

Nashville West's 1954 State Champions

By Gene Pearce

Time has a way of slipping away far too quickly. Today's high school athletes are living their most enjoyable years. They just don't know it. Fifty years from now, a fortunate few will remember their once in a lifetime trip to Murfreesboro for the State tournament. The Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association wants to preserve the state's proud sports history. The Association is hopeful the history of its member schools, many of which have been closed through consolidation, and the many great coaches and players of the past are never forgotten.

Today the TSSAA, organized in 1925, honors one of the great basketball programs of the past. Fifty years ago, on the night of March 13, 1954, West End High School of Nashville won its fourth and final State basketball championship. The story of this tenacious, never-quit team begins a tradition by the TSSAA of paying homage to past championship teams.

A history of the TSSAA written by Gene Pearce titled *A Privilege, Not a Right: The History of Tennessee High School Sports* will be available in the spring of next year. The following is an excerpt:

Linden (1955, '56, and '57 State champions) gave basketball fans at Vanderbilt's Memorial Gymnasium a brief glimmer of what was to be in 1954, but it was the Bluejays of Nashville West who wrote a script only Hollywood could have conceived. In game after game, West's cardiac kids turned certain defeat into victory. State tournament trips and winning championships were not new to Nashville West. The Bluejays were the most dominant basketball team in the 1940s, having won three times (1944, '46, and '48), finished second in 1947, and third in 1943 and '45. The 1940s was the Emmett Strickland era and West was blessed with a great number of excellent athletes. In 1954, the coach was Joe Shapiro and the team was made up of ten gritty competitors. Two of the biggest battlers were the senior guards, 5-7 Jimmy French and 5-8 Ralph Greenbaum. The other starters were 5-11 senior Billy Owens and 6-0 junior Buddy Parsons at forward and Eddie Greer and Butch Stephens, both 6-2 juniors, who alternated at center. "You've got to give the kids plenty of credit," Shapiro said after the 42-40 overtime victory against LaFollette in the finals.

"We didn't have a George Kelley or Billy Joe Adcock or Bob Dudley Smith for us. The boys simply did it on courage, inspiration and with the all-out help of the student body. We were blessed with a naturally fine defensive man in Billy Owens and the rest of the team took pride in their defense. I doubt that any team in the state had a better defense than we did. The boys didn't ask how many they'd scored after a ball game. They always wanted to know 'how many did my man make?'"

The LaFollette win was the fourth overtime win in the Bluejays' previous eight games. Every game was a gut-wrencher, but West was a team of destiny. *I'm Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover* had been West's fight song for several years, but from the beginning of the 1953-54 school year, West supporters adopted another chant: "All the way for Doc! Hey! All the way for Doc!" Dr. W. H. Yarbrough was the West principal who was in his last year at the school. "I don't know of a school man in the world who is held in deeper affection by his boys and girls than is Dr. W. H. Yarbrough," Nashville Banner sports editor Fred Russell wrote. "It's easy to understand. Any one among his thousands of former students can become ill, or suffer some misfortune, or get into trouble, and usually the first person to show up as a comforter is Dr. Yarbrough."

After defeating Petersburg, 51-43, in the first round, it took overtime wins over Lake City, 46-42, and Memphis Treadwell, 46-40, to reach the finals. In the pre-

