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Georgia's greatest high school basketball game won by 'Where's Mark Smith?' team

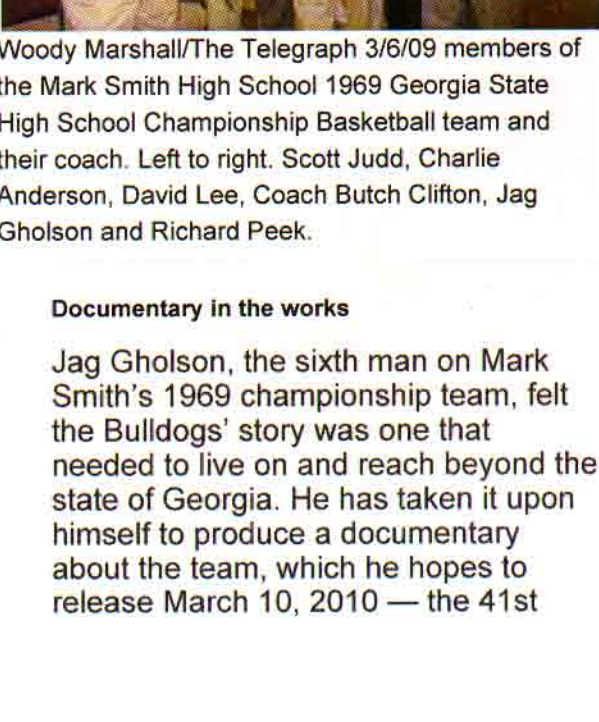
By Jay Adams - jadams@macon.com

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Every so often, the memories come fluttering back to Butch Clifton like it was yesterday when he was yanked out of a car and hoisted onto the shoulders of a frantic crowd and carried onto a stage.

The reminders are sometimes subtle, but mostly, curious admirers take him back to what it was like 40 years ago.



Woody Marshall/The Telegraph 3/6/09 Members of the Mark Smith High School 1969 Georgia State High School Championship Basketball team and their coach. Left to right: Scott Judd, Charlie Anderson, David Lee, Coach Butch Clifton, Jag Gholson and Richard Peek.

Documentary in the works

Jag Gholson, the sixth man on Mark Smith's 1969 championship team, felt the Bulldogs' story was one that needed to live on and reach beyond the state of Georgia. He has taken it upon himself to produce a documentary about the team, which he hopes to release March 10, 2010 — the 41st

Like the landscaper who showed up just the other day to cut Clifton's trees and didn't leave before cordially demanding Clifton to "tell me about the story," or the seemingly unconnected man who approached Clifton 10 years ago while on a visit to Atlanta.

"You're Butch Clifton," Clifton recalled the man saying to him.

"Yeah," Clifton responded.

"I was there," the man said.

Clifton probably didn't need to ask. After being approached countless times with even more ambiguous, non-specific remarks before a formal introduction, Clifton always has a way of knowing what someone is talking about.

Still, he plays along.

"Where is that?" Clifton asked the man.

"I kept score at Alexander Memorial Coliseum," the man said.

That was all Clifton needed to hear. The man was, indeed, referring to what is considered one of the greatest high school basketball games played in Georgia.

The game itself, that Monday night back in 1969,

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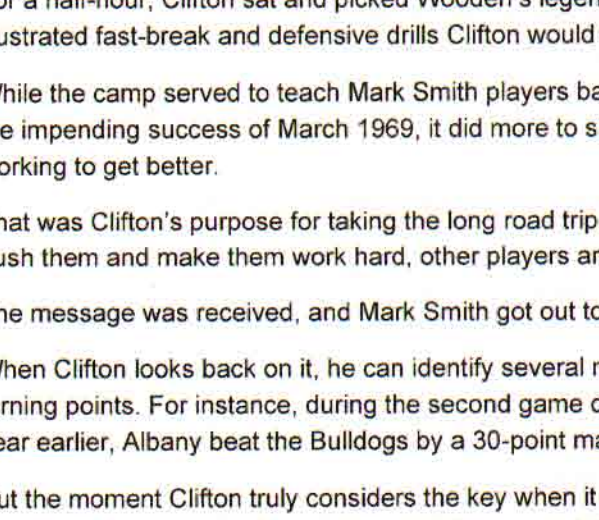
anniversary of Mark Smith's improbable title win over Carver-Columbus.

