



Patti Kerns holds onto the ball. *Alison Shaw*

## Some Glory Days Never Fade, 1979 Girls' Basketball Stands Tall

*Ivy Ashe* Thursday, January 16, 2014 - 6:15pm

The Vineyard girls' basketball team entered the gymnasium of the College of the Holy Cross on March 17, 1979, greeted by familiar hues. It was the day of the Massachusetts state championship game. The team—along with more than eight busloads of fans — had made the trip to take on Quaboag High for the Division 3 title. Both squads had identical season records (21-2). But only one shared school colors with the host venue: purple and white.

“A good omen for the superstitious fan,” Gazette sports writer Anne Carmichael (Lemenager) noted at the time.

The Vineyarders needed little in the way of superstition that afternoon. After all, hard work, good coaching and stellar team play had brought them to the finals in the first place. They took a 14-5 lead in the first quarter and fell behind in the second, surging back and pulling away in the final three minutes of the game to win 44-34.

No Vineyard team in any sport, boys or girls had won a state title before. No team had ever made it to the finals.

“I remember cutting down the nets at the end,” forward Lynne Pachico (Silvia) recalled this week. “Everyone got a piece of it.” Ms. Silvia, along with fellow senior and four-year starter Ann Mallory, scored 17 points. Make that 17 on the 17th, another note for the superstition book.

“There were tons of fans,” point guard Bonnie Ward (Pierce) recalled. “I just remember the gym; it seemed so big, and then we had all these amazing fans.”

“You knew it was an important game,” she said. “And the fact that we won was just amazing . . . it seemed surreal, almost.”

Thirty-five years later, the game still stands as one pinnacle of a masterful stretch of Island basketball. Never mind the 21-2 record from 1978-79. Between 1978 and 1981, the girls had a 65-5 record. Both the boys’ and girls’ teams were dominating the Cape and Islands League and were regulars in the newest incarnation of the state tournament, which had started classifying schools by size rather than throwing all teams into the same bracket.



Lynne Pachico takes advantage of a well-placed pick. —

The high school gym, located in what is now the library, was full on Tuesday and Friday nights for home games.

“That was the thing to do,” Ms. Silvia said. Ice hockey wasn’t even a sport at the high school yet. Wrestling, swimming and gymnastics made occasional cameos, but basketball ruled the Vineyard winters. Though the boys typically drew larger crowds, the girls also had a large following, recalled Bob Nute, who was head coach then.

“I didn’t know it was a big deal, but it was,” he said. “When you came home it seemed like half the Island would be there to greet you.”

Girls’ basketball has been around as long as the regional high school. It was one of the original sports when the school opened in 1959, and the team’s travel schedule allowed for one overnight on Nantucket. But the game itself went through a sea change beginning in the late 1960s, when the old six-on-six format was scrapped in favor of the five-on-five style used in the boys’ game. Gone were the skirts, replaced by the short shorts and tall socks that defined basketball in the seventies and eighties. Gone were the roving guards — the players who couldn’t cross the half-court line — and the limits on how many times a player could dribble before passing.

“No one was prepared for that, not the coaches, not the players” Mr. Nute said.

At the time he was working as the high school music teacher and coaching a boys’ squad in the Vineyard church league. He was asked to help the girls make the transition to the five-on-five game. After one year as assistant, he took over head coaching duties for the 1970-71 season, and would eventually stay with the team for 20 years.

The next year, another shift took place as the passage of Title IX allocated more resources to the girls’

squad. By 1974, the Vineyard girls were poised for success. In 1975, the first year the girls' basketball tournament went statewide, the team made it to the state semifinals after winning the Cape and Islands league title and the Southeastern Massachusetts tournament. Over the next three seasons, the girls made the tournament each year but lost consecutive heartbreakers, including a three-point loss to Bourne in the state semis (they were still greeted with fire trucks and sirens on returning to the Vineyard).

"They were never not competitive," Mr. Nute said.

"It was a strong program when we got up [to varsity]," Lynne Silvia said. "So we had to keep it going."

Those teams "set the bar," said Tricia McCarthy, a sophomore on the 1979 team. "When we got up there, we knew what we could do." Most of the team had been playing together for years, she said, attending summer camp at Massachusetts Maritime Academy "as a crew." After practices, the team stuck around the gym to play three-on-three with Coach Nute.

"We just loved the game," Ms. Silvia said. "It was a close team."

But no state title is a given, and the 1978-79 season brought a unique set of challenges. The high school was closed for asbestos removal, so the team was practicing at the Boys' and Girls' Club at 9 a.m., then attending classes at the elementary school from 1 to 7:30 p.m. Away games meant missing an entire day of classes because of the travel schedule.

Ms. Silvia and Ann Mallory led the team that season. Their former teammates and coach describe them as "exceptional, phenomenal" players. The supporting cast — made up of Ms. Pierce, Ms. McCarthy, Jenny and Missy Manter, Wanda Moreis, Lana Ben David, Patti Grant, Lynn Merry, Heather Hall, and Patty Kerns — was formidable in its versatility.

"As a team, everybody could jump into positions," Bonnie Pierce said. "You always had somebody just as competent to go in."

"We played a style back then that would have been what the Celtics were running at that point," Mr. Nute said. "We were always swarming people." He remembered that a trainer for the Celtics once watched a Vineyard game — the Southeastern Massachusetts tournament finals — and said he'd never seen girls play that type of basketball before.

"It was intense," Mr. Nute said. "It was a lot of work."

"Of course, it paid off," Ms. McCarthy said. "We were very successful, and [the work] became worth it."

The team was greeted by some 2,000 fans after they came back from the state finals, trophy in tow. The reception was noteworthy not just for the sheer number (roughly a third of the Island population at the time), but also for showcasing the power of word of mouth.

"We were the first ones off [the ferry]," Ms. Pierce said. "All of the people were there with their cars, all the fire trucks were there," she added.



Tricia McCarthy was a sophomore on the team in 1979. —

“For me, because I was a sophomore, it was just like, oh my God, what is all this?” Ms. McCarthy said.

“I think it was almost overwhelming,” Mr. Nute said. “I don’t think anyone was used to that sort of thing.” After stepping off the boat, players and coach made their way to a flatbed trailer. “The crowd went a little crazy,” Ms. Lemenager the Gazette sportswriter wrote. Mr. Nute raised the trophy over his head. The entire celebration, which included an impromptu parade of fire trucks around the block, lasted 40 minutes.

“One of the girls asked me the other day — she’s now a woman, obviously — we weren’t really that good, right?” Mr. Nute said, laughing.

Two years later, the Vineyarders won states again, cementing a legacy that began in 1979.



Jenny Manter played on the team with her sister Missy. —