

## BEYOND THE PRIZE

### A Tribute to the 1963 Cloquet (Minn) High School Basketball Team

2013 – On the occasion of the team's 50<sup>th</sup> Reunion

-- *By Howard Lavick*

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Gather around good friends and I will tell you a remarkable story. A story that is heartwarming, heart-breaking, dramatic - and true! It happened 50 years ago, so many of you are either too young - or too old - to remember.

Most everyone knows the biblical tale of David and Goliath whereby young David, armed only with a sling and stones, defeats the Philistine giant Goliath. This story serves as a metaphor about the brave little guy defeating the big bad bully. It's a popular theme in sports whenever the underdog triumphs: the Minnesota Twins going from worst to first and winning the World Series; or the movie "*Hoosiers*", where the small town basketball team beats the big city team to win the Indiana state championship.

That is a David vs. Goliath story. But that is not this story.

Suppose young David walked out onto the field of battle armed only with his courage, determination, skill and intelligence, and confronted not the big, bad, fire-breathing, muscle-sprouting Goliath, but instead stood face to face with a mirror image of himself – a fearless foe just as heroic and honorable as he was. What would happen if David battled David? What kind of story would that be?

It would be the story of the 1963 Minnesota state high school basketball championship game between Cloquet and Marshall, arguably the most exciting and dramatic state finals ever played in the 100-year history of the tournament.

### THE TOWN AND THE TIMES

In the early 1960's, Cloquet could be excused for having a bit of an inferiority complex. After all, it was a town whose biggest claim to fame was that it burned to the ground in the great Cloquet Fire of 1918. Rebuilt, it grew into a small lumber town straddling the St. Louis River in Northern Minnesota with a population of about 9,000, if you snuck nearby Scanlon onto the census rolls. Oh sure, Cloquet claimed the "world's only Frank Lloyd Wright designed service station", but old Frank wasn't a local boy. Heck, he'd never even been to Cloquet and his office was someplace over in Wisconsin. So Frank's gas station didn't really count with the locals. And Jessica Lange? She was years away from running off with a big gorilla to become a Hollywood movie star.

Cloquet was known mostly for its endless stacks of pulp lumber and large factories like Diamond Match Co. and the Wood Conversion Co. -- commonly known as "the mill". These companies employed generations of fathers and sons, sisters and aunts; hard working folks who helped produce tons of wood and paper products annually. The manufacturing process also spewed out foul smelling smoke and gas fumes through tall chimneys, where the winds carried the pungent odor out of town and over the hill, to our ungrateful neighbors in Duluth. No wonder the Cloquet Lumberjacks had to endure chants of "beat stink city!" whenever they played the cake eaters of Duluth East or the bullies of Duluth Central.

## **THE SEASON**

Winter in northern Minnesota is a season to be endured. Once the holidays are over, the long dreary months of record wind-chills settle in like a bad chest cold. But winter is also basketball season. In the 1960's, high school basketball was king in Minnesota. Hockey hadn't really caught on yet and most of the rinks were outdoors, so that limited the frozen fans to a frostbitten few. The Vikings and Twins were still in their infancy, seen more as novelties than competitive pro teams. High school basketball on the other hand, would bring a community together in a warm gymnasium every weekend. If the teams were good enough, they could provide entertainment and also be a source of civic pride.

So it was, that in the winter of 1963 the Cloquet basketball team surprised almost everyone - except perhaps themselves - by fashioning a magical season the likes of which hadn't been seen before or since.

## **THE TEAM – A work in progress.**

The 1963 basketball team was small and the head coach was new. They had lost their senior leadership from the year before, so expectations were modest and uncertain – much like the town itself.

**Ben Trochlil**, at age 29, was in his first year as head coach. A high school teacher and father, with a beautiful wife and two young daughters, Ben had been the assistant coach under Bob Seikkula. When Seikkula unexpectedly left for another job, Ben was offered the position. He had known and coached many of the players during their junior high school years in Cloquet, so Ben gladly accepted the job and was about to see just what he had gotten himself into.