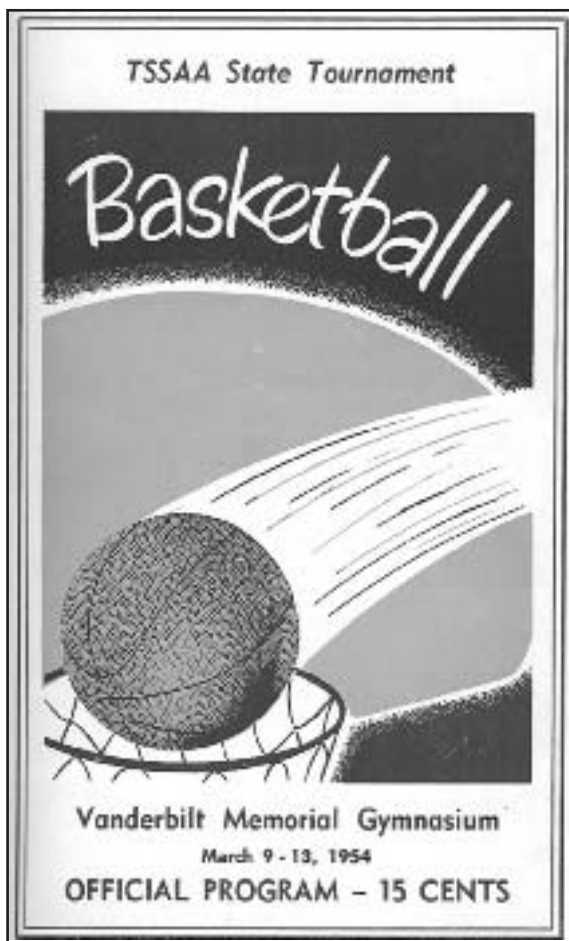
vious seven games, the Bluejays had earned a harrowing one-point victory in addition to four overtime victories, including two that required a second sudden-death overtime period.

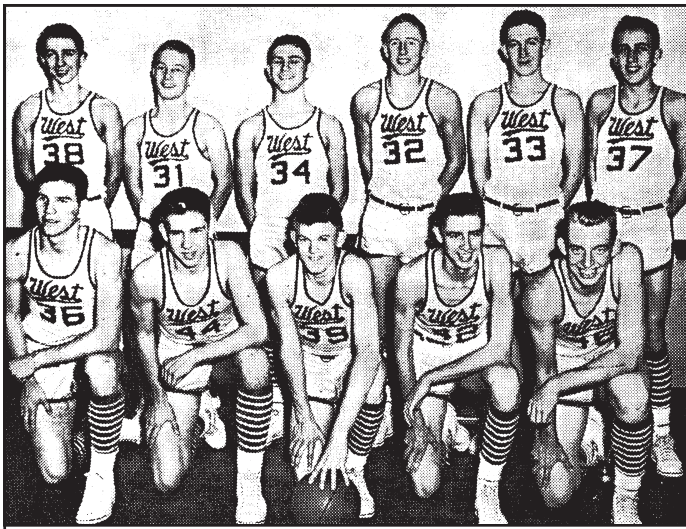
As usual, the Bluejays had to come from behind to defeat LaFollette in the closing seconds, completing a won-loss record of 24-3 for the season, in the championship game that was seen by 6,000, the largest crowd at the time to ever see a state final in Tennessee. Having blown an eleven-point lead, West trailed LaFollette, 35-32, at the end of the third period when the West principal, "Doc" Yarbrough, made his way to a seat among the West followers. The inspired Bluejays were not going to be denied. "Suddenly the crowd became quiet," French said. "He walked slowly down the aisle toward our bench. As we ran back on the court, we all had tears in our eyes."

The Owls were able to ward off the Jays and took a 39-35 lead before West began its surge. Butch Stephens hit a pair of free throws and Buddy Parsons connected on another as the lead was again cut to 39-38. Suddenly Jimmy French moved in and hit a hook shot to send the Jays ahead for the first time, 40-39, with only 1:37 remaining on the clock. "It was a shot I would practice in the back yard," French said many years later, "but it was not one I ever dreamed of using in a game. I have no idea why I shot it. Thank goodness it went in." LaFollette's Chuck Webb tied the game with a free throw, but West played for one shot as French made two free throws to end the suspense. The ill Yarbrough, who had listened to the previous games on radio, was given the game ball.

