

Keeping Alive

The Milan Miracle

By Dr. Norman Jones



Milan 1954 Championship team

Any Hoosier remotely interested in the history of the state that became known as “the basketball state” is usually well informed about the Milan Miracle that took place in Butler Fieldhouse in Indianapolis on March 20, 1954. It is the story of a small rural town in southeastern Indiana and how it pulled off one of the greatest upsets in sports history by winning the Indiana high school basketball state championship. In fact, the movie *Hoosiers* has helped to keep this famous game alive which pitted little Milan against powerful and heavily favored Muncie Central. Milan won 32-30 on a last second jump shot by the last of the small town heroes, Bobby Plump.

It has been the mission of many people, including this author, and the hard working people at the Milan ‘54 Hoosiers museum, to keep this famous team, this famous game mentioned in the media from time to time. One way to keep legendary sporting events or

players who took part in them on the minds of sports fans is to produce and re-run films, documentaries, videos and news clips as well as books and magazine articles about the accomplishments of participants who have died. For example, sports enthusiasts often see on TV news casts or films about the great Jesse Owens and how he won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics. Runner Steve Prefontaine from Coos Bay, OR set many long distance running records before he was tragically killed in a car crash at age 24. Walter “Sweetness” Payton, a running back for the Chicago Bears who set an NFL rushing record died at the age of 45.

In order to keep the most dedicated of Milan fans and Indiana basketball history buffs up to date on what has happened to some of the people directly connected to that legendary game since March 20th, 1954 a brief summary of the lives and accomplishments of those who have passed away is offered here.

Two players on the Milan team have died, the most recent being Bob Engel who passed away on January 5th, 2016. In the book titled *Bobby Plump: Last of the Small Town Heroes*, Bobby wrote this passage about his teammate which may best describe Engel’s contribution to the team: “He was the heart and soul of the ballclub. He was the never-say-die guy. He was the guy who knew we could win.” A glimpse of Bob Engel’s development as a youngster seems to tell how that never-say-die attitude became a part of him. Bob Engel’s family was poor and his mother raised him because his father left them when Bob was a baby.



Bob Engel

It is well known how the boys from Milan played together from grade school on and developed a cohesiveness that led to their championship. Bob Engel stated, "We used to have knock-down, drag-out games with kids who were a lot older." Engel recalled the time in 1949 when a Milan man took him and teammate Ronnie Truitt to see a semi-state game in Butler Fieldhouse. After the game, the man, Carl Brown, took the boys downtown to a jewelry store where the championship rings were on display. Bob remembers that he put his arms around us and said, "Now if you boys work real hard, who knows? Maybe you can win one of those." Perhaps this was fatherly advice Bob Engel never had.

Not only did Bob win a ring, he was good enough to be recruited by the University of Cincinnati and Xavier University. However, he decided not to play or even go to college. He moved to Ohio and received training from the IBM training school and worked for them. He married Sandra Hartman and they moved to Kalamazoo, MI where Bob worked for General Motors.

He moved into a white collar job, but he missed doing "the dirty work" and returned

to work with guys "who get their hands dirty." Rebounding and playing defense is known as the dirty work in basketball, which he did with distinction, and Bob seemed more comfortable in such a support role in the business world. He once said, "I did whatever I could do to benefit the team." He even moved from guard to forward his senior year because coach Marvin Wood thought it would benefit the team if Bobby Plump and quick, improving Ray Craft set up the offense.

Years after the championship season at a banquet for the team, it was recorded that Bob Engel spoke fondly of his teammates. He said, "I told them how much I loved them. Let's forget round ball for just a minute. I am so proud of what these guys have accomplished in their lives. It was put in our minds that we were doers. We knew if we sacrificed enough, we could get the job done." Bob Engel's sacrifices for his teammates and the people he worked with all of his life were greatly appreciated.

Ron Truitt was the first player from the Milan champions to die. He succumbed to cancer in 1988 at the age of 52. He and Bob Engel were the best of friends. Ron attended



Ron Truitt

the University of Houston and played for the famous coach Guy Lewis who later coached Hakeem Olajuwon and the "Phi Slamma Jamma" team to the NCAA finals.

After college Ron married Joan Thompson and they had three children. He became a teacher and coach and is the only Milan Indian to win a state championship as a coach. He took his Cypress-Fairbanks High School team to a Texas state title in 1971.

