

The year an all-deaf boys basketball team won state

By Erin Grace World-Herald staff writer



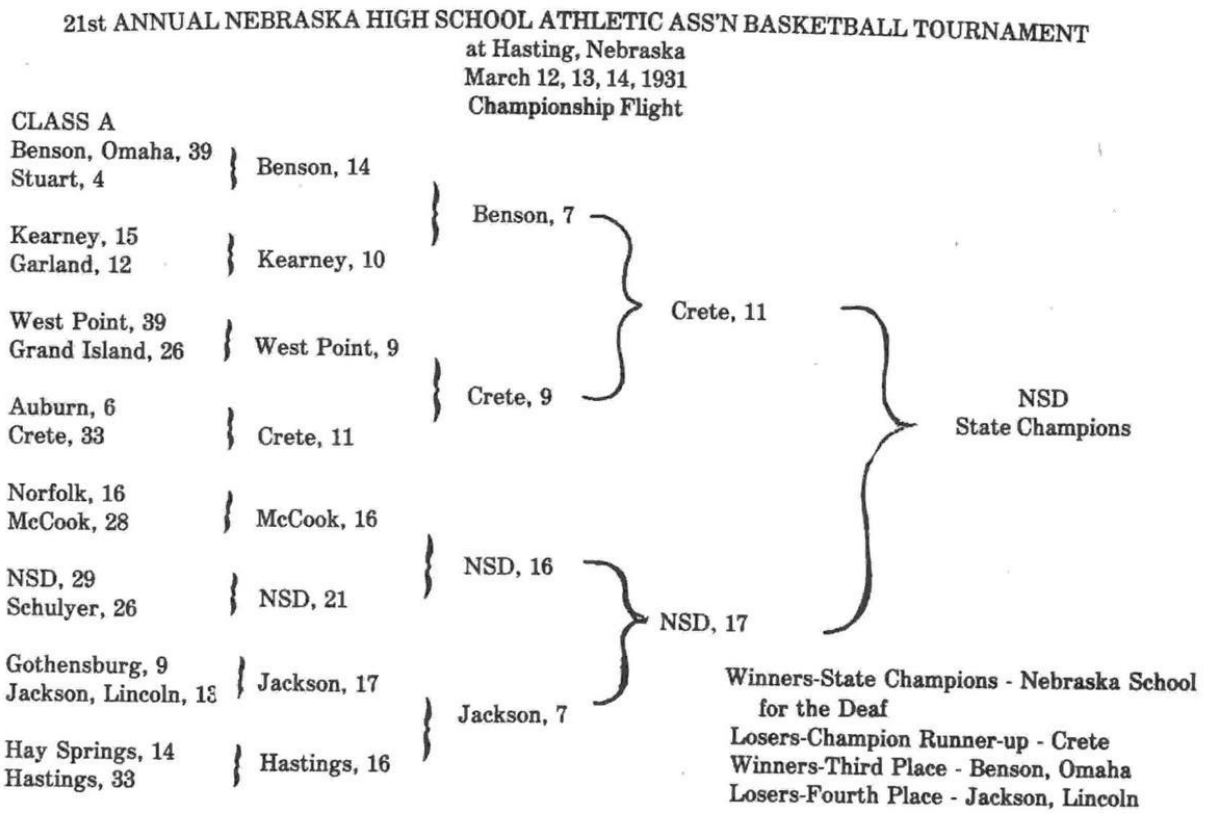
From left, Earl Petersen James DeVaney and Nick Petersen at a reunion in 1981, 50 years after the Nebraska School for the Deaf won the state basketball tournament. Earl played on the team, and his brother Nick was the coach. DeVaney was the president of the school's alumni association.

When 16-year-old Charlie Fletcher takes the floor this afternoon in Lincoln in the second round of the Class B boys state basketball tournament, the standout junior from undefeated Skutt Catholic High School will have something special going for him.

He is tied, by genes, to another undefeated Nebraska high school team, a David that beat all the Goliaths in its path to the state trophy in 1931. Unlike David, who could hear, this Nebraska team — coach included — could not.

In the all-class state tournament that year, the winningest team hailed from the Nebraska School for the Deaf. The residential school in northeast Omaha beat every single opponent that season, giving the school not just a trophy but a place in the imaginations of the public — and proof that a disability was not an inability.

One fact that might offer consolation to Charlie, his SkyHawks teammates and the other basketball players playing in near-empty gyms and arenas at this year's tournament might be this: You can still win even if you can't hear the fans. The deaf school did just that in 1931 as it plowed through competitor after competitor, winning all 29 games in its season, including the state final against Crete.



Nebraska School for the Deaf prevailed in the 1931 state boys tournament, as shown by these bracket results.

The story, like stories, do, had faded. Until now, Charlie had never heard that he once had a great-grandpa on a state championship basketball team, nor a great-great-uncle who coached it. His folks, James and Megan Fletcher, were unaware.

But Charlie's grandmother, Norma Fletcher, unearthed old yellow clippings this week in preparation for her grandson's trip to Lincoln.

I might have a story, she told me. Boy did she.

It's just the story we need right now as a pandemic and fear of the novel coronavirus grip the world. It's a story of grit, of love of a game and of that chance for glory that comes every March.

This story occurred in the throes of another national trial — the Great Depression. High school students all over were dropping out to help at home. Jobs were scarce. Suffering was widespread.

