

The Glory Days of MEI Basketball

By Vern Giesbrecht (Reprinted from the September 2017 Issue of The Mennonite Historical Society's Newsletter: "Roots and Branches" pp.22-25 ©2017.)

When a sports committee headed by Henry Klassen painted lines for basketball on a small, concrete-floored auditorium at Mennonite Educational Institute in the late 1940s, no one could have imagined that teams from this school would eventually dominate the competition in the Fraser Valley and sometimes the entire province.

Early teams played in long pants, but shorts were eventually allowed; there were no showers for the sweaty players and certainly no cheerleaders.

Mattresses were draped over the edge of the stage to cushion the impact as players dashed in for lay-ups. Some opposing teams refused to play in the tiny gym.

Nevertheless, by 1956 a team coached by Jake Unger and captained by Ed Janzen qualified for the BC tournament. Although the team lost both its games, 62-34 to Alberni and 49-41 to Mission, this was a significant accomplishment and hinted at later successes.

In the 1960-61 season, volunteers, including students, laid a wooden floor over the cement but more importantly, another senior boys' team qualified for the BC tournament, and this time, it made more of an impact.

Coached by former MEI player Jack Suderman, a 20-year-old Bible school student, and with his brothers Henry and Ed in the line-up, the MEI team stunned the Abbotsford Panthers and Semiahmoo Totems in the Fraser Valley Tournament in Chilliwack to win a spot in the provincial championships, then won three games there, beating the Panthers again in overtime to take third

place, the first of five consecutive top-four finishes for MEI teams.

Ed Suderman was named to the first all-star team, with teammates John Haak and Vic Rahn winning second-team honours.

The next season, with Ed Janzen as coach, MEI's seven-player team edged Abbotsford for the Fraser Valley crown on Ed Suderman's late jump-shot, then lost by one point to eventual champion Victoria to finish fourth in BC.

The "glory days" really began with the arrival of coaches Jake and Eva Braun. During their tenure, junior and senior boys' and girls' teams won twelve Fraser Valley championships and three provincial crowns. Two teams were undefeated, the 1963 senior boys and 1965 junior boys.

Jake Braun had graduated from Sharon High School in Yarrow (he remembers playing in a haymow against MEI) and had coached in Kansas and California before coming to MEI.

Balding, small in stature, with an undistinguished playing background, Braun nevertheless commanded respect. He seldom shouted but in his gravelly voice he let players know what he wanted and how.

"He was his own man," captain Ed Suderman recalled many years later. "If six words sufficed, he wouldn't use seven."

Braun admitted he didn't give out compliments readily.

"I think I was a bit too slow in heaping praise on someone," he confided in a 1994 interview. "I could have used a little more of that, but my attitude was, you've done this very well, but you can do it even better still. Too much praise rules out further incentive for the player."

Braun took an already strong team (five players were added to the seven-player squad of the previous season) and moulded them into champions, guiding them to 26 wins in a row, including convincing wins over the Kerrisdale junior men's team and the University of British Columbia junior

varsity.

All home games were held in Abbotsford and standing-room only crowds of 1,200 were common, especially against the Panthers, now led by former MEI sharpshooter Vic Rahn. MEI beat the Panthers four times that season, then set a tournament scoring record that stood for twenty years in winning four games en route to its first provincial crown. Vancouver newspapers reported that 1,000 Clearbrook fans were among the 6,000 in attendance at UBC on March 16 to see MEI pull away in the last quarter to beat Alberni 58-40 in the final.

Playing with a badly-sprained ankle, Suderman scored 18 points and was named to the first all-star team for the third time. Jim Falk received second all-star award honours for the second time and George Heidebrecht, who scored 21 points and grabbed 18 rebounds in the final, also made the second all-star team.

At Clearbrook MB Church the next morning, where several players and the team managers sang in the choir, *Vancouver Province* sports columnist Eric Whitehead was in the pews, waiting to interview Suderman, who invited him home for lunch.

He wasn't the only reporter who had visited the Suderman hatchery on Clearbrook Road. Big-city reporters loved to play up the "country boys playing in haymows" angle, and as the top scorer on the team, Suderman was the centre of attention.

One scribe waxed eloquent: "The same dextrous fingers that can propel a basketball through the hoop with remarkable accuracy has been plucking eggs off the high speed conveyer belt for years as Suderman – the second youngest of 10 children – helps out in the family business."

In those days there were no divisions based on school size (A, AA, AAA, etc.), so much was made of the fact that MEI regularly played (and often defeated) schools with much larger populations.

Jake Braun's senior boys' teams finished third in BC the next two seasons,

third again in 1969 and then, in his final game as MEI coach in 1970, a team led by Rudy Siemens, George Bergen and Al Neumann edged Abbotsford 49-47 at the Pacific Coliseum in the first all-Fraser Valley final. After leaving MEI, he coached at Trinity Western University for several years.

Braun's tournament record of 17-5 remains as one of the best all-time, and in 2011 he was elected to the BC Basketball Hall of Fame.

While some of the other Hall of Fame inductees rambled on about their accomplishments, Braun's acceptance speech was very brief. He simply thanked God for the blessings in his life. He was the only one to receive a standing ovation.

Braun also had great success as a junior boys' coach, with three Fraser Valley championships and three top-three finishes in the provincial tournament, including an undefeated season in 1965 that was capped by Rick DeFehr's "buzzer-beater" against Vancouver College.

Eva Braun was also an excellent coach, winning five Fraser Valley championships with her junior and senior girls' teams.

Following the Braun era, a long line of dedicated coaches and strong teams kept MEI competitive in the basketball scene, especially in the Fraser Valley, where MEI basketball teams at various levels have won 17 Fraser Valley championships since Eva Braun's junior girls won the title in 1979.

