

“March Madness”

It's the month of March in Minnesota and spring is just around the corner. However, March is also known for snow storms and the state high school basketball tournaments, events that sometimes occur simultaneously.

The first state basketball tournament in Minnesota dates back to 1913. It was a thirteen team invitational held at Carleton College in Northfield. Fosston won that first state championship by defeating Mountain Lake 29-27 playing without a coach and with only six players.¹

Martin County has also fielded many exceptionally gifted basketball teams that have recently advanced to the state tournament, both boys and girls. However, looking back at the 20th Century we can catch a glimpse of how the tournament and basketball has evolved by reviewing the accomplishments of some of the Martin County teams during that era.

The first Martin County basketball team to gain state recognition was East Chain's 1923 “farmer boy” team in the graded school tournament held at Hamline University. They defeated Raymond, located ten miles southwest of Willmar, by a score of 35 to 26 to win the state championship. It was reported that this game featured clever passing and shooting and that all five East Chain players were in it every minute, winning as a result of superior teamwork and basketball knowledge.

In 1924 the Fairmont cagers got hot and beat Waseca 8-6 to enter the state tourney. Trailing Waseca 6 to 4 at the start of the 4th quarter, Fairmont's Gaylord “Scrub” Anderson went on a scoring spree hitting two buckets while Waseca failed to score. However, they soon cooled off losing their opening game in the state tournament to St. Cloud by a score of 29 to 7. In that game Fairmont was held to one field goal and five free throws.

In 1937 Tri-Mont, at that time the twin villages of Triumph and Monterey, defeated Mankato 23-22 in the Region Two Tournament to gain a berth in the state tournament. They were referred to as being undermanned, but speedy. Regretfully, the Cinderella story soon came to an end as they lost their first game in the state tournament to New Ulm by a score of 29 to 26.

In 1942, Fairmont entered the state tournament for the first time since 1924. First year coach Jerry Sullivan guided his team to a 12-3 record during the regular season, losing

¹ MSHL Boys' Basketball State Tournament 1913-2012.

only to St. Paul Johnson by one point, Tri-Mont by five, and Windom by six. Unfortunately, Fairmont faced Buhl, the defending state champion, in the first game of the tournament. Buhl had won twenty-five straight games and was favored by fifteen to twenty points. The prognosticators were fairly accurate as Buhl handily defeated Fairmont by a score of 51-38 and went on to repeat as state champions.

Fairmont made the state tournament once again in 1955 under Coach Walt Enger. Following a 9-9 season, the Fairmont team seemed to jell at the right time beating Sherburn in the district finals, and although apparently vastly underrated, taking the measure of Garden City 47-44 in the Region Two final. Fairmont, with one of the poorest records of the eight teams in the state tournament, faced Austin in their first game. Austin, having a superior height advantage, was picked to win by as many as 20 points. Yet, Fairmont led throughout most of the game. In the final quarter, the score became tied 65-65 with only seconds to go and the game went into overtime. Austin's superior height advantage and bench depth finally prevailed as Fairmont lost 76-69 in the overtime. Nevertheless, their scrappy play against Austin's "towering giants" made them the "darlings" of the tournament.

The 1970 Sherburn Raiders, coached by Dennis Christofferson, went undefeated during the regular season. They entered the post season by capturing the district and region titles with relative ease. In the state tournament, they defeated Melrose 65-54 and Marshall 71-60 to reach the finals. In the championship game, they faced South St. Paul, heavily favored and rated number one in the state much of the year. Nonetheless, the Raiders were obviously unimpressed by the "big city" team and went on to win decisively by a score of 78-62 to cap off a perfect undefeated season. Ironically, the championship trophy was awarded to the Raiders by Governor Harold Levander, a South St. Paul resident. This was the last year that all schools participated in a single class tournament. In 1971, the field was split into two classes for large and small schools.

Both the 1980 and 1982 East Chain girls' teams, coached by Rick Uttech, were successful in reaching the state tournament. The undefeated 1980 squad wound up finishing fourth after losing to Albany and then New York Mills and their star player, Janet Karvonen. The 1982 squad, ranked 4th in the state in the final Minnesota Basketball Coaches Association Poll, also made it to state tournament. They defeated St. Charles 46-43 and Tracy 56-37 before losing the championship game to Moose Lake 52-49 in overtime after having led for most of the game.

The 1985 Ceylon Huskies boys' team, coached by Corwin Schmidt, reached the state tournament triumphing over Cedar Mountain of Morgan 53-44 before losing to De La

Salle 62-51 and then Greenway 53-51 in the consolation game. Ceylon had also been represented in 1925 at Hamline University losing to Chisago City in the finals by a score of 17-11. Their coach was Herbert Behm.