In the quarterfinals, Lake City had a 41-39 lead and possession of the ball with thirty seconds left to play. An errant pass from Lake City's Bobby Leach to Bob Daniels went out of bounds. Then West's French missed from twenty-five feet, but got his own rebound and fired again. The ball rolled around the rim for an agonizingly long time before dropping in with four seconds remaining. Time ran out before Lake City could get a shot off. In overtime, Lake City scored first when Leach hit a free throw, but West's Greenbaum came back with two free

throws and French drove under for the clincher. Against Memphis Treadwell in the semifinals, Greenbaum had scored 18 points, but had to leave the game with a cut above the eye. He returned midway of the final period with West leading, 37-35. This lead was lost, but French sent it into overtime by tying with a free throw and the Eagles missed two shots in the final seconds. In overtime, Greenbaum scored five of West's eight points. For the night, French and Greenbaum had scored 37 of West's 46 points. After the game, Greenbaum got two stitches. Fifty years later the noted Nashville pediatrician remembers the final as not one of his best games. "We were behind at the half," Greenbaum said. "Coach Shapiro put Billy Owens on LaFollette's best scorer and Owens shut him down." From eight to four on Saturday, Greenbaum was taking the college entrance examination and the next day spent nine hours at his job as a supermarket checker at Bramlett's on Franklin Road. After two years at Yale, Greenbaum enrolled at Vanderbilt, joining French again where both played basketball and baseball. French was a coach and fund raiser at Battle Ground Academy for many years. Two names would no longer appear in the roster of school principals after 1954. They were Yarbrough and Fred S. Elliott of Whitehaven. Both were TSSAA pioneers. At the beginning of the TSSAA's second school year, 1926-27, Yarbrough, then principal of Nashville's Peabody Demonstration School, became the Association's secretary-treasurer. Elliott held this position, the TSSAA's most authoritative, from 1930 to 1942.





First Row: Buddy Parsons, John Stephens, Bobby Glenn, Eddie Greer, Eddie Gaines. Second Row: Vaughn Dubose, Jimmy French, Ralph Greenbaum, Archie Grant, Billy Owens, Jerry Morrison.

Roster				
Jimmy French	G	Sr.	5-7	31
Archie Grant	G	Sr.	5-9	32
Billy Owens	F	Sr.	5-11	33
Ralph Greenbaum	G	Sr.	5-8	34
Boyd Parsons	F	Jr.	6-0	36
Vaughn Dubose	G	Jr.	5-9	38
Bobby Glenn	F	Jr.	6-1	39
Eddie Greer	F	Jr.	6-2	42
John Stephens	C	Jr.	6-2	44
Eddie Gaines	C	Jr.	6-4	45
Dallas Thomas	F	Soph.	6-1	35
Jerry Morrison	F	Sr.	5-11	37

High School Enrollment, 503; Superintendent of Schools, W. A. Bass; High School Principal, W. H. Yarbrough; High School Coach, Joe G. Shapiro; School Colors, Blue, Gray, and Red; Teams Nickname, Bluejays.



The trophy presentation at West High School.



TSSAA's first Executive Secretary, A. F. Bridges, presents state championship trophy to the Nashville West team.

West High Cagers Go 'All the Way For Doc'

By JOHN SEIGENTHALER

"All the Way for Doc!"

While thousands of hoarse voices shouted these five words last night a bald, sad faced man walked calmly into the bedlam of Vanderbilt memorial gymnasium and a few minutes later "his boys" were state champions. They did it just for him: W. H. (Doc) Yarbrough, principal of West End high school.

His doctor had ordered the aging, veteran school teacher to stay away from basketball games because the excitement might be harmful to him.

And because this game he loves had been taken from him the students at West high three weeks ago made this their battle cry:

"All the Way for Doc!"

'Just for Doc'

All the way to a state championship, just for "Doc" Yarbrough.

For three weeks, as their team, certainly not the biggest, perhaps not the best, as far as talent is concerned, marched through the district and regional tournaments, the students' cry became part of a crusade that engulfed the players, the cheer leaders, the band, the students, the whole school—yes, even the parents.

They were going all the way for Doc.

Almost Didn't

But they almost didn't. Until the beloved principal walked into the gymnasium last night there was a doubt that the team would go "all the way."

