

# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## PEARL HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL: NATIONAL AND STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS

In March 2006, when the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association (TSSAA) prepared for the boys' state basketball championship tournament, recognition was given to the Pearl High School team of 1966. That team made history when it broke the color barrier and became Tennessee's first black high school team to win the TSSAA's boys' state basketball tournament. The first year that black high schools were permitted to vie for a TSSAA basketball title, the school's legendary coach Cornelius Ridley suited a team of well-disciplined student athletes. After a 21-0 regular season record, the Pearl High School Tigers entered post-season play with a great deal of momentum, winning the 17th District championship and the Region 5 tournament. The Tigers fulfilled their date with destiny when they won the 1966 State Boys' Basketball Championship, closing an undefeated season.

Pearl High School was no stranger to basketball championships. Although the team was not allowed to participate in games with white schools from across the state, its athletic prowess had earned the school national attention, as it dominated many of the state's black championships between 1939 and 1964. Pearl participated in the National High School Athletic Association (NHSAA) tournament games, established in 1929 by Charles H. Williams, and sponsored by the historically black Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (now Hampton University) in Virginia. Replaced by the National Interscholastic Athletic Association (NIAA) in 1934, the championship games moved to other locations before World War II intervened. In 1945, Tennessee A&I College (now Tennessee State University) athletic director Henry Arthur Kean, and the college president, revived the tournaments, bringing them to Nashville, where they remained until 1964. Because A&I's campus facilities were not large enough to host the tournaments, Davis and Kean sought the use of Pearl High School's gymnasium, which was

the best athletic facility for blacks in Nashville. After consulting with Principal J.A. Galloway, Coaches William J. Gupton and Sadie Galloway, and with the approval of Nashville's superintendent of schools, W.A. Bass, the first games were held on March 29, 1945. Tournament games alternated between Pearl and A&I until 1953, when the university opened a new 4000-seat gymnasium in Kean Hall, where all the games could be played at one site. That same year, Pearl won the consolation game against Knoxville's Austin High School and broke the NHSAA's scoring record.

Pearl's boys' basketball teams were not the school's only teams to excel at the sport. Under Sadie Galloway Johnson, who became the girls' basketball coach in 1939, the girls' teams dominated the basketball court in Middle Tennessee. Winning eight district titles and three state titles, Johnson amassed a record of 160 wins, six losses, and two ties, and seven undefeated seasons, before retiring in 1953.

In 1958, coached by William J. Gupton and led by forward Ronnie "Scat" Lawson, Pearl captured the first of three consecutive national NIAA championships. That year, the Pearl team posted a perfect season. Pearl's winning streak ended in 1961, when Clarksville's Burt High School won. Booker T. Washington High School of Memphis won in 1962. In 1963, Pearl recaptured the championship, and Henry Watkins became the first black basketball player from a racially segregated school to be awarded All-American honors. Tennessee's national championship dominance ended in 1964, when Birmingham's Park High School won the last NIAA tournament held in Nashville. Pearl's participation in the NHSAA ended in 1964, and the tournament moved to Alabama State College in Montgomery, where it was played until 1967. Led by Pearl, Tennessee teams placed third among the states winning NIAA championships, a record exceeded only by Oklahoma (8) and Indiana (7). The Pearl High

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Tigers continued to dominate the basketball court in the THSAA, winning the final two state championships in 1963 and 1964.

On June 14, 1964, during the height of the battle for integration, TSSAA Board of Control members voted to accept black segregated schools belonging to the THSAA and the Middle Tennessee Athletic Association as affiliate members, allowing them to schedule athletic matches in any sport with TSSAA member schools. With this decision, Tennessee became the first and only southern state to desegregate its high school athletic organizations without court intervention. At Pearl, coaches, staff, and players carried on business as usual, continuing to add games and championships in the win column, winning the TSSAA Affiliate Championship in 1965, under coach Cornelius Ridley.

In 1966, the varsity basketball team excelled in competition. Coaches Ridley, Melvin Black, and James Armstrong and the Tigers posted a perfect record (21-0) in the regular season. The ten-man squad was a group of well-disciplined athletes. Through the district, regional, and state competitions, the Pearl squad warmed up to the song, *Sweet Georgia Brown*, and demonstrated their main weapon, the demoralizing slam-dunk, which awed both spectators and their competitors.

Pearl was not the only African-American high school to play in the 1966 state tournament. Two other African-American schools, both in West Tennessee, Jackson's Merry High and Weakley County Training School of Martin, were also in the competition. Additionally, four other Tennessee teams had African-American players on their squads, including Oak Ridge (3), Alcoa (2), Bradley Central of Cleveland (2), and McMinnville City (2). On March 19, 1966, the Pearl Tigers conquered the TSSAA competition and made Tennessee history by defeating Memphis Treadwell for the Boys' State Championship, becoming the first

African-American team in the state to win the title. The team's contributions to sports history in Tennessee are also intertwined with civil rights achievements of black Americans.

While the Pearl teams were known for their athleticism, the players were also academically inclined. Pearl had a nationally recognized reputation as an excellent secondary educational institution. Just as team members Ronald R. Lawson, Walter "Vic" Rouse, and Leslie Hunter played on winning teams during the era of segregation, and were heavily recruited by the nation's colleges and universities, including UCLA and Loyola University, so were the members of Pearl's 1966 championship team. Perry Wallace, team center and class valedictorian, was recruited by some eighty colleges, and became the first African-American to play basketball in the Southeastern Conference, at Vanderbilt University. Other team members went on to play collegiately at Memphis State, Fisk, and TSU. Ted "Hound" McClain played in both the American Basketball Association and the National Basketball Association.

Several coaches and players associated with Pearl High basketball teams have been inducted into numerous Hall of Fames. The Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame honors Coach William J. Gupton (inducted in 1979), Coach Sadie Galloway Johnson (1981), Theodore McClain (1997), and Perry Wallace (2003). The TSSAA Hall of Fame includes Coaches Cornelius Ridley (1991) and William J. Gupton (2006), and player Ronald R. "Scat" Lawson (2004). The Metro Nashville Public Schools Hall of Fame has inducted players Perry Wallace (2003) and Theodore McClain (2005). In 2005, the National Negro High School Hall of Fame inducted Coach William J. Gupton and player Ronald R. "Scat" Lawson.

-- Linda T. Wynn

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