

# *Did This Team Invent the Fast Break?*

BY CHARLES R. WHALIN



The 1925-26 Marrowbone team was the first to play on the school's new sand and sawdust court.

## *Primitive conditions in many Kentucky schools no doubt contributed to one of basketball's more exciting plays*

**A** player leaps high in the air, snares the ball from the opponent's goal and quickly snaps a pass to a teammate who is sprinting full speed down the floor. Without breaking stride, the teammate, in a single fluid motion, catches the ball and softly deflects it into the air where another player soars skyward, intercepts the ball and slams it through the net.

Combining speed and skill with grace and agility, basketball's blazing fast break traces its pedigree to teams like the Marrowbone, Kentucky squad that pioneered the sport.

Dr. James Naismith's game was spreading from city to countryside when it came to the Martha Norris Memorial High School at Marrowbone in 1924. That year, Principal F.A. Strange hired Reverend Andrew Layman as a teacher and coach. From an enrollment of 35 students, the school's first basketball team was formed. The squad played surrounding high schools, independent teams and even some colleges before winter arrived. The season was concluded in the spring with a loss in the district tournament.

Marrowbone lies in a valley six miles from the Cumberland County seat of Burkesville in south central Kentucky. The only hard surface road in 1924 ran from Marrowbone to Burkesville, and winter snows quickly turned dirt roads into muddy quagmires, isolating the area for much of the year.

Marrowbone, like many other

Kentucky high schools, had no gymnasium. Its basketball facilities consisted of a single backboard and goal hung on a rough-hewn post that was none-too-firmly implanted in the flattest piece of ground close to the school.

After the school's first season, Layman relinquished the coaching job to 24-year-old Roy Whalin, a new teacher fresh from Western Kentucky State Teachers College, whose only qualification in basketball was a course he had taken from E.A. "Uncle Ed" Diddle, just beginning his illustrious coaching career at Western.

Marrowbone paid no salary to its coach, and travel costs were usually paid out-of-pocket. Still, the newcomer brought a novice's enthusiasm to the coaching job, and in 1925, the school joined the newly formed Kentucky High School Athletic Association; just in time to play its 1925-26 season under official rules.

To upgrade its facilities, a new outdoor court was constructed. Ground was graded and smoothed, then topped with a layer of sand hauled from nearby Marrowbone Creek. The sand was layered with sawdust to alleviate injuries. Construction was completed by burying a one-inch thick board flush with the surface to mark the boundaries, then two-inch boards were buried to mark the center and free throw lines.

The squad practiced daily on this primitive outdoor court, even in winter. When blanketed with snow,

the surface was cleared during morning recess by two or three players. By noon, it was dry and ready for team practice, which was held during the afternoon class break. The coach, clad in an overcoat, would referee a scrimmage game until Principal Strange rang the bell to signal the return to academics.

Even on this improved outdoor court, a problem remained. It was just as impossible to dribble the ball on this sand-and-sawdust surface as on the old dirt court. To compensate, the players were coached to move the ball upcourt by passing it back and forth until they got it in position under the goal — then shoot. As they honed these run-and-gun skills, they became increasingly adept at exploiting the opportunity to beat an opponent with a fast pass and an uncontested close-in shot.

One of these Marrowbone players, Sam Alexander, also recalled an early version of the slam dunk:

"When we went to Oakland, down in Warren County, to play, I remember that the goal was just nailed up inside on the wall of an old frame building. One of the ways we'd make a goal was to run and put a foot up on that wall and kick back up; we'd climb the wall and drop in the ball."

Marrowbone's primitive facility did not qualify the school to host home games. All of its games were played on hostile territory with spectators rooting for the other team and hooting at the Marrowbone boys. But James Davis, another Marrow-





**STEEL ROOFING & SIDING**

No. 1 Painted,  
 4 colors in stock ..... \$39.95 sq.  
 White, 8', 10' & 12' ..... \$24.95 sq.  
 2-1/2" Corr. Galv. .... \$19.95 sq.

