

130 YEARS OF INDIANA BASKETBALL: PLAYERS, COACHES, AND GYMS

A topic as broad as the title cannot be dealt with in a single paper. For example, Indiana has eight out of the top ten high school basketball arenas in the USA. All of those activities and from grade school through college would have to be part of a historical write-up.

For sampling of the 130 years, this paper will relate some important eras in the basketball “life” of Indiana University (IU or the “Hoosiers”). That institution fits the designation of Indiana as “The Basketball State.”

In 1900 officials at IU decided that a basketball team should be formed, and play began 1900-1901 among a small number of Indiana and Midwest institutions. Play in 1900 began with four games.

The years for IU from 1900-01 began play in the Men’s Gymnasium – the original Assembly Hall. In 1917 the Hoosiers moved into the new Men’s Gymnasium which included the first basketball court that was meant to accommodate spectators at IU.

The centerpiece of the new facility was a 2,400 seat basketball arena often referred to as the “New Gym.” One of the most interesting features of the New Gym was that it may have been the first in the country to use glass backboards. Better view for the fans behind the end line.

The Fieldhouse in 1928 was a significant upgrade built next to the Men's Gymnasium. Room for 8,000 spectators – later expanded to 10,000 – was featured. IU hosted 32 seasons of basketball in the New Fieldhouse, still in use today – for use by the School of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (HYPER).

There followed in 1960 the New Fieldhouse that was not much of an upgrade and expected to be followed by a grand state-of-the art arena. The interim turned out to be 11 seasons.

The hoped-for modern facility, Assembly Hall, came in time for the 1971-72 season. Opening coincided with the arrival of Bobby Knight. Assembly Hall became dear to fans and a consistent attendance leader helped by Knight's .866 winning percentage.

But back to early years. The opponents were mostly other Midwest state colleges, and their play over years became the Big Ten. Officially, it was the Intercollegiate Conference of Faculty Representatives ("ICFR"). The name "Big Ten" came about from media reports in 1917 using that description for what had generally been known as the Western Conference.

In the early seasons each year saw a new coach (some of them of dubious qualifications). Stability in the coaching ranks was sought in 1924-25, the start of the Everett Dean era lasting to 1937-38. Dean was a former IU basketball All-American.

Fans quickly warmed to Dean who began in 1924-25 coaching IU to an overall record of 15-5 capped by second place in the conference. The 1925-26 season concluded with an overall record of 12-5 and an 8-4 tie for first place in the Big Ten.

In 1926-27 IU had an overall record of 13-4 and a 9-3 second place in the Big Ten. Up and down records followed leading to a very good year in 1935-36 with an overall record of 18-2 and first place at 11-1 in the Big Ten.

Along the way Dean groomed All-Americans including Branch McCracken and many fine players including Vern Huffman and Ken Gunning.

Branch McCracken played a stellar three years at IU setting the Big Ten single season scoring record as well as All-American in 1929-30.

The 1937-38 season was not as good as some of Dean's prior coaching accomplishments. The 1935-36 season had been to an 18-2 record and Big Ten title. Dean surprised the players by his June 1938 resignation to go to Stanford and coach basketball and baseball. Dean left behind a team of players with talent and enthusiasm.

The search led to a familiar name – Coach Branch McCracken.

Coach McCracken entered the 1938-39 season with vigor. The McCracken era would stretch from 1938-39 to 1942-43 with a break for his U.S. Navy service during much of World War II. He returned for consistent success in 1946-47 to 1964-65.

The arrival of the “Hurryin’ Hoosiers.” McCracken started the 1938-39 season with a new style of play that excited crowds and intimidated many opponents.

McCracken’s first season was pretty good at overall 17-3 and Big Ten second place. The second season 1939-40 was a case of building to an unexpected victory: The 1940 National Championship. Fort Wayne native “Curly” Armstrong was a junior forward (at 5’11”) on that team, a colorful character but also the leading scorer on that high-powered IU squad.

As with most IU teams, the season focused on a Big Ten championship. Some breathtaking wins and losses played out concluding with a first IU win in West Lafayette over Purdue in 17 years. The result was a second place in the Big Ten.

On the day the season ended, the NCAA’s selection committee chose IU instead of Purdue to represent the Big Ten in the 1940 first postseason tournament to be run by the NCAA.

It wasn’t a big team, but they were fast and versatile – with emphasis on fast. McCracken by his second season was putting his loved running attack in, along with the one-handed shot.

IU started the tournament as one of four teams in the Eastern Region. IU won the Eastern with a close one over Duquesne after IU’s running game was

almost overcome. The Western champion was Kansas, and the final was set in Kansas City, Missouri.

