



michigan high school athletic association

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 10, 2008

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## The Game Of The Century Participants Honored In Legends Program

**EAST LANSING, Mich. – March 10 –** *In an effort to promote educational athletics by showcasing some of the great teams of past years, the Michigan High School Athletic Association instituted a program called “Legends Of The Games” in 1997. This year, the participants from the 1958 MHSAA Class A Boys Basketball Finals – Detroit Austin Catholic and Benton Harbor – are being honored at halftime of the Class A Boys Basketball Final on Saturday at the Breslin Student Events Center in East Lansing. Seventeen members of those teams will be in attendance.*

*The text that follows was written by MHSAA historian Ron Pesch of Muskegon for the souvenir program for this year’s Boys Basketball Finals:*

“Tournament History is filled with great finishes,” wrote *Detroit Free Press* prep guru, Hal Schram.

Nicknamed “Swami,” Schram’s statement can be found in his coverage of the 1958 Class A Final between Detroit Austin Catholic and Benton Harbor. The “frenzied” final quarter of action was perhaps the epitome of great tournament finishes.

On display for hardwood fans were two of the state’s all-time great prep players. Both seniors, Austin’s Dave DeBusschere and Benton Harbor’s Chet Walker would close out their high school basketball careers in remarkable fashion. Each individual would ultimately take their game to college, and then the professional level.

But it was the key contributions by some unsung teammates in the final minutes of the title game that would leave a lasting impact and set the game apart.

Of course, only one squad could emerge as champion, but both teams are true “Legends of the Games.”

At Austin, they called him “Big Dave” for good reason. Standing 6-5 ½ and weighing 191 pounds, DeBusschere was Detroit Austin’s go-to guy, and one incredible athlete.

On the other side of the state was his match. Chet “The Jet” Walker stood 6-6 and weighed 199 pounds. While the nickname wouldn’t arrive until his college days at Bradley, it was proper. Speed and agility were his trademarks, and he dominated the boards and the scoring column for the Tigers.

As juniors in 1957, both players were named to all-state teams by various media outlets, but the duo had failed to cross paths during the basketball season. Geography was to blame during the regular season; the Muskegon Heights Tigers, Class A champs that year, were at fault come tournament time. The upstate Tigers had defeated both teams in the postseason – Benton Harbor during the Semifinals and Austin in the Final.

The hardcourts of Southwest Michigan were fraught with peril for Benton Harbor. The team had last won a crown in 1941 under Coach Bill Perigo, (who later would coach basketball at the University of Michigan). Battling the likes of Kalamazoo Central (Class A champs in 1949, 1950 and 1951) and Muskegon Heights (Class A champs in 1954, 1956 and 1957) during the regular season presented plenty of challenge for the Tigers. These teams would often cross paths again come tournament time.

The 1958 season was no different. Battle-tested over the previous few years, Benton Harbor was ready for the fight. The Maroon Giants from Kalamazoo were dispatched twice during the regular season. A 51-47 victory at home over the Heights in early February helped the Tigers lock down the top ranking in the state’s Class A polls. Benton Harbor rolled to a 13-0 mark as the season entered its final week.

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## 2-2-2 – Legends Of The Games

A trip to Muskegon Heights in their second-to-last regular-season contest, however, ended the streak, as the downstate Tigers lost, 59-51 to their northern rivals. Harbor took it out on their opponent the following night, routing Niles, 70-29. Walker racked up 41 points to become the school's all-time leading scorer for both a single season and a career.

Across the state, Austin cruised through the regular season, and, despite the efforts by Head Coach Chuck Hollosy to the contrary, was quickly earning a reputation as a one-man team. Despite the tag, the team had climbed steadily in the rankings to third place in Class A.

"At the start of the basketball season," recalled Budd David Johnson, a backup to "Big Dave,, Coach Hollosy called a team meeting and said, "This is the year we will become state champs. DeBusschere will lead us to the title and EVERYONE on this team will help."

Austin, an all-boys school in only its third season of varsity competition, rolled through the regular season with relative ease. With the exception of a 55-53 win over Detroit Catholic Central, the Friars had little trouble grabbing the Detroit Catholic League's Central Division title for the third straight time. In the league championship game, DeBusschere erupted for 37 points in a 72-49 victory over Grosse Pointe St. Paul.