**Mike Forrest** was a handsome lady-killer with the good looks and charm to match his prodigious athletic talents. At 5'10 and a muscular 180 pounds, Mike had just won All State honors as the star halfback on Cloquet's undefeated football team. He used his strength, skill and self-confidence to star in basketball as well.

**Denny Breitbarth** was the strong and solid 6' center. Quiet and friendly by nature, he anchored the defense like an unmovable 'tree stump', often outplaying much larger and stronger opponents with his grit and intelligence.

The real David of this story was **Dave "mouse" Meisner**, who at 5'7" was the smallest, most dynamic player on the team. He could jump like a jackrabbit, kicking his legs as he unleashed deadly jump shots from anywhere on the floor. On defense, Dave flashed the quickest hands this side of a Parisian pickpocket, snatching the basketball away from an opponent in mid-dribble before the stunned player knew what happened.

### **RUN, RUN, RUN – Who are these guys?!**

Trochlil was a bright, confident coach who was unafraid to challenge his players through a strenuous training regimen. Team practices included running up and down the balcony stairs of the old High School gymnasium and fighting through “killer drills” that pitted players one-on-one, chasing back and forth for 20 minutes non-stop. The team never complained, ever, said Trochlil. They were driven by a deep determination to return to the state tournament after falling short in 1962. This training paid off throughout the season as the ‘Jacks became known for their superb conditioning. The players claimed they were in the best physical shape of their lives.

Aside from the three senior starters, the rest of the team was a work in progress as Trochlil experimented with different line-ups in search of the team’s identity. During the early part of the season, Cloquet employed a taller, more conventional line-up, but after losing a close game at home against arch rival Duluth Central, and then losing to perennial nemesis Proctor, a change was needed. After talking with his senior starters, Coach Trochlil decided to go with a smaller, quicker, more athletic line-up. He added juniors Dick Boyer and Gary Welton to the mix and things took off from there – literally. The high-flying Lumberjacks began running and gunning, unleashing a high-scoring, fast-break offense augmented by a smothering full-court press defense that generated steals and disrupted the other teams. It wasn’t long before Cloquet set a state record by scoring 165 points in two consecutive games. A week later they broke their own record, scoring 181 points in two games.

On paper, Cloquet’s undersized roster looked to be overmatched. On the court however, it was a different story. Bigger, more talented teams were left gasping for air as they relinquished early leads and lost to the smaller, quicker Lumberjacks. Opposing coaches could only shake their heads and wonder, “Who are these guys?!” For their growing legions of fans, the Cloquet team was thrilling to watch!

Near the end of the season, the ‘Jacks blew into town for a rematch with Chet Anderson and Duluth Central. Anderson, a muscular and agile 6’3” and 215 pounds, was the leading scorer in the conference, and would later play pro football in the NFL. The Duluth gymnasium was packed with several thousand people anticipating this showdown. Led by Denny Breitbarth’s inspired defense that held Chet Anderson to a season-low 9 points, the Lumberjacks hammered the Trojans on their own court, 74-51, and established themselves as a team to be reckoned with.

### **DISTRICT AND REGIONALS - The next step.**

Cloquet continued its frenzied pace through the Conference, ultimately meeting Central in the District Finals for the rubber match of their season series. After falling behind the Trojans by as much as 10 points in the third quarter, Cloquet’s run-and-gun pace began to wear on Central. Feeling the game slip away, Central’s coach Jim Hastings made a strategic mistake. He ordered his team to do only one thing: get the ball into Chet Anderson, their all-state center. No one else was to shoot. Cloquet’s defense, again led by Denny Brietbarth under the basket and Dave Meisner’s slight of hand steals, collapsed around the burly Anderson, daring the others to shoot. The tide began to turn and the Lumberjacks came away with a hard-fought and well-earned victory by a 59-50 score.

In the Region 7 tournament, Cloquet faced one of the areas largest and most physical teams, Aurora-Hoyt Lakes. They featured a line up with all starters over 6-feet tall, including the two McNulty brothers, one stood 6'6" and the other 6'3". Following a familiar pattern, the bigger team dominated early, but as Cloquet's conditioning and quickness proved time and again, Aurora-Hoyt Lakes faltered as the game wore on.

