

Racial tensions in Louisville were high in the winter of 1958. Public schools had only just been integrated in the 1956-57 school year. Redlining still prevented black families from moving into all-white neighborhoods. I was a freshman at St. X, playing in what my teammates and I believed was the best high school basketball program in Louisville under head coach, Gene Rhodes.

As my freshman class entered the building at Brook and Broadway earlier that fall, most of us had something in common besides our age, our gender and our Catholic heritage. Most of us had never met a black person our age, much less competed against an athlete who was not white.

But that had not been true of our basketball team, which had been playing Central High School since 1950 when St. X Principal Brother John Joseph and Central's principal agreed to compete in sports, breaking the so-called color line. In the era of segregation, Central was the only high school available to black students in urban Louisville. Unable to compete for official KHSAA state titles, all-black high schools throughout Kentucky were forced to compete in their own separate state tournaments. So, the games between the Tigers and the Yellow Jackets, though hotly contested in front of segregated cheering sections, were mostly for bragging rights.

But 1958 was different. In 1956, under court orders, all athletic titles in Kentucky were finally desegregated. In 1958, St. X basketball teams at the freshman, JV and varsity levels were all formidable. And one of the teams that we all knew we had to beat to claim the mantle of best that year—for real, not just for bragging rights—was Central, still an all-black school despite desegregation.

The Yellow Jackets were on the schedule and everyone knew what was at stake. What most of us didn't know was that rumors were spreading that some people connected with the KKK had threatened a bombing if the games went on. Some officials had advised cancelling the contests. But our principal, Brother Thomas More was having none of it.

He was keenly aware of how the "Know Nothing" Party of the 1800's had threatened the Xaverian Brothers when they came to Louisville. He knew of bias against Catholics, and he knew about the hostility in some quarters that arose when St. X and Central had decided to play at the beginning of the decade. He refused to cancel. The games were played.

Some might have noticed a bigger security presence but probably thought it was because of the racial tensions already at play in the city. I only learned the truth years later when one of my English teachers from St. X, Brother Marion, told me the story when we were both in the same graduate school class at Columbia University in New York in 1966.

Postscript #1: No bombs were ever detonated.

Postscript # 2: Our varsity team lost. But the Tigers beat The Yellow Jackets in the Regional by 2 points in two overtimes, then went on to win the 1958 KHSAA State Basketball Championship.

Postscript # 3: Central, still an all-black squad, finally won its first KHSAA state basketball title in 1969. But that title was not the first KHSAA state championship for the Yellow Jackets. Their first came in the spring of 1958, following the bitterness of their loss to the Tigers in basketball. I was running on the varsity track team by then. We were good. The Yellow Jackets were better. They won the state title in track for Central's first official KHSAA championship.

Postscript # 4: Earlier that fall, St. X's varsity football team had won the State Championship, making St. X one of the rare schools to accomplish the feat of holding both KHSAA basketball and football titles in the same school year. To get there, they squeaked by Central 7-0.

Postscript # 5: A year after that eventful season of 1957-58, a group of Louisville junior tennis players, including several from St. X, were travelling north to play in some U.S. Junior Championship matches. They were sponsored by a St. X dad named Bill Cooper, whose sons were on the squad—several of whom are in St. X's Alumni Hall of Honors. The group had one black teammate, a player from Flaget High School.

The group stopped for lunch near Cincinnati. But the restaurant's staff refused to serve that young man, saying that the white kids could come in but their teammate would have to eat in the car. Mr. Cooper and the team refused the offer. They all ate in the car. The owner found out what had happened and came out to apologize. He said they all would be served if they ever returned. Mr. Cooper told the man he'd better mean what he said, because the squad would stop there on the way back to Louisville. And they did, served inside this time. All of them.

Final Postscript: What we all learned from the black athletes we competed with and from those Brothers and coaches at St. X who helped us grow up in those long-ago days in the old school on Broadway was something that still holds true today: The arena itself does not care about color. Never give in to racism. Ever.

--And the effort between Central and St. X goes on:

In March of this year, the Diversity Club of St. X and Central's Black Student Union began joint meetings every other week in response to recent events that continue to haunt Louisville's struggle for racial equality. The stated aim of these meetings is to "develop and recognize the common humanity we all share." Speaking for those of us who still remember those efforts by our two schools in the late 1950's, "Amen to that."

Written by Joe Kroh '61

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