The 1990 Fairmont Cardinals, coached by Ron Hested, defeated Maple River 97-88 to gain a berth in the state tournament for the first time in thirty-five years. They went on to face Mahnomon in the first game, winning by a score of 76-47. However, they lost a closely contested game to Mankato Loyola in an overtime nail biter by a score of 75-72. They finished up successfully in the consolation round winning third place in Class A by defeating Minneapolis De La Salle 72-69.

The single class era of Minnesota high school basketball stretched from 1913 to 1970. This era also witnessed some the “Cinderella” teams from small towns that won state titles. In 1971, the two class tournament began that included a third game between the Class A and Class AA champions. It has continued to evolve to the present day.

Details regarding those early years appear somewhat sketchy; however, Martin County has been well represented at the state level in basketball since the inception of the state tournament. Also, some of the earlier entries involved non-sanctioned tournaments that weren’t recognized by the Minnesota State High School League and were sponsored by other organizations. Nonetheless, high school basketball in Minnesota has evolved over the years enduring changes regarding rules, coaching strategies, player development, training, facilities, as well as competition. The game continues to be played with passion and is closely followed by its many fans in Martin County and throughout the state of Minnesota.

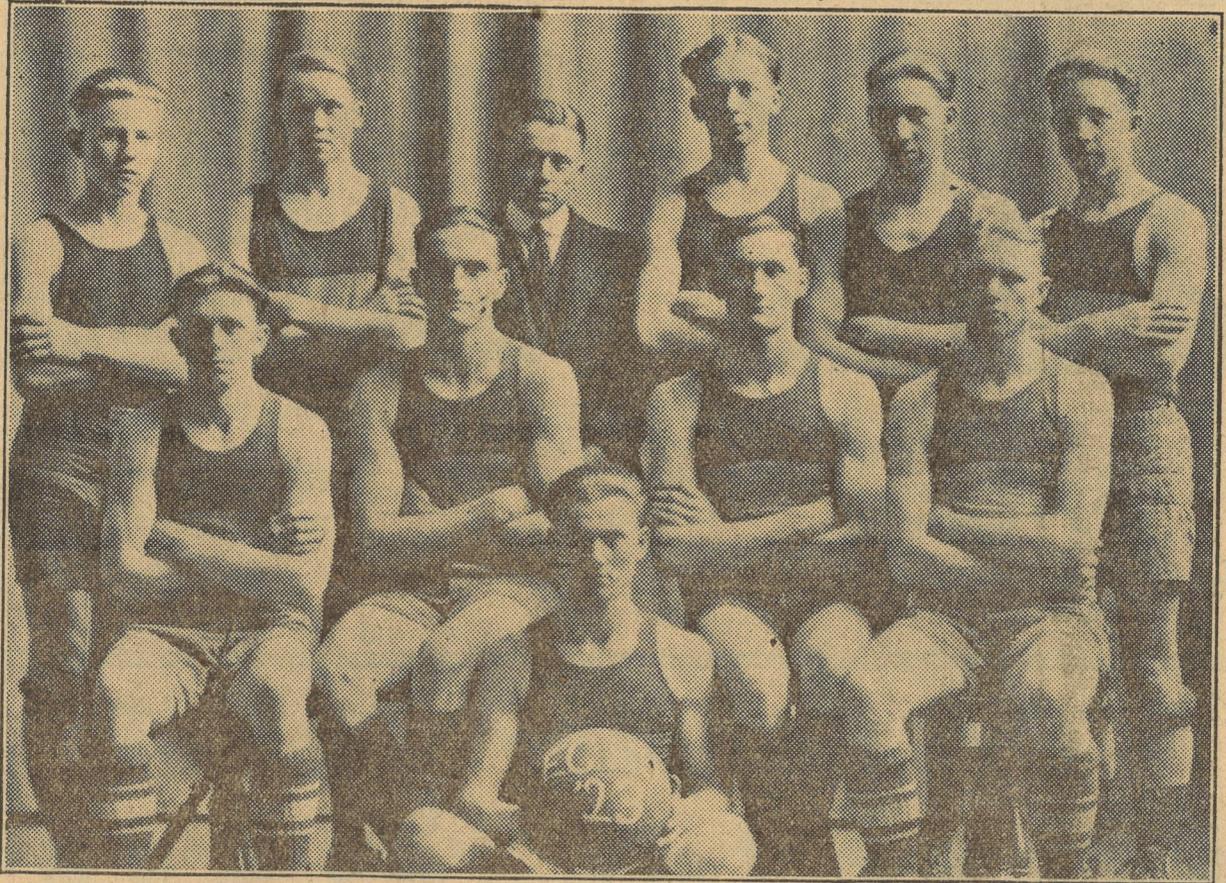
For more information on this topic or to become a member of the MCHS, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.