The Lumberjacks fed off of their own energy and with the high scoring duo of Meisner and Forrest leading the way, ran past A-HL by 72-58 and into the State Tournament.

### **THE STATE TOURNAMENT – Bright lights, Big city.**

In the early '60's there was only a single-class of teams for the state tournament, so any one of the several hundred high schools in Minnesota could potentially win the championship. Just getting to the state tournament was hard enough, but returning a second year in a row as Cloquet had done, was extremely difficult and rare. Indeed, of the 484 high schools in Minnesota that year, only 8 remained standing – one from each Region - to do battle in storied William's Arena on the University of Minnesota campus. Affectionately known as "The Barn", Williams arena was home to the Golden Gophers basketball team. However, during the state high school tournament held over three days in late March, it was SRO and even the U of M had to get in line for tickets. The games regularly drew crowds of 18,000 -19,000 fans each evening and the tournament was broadcast on television throughout the state. It was a far more popular sporting event than anything the Golden Gophers could hope to offer.

### **BLOOMINGTON #1 vs. #2**

To advance through the rounds of the state tournament, each winning team played three games in three grueling days. No running team had ever endured this marathon to win the state championship.

Cloquet came in to the tournament rated #2 in the state. In the first round they were matched against Bloomington, the powerful Twin Cities team that was rated #1 and considered the favorite to win it all. Featuring all-state guard Bobby Kelly, the Bloomington Bears presented a formidable opponent. As he had done throughout the season, Trochlil relied on detailed scouting reports from assistant coaches Bob Gerlach and Rollie Bromberg. They did their homework well. Because of his quickness, Dave Meisner was assigned to defend man-to-man against Kelly, who was an excellent ball-handler and scorer. It was no contest. After Mouse picked Kelly's pocket by stealing the ball 2 or 3 times in the first half – something which hadn't happened to Kelly the entire season – Bloomington got rattled and eventually crumbled. Bolstered by Denny's tough inside play and a game high 30 points from Meisner, the Lumberjacks overwhelmed the Bears and dispensed the #1 team by a lopsided score of 82-67. The Bloomington coaches were amazed. They had never seen so much speed at all five positions on one team

## **SAUK CENTRE – Can't miss.**

After their impressive victory over Bloomington, the Lumberjacks were tabbed the tournament's Cinderella team of "Mighty Mites" and now were favored to win the state championship.

But someone forgot to tell Sauk Centre. The Region 6 team barely survived the first round after struggling against their opponent's relatively mild pressing defense. It seemed obvious to the media pundits that Cloquet's relentless full-court press would be too much for Sauk Centre to handle. Coach Trochlil and his team respected every opponent, but after their exciting win over Bloomington, it was only natural that these young players might experience a let down. Whether or not this was the case, Cloquet came out flat, shot poorly and seemed a step slow on defense. Meanwhile, Sauk Centre played an incredible game. The Mainstreeters just couldn't miss and kept breaking Cloquet's vaunted full-court press. Rather than wilt under the smothering defense and greyhound tempo of the Lumberjacks, the Sauk Centre players, who were big, rugged and strong, kept up their fast pace and hot shooting. By the end of the game, thanks to 12 fourth quarter points from Gary Welton and solid contributions from their bench players, Cloquet outlasted Sauk Centre 87-81, the highest scoring game in the history of the state tournament.

But the grueling pace of this game took its toll on the players. Denny Breitbarth suffered severe leg cramps and could barely walk after the game. Meisner and Forrest were pictured in the locker room exhaustedly soaking their legs in the whirlpool tub. This photo was featured in the Minneapolis papers, and Meisner later lamented that he wished it had never been taken because it would show they were tired and give their opponent hope. With the championship game to be played the very next night, the Lumberjacks went back to the hotel to try and rest before taking on the Marshall Tigers, a small town team from the farmlands of southwestern Minnesota; a team that was in many ways a reflection of themselves.

