**Boys Introduction for**

**T of C program**

It was an idea born of imitation. It became the standard of excellence.

The Tournament of Champions has transitioned through a maze of venues and a handful of sponsors to emerge as a holiday tradition without equal.

In the beginning, the Tournament of Champions was staged in a high school gym, pitted on the same weekend against the nation’s largest high school basketball tournament some 75 miles away.

Still, the Tournament of Champions made an enduring and indelible impression on Oklahoma’s high school basketball landscape within its first two days of competition.

The format for the Tournament of Champions was unique in its concept. That alone engendered a measure of interest among fans, coaches and players.

Pairing top-quality small-school teams with blue-ribbon large-school teams was a recognizable David vs. Goliath twist not seen on such a stage under such spotlight circumstances.

And, then, before the second night of the tournament had been completed, David had slain Goliath.

In the tournament’s seventh game, a name had been made. A tournament had been born.

Class B Inola, carrying the banner for rural communities across the state, shut out the glare of big-city lights and shut down the fearsome squad out of Oklahoma City, Northeast High School.

Northeast was in the midst of an incredible run through the state’s second-largest classification, A, and was under the command of a player that today remains as one of Oklahoma’s best-ever prep performers.

With its 92-83 semifinal conquest of Northeast and Ray Russell, Inola fired the shot heard ’round the basketball world of Oklahoma.

Unheralded Inola, best known as the self-proclaimed “hay capital of the world,” had pulled off the most surprising victory of the season, and simultaneously put the Tournament of Champions on the high school basketball map.

Inola’s 80-60 championship win over host Tulsa Memorial the next night was downright anticlimactic. Memorial represented the state’s largest classification, 2A, but was in only its fifth season of high school competition.

Inola was crowned champion of the inaugural tournament, but its crowning achievement came during the Friday night semifinals.

This band of farmboys had put down the inner-city juggernaut. For Russell, a junior who would be singled out as the state’s player of the year in 1967 and one of the best for the whole decade, it was the final defeat of his high school career.

Northeast went on to win the Class A state championship in March and returned to the Tournament of Champions in 1967 on a 27-game winning streak.

Russell once again was the catalyst, leading the Vikings to an impressive Tournament of Champions victory, leading all scorers and rebounders. Russell and Northeast later repeated as state champions.

From that auspicious beginning a half-century ago, small schools have routinely earned the respect of their large school competitors and the support of SRO crowds, though precious few have won the tournament title.

It was more than a decade before New Lima became the second Class B representative to win the Tournament of Champions. Undefeated and top-ranked New Lima rocked three big schools – 3A Ada, 4A Tulsa Memorial, 4A Stillwater – en route to the 1978 title.

New Lima, which had not lost since the 1977 T of C finals, entered the tournament on a 30-game winning streak.

The Falcons had arguably the toughest road ever to a T of C championship. A major snowstorm blanketed Tulsa on Thursday, forcing postponement of the tournament opening.

While Class A No. 1-ranked Fairfax had to withdraw because of hazardous travel conditions, and was replaced on Friday morning by Tulsa Washington, the tournament’s revised schedule called for second-round and third-round games to be played on Saturday.

In one day, New Lima had to defeat two teams from the state’s largest classification: preseason favorite Stillwater and homestanding Memorial.

New Lima won both Saturday games by a combined seven points, and standout center Eddie Louie emerged as the tournament MVP with a three-game scoring record and a career scoring record that would stand for 23 years.

Class A Smithville made an heroic bid to join that small-school pantheon in 1985. Under the guidance of the same coach who led New Lima in 1978, Jim Knapp, Smithville pulled off the tournament’s No. 1 upset, topping even the Inola-Northeast outcome two decades before.

In the third game of the first round, held inside the venerable Pavilion on Expo Square, Smithville shocked unbeaten, tournament favorite Tulsa Washington, 83-70.

Washington entered the tournament on a 31-game winning streak, having won the 1984 Tournament of Champions and the 1984 Class 5A (largest classification) state championship.

Smithville rode that Thursday night momentum into the semifinals, where it knocked off 5A Tulsa Memorial, before falling to 5A Midwest City in the finals.

In 2007, Smithville became only the second team to be inducted into the T of C Hall of Fame.

While team performances have punctuated the majority of tournaments over the first half-century, it was a showdown of two gee-whiz individuals in the last decade that generated a “were-you-there?” day to remember.

Rotnei Clarke of Verdigris and Keiton Page of Pawnee, who would conclude their high school careers three months later as the highest scoring performers in Oklahoma schoolboy history, met in a consolation game scheduled for 2 p.m. inside the venerable Fairgrounds Pavilion.

To accommodate an overflow crowd, tournament officials delayed the tipoff twice, for a total of 35 minutes. Attendance was announced as approximately 5,000. Scores of people were unable to gain admittance.

Page and Clarke responded with a game for the ages.

In a 59-second span of the first quarter, the two combined for 11 points.

When it was over, the 5-10 Page had scored 28 points and the 6-0 Clarke had scored 34. For the record books, Page and Pawnee rang up a 57-49 win. The next day, Page scored 55 in an 88-70 fifth-place win over Stringtown and he was awarded the tournament’s most valuable player award.