Next up was a game with Detroit Northeastern for the Motor City championship. While Hollosy wouldn't predict victory against the "taller and more rugged" Public School League champs, the coach felt his squad would still excel if Northeastern chose to double-team his star player.

"When they double-team DeBusschere, he'll find the open man," said the coach.

Northeastern proved to be little challenge for the Friars and DeBusschere. Despite the double team, the big center still poured in 32 points in a 63-40 win.

The spring of 1958 marked the first time in tournament history that Class A schools would play a District level. In prior years, due to the limited number of schools in the state's largest classification, the Class A tournament began with the Regional round.

Both teams cruised through Districts and into Regional play. DeBusschere hit 15 field goals and added eight points from the free throw line for a game-high 38 points in the Regional Final against Grosse Pointe. Benton Harbor earned its third Regional title in four years with a nail-biting 70-67 win over Grand Rapids Christian. Walker played his greatest game of the season in scoring 34 points, including 11 in the final quarter, as the Tigers overcame an eight-point deficit with seven minutes to play. Senior shooting guard Duane Dunbar's basket with 1:13 remaining pushed the Tigers into the lead for good, 68-67, while senior Ron Lange, who finished with 16, added a pair of insurance free throws for the final margin.

Walker and Lange scored 17 apiece, while junior Mickey Yarbrough added 15 as the Tigers topped Inkster, 62-52, in their Quarterfinal. Across the bracket, DeBusschere again lit up the scoreboard with 31 points in a 65-48 win over a formidable squad from Highland Park.

The Tigers posted a final-round record for total points scored with an 81-58 rout of Flint Central in the Semifinal. Flint, which had knocked off defending champ Muskegon Heights in the Quarterfinals, had no answer for Walker, who grabbed 24 rebounds and 28 points, or for Dunbar, who finished with 24 points. Guiding the attack and playing outstanding defense, guard George Peapples finished with eight points for the Tigers.

"Their running game was right up our alley," said Coach Don Farnum. "We like to run with anyone. Flint's certainly a good team; they just couldn't stop us on the backboards."

Often triple-teamed, DeBusschere notched 24 points, while guard Paul Miller added 16 in the Friars' 58-42 victory over Dearborn Fordson.

To the joy of longtime tournament fans, the Class A Final would match the state's top big men in a battle for the title.

Despite the hype, the two had never met until that day on the court.

"We'd hear things on and off about him," said Walker about DeBusschere in the *Detroit Free Press* years later.

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### 3-3-3 – Legends Of The Games

“I did not get in the game that night,” said Austin’s Richard Handloser, “but I had a very good seat on the bench. That game was very nerve-wracking.”

DeBusschere guided Austin to a 39-33 halftime lead, scoring 20 points, but picked up his third personal foul early in the third quarter. The Tigers jumped on the opportunity, and quickly cut the margin. Walker’s tip-in just before the end of the third period put Benton Harbor up by a point, 49-48. The stage was set for a wild final frame.

Held to two points in the third, DeBusschere returned to form in the fourth quarter, nailing five more field goals within the opening five minutes. Russ Schoenherr added a pair of buckets while Joe Finazzo added two free throws to give Austin a 64-56 lead.

“Dave could shoot jumpers from 20 to 25 feet and just kill you,” said Hollosy.

“He was the first big man I faced who could shoot well from the outside,” remembered Walker, who had a 13-year career in the NBA, playing with Syracuse, Philadelphia, and Chicago.

“We couldn’t stop DeBusschere,” recalled Benton Harbor’s Gerald Biggart.

However, fouls could. Two seconds after Finazzo’s points, with 3:10 left, DeBusschere picked up his fifth personal, and was forced to depart the game. Austin’s “one-man team” was on the bench.

“The greatest memory I have of the game,” said DeBusschere about the contest in 1998, “is I fouled out of the dang game.” As a ballplayer for the Detroit Pistons and the New York Knicks following his college days at University of Detroit, DeBusschere put together a stellar career. Named one of the 50 greatest players in NBA history, he also pitched at the major league level for the Chicago White Sox for two seasons. He passed away in 2003.

