“Champions of the United States”

Ladies and gentlemen;

Several weeks ago while in Martinsville Indiana, the topic of conversation turned to Hoosier basketball and I heard about the sensational play of the Vincennes, Martinsville, Franklin, Frankfurt, Wingate, Crawfordsville and other champions. It was all quite interesting in the field of “play-it-pays.” And then I asked if the gentleman had ever heard of Ohio’s top rank in basketball and I proceeded to explain from sports memories.

During the past month we have been hearing much about state champions in basketball, and a few hours hence on this Saturday night the 1947 champions, both A and B will be proclaimed at the Fairgrounds Coliseum in Columbus Ohio. The state of Ohio has contributed much to Jimmy Naismith’s game of basketball ever since its invention in 1891. But no section of the Buckeye state has done more for this game than the great Miami Valley.

Since 1909 when state championship play began at Ohio Wesleyan University, our Miami Valley has produced the winner 17 times and 10 of those champions have come from Dayton. But there have been other basketball champions in our midst to, but unfortunately their conquests frequently escape our eyes as the years pass in parade.

Here in the city of Dayton in 1908 was started a team which in 1913 was labeled the champion basketball team of the United States. That team was called the St. Mary’s cadets and was composed of such outstanding athletes as Babe Zimmerman, Hugh and Norb Saxsteader, Al Mahrt, Martin Kuntz, R Baker, is and A Schumacher. During the five-year existence of the Cadets they won 61 games and lost three. In the season of 1908-1909 no team scored more than 10 points against the Cadets and the following season no more than 13. Some of the shattering scores were: Cadets 103 Conquestors 0. Cadets 115 Olympians 0, Cadets 139 Wintons 0. Many opponents scored but from 1-3 points while the Cadets counted near to, or over 100 points.

As the Cadets continued to gain momentum the question arose as to the championship of Dayton! Which was the better team-the St. Mary’s Cadets or the Dayton Turner’s-the latter, a splendid physical culture organization which had adopted the game of basketball shortly after its creation in 1891. Well it was finally agreed to play for the city championship during the 1911-1912 season and what a game was in store! Here were 40 minutes of dynamite on the hardwoods, for be it remembered that in 1911-1912 there were 20 minute halves, no quarters and no automatic timeouts.

The Dayton Turner’s had a finely balanced team in 1912. There were Martin, Varley, Boll, Dolan, Scheible and Ziegler, and although the rivalry between the two teams was sharp, nevertheless the game was clearly played. Back and forth the tide of battle swung as the 10 basketteers displayed speed, skill and strength. But in the closing minutes of the second half the Turner’s faltered with the result that the St. Mary’s Cadets won 36-21. And there with was created Dayton’s first city champion in basketball.

The title of champion seemed to inspire the Cadets because now they wished to atone for the two defeats they had suffered in the latter part of the preceding season. These reverses came at the hands of the Hull House Midgets by the scores of 42-19 and 40-29. Did you ever hear the story of Hull House Community and Social Center on Halsted Street in Chicago? Halsted Street is 32 miles long and on its narrow way one finds it symbolical of the truism that America is one vast melting pot, since here in one crucible are mingled nationalities from the four corners of the earth.

People on Halsted Street vary from most underprivileged at one end to the elite near the Gold Coast 32 miles away. Well some years ago a lady of renown was walking down Polk Street, then to Maxwell Street and State Street and at last to Halsted Street. She stood in the bohemian section where she viewed with alarm the plight of fellow Americans.

“Weary of myself and sick of asking what I am, and what I ought to be.”

These words of the poet had been running through the mind of Jane Adams, for Jane Adams it was who had been observing the squalor, the poverty and the seeming hopelessness and futility of Halsted Street. Then and there the die was cast, for Jane Adams decided to make this part of the big, cold city her home. She decided upon a life of sacrifices and devotion to American underprivileged, and so with the aid of friends she purchased on old residence from a Mr. Hull and this it was which became the famous Hull House of Chicago. Here was a social Center. A community builder, a beacon of hope and a builder of a better America through work and play.

Before we pass on to the great basketball games between the St. Mary’s Cadets and the Hull House Midgets may we not pause in behalf of another great American woman who will live forever in the hearts of Americans. She knew the value of recreation and play and she it was who established the Bunker Hill of American playgrounds. Like Jane Adams on Halsted Street, this lady too had a vision, and who was she you rightfully ask? Well she was a girl from Cincinnati and like Jane Adams she was to find her life’s work in making happier the lives of others. Her name, Lillian Wald, and the field of her endeavors placed her on Henry St., New York City. The windows of the house on Henry Street tell us another story of the American melting pot and the story of recreation and play. And I must not forget to mention Dayton’s own Charlotte Carr.