Truitt scored a total of 14 points in the two state final games in 1954 and nine of those were against Terre Haute Gerstmeyer in the afternoon game before the Indians met Muncie Central that night. In his book, Bobby Plump said this about Ronnie Truitt: "As a player, Ron was the type of guy who, when we were running our four-corner offense, if you were barely open, he was going to get you the ball. You would get it in the back of the head if you weren't ready. He could get on hot streaks. He was instant offense."

The last time most of his Milan teammates saw Ronnie Truitt was at the debut of the movie *Hoosiers* in 1986 in Ripley County, IN. No one knew Ronnie had been diagnosed with cancer. Ronnie died about a year after that visit. Although he was buried in Texas, a memorial service was held for him at the Milan United Methodist Church.

It is little wonder that Bob Engel made the comment at a banquet for the team about how he was so proud of what his teammates had accomplished in their lives. He had to be thinking about his close friend, Ron Truitt, who was doing such good things in a Houston,

Texas suburban community that eventually led to having a school named after him. Truitt Junior High School is named in honor of Ron Truitt. Bobby Plump may have been alluding to the words of Bob Engel when Engel mentioned how proud he was of the accomplishments of teammates. Plump said, "To have a school named after you, that is truly an amazing accomplishment."

More than a year before he died, Ronnie Truitt told a Cincinnati Post reporter "I would never even have considered college, never even thought about it. That's what winning did for me. It changed my life. It was a miracle of living too." The Milan Miracle, it seems clear, produced even more miracles and had a great impact on the lives of the players.

Perhaps the individual who had more impact on most of those associated with the Milan champions was the coach, Marvin Wood. He was born in Morristown, IN on January 21, 1928 and grew up on a farm near there. He accomplished the amazing feat of being named all-regional as a freshman at

Morristown High School. He attended Butler University and played three years for the legendary Tony Hinkle and learned his lessons well. He began his coaching career in French Lick, Indiana. He moved to Milan in 1952. The movie *Hoosiers* was rather accurate in describing the atmosphere in Milan. It was somewhat tense in that the coach had just been fired and the town's people were so interested in basketball that many often attended practices. That activity ended when Wood closed practice sessions.



Marvin Wood

Marvin Wood was only 24 years old when he came to Milan. He began to install a slower pace style than the previous coach and emphasized patience. Coach Wood called his offense “cat-and-mouse.” It paid off fast because in the 1952-53 season the team won its first regional and semi-state and advanced to the final four. They lost to powerful South Bend Central, but they would be back. Four starters returned and the 1952-53 season experience paid off. The rest is history as Milan lost only two games in the 1953-54 season and, as most everyone knows, beat Muncie Central 32-30 in the state final game. The state police estimated that about 40,000 fans descended on Milan (population 1,150) after the historic game.

Gene Hackman portrayed Coach Wood in the movie *Hoosiers*, but in a newspaper article Bobby Plump reiterated that his coach was far more mild-mannered than the irascible movie character played by Hackman. “He would never scream, instead raising the level of his voice ever so slightly. You knew he meant business,” Plump said. “He coached with quiet confidence and dignity.” Evidence of Wood being humble also surfaced once when he was interviewed about the famous upset. He said, “God was coaching that team, not me.”

After winning the state championship Marvin Wood, with a record of 52-7, moved on to coach in high schools at New Castle, North Central in Indianapolis and Mishawaka and at Bethel and St. Mary’s colleges. His high school record was 329-279. Marvin Wood was proud of his famous win, but often said he was even prouder that nine of his ten players that year went on to college. Six of the ten players became coaches and some thought this might even be a compliment to their coach. Those players who coached are Ray Craft, Glenn Butte, Rollin Cutter, Roger Schroder, Ronnie Truitt and Gene White.

His wife told the story about how Marvin turned down an invitation to the premiere of *Hoosiers*. He stated simply, “I had a front-row seat the first time.”

Marvin Wood died of cancer at age 71 on Oct. 13, 1999 in South Bend and was buried in his hometown of Morristown, IN. To show their

respect, the members of the 1954 Milan team all wore carnations, dyed the school’s yellow and gold team colors. He left behind his wife of 51 years, Mary Lou, their daughter Deidra and three grandchildren. Marvin was inducted into the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame in 1975.



Herman “Snort” Grinstead

Herman “Snort” Grinstead was the coach who Marvin Wood replaced. He was fired, as the story goes, mainly for ordering too many uniforms. He was well liked in Milan. In fact, Bobby Plump once stated on an ESPN interview that coach Grinstead “was the

most popular coach in Milan history.” The coach possibly had a vision never mentioned in Milan lore. Bobby Plump tells how in his freshman year he became impressed with the shooting style of a varsity player named Bill Gorman. He recalls, “I saw him shooting a jump shot. Nobody shot jump shots back then. I remember thinking that it would be awfully hard to defend, so I started copying it.” Enter coach Grinstead.