Early in the game they were trailing by more than ten points. At the half it was 23-17, West



—Staff photo by Eldred Reaney

W. H. (Doc) Yarbrough walks with "his boys" onto the gym floor to receive their trophy. From left are Bobby Glenn, Vaughn DuBose, Jimmy French, Eddie Greer, "Doc," Billy Owens, Ralph Greenbaum, Buddy Parsons and Eddie Gaines.

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ONE MAN'S OPINION



Yarbrough Says Blue Jays Won
On Determination and Spirit

—By RAYMOND JOHNSON—

"There wouldn't have been a person alive at West if we had another week of tournaments like the last three." . . . The speaker was Dr. W. H. Yarbrough, who retires at the end of the current school term because of his age, and naturally he was referring to the heart-throbbers the West Blue Jays staged in becoming State high school basketball kings.

"The boys won five games they should have lost," Dr. Yarbrough grinned as he attempted to relax at home yesterday. "I never thought they would come through but they did it on determination and fighting spirit. They are a great bunch of kids.

Doc Didn't Think They Had a Chance When He Arrived

"I didn't think we had a ghost of a chance Saturday night when I got over there at the end of the third quarter. Syd Pigue had called me at the half and told me we were behind six points. I knew Ralph Greenbaum was tired and worn out from taking a college exam. He called me about 7 o'clock and said he had just finished it and that he had a terrible headache. Then Syd told me that Jimmy French had been hit in the eye and that he had to leave the game early in the second quarter.



Yarbrough

"I knew the entire team was tired before the game. I remember one year, 1924 I think it was, our Peabody team which had Jimmy Armistead and that crowd, had to play three games in one day in the tournament at Murfreesboro. They caught Central high that night and the play of both teams in that game reminded me of the walkathon that was going on in Nashville at that time. They just went through the motions. I was afraid our boys would be in the same condition Saturday night."



Yarbrough Is Just as Proud of West Student Body

While Dr. Yarbrough is extremely proud of the Blue Jays, he is just as proud of the West student body . . . "We've never had a finer student body at West and I've been here since the school opened in 1937," he continued. "They have responded as never before during the three weeks of the tournaments. Their co-operation made me just as proud of them as I am of those kids winning the State championship.

"We played 24 games in the State tournaments in six years (1943-48)," Dr. Yarbrough said as his thoughts drifted back to some of the teams he had enjoyed. "Not once did we have an overtime game in those tournaments. Once we trailed Coopertown with 90 seconds to go but won it by six points. We lost some games, too, but never have I had the thrills that I got out of this one.

Never Seen Coverage of Tourney To Equal This

"I have never seen coverage of a high school tournament like you all gave this one," continued Dr. Yarbrough who was executive secretary of the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic association from 1925 through 1930. "It was wonderful and much more than we deserved. I'm sending your Saturday and Sunday papers to my relatives in Texas to let them see it."

West high's shocking and unmatched performances in the District, Regional and State meets might well be compared to Ben Hogan making a hole-in-one on the 72nd hole to win the National Open; Mickey Mantle hitting two grand slam home runs in one inning; Rocky Marciano knocking out three opponents in one round the same night; Jack Harshman pitching consecutive no-hitters with the Chicago White Sox this summer; Johnny Parsons winning the Indianapolis 500-mile auto race at 180 miles per hour; or a stable boy getting a mount in the Kentucky Derby and winning it . . . I don't believe there ever has been anything in sports, certainly not in this neck of the woods, to equal West's achievement.



Fred Russell

SIDELINES

Needed: A Thermometer Of Emotion

SEEMS to me that Vanderbilt Medical School could be making good use of the tingling State basketball tournament for studying first-hand the effect sustained, extreme excitement has on the heart.

Of the past six games, three ended in ties, requiring overtime play, two were decided by two-point margins, the other by one point. Imagine . . . a total of five points difference in six games!

Maybe for the finals tonight some genius will have invented a thermometer of emotion to install in each seat. Then, a trophy might be presented to the spectator registering the lowest blood pressure. Except that it should be made sure that such a winner is alive . . . and thus eligible.

