

# THE Seeds of Change

## A Story of Hopkinsville's Black and Decker

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What does Towson, Maryland and Hopkinsville, Kentucky have in common? The average citizen would quickly shrug their shoulders and conclude nothing.

Hopkinsville is a small average size rural community in Western Kentucky, primarily known for Tobacco, Edgar Cayce, Fort Campbell and in more recent years an enviable string of successes in attracting small to midsize commercial and industrial companies that have significantly enhanced job opportunities and balanced our dependence upon agriculture, while capturing the fascination our peers and neighbors.

Towson, Maryland on the other hand is located in Baltimore County and is the home to Towson University. Founded in 1768 by Ezekiel Towson, it is a typical city with small town charm; except Towson, Maryland is also the home of Black and Decker. The world's foremost toolmaker and a fortune 500 company whose contribution to the community of Towson are unsurpassed.

Just ask Towson residents how they feel about Black and Decker.....and the citizens of Towson will beam with pride at every opportunity to talk about their own hometown success story which has been responsible for positively transforming the lives of so many of the citizens of Towson.

***Here is where an odd similarity begins, for Hopkinsville also has its very own Version of Black and Decker and oh what an interesting story to be told.....***

**1966** by all accounts was a normal year in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. The war in Vietnam continued to dominate the national and local headlines, so consequently a short and rather dry article buried on the sports page of the local paper, announcing the hiring of a young new head basketball coach at Hopkinsville High School was hardly noticed.

Roy G. Woolum, a native of Eastern Kentucky and fresh from his first head coaching assignment at Estill County High School was full of vim, vigor, enthusiasm and new ideas. **But what could he have been thinking.....** when he accepted this job. **There were several negatives working against him.**

- A lack luster basketball program which had never really lived up to its billing, for it was always overshadowed by Football, which was King at Hopkinsville High School. (state football class AA Champs 1965 and 1966)
- The huge uncertainties of integration as the impending closure and merger of the local Black High School (***Crispus Attucks High School***), which was recently announced, drew and emotional and negative response within the Black Community. The school would be closed in two stages with the sophomore class moving to Hopkinsville High School for the 1966/67 school year.....and the following year, shut down completely and merged.
- And finally.....the school did not even have a gymnasium.....but instead played its games in a depression era Cracker Box Gym at the former location of Hopkinsville High School.....on Walnut Street.

However as all true athletes can attest these were merely grown up distractions..... that really don't amount to a hill of beans when young men come together with friends and new acquaintances to have fun and do what they enjoy doing best..... Playing Basketball.

Determined to attract new talent.....Coach Woolum ran an ad in the Kentucky New Era in the summer of 1966 announcing that the gym on Walnut Street would be open daily all summer for those interested in Tiger Basketball. *It was a small but important beginning.*

The new school year for the recent transferees from Crispus Attucks High School began slowly without incidence and with the normal butterflies associated with the start of a new year. Perhaps this integration initiative would work after all. But soon came the first real test and setback. An assembly of all the sophomore students in the cafeteria to elect class officers resulted in voting strictly along ethnic lines and the results of which triggered a mass walkout by black students in protest of what seemed to be an unfair process. The school officials were stunned and moved quickly and carefully to appeal to the all students and to avoid a lengthy interruption to the class schedule. Soon, the tension subsided and everything progressed slowly back to normal, however it was clear.....**Change had to come.**

The First season for Roy Woolum's Tigers was a year of teaching, learning, adjusting, supporting and building on a less than stable foundation. A successful year in many ways, the new coach and team earned the support and adoration from endearing fans and respect and recognition from peers and opponents who experienced the hard work and discipline of Woolum's scrappy Tigers.

At the post season banquet, keynote speaker and Austin Peay Head Basketball Coach Fisher, described the Tigers as being as good as Rupp's U.K. Wildcats, who also completed their season with identical record of 13 wins and 13 losses.