He saw that Bobby had developed the jump shot so well that he told him he could make the varsity the next year. He took Bobby to the gym and told him, “Practice dribbling to the free throw line, stopping, and shooting the jump shot. Do it from both sides and you will be able to play for me next year.” Little did the coach know that his practice suggestions to Bobby would become an intricate part of Indiana basketball history.

Marc Combs had coached the boys in junior high school where they had played a zone defense. Coach Wood liked the man-to-man defense, but finally decided the zone would be best. Coach Wood realized it might be best for Combs to become involved with the varsity so he made him an assistant. Combs was instrumental in teaching the boys the 2-1-2 zone defense and polished their fundamentals. They also used a 1-3-1 full-court zone defense.

About the 1-3-1 zone Bobby Plump said, "Marc Combs may have actually invented that zone. We were certainly the first ones I ever knew of who played it."



Marc Combs

Marc Combs said of the Milan boys, "I knew in junior high school that they would be capable of contending for a state championship if they had the proper coaching and didn't neglect the fundamentals. You could see they had excellent characteristics... great body work, but good brain work too."

Once, when Combs was coaching them in junior high school, they lost badly to a team they should have beaten. Marc told the team they should take it as a lesson that you have to play every game and not act as if you won the game before it starts. Bobby Plump said the loss and coach Combs' message stuck with him and, "I never took an opponent for granted ever again."

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Marc Combs died in December of 1996 and the players served as pallbearers. He was laid to rest with his championship ring on his finger and a photo of the team in his casket.

Clarence Kelly is the name of one of two coaches who assisted Marvin Wood with the championship team. He is still alive, but should be mentioned here with the other coaches. Coach Kelly's understanding of young people may have had as much to do with Milan winning in 1954 than most people know about. He noticed Bobby Plump wasn't practicing with much enthusiasm and not smiling. He knew something was wrong. A talk with Bobby revealed that he was having problems with a girlfriend and was even thinking about quitting the team.

Coach Kelly is quoted in Bobby Plump: Last of the Small Town Heroes: "I told him that if he quit, Milan wouldn't go very far in the tournament, and he'd be just another clodbuster...another nobody from nowhere." Bobby Plump took the advice and remembers that, "Coach Kelly let me know it wasn't worth quitting the team over a girl. I guess it kind of woke me up."

Coach Kelly was primarily a track coach, but he was an excellent scout and prepared the reserves on the team each week to emulate the upcoming opponent. Some of the players



'49-'50 Jr. High Milan team

said at the time that they were given tough challenges in practice because of Clarence Kelly's scouting reports. It is hard to imagine that if Coach Kelly hadn't helped bring Bobby Plump out of a funk and worked so hard on scouting reports what would have happened to the Milan Indians in regard to their march to Indiana basketball glory.

It should be abundantly clear the effect the two assistant coaches, Marc Combs and Clarence Kelly, had on the Milan boys. Kelly refreshed Bobby Plump's attitude and Ronnie Truitt was known to have said this to Coach Combs after the Hoosiers premier. "Marc, I just wanted you to know that everything I have ever done, everything I am today, I owe to you." Coach Combs said, "It was the greatest compliment anyone ever paid me."



Virginia Voss, Pat Bohlke and Marjorie Ent

Three cheerleaders and 15,000 people: The published attendance for the Milan-Muncie Central game was 14,983. Milan had three cheerleaders. They were Virginia Voss, Pat Bohlke and Marjorie Ent. During the game, the three of them were instrumental in getting almost everyone in Butler Fieldhouse, except Muncie fans, to cheer for the Indians. Virginia, who later married Ray Craft, remembered, "The players helped us decorate the cars for the trips to tournament sites and cheerleaders were not as acrobatic as they are today." She said, "We had a sophomore, a junior and a senior on the squad. The sophomore was Marjorie. We didn't run around with her much

and for years she didn't attend team reunions." Sadly, Virginia recalled, "When Marjorie did finally come to a team reunion she told us how much fun she had and would be at the next one. Unfortunately, cancer took her life in 1991 before the next reunion came around."



