Campbell added 16 points as the Panthers hit on 48 percent of their shots in the second half. (NOTE: Price's daughter, Franthea, led Rouge to its first girls state basketball crown in 1984.)

1969 – After a three-year layoff, River Rouge was once again atop the heap in Class B, downing Kalamazoo Hackett, 83-50. The Panthers had lost in the finals in 1966 then missed the final round in both 1967 and 1968. Greene and his team responded with one of its most dominating exhibitions of basketball. Rouge’s 6-4, 250-pound forward, Dwayne Johnson, ended with 23 points. Teammate Rod Wimphrey added 16, but more importantly held Hackett's explosive Bob Calligton to nine points in the contest. Calligton hit 31 in the semifinals one night earlier.

1970 - River Rouge snagged its tenth Class B title with a 76-66 thriller over Saginaw Carrollton. The Panthers had opened up a 50-33 lead early in the third period when four personal fouls sent Rouge's top ball handler, Marvin Dunson, to the bench for a rest. Suddenly, the shooting of Carrollton's Don Kubia and Red Jones, as well as an impenetrable defense, allowed the Cavaliers to rally to a 64-63 lead midway through the fourth. Then, as quickly as it started, the momentum shifted again, this time in favor of the defending champions. The Panthers went on a 15-2 run, including eight points by Al Boswell and six by senior Malcolm Moulton. Moulton finished with 27, establishing a new Rouge single-season scoring mark of 537 points. Kubiak ended the contest with 19, while Jones scored 15.

(more)

5-5-5 – River Rouge Honored In Legends Program

1971 - Three crucial turnovers in the final three minutes by Muskegon Heights allowed River Rouge to pick up their its Class B crown in a row, by a score of 71-65. Leading by a single point, 60-59, the Panthers converted on two of the three errors, for a 64-59 lead. Al Boswell finished with 25 points and 16 rebounds before fouling out with 1:39 to go, but the Rouge lead was simply too much to overcome. The win marked coach Lofton Greene's 500th career victory and the Panther's 11th state title in 18 years. Tom Johnson bagged 23 points to lead the Heights scoring attack.

1972 – After 16 appearances and 11 titles by River Rouge and Greene, the Class B crown had, in the words of Detroit writer Joe Falls, "become almost their divine right each March." Muskegon Heights had lost to Rouge in the final one year ago, but it appeared that the Tigers had finally turned the tables on the perennial powerhouse. Leading 64-57 with only 58 seconds remaining on the clock at Jenison Field House, this game appeared to be over. But in perhaps the most amazing comeback in tournament history, the turnaround started with 45 seconds remaining. Ralph Perry's easy lay-up cut the Heights margin to five points. Fouled on the play, Perry missed the free throw, but teammate Byron Wilson pounded home the rebound and the Panthers trailed by three. An errant inbound pass kept the dream alive. Leighton Moulton sank a 22-foot jumper with 23 seconds remaining, and the Panthers trailed by a point, 64-63. The Tigers were called for traveling on the change of possession and Rouge had it's chance. Moulton, the leading scorer in the contest, was again called upon. He drove toward the basket and was fouled before the shot. "The clock read: 0:02. If Moulton missed the first, it would have been all over," wrote Falls, capturing the scene in characteristic clarity. "All of it rested on his lean, lithe shoulders...and the delicate touch in his finger. He stepped to the line while the crowd quieted. The pressure was immense. Moulton looked up, let it go-and swish. Now utter bedlam. Moulton broke toward the center of the court, thrusting his fist into the air. He jumped and danced and was mobbed by his teammates...He'd tied it. Rouge could do no worse than go into overtime. But now he had another chance," continued Falls, "the chance to win it. He made the most of it by dropping in his second free throw...That's when the tears started coming out of Lofton Greene's eyes, if you can imagine that."

Expected to be in attendance at the Legends ceremony are (List accurate as of March 12):

Boice Bowman -- Guard – 1962, 1963, 1964
Jesse Brim -- Guard – 1955, 1956, 1957
Abdul Raheem Khalid (W.B. Brim) -- Guard – 1957, 1958, 1959
Willie Burgess -- Guard – 1961, 1962
Cedric Dawson -- Forward-Guard – 1963, 1964, 1965
Rudy Diozegi -- Center – 1953, 1954
Alfred Driscoll -- Center – 1948, 1949
Richard Frazier -- Guard – 1954, 1955
Paul Greene – Center/Forward – 1961, 1962
Everett Griffin – Guard – 1958, 1959
Tony Guarino -- Forward – 1948, 1949
Theodore Harrington -- Guard – 1947, 1948
Fred Hudson -- Forward – 1962, 1963, 1964
Willie Johnson -- Forward -- 1971
William Kilgore -- Center – 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968
Robert Lyons -- Forward – 1959, 1960
Blanch Martin -- Center – 1954, 1955
Clem McIver -- Guard -- 1965

(more)

6-6-6 – River Rouge Honored In Legends Program

Wendell Mitchell – Guard -- 1971
Leighton Moulton -- Forward – 1970, 1971, 1972
Jack Peer -- Guard – 1954, 1955
Charles Reid – Forward -- 1966
Walter Popyk -- Guard – 1957, 1958
Marvin Popyk -- Guard – 1964, 1965
James Price -- Forward – 1961, 1962
Carlton Reeves -- Forward – 1970, 1971
Charles Richardson -- Forward – 1954, 1955
Park Richardson -- Forward – 1959, 1960, 1961
Bob Shearon -- Forward -- 1954
Rolando Shorey – Forward – 1964, 1965
DeWayne Smith -- Guard – 1953, 1954
William Stanley -- Center – 1955, 1956
George Stevenson -- Center -- 1959
LaMonte Stone – Guard – 1982, 1983, 1984
Eddie Tolbert -- Guard – 1962, 1963
Rudolph Tucker -- Forward – 1952, 1953, 1954
Eugene Virgiles Jr. -- Forward – 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971
Dennis Wilke -- Forward – 1955, 1956
Esly Williams -- Guard – 1960, 1961
Roger Wimpfrey -- Guard – 1971, 1972
Tommie Wood -- Guard – 1963, 1964
William Young -- Forward – 1954
Head Coach Lofton Greene

The MHSAA is a private, not-for-profit corporation of voluntary membership by over 1,300 public and private senior high schools and junior high/middle schools which exists to develop common rules for athletic eligibility and competition. No government funds or tax dollars support the MHSAA, which was the first such association nationally to not accept membership dues or tournament entry fees from schools. Member schools which enforce these rules are permitted to participate in MHSAA tournaments, which attract approximately 1.6 million spectators each year.

-0-

RL02-079

Farm Bureau Insurance is a year-round MHSAA Corporate Partner