

## **The road to the championship - Jack Bailey part 2**

**(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 15, 2011)**

Last week we followed the Oak Ridge Boys' Basketball through the "rebuilding season" that Jack Bailey reminded us was actually "a season to remember." The details presented by Jack set us up for this next episode of the drama long remembered by Jack as he now tells us the rest of the story.

Jack says, "Oak Ridge won three straight in the District Tournament, edging Clinton 54-51 for the Championship. More than 1,800 fans packed the Oak Ridge High School gym to witness the final.

"In Region play, Oak Ridge High School squeaked by Alcoa 46-45, Knox East 61-59 and then defeated Walland 57-50 to win the Regional Championship for the second straight year. It was their 17th straight win. John Lee and John Howard were named to the All-Region Team.

"In 1961, the State Tournament was held at the University of Tennessee Field House and 16 teams advanced to the tourney. In first round play, Oak Ridge beat Carthage 51-44 and then knocked off Chattanooga Red Bank 46-35 to advance to the semifinals. Head Coach Ira Green was quoted in the Knoxville News Sentinel as saying 'We've come this far by holding down the opposition. Our guards applied tremendous pressure today,...so much so that I'd have to give them credit for breaking open the game.'

"Oak Ridge High School beat Memphis Treadwell, the tallest team in the tournament, by a margin of 70-49 to advance to the finals. Kingsport Dobyns-Bennett blew by the 1960 state runner-up Union City by a score of 62-44 to earn their spot in the final versus Oak Ridge.

"Dobyns-Bennett entered the game as a prohibitive favorite. They had won the state championship in 1945 and lost in the finals in 1955 and 1959.

"Dobyns-Bennett was soon to make it three straight losses in the championship game. Before a crowd of 7,500, the largest crowd ever to witness a high school basketball game in the state of Tennessee, Oak Ridge was victorious 40-39. (According to Earl Nall, Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association Director of Technology, 2,000 people were turned away)

"The Knoxville News-Sentinel in its 3-19-61 edition said, 'Astonishing Oak Ridge, flawless most of the way, shaded ever pressing Kingsport Dobyns-Bennett.' It was East Tennessee's 4th straight TSSAA championship. (Again according to Earl Nall, The Oak Ridger's headline was: City Purrs after Cat's Big Meow – Ray)

"Guard Ralph Stevens made two clutch free throws with only four seconds left in the game to give Oak Ridge a 40-39 lead for good. When I talked to Ralph Stevens about the 1960-61 season and asked for his favorite memory, other than the obvious one of winning the state championship. He noted that he got fouled with four seconds left and was at the free throw line, leading 38-37. Robbie Robinson came up to Ralph, patted him on the backside, and said, 'Just make one and we'll beat them in overtime.' Ralph made both free throws and Kingsport Dobyns-Bennett made a meaningless layup as time expired, giving Oak Ridge the victory, 40-39. (Earl notes that Coach Green held his players to the side of the court and allowed this layup to be made unchallenged – Ray)

"Reporting on the championship winning game, the News-Sentinel said, '... but the hottest hand was Captain John Howard.' His 18-point effort will be chronicled as perhaps the most significant in the school's basketball history.

"Oak Ridge finished with 21 straight wins and a season record of 25-6. John Howard and John Lee were named to the All-Tournament Team.

"Following the game a motorcade estimated at 250 vehicles met the team at Solway (now Herman Postma) Bridge and followed the team to an impromptu celebration at the Oak Ridge High School gym. One cheerleader said much later in her life, 'It was the most exciting time of my life.' (Mayor Al Bissell boarded the bus at the bridge and rode into town with the team. – Ray)

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"John Howard was named third team All East Tennessee. Robbie Robinson, John Lee and Howard Hay (even though he missed the last half of season) were Honorable Mention. Future Heisman Trophy winner and Football Coach Steve Spurrier was also Honorable Mention, representing Johnson City Science Hill High School.

"John Howard and John Lee were Honorable Mention All-State.

"John Howard signed a basketball scholarship with UT.

"John Lee and Robbie Robinson signed basketball scholarships with Tennessee Wesleyan.

"Three of the Sophomore reserves led Oak Ridge to a second state championship in 1963. From that team, Kenny Campbell signed with Vanderbilt and Buddy Defenderfer signed with Georgia Tech.

"Reserve Billy Atkisson also starred on the '63 team. Kenny Campbell scored 29 of Oak Ridge's 38 points, including the game-winner with three seconds left in overtime, as Oak Ridge defeated Murfreesboro 38-36 in the State Championship Final.

"Coach Ira Green later moved back home to Arkansas and won two more state basketball championships.

"Ira Green, John Howard, Robbie Robinson and Kenny Campbell were later named to the Oak Ridge Sports Hall of Fame.

"Adam Lanning was Assistant Coach and Larry Martin was Team Manager. Bob Yongue did play by play on WATO radio with former Oak Ridge High School and University of Tennessee football star Bill Lanter handling the color analysis. Lanter is also a member of the Oak Ridge Sports Hall of Fame.

"In the Senior Superlatives for 1961 at ORHS, John Howard was named 'Most Handsome Boy' and Robbie Robinson was named 'Friendliest Boy.'

"I spoke with John Howard and we had a nice conversation about the 1960-61 basketball season. Growing up in the same Woodland neighborhood as John, I always thought he was a pretty modest, humble guy. His comments yesterday reflect that same attitude today. When I asked him his favorite memory of the season, other than the obvious one of winning the state championship, he talked about Coach Green and the team, not about himself.

"John Howard said, 'Coach Green taught us to play together as a team. He had a way of inspiring and motivating us to play better as a team. We probably weren't the most talented team in the state tournament, but we played better as a team and we won. Coach Green was a psychology teacher at Oak Ridge High School and he used his psychology training to get the most out of us as individuals and as a team.'

Wow, Jack Bailey, what a wonderful account of the historic 1961 Oak Ridge Championship Boys' Basketball season!

I hope you have enjoyed Jack Bailey's excellent treatment of this historic basketball championship season. I hope also that Coach Ira Green soon gets the recognition he deserves. I am working on an article that will focus on Ira Green's achievements and encourage someone to nominate him to the TSSAA Hall of Fame before the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1963 championship season where he again led Oak Ridge Boys' Basketball team to a second state championship.

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Earl Nall provides the following information on the upcoming celebration of the championship season of the Oak Ridge boys' team on Saturday, March 19, 2011. This will be the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this legendary winning season for the Wildcats: Nall said, "We have asked that the halftime presentation of the Oak Ridge team be telecast live on the TV telecast. However, as you know things could change at the last minute in the broadcast business. However, here are your choices for viewing the halftime presentation. The presentation will take place during halftime of the Class AA game.

- 1) Watch on your local PBS station -- all boys finals will be broadcast next Saturday, March 19, 2011
- 2) Watch the raw live feed on [TSSAANetwork.com](http://TSSAANetwork.com)
- 3) Watch the games on [ESPN3.com](http://ESPN3.com)

"If for some reason the live telecast does not get on, it will be archived and can be viewed for free on our [TSSAANetwork.com](http://TSSAANetwork.com) site.

There you have it, the story of the fabulous championship for Oak Ridge and the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that glorious season.



Front row, left to right---Senior Robbie Robinson, Senior John Lee, Senior Captain John Howard, Junior Ralph Stevens, Junior Allen Griffies  
Back row, left to right---Coach Ira Green, Junior Terry Hudson, Junior Doug Horn, Sophomore Buddy Defenderfer, Sophomore Kenny Campbell, Sophomore Billy Atkisson