Yet magic was happening inside the brick buildings on the Nebraska School for the Deaf campus at 3223 N. 45th St. Back then, deaf students were educated in residential settings not unlike college campuses. In addition to regular coursework, the older students took shop and home economics-style classes to prepare them for the work world. They published a school newspaper. They played sports. They knit together, as happens in many small schools, a warm, family culture.

In 1931, one of the alumni of the Nebraska School for the Deaf was a dedicated coach there. Nick Petersen, Charlie Fletcher's great-great-uncle, had graduated in 1923. He taught at other deaf schools and held other jobs. In 1926, he returned to his alma mater, where he taught woodworking and mechanical drafting and later served many years as the school's maintenance man — and its beloved coach.

He coached the school's undefeated 1929 football team and the championship 1930 track team. But it was the 1931 basketball team that turned heads.

Amazed newspaper writers used a disparaging and inaccurate — students could read lips and speak — term, "mutes," to describe what was happening in win after win.

“The mutes are the only undefeated hoopsters in Omaha,” said one Omaha World-Herald article, “and their convincing win over West Point, a team that owned Central, stamps the mutes as possible championship timber.”

One of those 1931 players was Nick’s younger brother, Earl. Earl was Charlie’s great-grandfather. He was then 17. Earl, Nick and another sibling in their family of 12 brothers and sisters were deaf. The Petersens were from Bennington.

In old photos, Earl has the same sturdy build and tousled, sandy-colored hair as Charlie, Skutt’s second-highest scorer, who has averaged 14.4 points a game this season.

“He can score at every level,” Skutt coach Kyle Jurgens said of Charlie. “He’s such a good shooter. He can knock down threes. He’s got a good midrange game. He can attack the basket and get to the rim. He’s only 6-1, but he plays bigger than that in terms of rebounding.”

News accounts don’t say how tall Great-Grandpa Earl was in 1931. Though the game was played slightly differently then, height still mattered. After every score, it went to a jump ball.

For his part, Charlie marveled at what it would be like to play basketball as a person who is deaf. He figures that the teammates must have known one another really well and known where to be and how to focus.

Deafness might have been the least of the team’s challenges. One news article said there were “pitifully few boys” at the K-12 Nebraska School for the Deaf, where total high school enrollment in 1931 was 40. Of the 25 boys, “most of them are small.”

Yet they had, in Charlie’s Great-Great-Uncle Nick, a disciplinarian “with strict control” over his “band of eight.” How tight did coach Petersen hold the reins? News reports said that when the team won a district contest, the players showed “no temperament.”

Translation: The players did not cheer or gloat because “Nick won’t stand for it” and because there were other games still to win. They took nothing for granted.

Reading these old clippings, you get a sense of motivation and spirit. The deaf players, it was reported, “are splendid fighters” who don’t complain.

Earl was enrolled sometime in the 1920s, entering in seventh grade. In his graduating class of 1933, he was one of 10 seniors entering an uncertain time. The cloud of the Great Depression still loomed, something noted by the class speaker and basketball star, Frank Jahnel.

“We acquired the spirit of fighting very early in life,” he wrote, “and we hope we can go on throughout our lives fighting.”

Their class motto was “Ever on.”

They did not lack for humor. In their graduating newspaper edition in 1933, it was noted that Earl’s class bequeathed to the juniors “all short chewed pencils, our wads of gum under the desks, our gift of gab and our art in evading study hour.” The student who was always late was bequeathed a watch. The student who never worried was bequeathed a pillow.

Earl, the class president, was given a carrot because of his “sincere love for beauty and color.”

Earl was named “best student” and “most friendly.” He loved the word “perhaps.” His favorite hobby was “sports.” His weakness was someone named “Betty.” (He later married a Catherine.) His fate was to become a coach.

Earl never did become a coach. After working odd jobs, he settled into a career in auto body work. He had jobs at Paden’s and McFayden’s. His wife was a graduate of the Iowa School for the Deaf. He became a father to two daughters, including Norma Fletcher. He died at age 72, when his grandson, Charlie’s dad, was a boy.

James Fletcher, now a professor of organic chemistry at Creighton University, never knew that his grandfather played basketball, let alone won a state championship. He remembers his grandparents and extended family using sign language and facial animation at get-togethers but didn’t really know what they were saying.

Norma said she didn't know much about her father's past hardwood glory. He didn't dwell on it. She dug out the old stories because her grandson's team was headed to state.

She's so proud of Charlie, and rereading these old stories make her proud of her late father and Uncle Nick.

Nick Petersen entered the Nebraska School for the Deaf in 1910 and was the smallest student in his class, weighing 95 pounds when he was 14. Classmates called him "Nickie." He was an athlete, playing football, basketball and baseball.

Nick was named to the American Athletic Association of the Deaf Hall of Fame. He retired from the school in 1969. His wife, Florence, worked at the school as a counselor and then ran the school laundry. He died in 1990.

That basketball victory in 1931 might have been sweetest moment of all. Nick was hoisted on the shoulders of cheering students. He got congratulatory telegrams from the Omaha mayor and the head of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce.

And when the team arrived back in Omaha from their win in Hastings, Nebraska, they were greeted by fans who lined Dodge Street and the campus.

The deaf players and their coach could not hear the thump of a ball on wood. They could not hear their teammates, their coach or the referee's whistle. They certainly couldn't hear the roar of crowds.

But they could pass and shoot and play so well that they were, as this newspaper once called them, "the only undefeated hoopsters in Omaha."

Think of that. None of the large Omaha high schools at the time could claim that feat.

And those teams could hear.