## **THE CHAMPIONSHIP GAME. David vs. David.**

Marshall was coached by Glenn Mattke. Ironically, he and Ben Trochlil came from the same tiny town of Morton, Minnesota. In fact, they were childhood friends and one summer Glenn saved Ben's life when he rescued him from drowning in a quarry.

Now the two longtime friends were meeting for the State Championship of Minnesota.

Marshall had a smart, broad-shouldered center named John Nefstead. He was the only senior on the team, joined by four experienced juniors. They were not as athletic and quick as Cloquet's players, but Marshall was a well-coached, good shooting team.

After an easier semi-final game, the Tigers were rested and ready. The stage was set.

On this third consecutive night of electrifying basketball action being televised around the state, the huge crowd for the championship finals packed Williams Arena with 19,000 enthusiastic fans. The roar of the fans was an incessant din throughout the entire game, matching the frenetic pace on the court where excitement and adrenalin drove both teams non-stop. Uncharacteristically, Meisner got into foul trouble early in the closely-called contest and this hampered his ball-hawking defense. The score was knotted 43-43 at halftime and the crowd buzzed with the thrill of the spectacle being played out before them. Even the television announcer had difficulty catching his breath and keeping up with the effervescent action on the court.

Early in the third quarter Mouse stole the ball and scored, but he was called for a questionable fourth foul on the play and had to spend nearly half the game on the bench. Denny and Mike did their best to carry the load, with Breitbarth battling Nefstead under the basket, fighting for rebounds. Forrest was firing up long-range jumpers and driving to the hoop. Welton and Boyer kept the score close, with bench players Steve Mangan, Jay Gildemeister and Bill Noreus spelling the starters.

When Meisner re-entered the game in the fourth quarter, Cloquet picked up the intensity. Marshall stayed with them. Back and forth went the action, as each team gave as good as it got. The score see-sawed with neither team getting more than a 3 point lead before the other team would fight back. There was no time to breathe as both teams battled through exhaustion, leg cramps and dry throats. This was truly a championship game played by champions.

Finally with 35 seconds left, the Lumberjacks held a one-point lead and had possession of the basketball. They were not about to slow things down and start playing it safe. Cloquet forced the action down the floor and Mike fired up a medium jumper, the kind he has made a thousand times before. But it was slightly off the mark and bounced off the rim. There was a mad scramble, more like a rugby scrum, for the loose ball on the floor. Rather than call for a jump ball in the melee, the refs suddenly whistled Gary Welton for a reach-in foul on Dennis Schroeder, the gangly Marshall forward. Screams from the thousands of fans, both pro and con, nearly lifted the rafters off the venerable arena as Schroeder stepped to the line to shoot one-in-one. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Schroeder's first free throw was a bit long, hit the back of the rim and bounced straight up. The ball hung in the balance, along with the state championship as 19,000 people held their collective breath -- and fell back through the hoop. The score was tied at 73 all! Schroeder nailed the next free throw to give Marshall a one-point lead and with 15 seconds left, Coach Trochlil called a time-out for the last time this incredible season.

### **THE ENDING – A piece of cake.**

The Cloquet team was calm and focused in the huddle. In their mad-dash world, 15 seconds was plenty of time to set up a final play. Trochlil outlined one they had run many times before: Forrest, who had already scored 29 points in a dazzling scoring display, would bring the ball down court and pass it to Breitbarth who would go in for a lay-up, or at least a foul, for the win. With everything coming down to this last play, Cloquet was confident they would score and win the game. Boyer and Welton flared to the corners, drawing defenders with them. Meisner raced alongside Forrest ready for a quick pass, while Breitbarth worked toward the basket. Mike passed him the ball as planned, but Marshall was equally determined on defense. Nefstead and his teammates collapsed around Denny, denying him room to move. This left Forrest open and Denny alertly dished him the ball. Mike fired up a "piece of cake" 14-foot jumper and watched the ball drop into the net – only to bounce back out! Again there was a mad scramble for the rebound and this time a jump ball was called. With only 3 seconds left, Denny tried to tip the ball to Mike, who fell to the floor while scrambling for the loose ball. It bounced away from his grasp, taking Cloquet's championship title hopes with it. The horn sounded. Players looked around in a daze and fans weren't quite sure what had happened. Was the game really over?!

