

Farm Boys, Crackerbox Gyms, and Hometown Referees: Coaching Basketball at Hurdsfield, North Dakota in 1953-1954

by Lawrence H. Larsen*

In 1953-1954, I coached high school basketball in Hurdsfield, North Dakota. Hurdsfield, a town with a listed population of 223 in 1950, had been founded early in the 20th Century on a branch of the Northern Pacific Railroad roughly seventy miles northeast of Bismarck and 200 miles west of Fargo, meaning in a practical sense, especially to a city person like myself, that it was in the middle of nowhere. Indeed, the highways running in and out of Hurdsfield were unpaved. What passed for distinguishing qualities were a couple of grain elevators, a large slough, a red brick two-story school, a few white wooden churches, two taverns, and a one-block main street. During my ten-month stay, I saw neither the inside of a church nor a tavern. I was too bullheaded to go into one of the former after the head of the school board sanctimoniously informed me that country folk were more religious than city people. As for the latter, they were out-of-bounds to school teachers, who, I was told, had to follow the same rules as ministers of the Gospel. It was a restrictive society, made worse for me because there were no eligible women in my age bracket — they all had seemingly left as soon as they got out of school, usually to become clerks or secretaries in Fargo or Bismarck. Under the best of circumstances there was little to do. Away from school my life evolved around my small rented room and a gas station lunch room, directly across the road. For recreation I listened to the radio and read, usually day-late Minnesota newspapers, along with old news magazines. Sometimes in the papers, I would read in the society columns about Minneapolis and St. Paul women I had known, some quite well, back in Wisconsin at Lawrence College in Appleton, only about 700 miles away, but as far as I was concerned a civilization removed from the bleak prairies of central North Dakota. I had the feeling of being on a remote frontier, where the big event of the day was the arrival of the afternoon train.

I was there because after I graduated from college in the spring of 1953 I had not bothered to look for a job. Assuming that I would be drafted and resigned to that fate, I concentrated without much success on my golf game. Then, in July, the Korean War ended and my father suggested that I might be well advised to go to work. By then, of course, most teaching jobs had been filled.

I suggested to my father that he send me to graduate school, but he rejected that idea. So, I got a temporary job in a foundry in my home town of Racine, Wisconsin, and listed my credentials for a teaching position with the Wisconsin State Employment Service. Lo and behold, toward the end of August I received several offers from small North Dakota schools that were desperate to fill positions. I took the Hurdsfield job, which paid \$3,200 with hardly any benefits, a fairly good starting salary at that time, because I would also be able to coach basketball. I had the title of principal, not bad for a new college graduate without teaching experience, but it turned out that my superior, the only other teacher in the high school, was the superintendent. Along with my coaching duties, I taught five subjects, including agriculture, about which I knew nothing. In fact, to be honest, I knew very little about basketball in a playing sense — clumsy and nearsighted, I moved slowly, handled the ball poorly, and was good only at hitting one-handed set shots from the corner. Yet, here I was at age 22, achieving a long-nurtured ambition of coaching high school basketball.

I had what I considered some coaching skills. From junior high school onward I had watched anywhere from fifty to 100 games a year at all levels. At Lawrence, I coached my fraternity team and a powerful aggregation made up of former college players in the tough Appleton city league. Moreover, I was head football manager for three years at Lawrence for what in the early 1950's was among the best small college teams in the country. By following around the coach, Bernie Heselton, a hard-nosed leader of the old school who constantly yelled at and belittled his players, pushing them on to greater heights of performance, I learned something, and, after all, it's easier to figure out what ten people are doing on a basketball court than twenty-two on a football field. So, armed with a strong belief in myself, I set off to coach the Hurdsfield High Stags.

My task would have been easier if the Stags had a winning tradition, but alas they did not. The last winning season for the Stags had been some time back, in the 1930's. I inherited a team that the previous year had gone something like 5-16 in North Dakota Class C basketball. Even more discouraging was that ten of the defeats had been by twenty points or more. Indeed, five of those losses were by 37 to 50 points. Apparently, the basic problem, along with little talent, had been a lack of practice time, hardly any during the season. Then, too, there was only one outdoor basketball backboard and basketball hoop in the entire town. While I cannot

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Hurdsfield High School in Hurdsfield, North Dakota was the setting for Larsen's experiences as a basketball coach in 1953-1954. The building, presently known as Pleasant Valley Elementary School, still includes the small gymnasium where the Hurdsfield Stags played.

— Photo by Brian R. Austin

say for sure, I think the hoop was too low.