In the 1960s and 1970s, MEI teams captured twenty Fraser Valley championships, giving the school 37 titles overall, including the banners won by the 2012 junior girls' and the 2015 junior boys' teams.

Former Killarney Cougar all-star Arnie Dick's long tenure as MEI coach included several trips to the provincial tournament with senior boys' teams (a record of 13-6) and two close second-place finishes in 1987 and 1995.

Long-time rival coach Rich Goulet of Pitt Meadows called Dick one of the toughest coaches to play against, saying Dick's teams were always well-prepared, fundamentally sound and strong defensively. In 1995, Dick was

named high school senior boys' basketball coach of the year.

MEI teams won two provincial championships in the 1990s.

Playing in their large, modern gym at the "new MEI" on Downes Road, the 1994 junior boys' team coached by former player Pete Reimer defeated the very tall Abby Christian squad, and in 1999, the senior girls' team coached by Tim Smith and led by all-stars Katie Hall, Dana Friesen and Cassie Born defeated Heritage Park of Mission in a high-scoring final, 86-74.

MEI teams have taken part in what long-time observers consider some of the most exciting games ever in the 72-year history of the provincial tournament: the 66-64 overtime loss to eventual champions Prince Rupert in which George Heidebrecht scored 34 points before fouling out (1964); Harv Engbrecht's long shot from the corner with one second left to beat Prince Rupert in double-overtime in the 1969 tournament; and the 49-47 win over Abbotsford in the 1970 final at the Pacific Coliseum, Braun's last game as MEI coach.

MEI Basketball Trivia

- Players on the first team to qualify for the provincial tournament (1956) were Ed Janzen, Werner Hooge, Walter Dahl, Nick Peters, Art Willms, Phil Ratzlaff, Don Neumann, Sig Polle, Jack Hooge, Ernest Loewen. Coach: Jake Unger.
- Former MEI principal Dave Neumann's sons Dennis and Al both won provincial championships (1963 and 1970). Dennis also played on two teams that finished third in BC; Al was a second-team all-star in the 1970 tournament.
- As a 10th-grader, Vic Rahn scored 36 points in MEI's first provincial tournament game in 1961 and helped the team beat Abbotsford in overtime to take third place. Then he transferred to Abbotsford where the Panthers lost three straight Fraser Valley championships to MEI and also lost by two points in the BC finals against Prince Rupert, despite Rahn's all-star efforts.

- Rahn later returned to MEI to coach two teams to top-four finishes in the late 1970s.
- Four MEI players have been named first team all-stars in the provincial tournament: Ed Suderman (three times), Jim Falk, George Heidebrecht, Rudy Wiebe, Harv Engbrecht, Rudy Siemens, George Bergen, Ken Klassen, Rob Schmidt, Paul Chaffee, Prentice Lenz, Joel Nickel, Mark Redekop and Joel Haviland. Surprisingly, only Heidebrecht was named MVP (1964).
- Many former MEI players have gone on to be successful coaches, including George Bergen, whose Walnut Grove team from Langley won the AAAA championship in March, 2017. Bergen's team also won the title in 2013 and finished second the previous season.
- Another successful coach is former MEI and Simon Fraser University star Prentice Lenz, who has coached both senior girls and senior boys at Abbotsford Secondary. In the 2016-2017 season, the girls' team twice beat defending champion Brookswood Bobcats and finished second in BC in the AAA division. Lenz's daughters Sienna and Marin were two of the top scorers on the team.
- Seven MEI players who competed in the provincial tournament have sons who also appeared in the season-ending championships: Dan Ratzlaff (Dale), Dave Loewen (Matt), Rick DeFehr (Matt and Steve), Phil Harder (Justin), Pete Reimer (Joel), Jay Pankratz (J.J.) and Scott Ratzlaff (Luke).
- The undefeated 1963 champions were honoured at three separate events in 2013, the fiftieth anniversary of their trophy: a Decade of Championships dinner at the Langley Events Centre in March, a reception in the MEI library in June and an MEI sports banquet that same evening. Coach Jake Braun, player Al Pauls and manager Ernie Brown have passed away, but ten of the surviving players were able to attend at least one of these events. Howard Loewen, Dean of Theology at Fuller Seminary, was the featured speaker at the sports banquet.

- Seventeen former MEI players and coaches Jake Braun and Arnie Dick are in the BC tournament record books for their accomplishments in the tournament: Paul Chaffee, Joel Haviland, Ben Neufeld, Jon Loewen, Vic Rahn, Matt Loewen, Prentice Lenz, George Heidebrecht, Harv Engbrecht, Ed Suderman, Jim Falk, Mark Redekop, Johnathan Inrig, Josh Hall, Ken Klassen, Brian Redekop and Joel Nickel.



The 1963 MEI championship basketball team

Back row L-R: Ernie Brown, Peter Hooge, Dan Ratzlaff, Mr. Braun, Howard Loewen, Jim Falk, Wes Giesbrecht, David Cornies
Front row L-R: Albert Pauls, Harold Derksen, Vern Giesbrecht, Ed Suderman, George Heidebrecht, Don Wallace, Dennis Neumann

Photo credit: 1963 MEI Evergreen Yearbook



MEI 50th reunion on March 16, 2013. L-R: Pete Hooge, Don Wallace, Howard Loewen, Ed Suderman, Dan Ratzlaff, Vern Giesbrecht, George Heidebrecht, Jim Falk. Photo courtesy of Vern Giesbrecht



Former coach Jake Braun, with son Jerry and daughter Christine, being honoured at the Hall of Fame dinner in 2011.
Photo courtesy of Vern Giesbrecht

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*"What we have heard and known
we will tell the next generation."
Psalm 78*



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