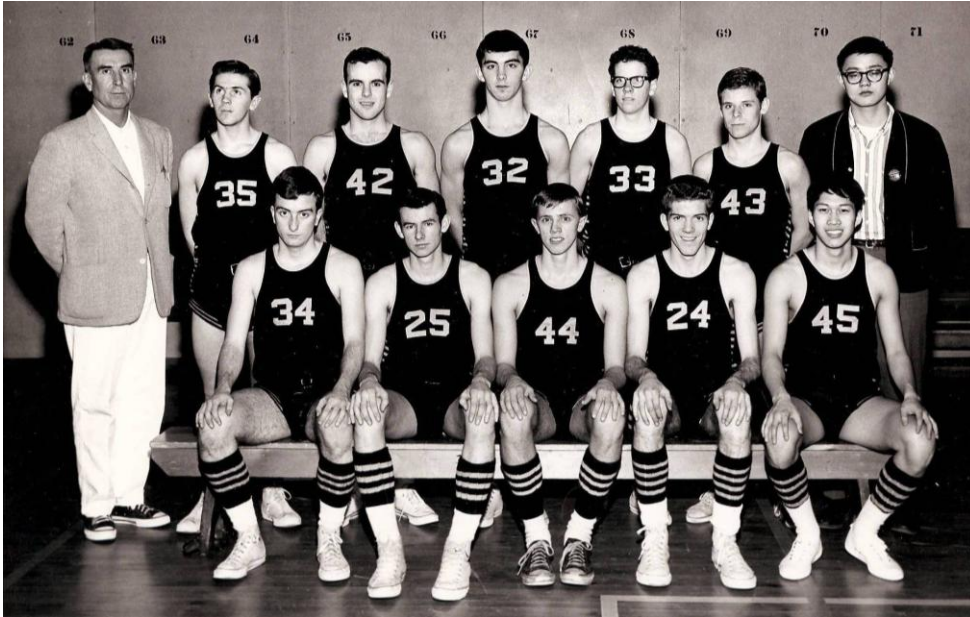


The Lost Boys of '67

A Tale of the Vic High Totems

**Losing a game is heart breaking.
Losing your sense of excellence
or worth is a tragedy.
Joe Paterno**



“So,” Len Roueche continued, “I had the ball in my hands underneath the backboard in the Duncan end of the court with only seconds left in the game, we were losing by a point, and I jumped up to lay it in. I came back down with the ball still in my hands. I don't know why, but I didn't let go of it.” Why? It certainly wasn't Len's fault.

Tinker Bell and all the pixie dust in the world couldn't have kept Len suspended long enough to take that shot or change the outcome. It was simply gravity that brought him down and Ollie Moilanen fouling out of the game with minutes left to play that set the stage. An explosion of panic swept through the Totems players, and for the last frantic three minutes, in a game played all those years ago, nothing made any sense at all. The 17- and 18-year-old boys that comprised the Vic High Totems in 1967 tripped over basketballs, tossed them into the stands, and threw them off the backboard with the subtlety of careening lacrosse balls. As passes banked off their backs, and lusty-throated teens screamed their lungs out, the time clock ran out, and the game ended with Vic High on the wrong end of a 40 to 39 score.

Nothing entirely new, really. In the world of high-school basketball, it happens every

March. However, this was odd; this game matched up the second-ranked team in the province of BC and the fourth-seeded up-island team on Vancouver Island. It should have had a foregone conclusion. The *Vancouver Sun* had predicted that the only team in the province, in 1967, capable of beating the mighty Vancouver College was practicing in the gym at Victoria High School. The *Sun* promised the 1967 provincial final would be nothing short of spectacular. The Totems were the defending provincial champions. Their potential so great it even lured legendary coach George “Porky” Andrews out of retirement, when Bill Garner, the Totems’ 1966 coach, moved on to teach elsewhere.

Returning from the '66 champions were the indomitable Ollie Moilanen, looking to win his third BC tournament all-star, the versatile athletic duo of Len Roueche and Greg Schroeder, the silky smooth Dexter Mason, Mister Physique Roger Halfhide, and a very competent Joe Teller. The team was rounded out by Paul Lee, Patrick Skillings, Dave Creed, and Bill Clarke. The two rookies were your writer, Barrie Moen, and straight-shooting Eric Earl. Eric managed some playing time with the Teepees; however, my sole purpose for existence centered around big Ollie having someone to knock around in practices. Coach Andrews, in a rare benevolent mood, sometimes stared down the bench, nodded his head, barked, “Moen!” and I was allowed, like a grazing deer, to wander out on to the court unescorted. But not before Barrie Chow, returning to his job as the student manager of the 1967 team following the 1966 season, elbowed me in the ribs and shook his head in dismay.