BORDER LEAGUE CO-CHAMPIONS 1984-85; DISTRICT 5 CHAMPIONS 1985; REGION 2A CHAMPIONS 1985;
4TH PLACE STATE TOURNAMENT 1985.

1st Row: Kevin Detert, Manager. 2nd Row, Left to Right: William Odegaard, Mark Schmidt,
Ricky Thiesse, Gregg Origer, Jeffrey Schultze, Calvin Bremer. 3rd Row, Left to Right:
Corwin Schmidt, Coach; Glen Miller, Jon Boehne, Richard Saggau, Thomas Saggau, Keith Franck,
Todd Fritz, Robert Wiinamaki, Assistant Coach.

East Chain Team Home Bringing Silver Trophy



—Photo by Flo.

THE EAST CHAIN BASKETBALL TEAM



EAST CHAIN
21

EAST CHAIN
23

EAST CHAIN
21

EAST CHAIN
15

EAST CHAIN
53

EAST CHAIN
35

EAST CHAIN
31

EAST CHAIN
3

EAST CHAIN
5

EAST CHAIN
51

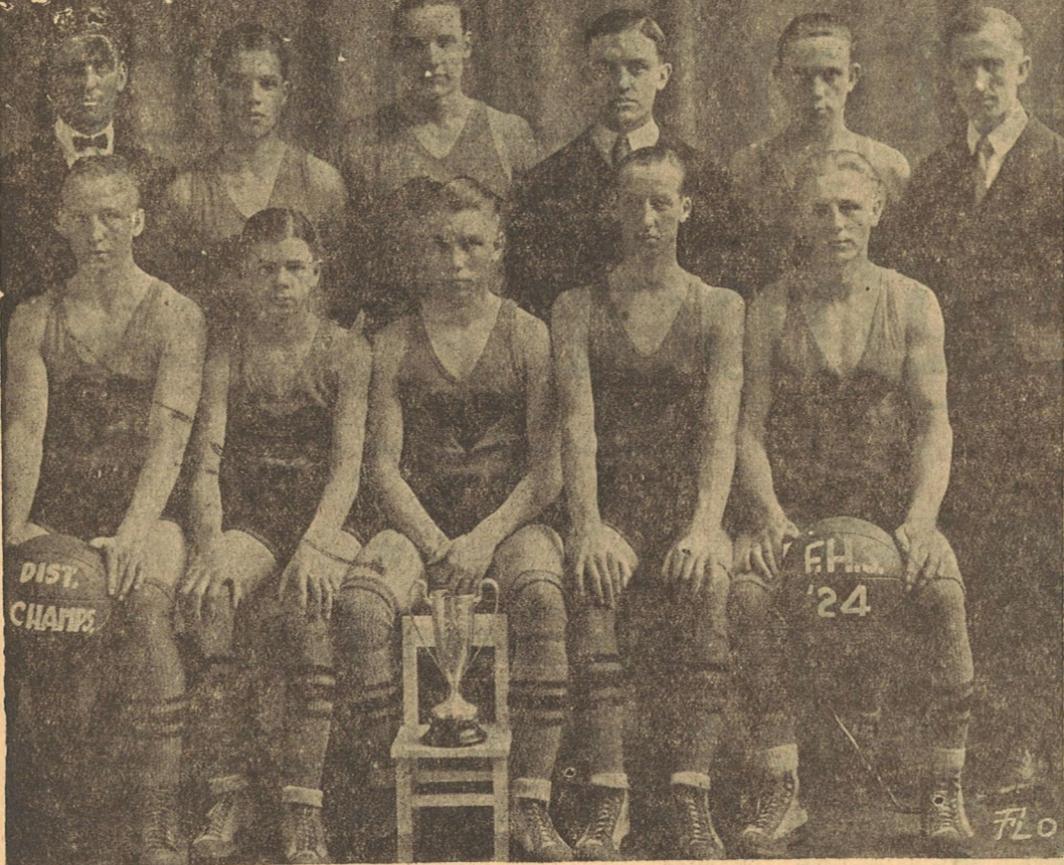
EAST CHAIN
41

EAST CHAIN
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EAST CHAIN
3

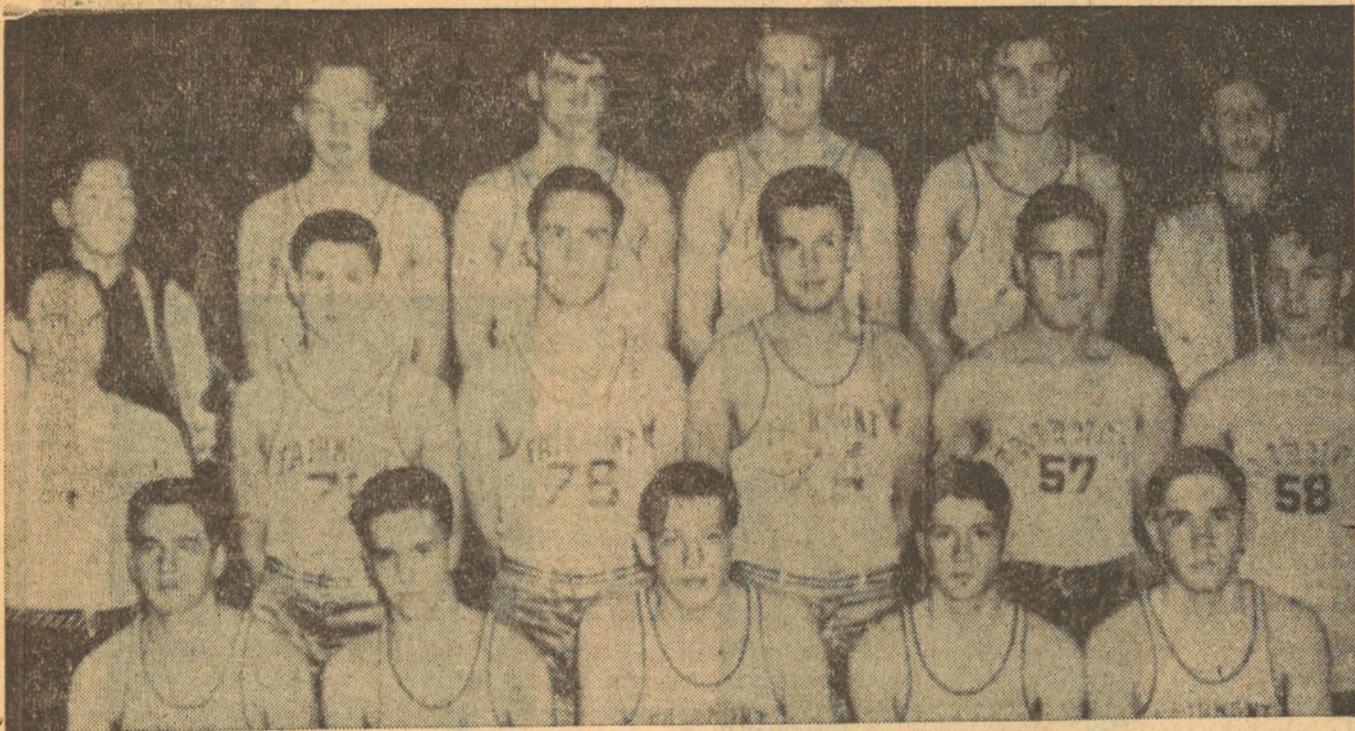
EAST CHAIN
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1980



1924 STATE CAGE TOURNEY ENTRY —
This team was the first from Fairmont to win its way into the Minnesota state high school basketball tournament. Top row, left to right, William Brazler, financial manager, Gordon Conklin, Warren Phillips, Erhard