Expectations for the 1967/68 basketball season were very high, and for good reason. Although several outstanding seniors had moved on due to graduation, the final closing of Crispus Attucks High School promised to bring the core of an inspiring young Attucks squad across town to join forces with a bright young Tiger Team. In addition, Coach William F. (Chief) Falls, head coach of the Attucks High School Wolves for the past 31 years had agreed to accept the assistants role with coach Woolum. Falls brought respect, knowledge, experience and a deep understanding of the game of basketball. During the 1966/67 season Falls was recognized by peers and admirers across the state of Kentucky after logging his 500<sup>th</sup> Career Head Coaching Victory. An accomplishment and honor enjoyed by few.

The 1967/68 season started with the excitement and promise of the pre-season. In an early away game at Trigg County, Junior forward Bobby Joe Parker scored 25 points and grabbed 26 rebounds to lift the Tigers to an impressive road victory. However just as things seemed to be going so good for the young coach problems surfaced. The challenges of consolidating two squads with so much talent and potential was more than the team could absorb. Internal differences among players eventually reached a boiling point resulting in a mid-season dismissal of two seniors and the benching of two others for disciplinary reasons..... Woolum announced, that for the balance of the season his starting line-up would be juniors and sophomores. "We might as well start getting ready for next season he commented as he paced the locker room floor."

The balance of the season was rewarding for the new team, but not much fun. An eleven game losing streak was finally ended with a victory in the final game of the season against Greenville High School. Although the record did not reflect it..... there was something unique and special building with this squad. By the end of that dismal season we had somehow gained inner strength and determination which would carry us in the new season of 1968/69.

**One Million Dollars**.....that was the headline in the Kentucky New Era in the summer of 1966.....and also the price tag for the brand new 5000 seat gymnasium which was nearing completion on the campus of Hopkinsville High School. **At last.....We had our very own home.** It was simply beautiful, and like none other in this region or the state. At it's formal opening it was appropriately dubbed "**THE PALACE**" by an admiring under classman.....the name stuck and **THE PALACE** it became.

Opening night of the 1968/69 season was an unnerving event. THE PALACE was packed to the rafters, however by some accounts, fans came to see the New Gym first and the Tigers second. Our season opened against a highly recognized team from Earlington Kentucky with a 5 and 0 record and ranked in the top 10 in the state. Gee Woolum..... you sure know how to pick em.

Coach Woolum was so focused on this game that he did something that he had never done before.....he informed all players that we would not be allowed to go home after school dismissed and return just before the game. Instead we would remain at school and the coaching staff would take us to dinner at a local restaurant. He did not want any distractions to impede our focus on this important game.

From the opening tip off until the final horn it was a hard fought contest of lead changes and heroic plays. However as the final horn sounded the entire gym erupted.....as a little known Tiger Team out lasted the powerful Earlington Yellow Jackets to win by four points. We Won! We Won! We Won!.....could be heard through the gym as excited fans cheered.

**Now finally, Hopkinsville High had its Team. Five determined young men.....Henry Parker, Melvin Woodard, William "Bird" Averitt, Wendell Lynch, four black boys and a 6 foot 6 inch Lanky white kid, named Richard Decker.....whom from this date forward would affectionately be Referred to simply as.....BLACK AND DECKER.**

Somehow now the vision seemed more clear, this team was destined to changed more than just statistics in a record book.

As the season progressed the hard work and team spirit paid huge dividends. Following a mid-season slump, the Tigers ended the regular season with an eight game winning streak for a total of sixteen victories.....the most in the history of Hopkinsville High School boys basketball at the time.

The red hot Tigers breezed through the 8<sup>th</sup> district tournament causing excited fans to begin to chant, State, State, State, State; for you see no Hopkinsville High School Basketball Team had ever earned a trip to the Kentucky Boys State High School Basketball Tournament. Later that week-end our draw for seeding in the second regional tournament was "déjà vu", South Hopkins High School. The only team whom had beat us twice during the regular season and on the first occasion by 19 points. Although well concealed, we could tell that Coach Woolum was concerned. This time however, we not only had momentum but also the added advantage of playing at home in "THE PALACE". Final score.....Hopkinsville High School by 4 points. During the semi-final game we coasted by a good Webster County Team whom we had beaten twice during the regular season.