"When I look at what's out there as far as sports and stories and what's motivational, the Cinderella-type story that can motivate any sports team — whether it's basketball, football, whatever — I just felt like we needed to do something to preserve it and to allow the younger generations to know and to see that, yes you can have a dream and with hard work and with some luck and all the elements coming together, it's possible to do what is considered to be the impossible," Gholson said Friday.

The documentary — titled "Where is Mark Smith?" — will include interviews from the players and head coach Butch Clifton. Gholson has launched a Web site to get the word out about the documentary that includes a trailer for the film and the entire original radio broadcast from the March 10, 1969 game.

For more information, visit www.wheresmarksmith.com.

— Jay Adams, The Telegraph



there and see their games. We started, I think, bridging the gap of — at least on the basketball court — social interaction between the races in Macon."

That, however, is in retrospect. At the time, most of Mark Smith's players had no idea what kinds of issues

is only part of the reason why Clifton is regularly asked by complete strangers and long-lost acquaintances about what it was like back then. There was much more to it, after all.

That season wasn't just about a single game or a single person.

It was about defying odds that seemed astronomical. It was about gaining respect when there was none to be given. It was about healing wounds that seemed incurable.

Most importantly, it was about answering the question, "Where is Mark Smith?"

NO WHITES ALLOWED

As a mid-20-something, Clifton admitted to being sometimes guilty of naivety. Looking back, he excuses those instances by shrugging and saying, "What did I know?"

As a head coach, however, there were very few actions he took that weren't well thought out and deliberate.

A year before the Georgia High School Association allowed white and black teams to compete against each other, Clifton figured the best way to accclimate his Mark Smith players to a different style of basketball was to show them first-hand.

He took his group down to the Macon Auditorium where Ballard-Hudson and Peter G. Appling — two all-black teams — were playing. Clifton approached the gate and was stopped by the attendant.

"No whites allowed," the attendant said to Clifton.

Clifton wouldn't accept the answer. For five minutes, he tried to coax his way past the gate with his six players in tow. The attendant left to get another opinion on the situation and returned. The Mark Smith players were allowed in.

"We would go in, and they'd put us on the stage," said Jag Gholson, Mark Smith's sixth man in 1969.

"We would be the only (white) people there, and they really started appreciating that we would come

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desegregation was sprouting among white and black communities alike. They were just a group of teenagers playing a game that happened to have a deeply rooted history in both communities.

Even when the 1968-69 season rolled around and Mark Smith began facing all black teams, there was never a hint to them that anything was different.

"When we stepped on that floor, we were athletes competing against each other, and they were the best athletes around," Mark Smith forward Charlie Anderson said. "All we wanted to do was compete with them. There was never a racial component to any of our competition. It was just athlete against athlete."

HARDLY A REGULAR SEASON

The end of the 1967-68 season marked the first official season in Clifton's head coaching venture, and it wrapped up with Mark Smith finishing 14-14.

For a program that hadn't even been around five years at that point, ending a season at .500 was an accomplishment. But Clifton felt his players were capable of more.

Since the GHSA didn't allow teams to participate in camps inside the state at the time, Clifton rounded up his players and took them to North Carolina during the offseason.

There, a Louisiana State University freshman by the name of Pete Maravich was helping UCLA head coach John Wooden conduct a basketball camp. With an opportunity too great to ignore, Clifton knew he couldn't leave the camp without getting a few private words with Wooden.

For a half-hour, Clifton sat and heard Wooden's legendary basketball brain. Wooden gave Clifton advice and illustrated fast-break and defensive drills Clifton would soon implement at Mark Smith.

