



THE EULOGY OF PITTSBURGH'S SCHENLEY SPARTANS

MARK HOSTUTTER





The Eulogy of Pittsburgh's Schenley Spartans chronicles the history of the most storied high school basketball program in Western Pennsylvania, a region known mostly to the nation for its football talent. Author Mark Hostutler details the 2006-07 team, which featured three future professionals, and puts into perspective the Spartans' achievements in an era when the best scholastic squads are the ones taking full advantage of the transfer epidemic sweeping the country.

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For the only two Holdens I know.

You both inspire me.

“The trouble with the rat race is that
even if you win, you’re still a rat.”

—Minister William Sloane Coffin Jr.
Riverside Church, New York City
July 29, 1979

About the Author

Mark Hostutler is a former award-winning journalist at the *Delaware County (Pa.) Daily Times* and the author of *Heads of State: Pennsylvania's Greatest High School Basketball Players of the Modern Era*, a book that profiles the best scholastic players in the Keystone State's illustrious history. His work has also appeared in *SLAM Magazine*, the *Basketball Times*, and dozens of newspapers throughout the country. A freelance writer and resident of West Chester, Pa., Hostutler earned his bachelor's degree in communications from Elizabethtown College and his master's degree in English from West Chester University. To contact him, visit MarkHostutler.com or e-mail guruhoss@yahoo.com.

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I. The Rat Race

DURING THE 21ST CENTURY, high school basketball—specifically in and around America’s urban settings—has devolved into an arms race akin to what has been transpiring on the college level for decades. The rat race of Division I hoops has turned coaches into caricatures of used-car salesmen, equipped with all the unsavory recruiting tactics that reinforce every negative stereotype associated with the profession.

And since we all know what flows downhill, the scholastic ranks, supposedly the last bastion of amateurism and integrity, have gradually become the bastardized offspring of college basketball.

Charter schools and prep schools, private schools and cyber schools. These alternative approaches to education, while valuable in their own unique ways, have torn at the fabric of high school sports, especially basketball. The game’s five-on-five nature enables programs to quickly build something out of nothing, since it only takes a handful of great players for a team to become championship-worthy.

As a result, the nation’s best prospects are poached and rarely represent the communities that nurtured their development. Before high school games are even contested on the floor, they are done so in a high-stakes marketplace where teenagers, some not far removed from puberty, are lured away from their neighborhoods through the promise

of a better future. That's how the likes of Rod Strickland, Ron Mercer, Rajon Rondo, Josh Smith, and Brandon Jennings—natives of New York, Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, and California, respectively—flock to Mouth of Wilson, Va., hundreds of miles from home. If not for basketball, no one outside the region would even know that Oak Hill Academy—a 150-student boarding school in the Appalachian Mountains, near the North Carolina border—even exists. However, the powerhouse program, which also counts Carmelo Anthony and Jerry Stackhouse among its graduates, is nationally renowned, having finished No. 1 or 2 in the *USA Today* scholastic rankings 14 times since 1990.

These alternative approaches to education have torn at the fabric of high school sports.

Findlay Prep, a high school basketball team without a high school, is another hoops factory, and one that isn't shy about its mission. The team's dozen players are Findlay Prep's only students, and they take classes at a separate private school across the street from their five-bedroom, four-bathroom house in Henderson, Nev.

In Southeastern Pennsylvania, the tiny American Christian School in Aston Township opened its doors to high school students in the early 1990s, and it remained relatively unknown even to county residents until a fledgling star decided to enroll. And when he left, the school ceased to exist. Tyreke Evans—from Chester, the hoops-obsessed city that borders Aston—attended American Christian so he could begin his high school career in seventh grade. By his 11th-grade year, Reebok had won a bidding war to outfit his team, which resembled more of an AAU club than a scholastic one, as it barnstormed the country. They played almost 40 games, some of which were

the college length of 40 minutes. Amidst criticism that the school, which operated out of a Baptist church and adjacent trailers, was a diploma mill and a vehicle for Evans, it survived not even one week without him. American Christian closed up shop days after Evans departed for the University of Memphis to embark on a journey that saw him become the 2010 NBA Rookie of the Year.

This, of course, shouldn't be too much of an issue for people who hold the nostalgic view of scholastic sports being my town versus your town. Oak Hill, Findlay, and American Christian, after all, are or were independent of the Virginia High School League, Nevada Interscholastic Activities Association, and Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association. Therefore, they cannot or could not prevent public schools, which are subjected to a different set of rules, from bagging state titles. Furthermore, it's acceptable when a kid finds a school that can facilitate his growth better than the one in his zip code.

It becomes problematic, however, when programs of their ilk are permitted to vie for state supremacy alongside John Q. Public High School. For example, the PIAA, the Keystone State's governing body of high school sports, allows almost every high school in the commonwealth's 46,000 square miles to contend for state-championship hardware. That includes charter schools comprised of students who spend more time in commute than in class, and Catholic schools that suit up ringers who won't be found in the communion line on Sundays.

Consider the charter school movement in Philadelphia that has completely altered the PIAA terrain. The school district's perennially dire financial straits—coupled with its label as a failure, according to the criteria of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001—have ushered in an era of not only educational but athletic upheaval. (Charter schools have

been draining resources from the cash-strapped city for so long that the 2013-2014 school year began with a \$304 million deficit that forced the distribution of more than 4,000 pink slips to teachers, principals, and other support staff.)

Philadelphia's tidal wave of change on the hardwood began to swell during the winter of 2001-02, when the Prep Charter basketball team became the first of a staggering number of charter schools that now compete on the varsity level. That season, the Huskies, as expected, were punching bags with a 3-16 record and suffered a pair of losses, 66-16 and 109-60. Four years later, Prep Charter, aided by the interior presence of twin forwards Marcus and Markieff Morris, earned the first of back-to-back state championships (Class 2A) with a 31-point blowout in the title game. The current members of the Phoenix Suns had engineered quite a turnaround for a school that was converted from a vacant supermarket.

All of these factors make what the Schenley High School basketball team achieved on the other side of the commonwealth during the 2006-07 season even more extraordinary. The players grew up within a stone's throw of one another in the same hard-knock neighborhood in Pittsburgh, and had known each other since their first days dribbling a ball.



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