The seniors from the ill-fated team were gone. Indeed, the high school had no seniors, a very unusual circumstance. So ill-trained were the remaining Stags that none could dribble without looking at the ball and few could take a lay-up without starting on the wrong foot. The team consisted of thirteen players, including 4 juniors, 5 sophomores, and 4 freshmen. Excepting the student manager and a cheerleader, both freshmen, all the boys in the high school were on the team. The tallest player was a burly 6'2" farm boy who had some potential, but he had never played basketball before. Not being able to shoot with any consistency — a classic case of "stone fingers" — and having a tendency to foul repeatedly, he was what is now called a "project," at least a year away from making a contribution. The rest of the team had three quality players; a good shooting forward who could hit from outside, a tough rebounder who improved as the season progressed, and a young guard who could bring the ball up under pressure. The best that could be said was that there was probably nowhere to go except up. Because none of the players knew much about basketball, they were willing to do what they were told, even if it was wrong. This had the effect of giving me an unexpected advantage. I should add that in an age before national television in central North Dakota, few of the team members had ever seen a big-time basketball game. As long as I was assertive and yelled a great deal, I usually did not have to worry about being second-guessed.

The playing facilities dictated my basic strategy. Our gym had seats for about 200, meaning most of the people in the immediate area. The floor was in a sunken pit. To say it was small is an understatement. The out-of-bounds lines, for the purpose of putting the ball into play, were drawn inside the playing floor. When the ball was in play, the court ended only a few inches from the walls. There was no space at either end behind the baskets, a definite deterrent to driving lay-ups; anyone who tried one ran the risk of being splattered against the wall. There were overlapping ten-second lines that started at the free throw lines. The floor was roughly 55x25 feet, making it ideal for either a zone defense or a full court press.

Basically, my defensive plans called for various types of zones. If a zone shifted properly, especially a 3-2 with

the two front players set up right on the free throw line, it was at times very effective. Once forced out of a zone, we had little success. I can not recall a game in which we came from behind to win because we were too slow to play good man-to-man defense. On offense we tried to slow things down, taking an occasional fast break to keep the opposition honest. Because we could not dribble very well, we passed the ball a great deal. Indeed, we spent much of our practice time running 3-on-1's and 3-on-2's, with the three passers on the attack going the length of the floor. By the end of the season we had developed into a sharp passing team, but shooting was another matter. The first half of the season we shot well under twenty percent. However, after I convinced the superintendent that we should have some daily gym time during the noon lunch break, simply to practice shooting, our percentages gradually became more respectable.

We competed in a new league called the Hi-7 Basketball Conference, named after Highway 7, the unpaved road that ran through or near all of the member towns. Running east to west along a fifty-mile stretch were Cathay, Sykeston, Heaton, Bowdon, Hurdsfield, Goodrich, Denhoff, and Mercer. Barring a catastrophic snowstorm, all the towns could be reached easily. Just to be on the safe side, we and our fans always traveled in a convoy when we went on the road, frequently running at speeds of 80 to 90 miles an hour or more, well above the posted speed limit. Sometimes, we encountered very cold weather. We once played a road game against arch-rival Goodrich on a still night when it was 35 degrees below zero on the Fahrenheit scale. Even though it was a short drive, it was still impossible to heat our automobiles under those conditions, and we arrived in Goodrich cold and miserable. The Stags never loosened up, falling behind 40 to 12 at the half on the way to a ghastly 60 to 19 defeat in a game that had figured to be close. I was so distressed when I got back to Hurdsfield that I walked the empty streets for close to an hour, not realizing until the next day how cold it was. In retrospect, I was probably lucky not to have frozen to death.

Due to potential weather problems, we started our season in mid-November with home and away games against Woodworth, located some twenty-five miles south of Hurdsfield. After the first blizzard the most direct road to Woodworth usually became impassable

until spring, necessitating close to a 100-mile detour. Woodworth had a reputation as being a "team of butchers" who were out of shape because they did not practice very often. They lost with regularity on the road and the previous year had been one of the Stags' few victims. In the 1953-1954 opener at Hurdsfield they lived up to their reputation. We never trailed and won by about 42-37 in a game that was not as close as the final score seemed to indicate. They were so bad that I actually looked forward to playing them again, even on their own court. This, as it turned out, was a mistake; one should never look forward to playing on the road, even against the Little Sisters of the Poor. When we did visit Woodworth, I had my first inkling that all was not well when I entered their Town Hall gym, a bandbox without a scoreboard, but complete with a snarling throng of spectators intent on seeing the home team triumph. The visitors' dressing room was a second floor loft, about 10x14 feet, reached by climbing a ladder. There were no lockers or any other furniture — our players had to pile their street clothes on a dirty floor. As for lavatory facilities, there were none; the only option was to go outside in back of the building.

