

'Cats embark on a season to remember... Jack Bailey tells the story
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 8, 2011)

Jack Bailey, as we have seen in an earlier *Historically Speaking* article, is an avid sports enthusiast. One of his passions is collecting sports memorabilia. He has now brought to my attention a story of historic proportions - the first Oak Ridge High School State Championship in basketball.

Jack has newspaper articles detailing the story of Oak Ridge's journey from a "rebuilding year" as noted in the one of the early articles to the hard-fought mid season and ultimately to the final challenges of the state tournament. This had to be a most exciting year for basketball fans in Oak Ridge. Do you remember that? I'll bet if you were a fan in 1961, you still recall that phenomenal season.

Jack tells the story of a young coach named Ira Green who took over from highly respected Head Basketball Coach Ben Martin and how he faced a disappointing loss in the quarter-finals of the 1960 State Tournament. Don't you know that must have been very disappointing to the young coach? I am sure he wanted desperately to win that championship in Coach Martin's honor as he had coached the players in their formative years.

Such is the case with sports, all too often. Winning is a fickle and elusive goal at best. Sometimes the most logical outcome is blown away by a team just losing their steam or by some simple mistake that seems to take the fight out of them. In the newspaper reports, all this and more happened to Ira Green in his first two years, but the team pulled it out a number of time and won the 1961 State Championship!

Let's let Jack set the stage for us and review that historic season leading the 1961 Tennessee State Championship for the Oak Ridge High School Wildcats. Enjoy what Jack has to say:

"Because of illness, long-time Oak Ridge High School Basketball Coach and Athletic Director Ben Martin stepped down from his duties as Head Basketball Coach in December, 1959. Thirty-three year old "B" team Coach Ira Green moved up to the varsity and took the reins and led ORHS to District and Regional Championships before losing to Murfreesboro in the quarter-finals of the 1960 State Tournament.

"Thus began the career of Ira Green, who then went on to lead Oak Ridge High School State Championships in 1961 & 1963, the only two boy's basketball championships the school has even won.

"When the Wildcats opened the 1960-61 season, the Oak Ridger headline on 11-4-60 was "Cats face rebuilding year". [

"Oak Ridge beat Lafollette 60-37 to win their opener. They opened with a 12-man squad that featured starters John Howard, Howard Hay, Stanley Bratcher, Ralph Stevens and Robbie Robinson. By the time the 1961 State Tournament rolled around, only six of the 12 remained as some players left the team and 'Howard Hay went out with a season ending ankle injury. Added were 'B' team players Kenny Campbell, Buddy Defenderfer and Billy Atkisson. Allen Griffies had been ineligible and joined the varsity in January. Doug Horn and Terry Hudson played key roles as reserves.

"Oak Ridge started out 3-1 and then played a tough two game road trip and lost to Elizabethton and defending State Champion Hampton. Coach Green felt a good early season road test would be beneficial in the long run, as it proved to be.

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"By mid-January, Green had tweaked his line-up, moving 6'6" John Lee and guard Ralph Stevens into the starting line-up to join forwards John Howard and Howard Hay and guard Robbie Robinson. The combo worked ... they avenged an early season defeat by beating Knox South 68-52 and snapping South's 16 game winning streak. Oak Ridge led at halftime by 31-13.

"A week later, ORHS countered their early season loss to Elizabethton, beating them by 42-40 on a last second goal by Captain John Howard.

"On February 8, ORHS defeated Bradley County 65-60 to beat the third team that had defeated ORHS earlier in the year. Second leading scorer Howard Hay had gone out with a season-ending ankle injury the previous weekend and the newly eligible Allen Griffies started in his place and pumped in 22 points to lead the 'Cats.

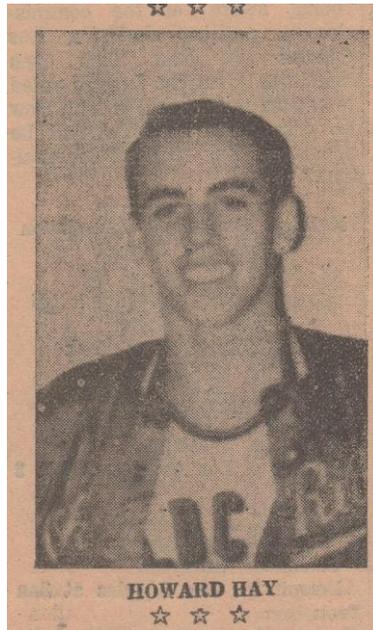
"One of Bradley County's leading players was future University of Alabama All-American Quarterback Steve Sloan. The team began to "jell" in this game and it marked a critical turning point in the season. This was the line-up that would lead ORHS on an undefeated run the rest of the season; two scrappy, defensive minded guards in 5'6" Robinson and 5'8" Stevens, the sharpshooting outside presence of Griffies and the inside scoring and rebounding of Lee and Howard.

"By February 20, ORHS was on a nine game winning streak when they played host to Nashville David Lipscomb. Lipscomb boasted 6'8-1/2" Clyde Lee, a future Vanderbilt and NBA Star. Their starting line-up was 6'8-1/2", 6'6", 6'2", 6'2", and 6'0" – a huge line-up for a high school in that era. Coach Green was quoted in *The Oak Ridger* as saying 'defense and rebounding' (his season long mantra) would be the key. In a defensive battle, ORHS won 34-28.

"Oak Ridge then beat Clinton 73-39 to end the regular season with its 11th straight win and a 15-6 record. ORHS finished regular season play ranked 13th in the state.

With that blow by blow description of the historic season, we will move on to the championship in the next *Historically Speaking* column.

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Howard Hay



John Howard

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Larry Hodge