Our country has been made bigger, better and happier by such personalities as Jane Adams, Lillian Wald, Charlotte Carr, and Ellen Gates Starr. Proof of this assertation may be readily found in the lives of George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Alfred Smith Angelo, and Benny Goodman and many others! But now let us return to the St. Mary’s Cadets and those two extra games with the Hull House Midgets. The Cadets were now riding the crest of success and when the referee tossed the ball, away flew the Cadets as never before, but the boys from Hull House gave as much as received but in the end the Cadets won 31-21. Unbelievable said the Chicago papers! And now came the second game of the series and ladies and gentlemen, if ever a basketball game had the touch of extreme finesse and technique, here it was! The fans were frantic; the officials were alert; the players watched the net and swished the net escalation point.

The last few minutes of the game remain; the score is just about even when the gun cracks, but the official scorer said St. Mary’s Cadets 19 Hull house Midgets 18. This was a great game of basketball in which red blooded American young men played the game clean, fast, and well. Jane Adams of Hull House has come and gone. Lillian Wald of Henry Street lives in our memory, but it is so refreshing to know that they built their projects with the help of recreation and play and that these involve our great American game of basketball. As one enters Hull House today one will see in scribed on trophies and plaques the names of Satt, Weinstein, Eller, Stein, Walfors, Wolf, and Durban and what do these names mean? They were the young man who came from Chicago’s Bohemia on Halsted Street and they were the young man who helped to make immortal the great American game of basketball.

Alexander sighed because he had no more worlds to conquer, and perchance so it was in 1912-1913 with the St. Mary’s Cadets. That season was most eventful for the Cadets who defeated among others New Lexington, Cincinnati Gyms, and the Columbus Blues. By this time the fame and name of Dayton’s St. Mary’s Cadets had reached from coast to coast. Hence a challenge to the Buffalo Germans!

Who were these young men, Saxsteader, Zimmerman, Schumacher, Kuntz, Mahrt, and Baker and how dare they question the superiority of the Buffalo Germans, a name which meant supremacy in basketball.

The Buffalo Germans of Buffalo New York did much for Jimmy Naismith’s game of basketball. The men on that team represented the YMCA of Buffalo and be it remembered they were the first Pan American and Olympic basketball champions. It so happened that one of the players in Jimmy Naismith’s first game of basketball was Frederick Burkhardt who became after graduation from the Springfield YMCA College a resident of Buffalo New York. Where he organized the first Junior Buffalo league. The Buffalo Germans first attracted attention in 1895 when Al Heerdt, Billy Rhode, John Maier, Edward Miller, Jay Bayliss and Emil Martin first played outside games. Here was a group of young men who were to spread the popularity of basketball and certainly they deserve on orchid for their endeavors in the field of sports.

In 1901, the Pan-American exposition was held in Buffalo and in June of that year the first national open basketball tournament was played as a part of the expositions athletic program. From this time hence the name of the Buffalo Germans was tops in basketball. They met all corners and in a four-year period won 152 games while losing 2.

And now came the clamor for a game between the Cadets and the Germans, and why not? Arrangements were made and the American press stated that here was a game for the championship of the United States. Dayton and the Miami Valley were the cynosure of the nation as Heerdt, Rhode, Miller, Faust, and Linnenborn came to do battle against our St. Mary’s Cadets. Al Heerdt, or Baldy Heerdt as he was familiary known brought his players to Dayton as a part of a barnstorming trip and what sterling players they were.

The game was now underway with coach Heerdt playing and directing his team as only a master could play and direct. But the opposition was full of speed, determination and skill and it could not be denied. Now the Buffalo Germans had been beaten before but never by more than a few points. But when this game ended the scoreboard said 45-30 in favor of the St. Mary’s Cadets. Hard to believe, said coach Heerdt, who also remembered that it was the worst defeat the Buffalo Germans had ever taken but he also said that it was one of the cleanest and best officiated games he had ever played in.

And thus a basketball tale has been on unfold. The men on that Cadets team are now a part of our great American life. The Buffalo Germans are all gainfully occupied in their chosen professions or vocations. The long and useful careers of these former players are fitting testimony to the fact that the game is not harmful, but helpful when properly played.

Leaders in social work bully realize this. Hull House on Halsted Street still carries on in basketball. The lights from the Windows on Henry Street beam brighter because of basketball and play.

Robert Worst 1947.