The game itself turned into a classic seven against five situation; the referees were big farmer-types wearing bib overalls. It was quite obvious that they had spent the afternoon at the local bar because they reeked of beer. During the game they hardly called any fouls. The Woodworth players played defense by simply knocking my boys down after they reached the forecourt, an effective method under the circumstances. Once I figured out what was going on, I took out my first team and substituted players who would have been on the football team if we had had one. We gradually caught up and near the end of the third quarter trailed by only a few points. During a time out I confidently told my boys that we would take them in the fourth quarter because they were obviously tired and we had taken over the boards. Play resumed and a short time later the buzzer sounded. I called my boys together to prepare them for fourth quarter action. However, at that point the Woodworth scorer declared the game over. Justifiably enraged, I ran down the floor to the stage where the scorer sat. Looking up at him, I started yelling

at him in an uncomplimentary way. At that point he uncoiled from his chair. To my horror he was at the very least a 6'5" brute of a man. He looked down at me, and, pointing a finger for emphasis, snarled in a menacing voice, "Listen here, buddy, you coach your basketball team and I'll watch this here clock." My humble reply was something like, "O.K., O.K., that's fine." We dressed quickly and slunk out of town into the cold and dark North Dakota night.

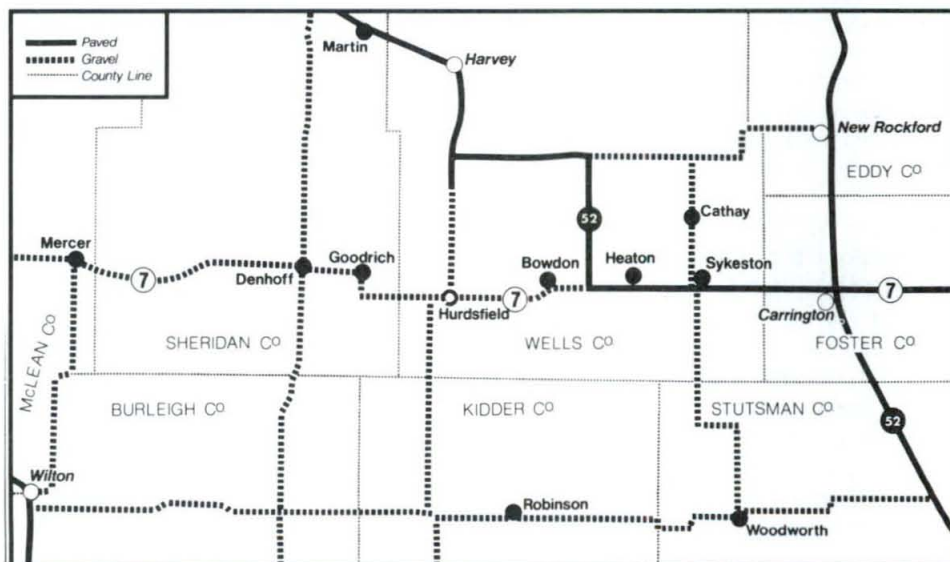
As the season progressed, "homer" refereeing problems became the rule when playing on the road and strange happenings became part of the game. Playing on the road against a strong Robinson team in a late season non-conference game, we ran off ten unanswered points, our best showing of the year, early in the second quarter. Because they did not have a scoreboard, we had to calculate mentally and had no choice other than to rely on the honesty of their official scorer. At halftime, he had Robinson ahead 30-22, when we should have been leading 32-30. Unfortunately, there was absolutely nothing that we could do about it; the home scorebook is the official one. We, of course, lost the game.

The strangest and for me most embarrassing incident concerning refereeing came against another nonconference opponent, Martin, which had destroyed us early in the season on our own court, 59-31, outscoring us 20-4 in the fourth quarter. However, on their court, the Stags won a major upset. Martin had only one referee who called what I considered, even under the circumstances, a positively terrible "homer" game. With all the calls going against us throughout the contest, I ranted and raved, oblivious to a woman sitting directly behind me. After the game was over, the Martin coach, gracious in defeat, introduced me to the referee, now flanked by the lady. The coach said, with a Cheshire cat smile, "I would like to introduce you to our fine and respected Lutheran minister and his wife." There was really no reply to that one.