Virginia "Jinky" Craft

It is sad that it must be inserted into this previously completed article that Virginia "Jinky" Craft died suddenly and unexpectedly on March 16, 2016. Since 1954 she had continued her Milan cheerleader spirit by being part of the many events over the years honoring the '54 Milan team including the Indiana Pacers' Hickory/Milan night on March 15. She was always happy to be a part of these and greeted everyone with a warm smile and genuine interest in the fans who were there. Ray and Jinky were married 55 years. She will be missed by all of the Milan '54 family.

Player comments about those who have passed away: Bobby Plump made a nice tribute to Coach Wood when he said, "The best thing I could say about Woody is that if someone had to pattern their life after a person he would be the epitome."



Leading cheers at the celebration

About Bob Engel, Plump remembers him commenting to the team at the semi-state when Coach Wood reminded the boys how some of the players on the Crispus Attucks team “could pick a quarter off the top of the backboard” and “they are really good.” Engel, usually the soul of the team, said something like “They will have to prove it to us first.” Plump said, “Engel was a very inspirational type player.”

Plump commented on how, “Ronnie Truitt was a great teammate who grew up in difficult circumstances, mainly by himself. He was an inspiration to all of us and he stands out in my mind as a teammate who took advantage of our winning more than anyone else on the team.”

Gene White on Marvin Wood: “I was fortunate enough to play for a coach who was ahead of his time. He was different.” On Bob Engel, Gene commented that, “He was our best college prospect.” He agreed with Bobby Plump’s assessment of Engel when Bobby said that Engel was the heart and soul of our team.

Gene White reiterated that Ronnie Truitt just did his job every game and “even got better in the state tournament.” Gene pointed out how easy it was to get along with his teammates and mentioned that most of them have been married for over fifty years.

Roger Schroder commented that, “Coach

Wood was someone we all revered and considered a role model. Ronnie Truitt was a good friend who you could count on for a crucial basket or rebound. Bob Engel was a much better player than many people know. He was a good shooter and ball handler and was a strong rebounder as a senior forward.”

Ray Craft said of his deceased teammates, “They were all hard working individuals. They had talent and were willing to play roles to help the team. They were just outstanding individuals.”

Ray remembered visiting with Ronnie Truitt at the showing of Hoosiers and, “I was amazed to see what he had accomplished. Sometimes he kept things to himself, but I was impressed with Ron’s accomplishments.”

As for Bob Engel, Ray said, “He was probably our best athlete and sacrificed a lot for the team. Not many people know he had a bad back and played in pain. He was a very competitive player.”

When asked about his coach, Marvin Wood, Ray said, “He was as outstanding as an individual as he was a coach. He didn’t play favorites and if you stayed out late you would be disciplined. If he said something he meant it. He fit his material to benefit the team. I was fortunate to have played for him.”

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Mary Lou Wood was at the victory celebration the day after the state championship game in 1954. She was asked to speak before the massive crowd. She eloquently told the audience, and the Milan teammates in particular, “Fellas, it’s been a wonderful, wonderful weekend. But I hope that you’ll remember it’s nice to be important, but more important to be nice.” This comment is strategically placed on a wall in the Milan ’54 Museum. One wonders if Mary Lou was giving the players advice or was simply thinking back to how nice her husband treated his players and how the empathetic, encouraging assistant coaches helped create the camaraderie that led to the success of the 1954 Milan Indians... a truly a miracle team.

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1954 Milan team members-Coach Marvin Wood, assistant coach Clarence Kelly, assistant coach Marc Combs, Ray Craft, Bill Jordan, Gene White, Bobby Plump, Ken Wendelman, Bob Wichman, Ron Truitt, Glenn Butte, Bob Engel, Rollin Cutter, Roger Schroder, Kenny Delap and managers Fred Busching and Oliver Jones.

Sources-Bobby Plump: *Last of the Small Town Heroes* by Bobby Plump and co-authors Marty Pieratt and Ken Honeywell, c 1997, Good Morning Publishing Co. Inc. and *Hoosier Hysteria: A History of Indiana High School Boys Single Class Basketball* by Herb Schwomeyer, c 1970, Mitchell-Fleming Printing. Co.

Contributors to this article are: Ray Craft, who was the lead scorer in the final game with 14 points. He was named to the Indiana All-Star team and was inducted into the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame in 1991. Bobby Plump, who was named Mr. Basketball in 1954 and was inducted into the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame in 1981. They both played at Butler University. Roger Schroder and Gene White made valuable contributions and suggestions. They both played at Franklin College. Schroder was a 2015 Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame inductee. Cheerleader Virginia Voss joined these players in making contributions and all of their efforts are appreciated.

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Marcus Combs, trainer & Bob Engel, player