While the camp served to teach Mark Smith players basketball skills that would undoubtedly help them reach the impending success of March 1969, it did more to simply show the team that other players were also working to get better.

That was Clifton's purpose for taking the long road trip. He wanted to show his players that, while he may push them and make them work hard, other players are out there doing the same thing — maybe even more.

The message was received, and Mark Smith got out to a fantastic start to the regular season.

When Clifton looks back on it, he can identify several moments throughout the season that he considers turning points. For instance, during the second game of the season, Mark Smith edged Albany 60-59. One year earlier, Albany beat the Bulldogs by a 30-point margin.

But the moment Clifton truly considers the key when it comes to turning points came near the midseason mark. Mark Smith had gotten out to a 10-2 start, and the Bulldogs were facing rival Lanier. With 1:05 left, Mark Smith had a somewhat comfortable six-point lead when it began getting careless with the ball.

It didn't take long for Lanier to cut that lead down to one possession, and Mark Smith's mistakes proved costly when a late steal by Lanier resulted in a halfcourt heave that banked in for the win at the buzzer.

"I went down to the dressing room, and I didn't say a word. I just looked at them," Clifton said. "The next day, I said, 'OK, if you don't want to play my way, then you're not going to play (in the next game at) Northside.'"

Clifton stayed true to his word and benched three of his starters. Mark Smith went on to beat Northside 55-44, and the season was never the same.

The Bulldogs had suddenly found something. Clifton explained it by saying that everything that needed to click did. But whatever changed resulted in Mark Smith winning 17 of its final 18 games to finish the regular season

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23-4 , earning a ranking in the top 10 in the state.

WHERE IS MARK SMITH?

Despite all the success Mark Smith had achieved, there was very little respect given to its players. After all, they were just the River Rats — a name given to Mark Smith students by those at other Macon schools because the school's proximity to the Ocmulgee River — locally, and at the state level, there was hardly any mention of the Bulldogs.

It was, perhaps, easy to overlook them. Mark Smith — an all-boys school that operated in conjunction with Lasseter, an all girls school — had just 400 students, which meant that the school's athletic competitions would take place at the Class A level.

But in order to play Lanier — the public school now known as Central which had the most stunning athletic reputation at the time — Mark Smith, which later became Northeast, would have to play up in AAA, which was the GHSA's highest classification in the late 1960s.

So there was a certain feeling around the state — among those who took the time to pay a second's worth of attention to the team — that Mark Smith didn't belong and would hardly be a nuisance once the playoffs started.

The way the state playoffs were set up at the time, a team like Mark Smith, which lost in its region championship game to earn the region's second seed, would often be matched up against a region champion early in the state playoffs. That's exactly what happened to the Bulldogs.

The tough draw, however, hardly fazed them as they gutted out a first-round win over a Monroe-Albany team that was coached by state legend Lewis Smith and was 22-1 on its home court.

The second round looked even more daunting.

The Bulldogs were set to take on Beach, a Savannah team that had its share of success at the time. Beach was coming off a state championship season two years earlier and had finished as the state runner-up the year before.

Beach was coached by another state legend, Russell Ellington. Leading up to the quarterfinal matchup, Ellington was asked by a reporter what he thought of Mark Smith.

"Where is Mark Smith?" said Ellington, who died in 2007.

Ellington's words, while not meant to be disrespectful, became the rallying point for the Bulldogs, and by the end of the quarterfinal matchup, Ellington knew exactly where Mark Smith was. The underdog team beat the tournament favorite 52-49 to reach the Final Four.

One night later, Mark Smith downed a Price team from Atlanta — 56-52 — that had entered the game with a 21-1 record.

By the end of their Final Four matchup, the Bulldogs were tired. They had been tested, and they had fought through a lot of tough odds to get to the AAA championship game, but the exhaustion of reaching that point was almost too much.