Meisner went over to where Forrest still lay sprawled on the court, his face buried in his arms. Despite the screaming throngs of fans, Dave heard only the heaving sobs of his distraught teammate. Meisner dropped to his knees, leaning over his fallen teammate, and pounded the floor with his fists, crying with frustration, exhaustion and heartbreak.

Now at this point my friends, we have a story that, while quite dramatic and sad, is not so very unusual. After all, there are plenty of sports stories that end with thrilling victories or painful defeats. Ah, but this tale still has a few more twists and turns to reveal.

### **TO LOVE THE GAME BEYOND THE PRIZE – The Photo**

The two teams milled about on the court, surrounded by fans, coaches and tournament officials. Opposing players sought each other out, congratulating one another for playing one helluva' game -- one that 50-years later is still called the greatest championship in the entire history of the Minnesota State Tournament. Somewhere in the midst of all this chaos, Dave Meisner and John Nefstead came together. The smallest and biggest of the championship foes met to shake hands. Then finally, inevitably, it all caught up with the littlest David of them all. Meisner was overcome with emotion and collapsed into the arms of the bigger player. Nefstead compassionately embraced him as a fellow warrior. This moment was captured for all time by Mpls. Star photographer John Croft in an iconic photo that came to epitomize the heroism of this game and symbolized the essence of the Minnesota State High School League creed:



***To Honour as you Strike Him Down,  
The Foe who comes with Fearless Eyes.  
To set the Cause above Renown,  
To Love the Game Beyond the Prize.***

-- "Clifton Chapel" by Sir Henry Newbolt

**COMING HOME – Sometimes – although it is rare – you can win for losing.**

As the morning sun of that brisk March Sunday broke through the clouds of despair, Cloquet’s players and coaches drove back along old HiWay 61 heading for home. In the first car driven by Coach Trochlil, Denny proudly held the State Runner Up Trophy in his arms. It was rather big, after all. Breitbarth, along with teammates Meisner and Forrest, had been named to the All-State Tournament Team. The players were quiet as they each pondered memories of the most fantastic, bittersweet weekend in their young lives. Thoughts of “what if” or “who knows...?” mixed with feelings of pride for having given their best and leaving it all out on the floor, if only to come up one point short. There is no dishonor in that. As Meisner said, “We were a Championship team that did not win the Championship”. In fact the Marshall coach, when accepting the state championship trophy, said it deserved to be cut in half and shared by both teams.

All of a sudden Trochlil became aware of something in the road up ahead. It was near Pine City or Forest Lake, but there seemed to be a disturbance ahead. Was it an accident or...? As the group of cars approached, the players realized to their surprise that the ‘accident’ was anything but. Clustered along the roadside, groups of people were cheering and holding up hand made signs: “Way to Go Champs! Cloquet our Heroes!” and “We Love Mouse!”-- waved by a group of excited teenage girls. As the team slowly passed by and continued driving north through small towns like Pine City and Moose Lake sprinkled along the four-lane blacktop, other cars fell in behind them, forming a long caravan that grew to more than 500 vehicles by the time they reached Cloquet. The team was escorted to the old Co-op on 14th Street where more than 2,000 friends, fans and relatives crowded the parking lot to overflowing. People dressed in their Sunday best, wearing coats and ties, cheering their local “heroes”. The Mayor honored the entire team. Coach Trochlil stood atop a flatbed trailer set up for the occasion and thanked everyone while the players marveled at being asked for their autographs by star-struck young fans.

No one had ever seen anything like this before. After all, Cloquet was the “losing” team. Or were they? Not to anyone who saw them play. This was an opportunity for the townspeople to thank this remarkable group of great kids who made them all feel so proud. In many ways it was a love affair between the basketball team and the city.

And so, a winter that began long ago in this small lumber town in Northern Minnesota that hardly anyone had heard of, turned into spring warmed by the spirit of a basketball team that will never be forgotten.

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**NOTE: The documentary, “Beyond the Prize” is now on YouTube.**

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