At home we used the same two referees for almost all our games. One was a recent Hurdsfield graduate, a nice guy and the best athlete in town. The other was a short tough farmer with a daughter in Hurdsfield High School. She and my best guard kept company, an arrangement the father did not approve of. As a result, the guard did

The Hurdsfield Stags competed in the Hi-7 Basketball Conference, named after Highway 7. Communities included in the conference were Cathay, Sykeston, Heaton, Bowdon, Hurdsfield, Goodrich, Denhoff, Mercer, Robinson, and Woodworth.

— Map drawn by Brian R. Austin





The limited playing facilities at Hurdsfield High School in 1953-1954 determined coaching strategies. Originally, the gymnasium seated 200 spectators. A corner office pictured in this photograph of the present building has been added and windows and a brass bell have been removed.

— Photo by Brian R. Austin

not “get” the calls. He got called for charging at least twice a game and routinely fouled out early in the fourth quarter, even though the other referee, understanding the situation, generally went easy on him. I thought that “zebra” to be very nonpartisan. However, one incident caused me to reconsider. When an opposing player scored 25 points in the first half, mainly on long jump shots, that referee came up to me, observed that number 7 was really hitting, and asked how many fouls he had, I answered, “2,” and he replied, “Is that so?” After the game resumed, number 7 picked up three of the quickest fouls I have ever seen, fouling out early in the third quarter.

My memories of the first half of the season are mainly ones of failure. Two games against Mercer, the ultimate conference champion, were cases in point. On their large floor in our first game after the Christmas break, during which the Stags had not practiced as a team, I stupidly decided to use a full-court press on the assumption their guards were poor ball handlers, an idea which proved wrong. All I succeeded in doing was to wear out my boys. Between that and “homer” refereeing, Mercer blew us out. At Hurdsfield, before an overflow crowd, our zone and slow break attack worked brilliantly against Mercer until into the fourth quarter. We led 40-31 with four minutes to play, but unlike the 200 spectators, I did not notice that one of my starting guards had tired. I left him in the game when I should have taken him out. Mercer ran off nine straight points, forced the game into overtime, and won 46-45. After all these years, I am still upset about that one.

Just as memorable was a road game early in the season against Bowdon. Bowdon had made the Class C basketball finals the year before, finishing third. The school had a reputation as being one of the best small high school basketball powers in the state. The only problem was that their state tournament aggregation had become a well-oiled machine by allegedly practicing four to five hours a day, neglecting schoolwork in the process. So there had been a reform. The coach had been replaced and shorter practices were held, all after school.

Even so, Bowdon had a powerful team. To make matters worse, their gym, located in the town hall, was a fiendish snakepit with highly partisan fans perched above on a running track. We dressed in a jail cell, complete with bars, which had a bucket in the corner to serve bodily needs. Quite obviously, this was a

1953-54 Hurdsfield Stags

Woodworth-H	42-37	W
Martin-H	33-58	L
Woodworth-A	24-31	L
Denhoff-A	44-26	W
Heaton-A	26-40	L
Tuttle-A	43-58	L
Mercer-H	44-45(OT)	L
Bowden-A	40-76	L
Mercer-A	31-58	L
Sykeston-A	34-45	L
Cathay-A	47-53	L
Goodrich-A	19-60	L
Tuttle-H	56-73	L
Fessenden “B”-A	54-46	W
Heaton-H	28-40	L
Denhoff-H	57-26	W
Robinson-A	50-58	L
Robinson-H	67-72	L
Martin-A	52-45	W
Bowden-H	40-58	L
Cathay-H	61-40	W
Goodrich-H	83-53	W
Mercer-A	47-35	W
Sykeston-A	56-70	L
Goodrich-A	43-64	L

8-17 (7-15 regular season)

Home 4-6

Road 4-11 (3-9 regular)