The tournament has matured and even gained in stature over the years, over the decades, thanks to marquee matchups similar to Page vs. Clarke, with pairings steeped in the David vs. Goliath tradition.

There was 2012, for instance, when Class 4A Roland knocked down 6A Union, in an overtime, 75-73 championship thriller.

Union was the defending T of C champ, but Roland countered with its version of David in 6-foot sharpshooter Seth Youngblood. He scored 30 in the finals and won the MVP award in a breeze.

And in 2014, on New Year’s Eve, David might have sat out the title game, but Goliath vs. Goliath proved to be one for the ages.

Class 5A Tulsa Memorial and 6A Owasso went three overtimes before Memorial emerged with a 91-88 victory that concluded mere minutes before the arrival of the new year.

It was a game that produced highlight after highlight. A game that saw Memorial’s 6-8 A.J. Cockrell solidify his MVP selection with a performance that included 34 points and 22 rebounds. A game that reinforced the long-held affirmation that this is truly a Tournament of Champions, a tournament for champions.

Through the years, the Tulsa World maintained a steady and guiding hand on the tournament.

The newspaper’s high school basketball writers selected and invited the teams and influenced the bracketing.

In the last couple of decades, tournament directors have assumed the responsibility of selection and bracketing after consultation with the writers.

It was a World sports writer, Wayne Mason, who promoted the idea of such a tournament to Memorial Coach and Director of Athletics Doug Dugger.

Mason accompanied Tulsa Central to Dodge City, Kansas, in the 1964-65 basketball season for the Kansas Tournament of Champions, then in its 22nd year.

Central won the tournament and Mason returned home with the idea of creating a similar tournament. Dugger readily agreed and together they drew up plans for the Tulsa Memorial Tournament of Champions to be played January 27-28-29, 1966.

In the summer of 1965, Mason resigned his post at the World and handed the high school basketball coverage to Terrell Lester.

Lester went to the 1966 Kansas Tournament of Champions with Central, two weeks prior to the tipoff of the Tulsa T of C, to view the proceedings.

Lester continued the practice of inviting and bracketing until he relinquished that role in 1977. Following him were sports writers Gary Shutt, Mike Brown and Barry Lewis.

Team selections were made not on past championship performances, but based on future championship possibilities.

Brown was instrumental in the formation of the Hall of Fame in 1994. Today, the honor roll includes some of the greatest names in Oklahoma high school basketball.

Dugger continued to oversee the tournament as Director of Athletics at Memorial until Tulsa Public Schools assumed sponsorship with the Tulsa World of the tournament in late 1989.

Tournament Director J.V. Haney and Tulsa Public Schools Director of Athletics Ed Lacy changed the tournament date from late-January to the Christmas holidays in 1989. That change coincided with the move from Memorial High School to the Fairgrounds Pavilion and the Oral Roberts Mabee Center.

Twenty-two years later, Tournament Director Tommy Thompson championed the historic expansion of the Tournament of Champions. The all-girl Oklahoma’s Best tournament, launched by Tulsa Public Schools in 1999, was merged in 2011 with the Tournament of Champions, forging a 16-team, co-ed basketball extravaganza played out in 24 games over 72 hours.

Mick Wilson, TPS Assistant Athletics Director, inherited the responsibilities of Tournament Director in 2013 and is in charge of extending invitations and drawing brackets.

This year’s field brings together teams from each of the state’s seven playoff classifications: 6A Tulsa Washington, 5A Tulsa Memorial, 5A Del City, 4A Oklahoma City Heritage Hall, 3A Oklahoma City Millwood, 2A Okemah, A Garber, B Duke.

Having every class represented is somewhat rare. Since the OSSAA expanded its playoff system to seven classifications in 1996, only twice, in 2012 and 2013, has the T of C brought in teams from every class.

In the beginning, the practice of gathering teams from all classes was routine. In 1966, Oklahoma had but four classifications for basketball. In 1967, the number grew to five, and expanded to six in 1980. From 1979 until 2012, no T of C drew a field with all classes represented.

Seldom has a team returned to defend its T of C title. Tulsa Washington has that chance in 2019. Not only is Washington back, the reigning Most Valuable Player, Hornets senior Bryce Thompson, is returning. So, too, is the 2018 runner-up, Tulsa Memorial. Washington won the title last year with a 66-60 decision. Then in March 2019, Washington (6A) and Memorial (5A) won state championships on this same Mabee Center floor.

As the T of C has evolved over the years since Inola scripted that David vs. Goliath narrative in 1966, Class 6A teams have won four straight championships.

Still, the small schools have had their moments. There was Roland in 2012, and since 2000, four small teams have finished second and five have finished third.

Wilson now is in charge of protecting, and extending, that role of tournament excellence. His experience with the T of C dates back to 1998, when, as a coach, he directed Tulsa East Central to a third-place finish.

Today, as a member of the TPS administrative staff, Wilson is leading the Tournament of Champions to the brink of its seventh decade.

Through 55 editions of the Tournament of Champions, it can be said with conviction: “Often imitated, never duplicated.”

**--Terrell Lester**