

Philadelphia's Big Five

Celebrating the City of Brotherly Love's Basketball Tradition

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Chapter One: LaSalle

TOM GOLA

Tom Gola did it at LaSalle High School, LaSalle University, and the Philadelphia Warriors, winning championships in the 1950s. Born and raised in Philadelphia, he led LaSalle to the Catholic League Championship in his junior year in 1950 and in the Philadelphia City Championship game, LaSalle defeated Overbrook, 55-31. Gola made the All Catholic teams in 1950 and 1951 and won the Markward Club Award as the Philadelphia High School Player of the Year. Gola was the first of two players to score 2,000 points and have 2,000 rebounds. His 2,201 rebounds is still an NCAA record. Joe Holup of Gerge Washington was the other. Gola was the second player to win the NIT Tournament, the NCAA Tournament and the NBA Championship. Arnie Fernin did it with Utah and the Minneapolis Lakers.

"We were the last team chosen for the NIT in 1952," said Gola. "They took only 16 teams. We were the Cinderella team. We had five loses and everyone was seeded above us and the four teams that we played all were ranked above us. It was a great tournament. I always tell people that my biggest thrill in life in basketball was the fact that we won the NIT in 1952. I was a freshmen, 18 years old and I was very impressible to play in the old Madison Square Garden. The crowds were packed in there every night, sell outs. Most of the teams and the powers were concentrated in the east and Seton Hall had a big New York following. We upset them. Then we went onto play St. John's who was also a local favorite and we ended up beating them. Then we played Duquesne and of course that was neutral as far as the New York crowd went. They rooted more for us then Duquesne and they rooted more for us then Dayton who we beat in the finals.

Two years later, Tom led the Explorers to the NCAA Championship. Gola was who voted the College Player of the Year had one teammate that was a senior and the remaining eight players came up from the Freshmen team. They set the record for the most points in a championship game when they beat Bradley, 92-76. In Tom's senior year, he took LaSalle back to the finals but they lost to San Francisco in the championship game, 77-63. He was was voted to the All American team for the third straight year.

The following year, he helped the Warriors win the NBA Championship after they finished in last place the year before. Playing up front in college, Tom played in the backcourt. They took out the Fort Wayne Pistons in the finals in five games.

Gola spent 10 years in the NBA and was selected to the All Star Game five times. When the Warriors moved to San Francisco after the 1961-62 season, Tom started the year on the west coast but soon after was traded to the New York Knicks. He retired after the 1965-66 season.

When LaSalle was put on probation for two years beginning with the 1968-69 season the Explorers were searching for a new coach. The call went out and Tom came back. The 1968-69 team was the best in Big 5 History and went 23-1 and were ranked number 2, They swept the City Series. Gola said this team was better than any of the four he played on.

Gola was voted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1975, the Big 5 Hall of Fame as a coach in 1986 and as a player in 2000 even though he graduated the year before the Big 5 was formed. At LaSalle, he played against Penn, St. Joseph's and Temple and was 13-2 in those games.

Tom Gola has always been considered the Best College Basketball Player in Philadelphia died in 2014. The arena at LaSalle was named after him in 1988 and rightfully so.

ERNIE BECK

Open up the Penn Basketball Media Guide and start to look up all the scoring records and they still belong to Ernie Beck more than 60 years after he graduated. Beck scored 1,827 points in three years and averaged 22.3 points per game. He set the school record for most points in a game with 47 breaking his own record of 45 set a year earlier at Harvard. Ernie also set the record for the most rebounds in a season with 556 in 1951 and holds the career record with 1,557. He was voted to the All American team in 1953.

Beck led West Catholic to the Philadelphia High School City Championship in 1949 when they defeated Overbrook, 41-38, at the Palestra. He won the Philadelphia High School Basketball Markward Club Award for the best high school player of the year.

"Everything I did in high school and college, I did it in the Palestra, recalled Beck. "I loved that place. I enjoyed my three years at Penn and when we played in the Palestra, I used to stay around and watch the Villanova games. I was close to some of the players and they had tried to get me to go to Villanova, but I wanted to go to Penn. I never regretted my decision. I remember one night, I set the record for the most points scored in the Palestra and the record got broken in game two by Larry Hennessey. Eventually, Bob Schaefer who was another great player at Villanova broke it in 1954.

"My most memorable moments at Penn came in 1952 when we played in the Dixie Classic in Raleigh, North Carolina," recalled Beck. "We lost to Wake Forest by only four points and then we came back and beat Duke and North Carolina. It was in the Duke game that I set the Penn record for most points scored in game with 47. I am surprised the record has held up along with my other scoring and rebound records. Records are made to be broken.