The last time Mark Smith had been that worn out was just a few weeks earlier during the region tournament. The Bulldogs faced a grueling tournament schedule that included wins over Northside, Lanier and Jordan of Columbus and a hard-fought victory over a Spencer team from Columbus that pressed the entire game, pushing the Mark Smith players to their physical limit in reaching the region championship game.

Their region title opponent was Carver-Columbus, which took advantage of Mark Smith's exhaustion and

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handed the Bulldogs a 76-59 loss — their first in 14 games.

And after another long, exhausting road toward a championship game, it was Carver-Columbus that again was waiting on the other side.

THE GAME

Clifton was meticulous about planning for the AAA title game. A consolation game would be played before the Mark Smith-Carver matchup, so a few minutes before that game was slated to end, Clifton took his team down the tunnel at Alexander Memorial Coliseum on the Georgia Tech campus.

To Clifton's surprise, however, the consolation game went into overtime. By that point, Carver had also made its way down the tunnel, setting up just behind Mark Smith and leaving the Bulldogs stuck between the basketball court and the locker room.

Taking advantage of the situation, Carver began whooping and hollering in the corridor.

"Carver was really intimidating the daylight's out of us," Clifton said.

Mark Smith, however, stayed composed despite the chanting coming from Carver and the fact that there were about 8,500 people inside the arena waiting for the title game to start.

Most had shown up to see how the Bulldogs would handle Carver's big men. With 6-foot-8 Ruben Whittaker and 7-foot Fessor Leonard, Mark Smith's tallest players — Anderson, Frank Prince and David Lee, all 6-4 — likely would have their hands full.

"I taught Charlie Anderson and all my kids that if you've got somebody big and strong, take it to them," Clifton said. "But if you'll show them the ball and pump fake, they'll leave the floor. If they leave the floor and you get two fouls on them, you'll own them."

That's exactly what Mark Smith's post players did, and it worked to neutralize the clear advantage Carver had. But with four minutes to play in regulation, Mark Smith point guard Scott Judd fouled out.

"Only game I fouled out the whole year," Judd said. "Thirty-one games, and I foul out the one game the whole year. Only you imagine that? But God had a plan."

So did Clifton. Facing a tie game with less than two seconds left, Clifton called a timeout.

His players joined him at the bench and asked the head coach what they were going to do.

"We're going to run the four-second play in two seconds," Clifton recalled saying to them.

The four-second play consisted of inboundng the ball from down the court and calling a timeout while the ball was in the air so the Bulldogs would have another chance to inbound the ball from halfway.

The problem was, the play was time-consuming. Mark Smith, however, found a way to pull it off with about one second left on the clock.

With Lee inboundng the ball at the halfcourt line, a screen was set for Anderson, who ended up wide open at the top of the circle. He got the shot off and was then hammered by a Carver defender. The ball went inside the rim and ricocheted out. Clifton waited for a whistle that would send Anderson to the line, but it never came.

The game went into overtime, but the first extra period also finished in a tie. It was the second overtime period that would turn a state championship game into a legendary contest.

With 11 seconds left, it looked like the magic had run out for Mark Smith. The Bulldogs were down by one

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point, and Carver had possession. Mark Smith had to do whatever it could to change its fate at that point, but it didn't look good.

"We were not a good pressing team. We were kind of a zone press," Clifton said. "I turned to them and I said, 'Guys, we're going to play butts to the baseline. Prince, I want you to fight the inbound pass, and for goodness sakes don't let them have the first one because they're going to out-quick us.'"

Prince followed his coach's advice, playing tall at the baseline to keep Carver from getting a clean pass into play. Once Carver finally decided where to pass the ball, time slowed down for some and sped up for others.

Cam Bonifay, Mark Smith's shooting guard, came from out of nowhere as the ball was on its way inbound.

"He played second base all his life," Clifton said. "All he was doing was making a double play."

Bonifay got a hand on the ball, tipping it to Prince, who was set up right underneath the basket for the easy layup, giving Mark Smith a one-point lead with two seconds left.