**INSULATION**

1" Styrofoam ..... \$6.99 sht.  
 Owens-Corning®  
 Fiberglas, R-11 ..... 13¢ sq. ft.  
 Owens-Corning®  
 Fiberglas, R-19 ..... 23¢ sq. ft.  
 1/2" Plywood ..... \$6.50 sht.

**TRUSSES DIRECT FROM MANUFACTURER**

Also lumber, garage doors, house windows, storage bldgs. and building kits.

**GRABER POST BUILDINGS, INC.**

R.R. #1, Box 225, Montgomery, IN 47558  
 Phone: 812-636-7355 or 812-687-7508

Located 5 mi. south of Odon or 7 mi. north of Cannelburg on County Rd. 900 East

bone player, remembers, "We never got nervous away from home. We just went out there and played our game; that's all we could do."

The Marrowbone team opened its 1925-26 season playing games within a 100-mile radius of home. Since the sport hadn't yet started in towns like Glasgow or Edmonton, a two-day trip was usually required to reach a school with a team and a gym, play a game and return home.

Sam Alexander recalled some of those early gymnasiums:

"Each gym was different, but the lights were always poor. Hardyville, over in Hart County, and Center in Metcalfe County, had gyms. Burkesville's first gym was an old tobacco warehouse with a low ceiling. Then the gym was moved to an old abandoned post office building. Whenever we had a place that was really

Then, Buss Ballard would hitch his six mules to a wagon and haul the team to its destination.

While community support ran high, so did Marrowbone's coaching turnover. The school had three coaches in its first three seasons. None had ever coached a basketball team before.

Lester Woosley, destined to become a military chaplain and Methodist preacher, assumed the coaching job for the team's 1926-27 season. Woosley's players continued to sharpen their pass-and-shoot skills, and this offensive style worked so well that, in a game against Lebanon, the team scored three consecutive field goals from its fast break. Then, in the spring of 1927, the team won its Class B district tournament championship, earning the right to compete in the regionals held that

*Marrowbone, like many other Kentucky high schools, had no gymnasium. It's basketball facilities consisted of a single backboard and goal hung on a rough-hewn post that was none-too-firmly implanted in the flattest piece of ground close to the school.*

a gymnasium rather than something that was makeshift, it was like bringing us from darkness to daylight."

The efforts of these feisty farm boys slowly kindled fires of community pride that ignited into heartwarming help for this Marrowbone team. John Frazier, a neighbor next to the outdoor court, installed a stove in his wheathouse, then turned it over to the team to use as its dressing room.

Another citizen, Shorty Brown, furnished traveling accommodations to most games, hauling the team in his farm truck which had an extra low gear. The players rode in back on a bed of straw, with a tarp tied overhead. If the truck mired in mud, the riders would hop out and push. As a last resort, Shorty would bring out his block-and-tackle.

At times, though, the roads were too bad even for Shorty's truck.

year in Louisville.

One of Marrowbone's top players, a homebound farm youth, refused to make the trip, which itself proved both an adventure and an example of community cooperation. On March 10, 1927, the squad left Marrowbone in Shorty Brown's farm truck. Shorty hauled the team to the top of Marrowbone Hill where they bravely transferred to Jim Bartley's mule-drawn farm wagon for a bone-jostling trip to Temple Hill. There, C.B. Norris picked the team up in his farm truck and transported them the remaining distance to Horse Cave where they boarded a train to Louisville, arriving in time for their first round game with Worthville. *The Courier-Journal* ran a picture of the team, headlining its journey via mule-wagon, farm truck and train.

Marrowbone defeated Worthville by a score of 36-26, then won 28-21

**SELL UNIQUE BELT BUCKLES and Beautiful Jewelry!**

*The easy way to make BIG PROFITS!*

Just show this big, FULL COLOR wholesale catalog. Sell more than 1000 styles of belt buckles, belts, hat tacs and jewelry. The beautifully crafted items sell themselves.

SEND \$1 FOR THIS FULL COLOR MONEY MAKING CATALOG TODAY. USE THIS HANDY COUPON...