"I had a game in my senior year against Harvard when I scored a lot of points and they had a center that was roughing me up pretty good," said Beck. "Our coach, Howie Dallmar sent in John Lavin who was also one of the players on the football team to stop him from roughing me up. It stopped after that."

Penn made the NCAA Tournament for the first time in Beck's senior year. They started off and met Notre Dame, but lost, 69-57. Ernie led the Quakers with 25 points. The following night in the consolation game at Chicago, Penn defeated DePaul, 90-70, as Beck scored 22 in his final game at Penn.

"That meant a lot to win my last game at Penn," recalled Beck. "My biggest thrill in basketball was winning the NBA Championship with the Philadelphia Warriors in 1956. Six of us played our college basketball in Philadelphia; Jack George, Tom Gola and Jackie Moore went to LaSalle, Paul Arizin and Larry Hennessey went to Villanova and the last player cut was also from Villanova, Bobby Schafer. I was at Penn and our coach, George Senesky went to St. Joseph's. I remember when I was in high school and one of the buildings that the Warriors played in was the Arena at 45th and Market and I lived only four blocks away and I used to walk over and see the games.

"Another great moment was five of us that didn't play in the Big 5 were inducted into the Big 5 Hall of Fame. Arizin, Gola, Bill Mlkvy from Temple, Senesky and myself all were inducted in 2000."

There is no doubt that Ernie Beck is still Penn greatest player.

STEVE BILSKY

Any thoughts that anyone might have ever had about the little guy making it big in the Big 5 would only have to look back at the career of Steve Bilsky, one of the finest guards to ever play at Penn. Steve was only five ten but between the seasons beginning with 1968-69 and ending in 1970-71, Bilsky and Dave Wohl teamed up to form one of the best back courts ever seen in the Big 5.

Bilsky who made the Big 5 Hall of Fame in 1988 scored 1,108 points in his three years and was the 10th player in Penn's history to go over the 1,000 point mark in a career. In his three years, Penn was 15-10, 25-2 and 28-1. They won the Ivy League Championship twice, won the City Series Championship twice and also made two appearances in the NCAA Tournament, seasons.

"My most memorable moment was the shot that I made against Villanova which is remembered by most people in my sophomore year," said Bilsky. "We played them and we were outmatched, so we played a slow down game and beat them, 32-30, on a shot that I made with two seconds to go. What is most remembered is that was the shot that changed the picture in Philadelphia basketball. Previous to that, it was considered the Big 4 and Penn and from that time on, Penn was entered into the Big 5. We thrived from that moment on"

This was the 14th year of the Big 5 and Penn had never won the title outright. The closest they had come to winning the championship was back in the 1962-63 season, when they shared the title with Villanova. After that, Penn won in the 1969-70 and 1970-71 seasons.

"There was always a natural rivalry with Villanova for the some reason or other," added Bilsky. "I think the fact that they were ranked at the time, the

type of game it was, a slow down game although it wasn't an outright stalling game. They were a fast paced team and we slowed them down and they played the way we wanted to play. In the last six minutes, I basically held the ball and wasn't challenged, so it was a question of just counting off the time. There are many games that end in a situation where somebody makes a shot in the last second. The fact it ended with a countdown of six minutes of the shot going in and it being a great upset.

Villanova had led, 28-24, with 14:04 left before the game was tied, 30-30. Steve got off the last shot which went through as the horn sounded giving Penn the win, 32-30. Bilsky was high in the game with 10 points.

"The jump shot that I took in the end, I knew it was in when I let it go," mentioned Bilsky. "The play that we used guaranteed my getting off the shot. It was our basic man to man and I was coming off a pick and the shot was there.

Today, Steve is the Executive Director of the Big 5.

Chapter Two: The University of Pennsylvania

DICK CENSITS

Penn had tied for the Ivy League Championship in the 1954-55 season, but lost a one game playoff to Columbia. Up front, the Quakers had Joe Sturgis at center and Lou Bayne. One of Penn's all time greats, Bart Leach who made the All-Ivy team had graduated. Dick Csencsitz took over Leach's position and the Quakers remained strong up front despite dropping to 12-13. Censits went on and made the All Big 5 team three times in three tries and in his junior and senior years, was voted to the All-Ivy League team.