Mark Smith's bench went wild. But the celebration was premature. Carver inbounded the ball quickly and made its way downcourt. The ball got into Whittaker's hands, and he had a nearly clear lane to the basket. The only thing standing in his way was Lee, who attempted to draw a charge.

Whittaker and Lee collided, and a whistle blew. Clifton expected the foul to be called on Whittaker, but instead, Lee was the one called for the foul, which sent Whittaker to the line to shoot a 1-and-1 with a chance to put an end to the game with Carver as the champion.

Up to that point, Whittaker was 5-of-8 from the free-throw line.

"It was pretty tense because you have no control," Gholson said. "You're sitting there hoping that you get a break, and we did."

Whittaker missed the front end of his 1-and-1, and Prince came down with the rebound with five seconds ticking off the clock. Clifton should have felt comfortable, but with the ball in Prince's hands, anything could happen.

Prince had just previously moved to Georgia from California, so naturally the Bulldogs referred to him as their California Dreamer — primarily because Prince was known, as Clifton put it, for doing some screwball stuff.

Instead of holding the rebound and waiting for time to run out, Prince took the ball to halfcourt and heaved up a shot as the final buzzer mercifully sounded.

"I mean, it's classic," Clifton said. "You can still see me on the film pointing my finger at him like, 'I'm not going to kill you right now, but I'm going to kill you later.'"

The Alexander Memorial Coliseum crowd swarmed as Clifton was hoisted onto the shoulders of several of his players and was carried off the court.

When they returned to Macon and exited the freeway, they were given a police and fire department escort back to the Mark Smith campus, where Clifton was lifted out of his vehicle. They were greeted by Mayor Ronnie Thompson, the City Council and hundreds of citizens.

THE FEELS LIVE ON

It feels like it has been every minute of 40 years since that March day in 1969.

The players from that storied team are a lot older, a little wiser and a little grayer. They have families now. Some stayed in Macon, others moved away.

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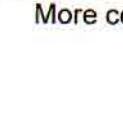
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littladyknowsbest wrote on 03/09/2009 00:48:23 AM:

This story caught my attention because I am a graduate of Northeast. Until I read some of the comments, as usual someone always try to take away from the true meanings and beliefs behind events. This what I gathered from the article-A young white basketball team- wanted to expand their knowledge and sharpen their skills in basketball; went to observe black basketball players at the Coliseum; played with those guys, learned some valuable lessons; used those pointers in games with other opponents and won a Championship game. By using diversity, the techniques used by the guys they observed and played with the coach exposing them to different cultures, different basketball teams, etc. Made them a Success. Yes, South West Produced several NBA stars-but NEHS girls have ruled the courts for years. This story is not like those of the Music Industry with copy rights infringements, etc, and artists stealing moves, lyrics etc, for a cross over. Why the negative comments? If I didn't find any Flaws.

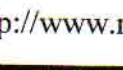
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StrangeBird wrote on 03/08/2009 11:00:15 PM:

Best sports story I've read in forever. A feat that will never be repeated! I was there too!

Recommend (1) Report abuse



JWW wrote on 03/08/2009 10:22:38 PM:

Great article! Went to school there. Was there the night of the big game. Looking forward for future information.

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nenokr wrote on 03/08/2009 10:20:23 PM:

I graduated with most of those guys in 1970. I was at THE GAME too! I couldn't even talk the next day from hollering so much. What a great story and great memories! We were so proud to a Bulldog!!

Recommend (1) Report abuse

scfile wrote on 03/08/2009 08:36:29 PM:

You had to live it to really get it! A bunch of you folk would't understand

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nanadink wrote on 03/08/2009 07:39:13 PM:

I went to Southwest in the 70's. Norm Nixon graduated in 73. The 70's was great for Southwest.

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Z52 wrote on 03/08/2009 04:00:39 PM:

What a great story! Two of these men that I know, Charlie Anderson & Scott Judd grew up to be some of the finest Dads/husbands/MEN that have ever been put on the planet. Knowing the 2 of them made this story even more special.

Recommend (1) Report abuse

More comments on this story: 1 2 3

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