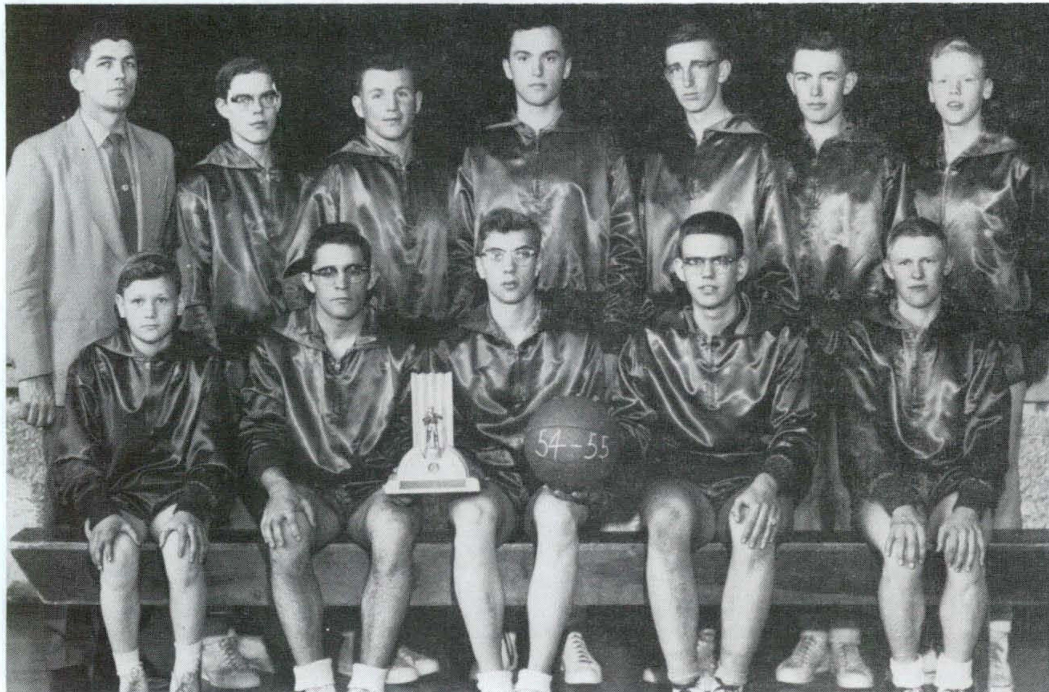
deliberately intimidating situation, and I told my boys just that. When we went out to warm up, the Bowdon players had not yet appeared. As we ran some stylish passing drills — remember, that is about all we could do — I wondered where the Bowdon team was, assuming they probably dressed at their school. Suddenly, a trap door opened in the middle of the floor, and they charged up onto the court, all to the loud strains of their fight song and the rousing cheers of their fans. It was one of the most shocking sights I have seen in my years of watching basketball. After that, everything was anti-climactic. Bowdon, moving well and shooting over our zone, which was functioning well, made nine of ten opening shots, surging to a 26-8 first quarter lead. Even though we did not play all that badly, we ended up losing 76-40, a disastrous defeat that destroyed our confidence for close to the next two months.

A turn-around finally came in a late season game in which our opponent played a man-to-man defense. Using the “Beloit Roll,” somewhat similar to what is now called a four-corner defense, we scored almost at will before they caught on too late and switched to a zone. That victory rebuilt our confidence and we were competitive for our last eight games. In the best game we played all year, we lost 58-40 at home to Bowdon, playing them close after trailing 15-3 early in the game. We beat our hated rival Goodrich 80-53 at home, incredible in light of our 60-19 loss on their court. We beat another good conference team, Cathay, 61-40 at home, tuning up for the district tournament at Goodrich

and peaking at just the right time.

Our first tournament game, played before roughly 1000 people, a very large crowd by Class C standards, was against Mercer. Even though they were conference champions and even though they had defeated us twice, we knew we could beat them — one of the greatest feelings underdogs can have is to know they can win. Except for just before the end of the first half, when Mercer scored six straight points after intercepting in-bounds passes under our baskets, we dominated play, winning 45-36. My enthusiastic players carried me off the court in triumph. While it was hardly the equivalent of winning a national championship, it sure felt good at the time. We lost the next night, but the Mercer game was our season. Even though the Stags ended up 8-17, we were a respectable team. Of course, we had neither the people nor the shooting ability to play over .500 ball. Given how we had started, we had come a long way.

I do not know what happened the next season. I hope the Stags did very well. I went to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, having saved \$1400 of my \$3200 salary; there was simply nothing that I wanted to spend money on in Hurdsville. For someone from the city, living in Hurdsville was a tremendous learning experience. In fact, I would have to say it was where I grew up. I sometimes think that I never would have gone on to receive a Ph.D. in American history if it had not been for learning about life as a small town basketball coach in North Dakota.



*There were no seniors enrolled at Hurdsville High School in 1953-1954, and the school did not publish a yearbook. Judging from this photograph of the 1954-1955 Hurdsville Stags, Larsen's coaching contributed to a winning season the next year. Player names marked by an asterisk are those seniors and juniors who most likely were coached by Larsen on the 1953-54 team. Back row (l-r): Doug Oglesby, Coach 1954-1955, Gene Grimm, *Lanny Rhone, *Bob Knecht, Don Radthe, Ron Haux, and Leslie Thompson. Front Row (l-r): Ted Rall, *Neale "Lefty" Rhone, *Nayland Mielke, *Don Grimm, and *Jim Rauser.*

— Photo courtesy of Jim Rauser, Williston, N.D.