ANCHOR SPEC. CO. 1987

**ANCHOR SPECIALTIES CO.**  
 Dept. RK88, P.O. Box 3958  
 North Providence, RI 02911

RUSH your full color catalog and Dealer's Wholesale Price List. I enclose \$1 (refunded with my 1st order)

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 City \_\_\_\_\_  
 State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

over Bardstown St. Joe, providing city spectators a display of their no-dribble offense. These victories earned a berth in the state championship tournament in Lexington the following week.

The team now faced another dilemma. Heavy rains had ruined roads, preventing a trip home, but the group was not financially prepared to layover in Louisville another week. Coach Woosley funded the shortage from his personal finances, and the seven players stretched resources, each with a fifty-cents-per-meal allowance.

The state tournament opened in Lexington on March 17, 1927. Marrowbone was paired against Wickliffe and won, 24-14. Then, with its eighth man still back on the farm, the team lost 31-20 to Millersburg Military Institute, which went on to become the 1927 state champions.


To return home, the team took a train from Lexington to Burnside; there, they boarded a steamboat and traveled the Cumberland River to Burkesville for the final six miles overland to Marrowbone. Decades later, newspapers and regional publications would refer to this squad as "The Marrowbone Wonder Team."

The old Martha Norris Memorial High School building still stands in Marrowbone, decommissioned in 1987 after serving as an elementary school, and recently sold at public auction. Three members of the Marrowbone Wonder Team still live in the community: Paul Strange, James Davis and Frank Alexander. Shorty Brown dwells there, too. Another player, Sam Alexander, lives near Louisville.

Although proud of their pioneering accomplishments, these men do not claim that the fast break originated only at Marrowbone. But Marrowbone typifies the many schools where dirt courts forced teams to modify their style of play.

"I think," said Sam Alexander, "that the fast break *had* to be practiced by those who had no wood floor on which they could dribble the ball. I don't think there's any doubt but that this is how the fast break began."

*No Other Tree in the World Like The*  
**LILY-OF-THE-VALLEY TREE**



- *Red Foliage in Fall!* **ONLY \$1.69 ea.**
- *Beautiful White Flowers!* (2 for \$3.25)  
(3 for \$4.65)

Every July this tree changes from a pretty green shade tree into a white cloud of thousands of flowers like Lilies-of-the Valley. The second miracle happens in the fall with the first frost, which causes the whole tree to turn to a flaming red. One of the most beautiful and unusual of all trees. Grows to 30'! And, now you are able to purchase this sensational tree (*Oxydendrum arboreum*) at bargain prices. You receive 2' to 4' top-notch collected trees. So order today!

---

ORDER HERE

**GUARANTEE**  
If not 100% satisfied, just RETURN THE SHIPPING LABEL ONLY, within one year of receipt for free replacement or purchase price refund, your choice. THE WARRANTY IS VOID unless the Shipping Label is returned.  
House of Wesley, Nursery Div.  
Bloomington, Illinois 61701

**HOUSE OF WESLEY, NURSERY DIVISION**  
DEPT. 2753-79  
2200 East Oakland Avenue  
Bloomington, Illinois 61701

Please send me \_\_\_\_\_ N6752 Lily-of-the-Valley Trees.

Postage & handling, please add \$ .50  
Illinois Residents add 6½% Sales Tax. TOTAL \$ \_\_\_\_\_

NAME \_\_\_\_\_  
ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
CITY \_\_\_\_\_  
STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

*Introducing the ultimate solution  
for rotary trimmer problems*

**The New Weed Wizard™**

- No more trouble with trimmer line - **never buy line again!**
- Fits all gas trimmers
- Finest materials for long lasting durability
- Cuts through the toughest of weeds, briars, grass and problem vegetation
- Easy to install on your trimmer.



Weed Wizard installs on your rotary trimmer as shown.

*"Keeps your rotary trimmer in business!"*

\$21.95

\*CALL FOR DEALERSHIP INQUIRY\*

---

**TO ORDER CALL**  
**800-262-5122**

[ ] VISA [ ] M/C # \_\_\_\_\_ Exp. Date \_\_\_\_\_

[ ] Check or money order enclosed for \$21.95 plus \$2.50 postage and handling.

Trimmer Make \_\_\_\_\_ Model # \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Send to: **WEED WIZARD, INC.**  
P.O. Box 275, Dahlonega, Georgia 30533