The year started off well. The Totems rolled through most local and mainland opposition without too many problems and seemed in line to satisfy the pundits’ predictions. As the Island Championship approached, Coach Andrews told the school newsletter the *Camosunet*, “This year is to be the best yet.”

However, ten minutes following Roueche’s two-point landing on the floor of the old UVic gymnasium, a beleaguered group of Totems, sweatsuits hanging off their shoulders, straggled out from under the lights and the noise of the gym and grimly found their place on the benches in the locker room. They stared blankly at walls. Coach Andrews simply stared at them.

The loss was as bruising as a car accident. We were too young to even understand denial. We just sat waiting for someone to come running into the change room and shout, “There's been a mistake. The scorekeepers missed one of your hoops.”

But no one came to our rescue, so we showered, dressed, and started towards the exit door, hoping the cold February evening might act as a balm for our shattered emotions.

There is usually a thrill in victory; however, there is always something to learn from the experience of defeat. Perhaps one, if fanciful, and imagined hard enough, they might

have thought they saw the youthful spirits of these boys on this night, in this place, separate, lift off, and take the “second star to the right” and travel “straight on 'til morning” to join the tribes of other “Lost Boys in Never Never Land.” Certainly, their history in the annals of high-school basketball was lost forever. However, if the observer were a more pragmatic type, and wanted a practical, structured view of the evening's events, then one might have seen 12 disappointed young men stepping out into the cold night air and continue their bumpy journey into manhood.

**Never say goodbye, because goodbye
means going away, and going away
means forgetting.
J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan***

The LIT

According to J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, all that Lost Boys require is a “Wendy” to find their way back to reality. Sometimes a Wendy appears; sometime she doesn't. In this story, Wendy does appear. She arrives in the form of an attractive Regina native named Wilma Hillier.

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning, Wilma joins myself and a group of 23 people for an exuberant circuit class at the Henderson Recreation Center. One morning, by chance, a conversation about the rigours of Regina winters opened up a treasure chest of memories, ending with an imaginary trip back in time to the one and only high-school national basketball championship ever staged.

“I know about Regina winters,” I informed her.

“No you don't,” she said, “Why would you go to Regina in the winter? Do you have family there?”

“No,” I answered, “I was there playing basketball in 1967.”

“The LIT?” she asked.

“I don't know about that, but it was some kind of national championship. I remember we played a team called the Luther Leos,” I answered.

“The Lions,” she laughed.

“If you say so,” I chuckled back. “They wore similar black and gold uniforms and stunned us when they ran out onto the court wearing the identical warm-up suits we did. You know, except for a few vocal groups in the fifties, I couldn't imagine anybody else strutting around covered in all that shiny gold material.”

“It was in January 1967, something to do with the Centennial,” I added.

“I know,” she said. “I went to Luther College High School and was a student volunteer. You must have played for the BC team that beat us in the first game.”

“Get out,” I answered. “You mean you remember our team?”

“Well, sort of,” she answered.

“Good enough,” I thought. “Let’s get that old Totems team back out in the daylight.”

The LIT, or the Luther Invitational Tournament, is a Saskatchewan provincial invitational tournament that has taken place for sixty-four uninterrupted years. The school itself is celebrating its hundredth anniversary this year. It is a school tradition for the students to run the tournament, and some years, up to 150 members of the school body are involved. In 1967, with Centennial fever sweeping through Canada, Luther College applied for and received the financial support to host a nationwide tournament. Eight teams from across the country attended, with Victoria High representing British Columbia. A national tournament had never happened before, and it has never happened since.

January 1967

This was a big deal. The CBC was scheduled to tape the proceedings, and the games were to be carried live on Regina radio. Coach Andrews began ramping up the pace of our practices. He went over the difference in court sizes and the different rules and procedures involved in playing basketball outside of BC. Who knew?

After rounding up an obligatory set of long johns, we flew to Vancouver on an old DC3, and then boarded a prop-engine Viscount for the milk run to Regina. Roger Halfhide, our man trying to disguise himself as a boy on the team, informed us that was what a non-direct flight was called. After that we couldn't get enough of aggravating everyone within hearing range by using our new phrase. It sounded so worldly.

“What did a volunteer do?” I asked Wilma.

“Made posters mostly,” she answered, “hundreds of them. Uh, we sold tickets as well. And we screamed a lot I guess.”

“Oh, we helped at the tournament banquet too.”

“Good Heavens! You weren't the waitress that dumped a full chicken dinner on to my lap were you?” I asked.

“No,” she quipped, “we would have hired caterers specifically to do that kind of stuff.”

”Very funny,” I answered. “For a West Coast boy, the idea of a blanket of gravy freezing on my crotch was pretty frightening.”