The game had a somewhat Jayhawk flavor as the game was being played only 40 miles from the University of Kansas campus. IU had trouble pulling away from Kansas at only 17-14 after the first 13 minutes.

IU then put its running game in overdrive with a 15-5 run moving IU up 32-19 at the half. From there the Hoosiers kept running all the way to an impressive 60-42 win.

In the 1942-43 season the IU record was 18-2. The result was an undisputed second place in the Big Ten. Then came the war years with McCracken and many of his possible players going into World War II service.

McCracken returned to coach IU after his Navy service and coached well from 1946-47 to 1964-65. He was to win a second NCAA championship in 1952-53.

Big help for the Hoosiers came with the recruitment in 1951 of 6'9" Don Schlundt from South Bend, Indiana. He started varsity play as a freshman with great help from outside shooter Bob Leonard on the 1951 team with several other key players which set the stage for the 1952-53 season.

The overall record in 1952-53 was 25-3 for first place in the Big Ten. That record also led to IU placement in the regional semifinals of the 1953 NCAA

championship bracket. Strong wins led to the Final Four and then the title game against Kansas.

The 1953 final game was tense just as the 1940 game because the Kansas City location was only miles from the Kansas State campus. This time about 500 IU fans made their way to cheer.

The teams battled evenly from a 41-41 half-time break. Leads changed until Bob Leonard dropped in a foul shot to reach a 69-68 win with less than a minute left. Defense held.

McCracken's follow-up team for 1953-54 produced a 20-4 overall record and first place in the Big Ten. Branch McCracken coached on producing All-Americans and Big Ten competition. He had to work through a four-year probation resulting from a football program infraction of NCAA rules.

McCracken resigned attributed to poor health after the 1964-65 season where he produced three All-Americans: Dick Van Arsdale, Tom Van Arsdale, and Jon McGlocklin.

The passage 1965-66 to 1970-71 was unremarkable except for a Big Ten first place overall season of 18-8 under Coach Lou Watson. IU looked for a coaching improvement.

Enter the Bob Knight era. Knight had been the coach of the West Point basketball team. Knight brought a reputation for running a deliberate offense and as a strong disciplinarian. He prevailed especially from 1970-71 through 1992-93

with Big Ten titles and three NCAA Final championships: 1975-76, 1980-81, and 1986-87.

The very best Knight season was actually two seasons, 1974-75 and 1975-76. The 1974-75 season resulted in an overall record of 31-1, including the Big Ten championship with an 18-0 record. The team was led by Kent Benson, Steve Green, Scott May, Quinn Buckner and Bobby Wilkerson. Off the bench were John Laskowski and Tom Abernathy. There was a strong group of freshmen including Wayne Radford and Jim Wisman.

Scott May was critical with his agility and shot making to make plays devised by Knight to defeat the defenses of opponents. Unhappily May broke his wrist late in the season and was sidelined for most final games with a cast on his arm. The rest of the team rallied and completed the 1974-75 regular season with a perfect 29-0 record.

In the regional semifinals of the 1975 NCAA, the Hoosiers had won the previous games convincingly but faced Kentucky which still was seething over a 14-point loss to the Hoosiers in Assembly Hall earlier in the year. Kentucky began with a very physical game plan which prevented Scott May, cast and all, from getting into position. A late Kent Benson rally brought the score to a 90-93 deficit; but IU could not get any closer in the final 33 seconds.

Bob Knight said the team had played to the greatest and purest defense of any previous IU team. All the players had a new resolve to return to the next season.

For the run at the Big Ten and NCAA 1976 championship, Crews, Radford, and Abernathy moved up to fill the losses of Green and Laskowski to the NBA draft. Scott May became more aggressive in the 1975-76 season and improved his scoring average as did Kent Benson and others.

Undefeated, IU won the Big Ten and NCAA Tournament victories over St. Johns and a hard fought win over Alabama and Marquette to reach the Final Four. UCLA was the opponent and defending NCAA champ. Defense turned out to help IU to a win and face Michigan who IU had beaten in a close one in the Big Ten season.

Michigan's All-American center created early trouble, but Knight made defensive adjustments. From the middle of the second half IU outscored Michigan to get the win and an undefeated 39-0 season as NCAA champion.

In the words of former player and author Dick Van Arsdale, "Indiana's 1975-76 basketball team gave us one of those perfect moments by coming from behind to defeat Michigan in the 1976 NCAA title game. The victory sealed the national championship along with an unblemished 32-0 season for the Hoosiers."

Combined, the 1974-75 and 1975-76 teams amassed a 63-1 record over a period of two years. In the history of NCAA basketball no school – save UCLA –

can match the two-year dominance of the two Hoosier squads. The seniors on that 1975-76 team had captured the Big Ten championship in each of their four seasons, they went to two Final Fours, won an NCAA championship, and put together a four-year record of 108-12 overall and 59-5 in Big Ten play. And of course, they achieved the last undefeated season in NCAA basketball – and counting.