"All the Way for Doc"

Written by Harold Huggins in 1998

Basketball tournaments always have a sense of theater, where unlikely heroes emerge on the court...and sometimes in the bleachers.

Fifty years ago, in a time and a place so different from today, Nashville West High's basketball team wrote an unforgettable chapter in the state's high school sports lore.

The movie "Hoosiers" has nothing on the real-life drama of West High's championship run. No less of a sports authority than southern radio legend Larry Munson calls the West High story his favorite sports story.

As another boys' state tournament occurs this year at Middle Tennessee State in Murfreesboro, a few attending that event will have been among those present on a chilly Saturday night at packed Vanderbilt Memorial Gym in 1954 when West High followed its motto –All The Way For Doc –to the state championship.

The story revolves around the late W. H. (Doc) Yarbrough, who had been West High's only principal since the school opened in 1937. Yarbrough already had announced his retirement, effective at the end of the 1953-54 school year.

Those were different days. Principals were respected, even revered. School spirit was something more than a cliché. West High even had a school song –*I'm Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover* –that foreshadowed what happened in the state tournament.

Yarbrough, his retirement approaching, became ill at tournament time and was placed under doctors' orders not to attend the games.

His illness became a rallying point for the West High team. Starting with the district tournament, West High, coached by Joe Shapiro and already one of Nashville's top teams, began winning close games. The run continued through the region and eventually into the state where the Bluejays were one of the more unlikely of the Sweet 16 final teams. With each win, the motto –All the Way for Doc –took on added significance.

A TRUE TEAM

West High, which is now West End Middle School, located at the corner of West End and Bowling Avenue, was a good team –with emphasis on team.

Shapiro coached a team that included the dynamic guard duo of 5-foot-7 Jimmy French, now 68, and 5-8 Ralph Greenbaum, 67. Billy Owens, Buddy Parsons and John (Butch) Stephens, at 6-2 the tallest starter, rounded out the starting line-up. Long-time Hendersonville and Davidson Academy coach Eddie Green was also on the team.

"This had all the elements –a motivation for winning for a beloved principal, even down to our spirit song," recalls French.

Retired *Tennessean* sports writer Jimmy Davy, who covered preps during those days, says, "West High was a team that not many thought would go very far going in the tournaments" before somehow winning the state title in what he terms "a miraculous experience."

This was pre-integration Nashville, where black and white did not mix on the high school basketball court. It would be 12 years before powerful Pearl High won the first state championship in the tournament that included teams from black high schools.

But the West High fairytale crossed color lines, leaving an impression on people like Melvin Black, a former player and assistant coach at Pearl High.

"Back in the '50s, some of us would compare scores in the paper and we'd say we could beat so-and-so," says Black. "West, along with East, Litton, and MBA were some of the elite schools.

"What West did that year was outstanding."

The title march began in the district tournament and took flight with a win over Ryan.

"Then it became an escalating thing," says Shapiro, now 93, adding that the All the Way for Doc slogan began in the region tournament. "Every time we had a close game we believed we were going to win." In those days, sudden deaths settled games that were tied at the end of the first overtime. In the District 18 finals, French scored in sudden death to beat MBA 36-34.

"I was a sophomore that year," recalled Tommy Frist, Chairman Emeritus of Hospital Corporation of America. "I was guarding Jimmy at that game at Lipscomb. In sudden death he hit a jump shot over me to win the game.

"When they got to the state I was very excited for them," he said. "It was an amazing run and a great success story."

The story continued to build into one miracle finish after another, with four of West's 10 games in the tournaments going into overtime and two into sudden death. In the most dramatic game, Greenbaum was fouled with no time remaining on the clock and West trailing Donelson by two points in the region tournament. He made both free throws to keep his team alive, and West went on to win in overtime. West was looking like Little Engine that Could.

Finally, the only thing standing between West and a state championship was a good LaFollette team from east Tennessee.