January 1967

The old Viscount landed in Regina where we marched out onto the tarmac, greeted by the tweets and toots of a pep band and the rousing shouts of a group of cheerleaders. I believe it was Dave Creed who commented, “Kind of like the Beatles, eh?” I wasn't sure what the Beatles would have made of this event, but it was certainly beyond the realm of experience for this 16-year-old kid.

We were loaded into and driven to the school in the back of three station wagons, maneuvering through walls of snow fifteen feet high. Our host driver chatted on about the scenery, though I thought it had the sightseeing charm of a subway ride. We sat in the back planning the possibility for our evening's entertainment on the first night of our road trip; however, that all deflated like a rotting pumpkin when we were shown our accommodation.

A posse of bunk beds was set up in an empty classroom with a single bed to accommodate the coach. Whoa! Coach Andrews? Sleeping in the same quarters as us?

“So much for the chicks,” Dave commented.

It didn't hinder the fun. We chattered like budgies and swung around the bunk beds like chimpanzees. Lights out when Coach Andrews entered the room.



“I threw out my year book when we moved,” Wilma told me.

“Well, off to the source I guess,” I responded.

I sent off an email to the Luther College Alumni Association, and within hours received a response from their contact, Lisa King. They would love to help, but at the moment, they were preparing displays for their centenary. How soon would you need the information, she asked? Hopefully before Christmas, I responded. She said she would see what she could do, and in less than a week, I received a striking photo of the eight team uniforms set in a ring. I remembered it appearing on the front page of the *Regina Post-Leader*. There was Len Roueche's number 34. Maybe Len's senior year of basketball slipped quietly below the waves in BC, but his number was entrenched in the Luther College Archives. Some press



clippings followed. Lisa and I bantered back and forth a number of times, and I think the score was a draw when it came to a tally of the good-natured jibes.

January 1967

The tournament itself had a circus quality about it. Lights and posters, bands and screaming: so much screaming. We opened against the host team in the forge-like heat of a packed gym. With all the foot stomping and yelling, it seemed like the oxygen was being sucked right out of the building. We lost any chance of being a fan favourite when we topped Luther College and moved on to the semi-final against the eventual champions, the Sudbury Blue Devils. They were as tough as the nickel their city was famous for, and despite giving them their toughest game of the tournament, we ended up on the wrong side of the scoring. We moved on to play Winnipeg for third place. That game had the thrill of watching two draft horses grazing in a field. In those days, there was no shot clock and no 3-point line. You had to shoot backcourt fouls, and games were divided into 8-minute quarters. The game was so dull it evolved into a slow bicycle race, and there was a sigh of relief from the onlookers when the final buzzer sounded. We had lost, out-bored by the Manitoba team, but for some unknown reason, they gave us fourth place. Not surprisingly, Ollie made the all-star team.



Coach Andrews wasn't impressed by our showing. He kept that all-familiar straight-ahead stare all the way back to Victoria. There wasn't a lot of jabber on the plane ride.

When we landed back in Victoria, we were surprised to find a crowd of students and parents waiting to cheer for us as we left the plane. Andrews just frowned as we made our way through the throng, trying not to look too elated and catch Coach Andrews' attention.

That was the last time anyone waited and cheered for us. Within six weeks, we had slipped from notoriety into Never Never Land, and that was a shame.

They were a great team those '67 Totems. They had sophistication about them. Experienced champions, top-drawer scholars, and the wit of Roger Halfhide and Dexter Mason made all our outings together worthwhile. I was proud to play a part on that team. They really deserved better from fate than they received. They were the only British Columbia high-school team to ever attend a national championship, and hopefully, if for no other reason, they'll make the history books for that accomplishment.

Epilogue

As for the rookies, Eric Earl and I, we hung around two more years. Fortunately, technical advances in pharmacology and a bit of professional therapy has allowed me to forget that bizarre season of 1968.

But that 1969 team: What an aggregation that was! They were as brash and undisciplined as a street gang. They were as uncompromising as a granite quarry. In awe of no one or anybody, and sometimes Andrews left practices bleeding from his nose or sucking air past his bruised ribs. Twice he threatened to quit, twice he was coaxed back.

When the March of '69 rolled around, like thieves in a tale from *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, this Totems team stormed through an open back door at the Pacific Coliseum and snatched the provincial championship from beneath the noses of the Sultan of Oak Bay and his loyal henchmen. We grabbed the trophy and the ball, took it home, and partied until it hurt. We still party. We won: They lost. That will never change. Life doesn't work that way. "Don't I know?"

A big thanks to Lisa King and the archivists at Luther College for their support in recreating these memories. And another big thanks to my new pal Wilma Hillier who patiently put up with my unceasing inquiries.

My thanks to Len Roueche for letting me suspend him in mid-air at the old UVic gym. He says he's okay with that despite the fact he tells me his shot hit the bottom of the backboard. I wasn't sure what I could do with that as a metaphor, so we agreed to leave the story as written.

Barrie Moen, Class of 1969