

1959 Vic High Totems relive Island's first B.C. basketball title

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David Nelson, right, and Tom Wyatt were members of the 1959 Vic High Totems, the first Island team ever to win the B.C. boys' high school basketball championship. Nelson was the captain of the team.
Photograph By ADRIAN LAM, Times Colonist

They are now all 72 or 73 years old. But on Saturday afternoon, it felt like being 17 or 18 all over again for the 1959 B.C. champion Vic High Totems basketball team.

The 1959 Totems held their own reunion amidst the larger centenary events taking place this weekend celebrating the 100th year of the Vic High building on Grant Street.

What makes the 1959 Totems so special is that while 13 Island teams have won the B.C. boys' Triple-A (now Quad-A) hoops championship, this Vic High team was the first to do it. It was coached by the legendary Porky Andrews.

B.C.-champion Island teams which followed in their high-top footsteps included Andrews's Vic High squads of 1962 and 1969 and Bill Garner's Totems of 1966. Also provincial winners were Gary Taylor's Oak Bay Bays in 1965 and 1968 and Don Horwood's Bays in 1973, 1974 and 1977. That was

followed by John Levering's Nanaimo Islanders in 1978 that was led by UVic Vikes great and two-time Olympian Gerald Kazanowski. Ian Hyde Lay's SMUS Blue Jags, led by two-time NBA MVP Steve Nash, turned the trick in 1992, followed by Randy Steel's Ladysmith 49ers in 1995 and Mark Simpson's Dover Bay Dolphins in 2007.

Eight of the 11 1959 Totems turned up for the reunion and exchanged old sporting war stories.

"Porky [coach Andrews] was already a legend — an all-American player with the University of Oregon Ducks — before he turned to coaching," recalled 1959 Totems star player David Nelson.

"Porky was a tough guy and you didn't mess around in practice. You might get a ball bounced off the head. There were no lawsuits in those days. In oldtimers ball now, I still look back all the time," said Nelson, with a chuckle, as he hearkened back to an era of coaching and playing that had different standards.

"That's how we learned. But we were also a team that was kidding around all the time, and we broke him [Andrews] down a bit."

Yet some things remain the same, such as transfer controversies back then that are no different now as players cross catchment boundaries to play for the best school programs. Nelson transferred to Vic High for his Grade 12 year from the Esquimalt High Dockers and B.C. tournament MVP David Black from the Mount View Hornets (now Spectrum Community School).

"We wanted to play with the best," said Nelson, chairman of Nelson International, which manufactures toilets, sinks and doors in Chinese factories.

Ironically, the only game the Totems lost in that 1958-59 season was the league opener against the Dockers.

Nelson also attended the Esquimalt Class of 1959's 50th anniversary five years ago.

"They [former Esquimalt classmates] said I had been in jail long enough," he said, with a smile.

"But that year at Vic High set me up in so many ways," said Nelson.

Both Nelson and Black went on to successful university basketball careers with the UBC Thunderbirds. Nelson is still heavily involved with UBC athletics through the Thunderbird Council.

Nelson met his wife, fellow 1959 Vic High Grade 12 student Pat Service, during his championship season with the Totems. They celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary on Saturday, rather fittingly during the Vic High reunion weekend.

“That one year changed my life in so many ways,” said Nelson, named to the 1959 B.C. tournament first all-star team, along with Vic High teammates Black and Darrell Lorimer (also Gordon Betcher of the Courtenay team).

The champion for distance travelled for the reunion was 1959 Totems captain Tom Wyatt, a university psychology professor in Macau and China.

Members of the 1959 championship Totems team were Nelson, Black, Lorimer, Wyatt, Bill Hobbis, Barry Sadler, Robin Barnes, Tom Collett, Keith Hart, Norm Isherwood and John Balloch.

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