But, unlike in the third quarter with DeBusschere out, Benton Harbor failed to take advantage. Missed free throws derailed the comeback. Scoring only two points over the next two minutes of the game, Austin managed to up the lead to 10, 68-58, before Paul Miller exited on fouls with 1:50 remaining. Forty seconds later, Schoenherr received his fifth personal.

Benton Harbor pulled within four, 68-64, but Austin’s Gary Ruprich added two free throws to up the score to 70-64. Lange’s basket for the Tigers with seconds remaining cut the margin to four again, but Finazzo added a free throw in the waning seconds to put the game out of reach. A final Walker tip-in provided the final margin as the season ended.

In the words of Associated Press writer Jerry Green, Austin’s one-man squad “sprouted into an eight-man team.” The makeshift Friars had held off Benton Harbor for a 71-68 win.

“My heart was going a hundred miles an hour,” said Finazzo. “When Dave and Russ and Paul fouled out, I was really worried. But I stayed in along with Paul Kasper and Tom Pine. Our second string did a great job and we hung on to win.”

“I admit, we were all a little tired and sluggish the first half,” said Lange about the Tigers. “But we came back, and I thought we would pull it out.”

“Fortunately, we were able to hold on and defeat Benton Harbor to provide us with not only the state championship, but also, an undefeated season,” said Handloser. “We had a great mix of juniors and seniors and we all got along great. Plus, we had a very smart coach in Chuck Hollosy, who never let all the wins we had go to our heads.”

“Detroit Austin was by far the greater team that *night*,” added Benton Harbor’s Nathaniel Wells.

DeBusschere ended with 32 point, while Walker finished with 25. Lange added 19 and Dunbar 12 for the Tigers. Schoenherr provided 16 and Miller 12 points in support for the victors.

“What amazes me is how little I remember of the actual game itself,” noted Peapples. “What stands out in my mind was how fortunate I was to be on a team that had the opportunity to play in a state championship final of that magnitude. Both teams had the benefit of an extremely talented and outstanding player. I knew I was playing in that game because we had Walker on our team and I’m sure the same could be said for the other Austin players about DeBusschere.

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#### 4-4-4 – Legends Of The Games

“It was some years later that the importance of the game really began to sink in. I would meet people from other parts of the state who would tell me that they were at the game and were impressed with what a game it was.

“While we lost the game in the end by three points and we felt we let ourselves and our teammates and fans down, that feeling didn’t last long when we got back home and saw the warm and generous reception we received from the Benton Harbor community.”

Austin would close its doors 20 years later, following the 1977-78 season. Hollosy, who took over the program when the school opened, would remain at the helm until 1961. He and his family moved residence to Grosse Pointe South, where he coached until 1979.

“Leaving Austin was traumatic,” Hollosy told Mick McCabe of the *Detroit Free Press* in 1998. “One of the priests knew I was in a dilemma. He came up to me and said: ‘Chuck, if it’s important to see your name in the paper and have great teams, stay here. If you want to support your family, you should leave.’”

The 1958 season was a continuation of a long love affair with basketball within Berrien County and the Benton Harbor community. Farnum had guided the Tigers to three final-round appearances in four years. He would lead the school on three more trips to the late rounds of the tournament during his 18-year stay. Two squads would ultimately win MHSAA crowns. Today, the team remains among the top schools in the state in all-time cage victories.

Expected to participate in Saturday’s presentation from Detroit Austin are: team manager Patrick Harrigan; guard Joseph Finazzo; forward Richard Handloser; forward Michael Yelich; and Head Coach Chuck Hollosy

Expected to participate in Saturday’s presentation from Benton Harbor are: forward Gerald Biggart; guard Duane Dunbar; guard Jack Hall; forward Ronald Lage; forward Anthony Megna; guard George Peapples; forward Joe Rodgers; forward Robert Tucker; forward Nate Wells; forward Bruce Wightman; guard Charles Williams; and center Charles Yarbrough.

The MHSAA is a private, not-for-profit corporation of voluntary membership by over 1,800 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.

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**NOTE – The game film of the 1958 Class A Boys Basketball Final between Detroit Austin Catholic and Benton Harbor can be viewed on the MHSAA Internet Broadcast Network at MHSAA.TV**

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