"I wanted to go to Penn because I wanted to go to the Wharton School," said Censits. "I remember visiting the campus and went into the Palestra and I just fell in love with the place. In fact even today, if I see a game on television, I love to hear the announcers talk about the Palestra.

"I played on the Freshmen team and my coach was Jack McCloskey who was also an assistant to Ray Stanley. I only played one year under Stanley until he left and McCloskey became the head coach. I remember when Stanley was the coach and we had a scrimmage and Jack used to play in those. I boxed McCloskey out and got the rebound and Stanley was yelling at Jack about my getting the rebound. The next time that I tried to box him out, he just knocked me over."

Penn was 12-13 in his first year, but finished tied for second in the Ivy League with a 9-5 record, one game behind Dartmouth. The Quakers dropped to 7-19. He tied the school record for making the most foul shots in a game with 17 as Penn beat Harvard in the Palestra, 88-73. Penn dropped off to 7-19 the following year, but rebounded to 13-12 in Dick's final year.

"One of my biggest moments at Penn was when we finally won a City Series game in my last year. The first two years, we lost all four games, but in our first game of the 1958 season, we beat LaSalle in overtime by one point.

"My other biggest moment as a player was when I went over 1,000 points in my career. I hit a jumper against Cornell. Dick was the sixth player to go over 1,000 points.

Censits played two years with Sunbury in the Eastern League. Some of his teammates were John Chaney, Bob Gainey, Alonzo Lewis and Joe Sturgis.

Two of my biggest other moments came when I was voted into the Big 5 Hall of Fame. That was a big thrill and later n when they picked the all time top 50 players on the 50th anniversary of the Big, I was selected 25th and that meant a lot to me.

Dick was one of the first two to make the All Big 5 Team in their only years at their school. Guy Rodgers was the other. "I never saw anybody that could handle a basketball any better then Guy."

Censits was also one of Penn's all time greatest players. He was in the first class when Penn opened it Sports Hall of Fame.

STAN PAWLAK

Penn turned out some great players over the years and one of their greatest was Stan Pawlak who was All-Ivy three years and made the All-Big Team in 1964. When he graduated, he was second in career points with 1,501 behind All-American Ernie Beck. Stan averaged 20.6 points per game, third highest in Penn history.

"My first two years at Penn, we couldn't beat Princeton who had Bill Bradley, said Pawlak. "He graduated after the 1965 season and the following year when I was a senior, we won the Ivy League championship. That was one of my biggest moments at Penn and in my three years, we won three City Series games and anytime you beat one of the Big 5 teams, that was a great moment.

"On the down side, when we won the Ivy League Championship which was Penn's first, we were scheduled to play Syracuse in the NCAA Tournament, but athletic director, Jerry Ford had a dispute with the NCAA, so we weren't allowed to go into the tournament."

The NCAA had passed legislation that required athletic directors to confirm in writing that students predicted a minimum 1.6 grade point average. Penn's were much higher then that, but when Ford refused to sign, the Quakers stayed home. This could have been the first year that four of the Big 5 teams could have gone to the post season.

"I remember when I first saw the Palestra," said Pawlak. "I knew I wanted to play there and I got into Penn. My biggest moment my first year was when we beat St. Joseph's. We wanted to beat the City Teams. My senior year, we beat LaSalle and Villanova. In the LaSalle game, I had 37 points and 26 of them were in the first half. We beat Villanova and they finished third in the NIT Tournament and they had Bill Melchionni who was also from South Jersey."

Stan's 37 points tied Hal Lear at the time for the most points in a City Series game. Pawlak also set the record that year for the most points in a season with 105, but Cliff Anderson broke it the following year. His 105 points are still the second highest.

He was later named to the Ivy League Silver Anniversary All Star Basketball Team in 1981. Pawlak played 10 years in the Eastern Basketball League and was voted first team EBL five consecutive years and to commemorate the 50-year life span of the Eastern League, he was named to the All Eastern Basketball Association team in 1996. Another one of the other guards was Jack McCloskey, his coach at Penn.

"I remember beng interviewed after some of the games in my senior year and it was Richie Ashburn that interviewed me," recalled Pawlak. "My favorite baseball player was Stan Musial. We both had the first same name.

"It was a great honor to be the first player from Penn to be elected to the Big 5 Hall of Fame in 1973. It is a privilege to do the Penn games on radio and it is always nice to see the banner hanging in the Palestra for winning the Ivy League Basketball Championship.

Stan was also voted into the Penn Sports Hall of Fame and will always be remembered as one of their all time greats.