The 1979-80 season brought a good group together and captured the Big Ten championship. By 1980-81 two important players were gone; but coming back was sophomore Isaiah Thomas, widely renowned recruit and excellent player in his freshman year.

Returning in 1980-81 were Ray Tolbert and Glen Grunwald as well as returning seniors. Thomas with his great talents took control of the team, running to a 26-9 record and first place in the Big Ten at 14-4, a second straight.

Indiana began the 1981 NCAA championship with a No. 3 seed much helped by a first round bye. IU beat the teams seeded six, nine, and seven, beat a surprising St. Joseph's, and entered Knight's third Final Four in ten IU seasons.

IU beat LSU soundly and set up for a final against North Carolina. It was Coach Dean Smith against Coach Bob Knight. Both had provided unprecedented success in prior years for their respective schools. A basically even first half was followed by a brilliant second half by Isaiah Thomas, the Most Outstanding Player of the Final Four for the winning Hoosiers.

The real key to the squad was defense. IU held opponents to a miserly 58 points per game. No Hoosier team since the 1980-81 season has been able to match that defensive stinginess.

Time and seasons passed under coach Knight up to season 1986-87. Seniors Steve Alford, Daryl Thomas, and Todd Meier were looking at their only chance to be four-year players at Indiana without winning at least one Big Ten championship. Added to these players were newcomers and transfers Dean Garrett and Keith Smart. The lineup became Garrett, Smart, Alford, Thomas and sophomore Rick Calloway as starters. Primary sixth man was sophomore Joe Hillman.

All-American Steve Alford had developed a field goal percentage of 56% - great for an outside shooter – on his way to becoming Indiana’s leading scorer, using the new three-point shot.

The 1986-87 overall IU record was 30-4 and 15-3 for a first place in the Big Ten season. IU was No. 1 seed in the NCAA Midwest. Tough games were won against especially strong adversaries Duke and LSU to get IU to the Final Four with consistent points from Alford and excellent play by Garrett along with the rest of the team in tense final minutes.

The Final Four contest faced IU against UNLV, the No. 1 ranked “Runnin’ Rebels.” Knight chose to outrun them, and with strong shooting – and other hard plays – took the game 97-93.

The 1987 NCAA championship game against Syracuse might well be described as a “barn burner.” IU closed the first half 34-33 on Alford’s last-second three-pointer. The second half featured back and forth scoring with IU making consistent responses by Garrett. With seconds left, Garrett took a Thomas pass, jumped high from the left, and dropped the ball in the net with 0.05 left, IU winning 74-73.

Knight said, “This team played the last five minutes of critical games as well as I’ve ever seen a team play.” That was the legacy of greatness left by the 1986-87 Hoosiers.

Another run at the NCAA title came at the 1992 championship where IU was edged out in the Final Four by eventual champion Duke. Important players were Calbert Cheaney, Damon Bailey, Alan Henderson and Matt Nova.

This group along with others had a very successful 1992-93 with an overall record of 30-4 and Big Ten first place at 17-1. This core group moved through the Big Ten and on to the NCAA Tournament. They played well, but without injured Henderson, not unlike Scott May in 1975, were not as capable. In the Final Eight, Kansas won 83-77.

Calbert Cheaney finished the 1986-87 season as the all-time IU basketball scorer and remains there today. As a whole, this group of 1989 recruits did win two Big Ten titles and kept IU men’s basketball in the top ten teams in the U.S. for 51 out of 53 weeks along with the high achievement in the NCAA.

In the years that followed, the Knight coaching era went into twilight. Up and down seasons, NCAA disappointments, and controversy. A former player published allegations in the spring of 2000 that Knight committed physical abuse as to him and other verbal and physical abuse. The allegations started a series of events which led to Knight's dismissal six months later.

Assistant coaches Mike Davis and John Treolar of necessity stepped in. To the surprise of fans, the team in 2000-01 had 21 wins, upsets over two top-five teams, and an NCAA berth. In 2001-02 the interim tag was removed, and the Davis team won first place in the Big Ten, the first in nine years, and made an unexpected run to the NCAA final game, losing to Maryland.

The 2002-03 season started well and concluded with one NCAA Tournament win and a defeat by a solid Pittsburgh team.

From 2003-04 forward results did not go well, and amid some calls for his replacement, Mike Davis resigned in February of the 2005-06 season. There followed Kelvin Sampson, Dan Dakich (interim), Tom Crean, Archie Miller, Mike Woodson, to no significant seasons. The search went out and Darian DeVries (March 2025) was hired.

And so the teams play on as Hoosiers hope this will be the turn-around.

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