Welchlin, Walt Rabe, Coach C. L. Knudsen. Bottom row, Mervin Clark, Gaylord Anderson, Captain Ray Weckwerth, Harry Serle and Dick Bengen. Of the group Welchlin and Conklin are known to be deceased.



1942 STATE TOURNEY CAGE TEAM — The Fairmont high school basketball team won the District Five and Region Two tournament and a berth in the state classic in 1942. Members of that team, seated bottom row, left to right, are: Russell Grotte, Bob Orser, Gerald Cady, Cal Gould and Rolland 'Red'

Malcolm. Second row: Jerry Sullivan, coach, Dick Chambers, Ray Evans, Clair Kuss, Clair Olson and Harold Hall. Third row: Bill Norman, manager, Rolland Schwartz, Bob Collision, the late Bruce Olson, Bob Haertel and Todd Turner, manager.



VARSITY TEAM, ROW I: DaWayne Barber, Lowell Ziemann, Tom Idstrom, Jan Jaqua, Roger Smed, James Gotfredsen, John Webb, Steven Howard. ROW II: Thomas Palmer, Richard Miller, Jack Houfer, DeWayne Babb, Arno Norman, Ronald Olson, Vincente Biehler, Vic Horswell.





1937 TRI-MONT REGION TWO CAGE CHAMPS — Front row, left to right: Ronald Steele, John Frahm and James Brennan.

Back row: Coach K. B. Knutsen, Duane Rippe, Wes Smock, Leo Mau, Claude Smock and Barry Schmidt, manager.