DOC SHOWS UP

Doc Yarbrough was not in Memorial Gym when the championship game started. On

doctors' orders, he was at his home, playing bridge with his wife and two friends.

The doctors didn't want him listening to the game on the radio, but Doc Yarbrough didn't always do as he was told and when West High trailed 27-17 at halftime, the principal excused himself from the bridge table.

"He told his wife, 'my boys need me,' and he put on his coat to go to the game. They tried to stop him, but he went anyway," recalls Munson who broadcast the game for WSIX Radio.

Munson, whose broadcast résumé includes the 1989 championship run for the University of Georgia football team, recalls the scene in Memorial Gym in classic Munson style.

"I remember distinctly Dr. Yarbrough walking down that aisle way with an overcoat over his arm, a red scarf and overshoes. The place just went into an uproar. It became a sustained roar." Yarbrough's entrance was impossible to miss and it got the desired effect out of the West High players.

"During a timeout, Dr. Yarbrough came in on the east side," recalls French. "It was a very moving experience. You could hear a pin drop.

"Then there was a big roar from the standing-room only crowd."

Bill Roberts, retired copy editor for the *Nashville Banner*, was keeping the score book for Munson that night and remembers, "The roar was so loud when he came in, and they started singing their school pep song... then everything they started doing seemed to work."

Says Davy who covered the game for the *Tennessean*: "The last half turned into a totally emotional experience."

West High began chipping away at the lead. With about a minute left, French hit a hook shot from outside the foul line to give West the lead for good.

"When Dr. Yarbrough came into the gym, the student body went nuts," says Shapiro. "Then Jimmy hit that big hook shot late."

West High got the ball back and French dribbled out the last 18 seconds. Sobbing, he was engulfed by delirious fans at mid-court.

Munson's conclusion: "There's no doubt that his coming there won the game for them."

STILL UNFORGETTABLE

The events of those few days, especially the remarkable scene in the state championship game, are stamped on the memories of those involved in the All the Way for Doc miracle.

"After I got out of the Navy, the postman asked if I was the one who played on the West team," recalls Greenbaum, who teamed with French in the backcourt. "It was as if I had become as famous as someone who had won a Pulitzer Prize."

"Every coach will tell you what might have happened if his team had done this or that," Shapiro said. "Well, with all the close games, overtimes, and sudden deaths we had then –if happened."

In the aftermath of the game late *Banner* Sports Editor Fred Russell wrote, "If there is anything new that possibly could be said about the magnificent climb that took West High's Bluejays to the top of the state basketball ladder, we are not aware of it. It was a great team with a great purpose."

On the Monday after the game Doc Yarbrough addressed the West High student body with these words: "You have done the impossible. It is an unbelievable achievement."

Then Jimmy French, as captain, presented the state champion trophy to Yarbrough and said, "I want to present this trophy to the greatest principal in the world."

Yarbrough, who later was elected to the city council, died in June 1961, at age 77 following a stroke he suffered the year before. But the memories remain, supplemented by yellowed pages in the scrapbook.

The headline in the *Tennessean* the day after the game summed it up perfectly: "We Made it, Doc –42-40."

Did they ever.

Harold Huggins now writes for the Nashville City Paper in a distinguished career that has included the Nashville Banner and the Nashville Tennessean. In writing this story, he said: "When I was a little boy, my father, Harold, a big sports fan himself, became fascinated with the West High run in the tournaments. He said we ought to go to the state finals and see West play at Vanderbilt. It was my first state tournament.

"A person is influenced so much by what happens early in life and the West High story certainly had an early impact on me.

"This special event made me realize hopes and dreams really can come true.

"Your memories become a little faded and scratchy in 50 years, but there are a few things on that March 13 night I will never forget.

"Things like Doc Yarbrough coming into the West cheering section ... West trailing the entire way ... then Jimmy French dribbling out the final seconds ... and how he broke down crying as the West students and cheering section rushed out and mobbed him and the team on the floor.

"These types of endings do not happen all the time –but it did in 1954."