This now set the stage for the biggest game of our careers. The regional finals paired the Tigers against a Union County Braves team whom just happened to boast the best record of any team in the commonwealth of Kentucky....28 wins and 2 losses. This unselfish and highly talented team was the product of a school system merger, similar to what has taken place in Hopkinsville one year ago, except, in this case.....it worked. The union County Braves also boasted one of the highest winning margins of any team in the state, thereby causing one Evansville, Indiana sportswriter to predict the Braves to win the Kentucky Boys High School State Tournament.

Also, to add more flavor and drama to these historic events the Union County Braves were somewhat reminiscent of the 1966 National Championship Texas Western Miners under Coach Don Haskins who started five black players in the 1966 NCAA final game against Adolph Rupp's all white Kentucky Wildcats. The Braves emerged from their school system merger with 12 players on the squad, 7 white and 5 black. The starters were all Black.

**The "Seeds of Change" are evident everywhere.**

The crown was so large that Saturday night in March of 1969 that many unhappy fans were turned away at the door because the gym was filled to capacity. Union County brought over 20 school busses filled with screaming, hollering and loyal fans. This was truly the moment that hopes and dreams are made of.

**However, As in William Shakespear's subtle warning, in his account of Julius Caesar.....Beware the Ides of March--  
--A Warning to watch out for Betrayal or Misfortune.....**The Ides of March is a day on the Roman calendar that corresponds with present day March 15<sup>th</sup>. It was marked by several religious observances and notably for the Romans as a deadline for settling debts. However, in 44 BC, it became notorious as the date of the assassination of Julius Caesar, whom was repeatedly warned.....".Beware The Ides of March", and now, **Saturday March 15, 1969** the stage is set for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century version of....."**Beware The Ides of March**".

From the opening tip off the Tigers took control of the game and exploded with a first half performance that left the Union County Braves completely stunned. The half time score Tigers 43, Braves 32. In the locker room Coach Woolum was so emotionally charged that it sounded like a prep rally. " We will not only go to the state tournament, Woolum shouted, we're going to win the whole damn thing". The locker erupted into a frenzied pitch that can only be described as.....INSANITY!!!!

As fate would have it, the second half was exactly the opposite of the first half, and by the end of the third period Union County owned a 1 point advantage. The fourth quarter was nasty and evenly matched and filled with lead changes into the final 60 seconds. The score was deadlocked Tigers 60, Braves 60.....Possession, the Union County Braves. As they advanced the ball across mid court.....miraculously William Bird Averitt appeared from no where and intercepted a pass at mid-court and immediately signaled timeout..... with 30 seconds remaining in the game. You could feel the tension in the air.

When play resumed, with time running yours truly faked and dribbled down the lane for an easy lay up.....unbelievably the ball rolled off the front of the rim, but right into the outstretched arms of none other than Big Richard Decker who gently tipped it back into the basket to give the Tigers a 2 point advantage with 8 seconds remaining on the clock.

The Braves coach, Steve Cunningham immediately called time out and began to map out a strategy to overcome the Tigers slim two point margin. When play resumed the ball was inbounded and quickly passed the length of the court into the hands of Big Freeman Sibley, a red headed 6'4" southpaw senior forward whose signature shot the whole tournament was a high arching corner shot.....**reminiscent of UCLA's legendary Forward Lynn Shackelford**.....Sibley seldom missed.

A quick head and shoulders fake and Sibley leaned back and released a precision high arching shot with perfect rotation; every heart in the gymnasium skipped a beat and every person held their breath for what seemed like an eternity. Just as the ball began to reach the high point of its arch..... just before it's inevitable decent towards the basket.....a most amazing and unbelievable site appears from virtually nowhere....the outstretched left hand of Henry "Wildman" Parker, senior forward for the Hopkinsville Tigers, appeared..... and elevated Higher and Higher and Higher and Higher and just as the basketball appeared to reach the apex of its trajectory Parker's fingertips swatted the ball out of the air and into the elevated seats behind the Braves goal. **No one could believe this unparalleled feat of athleticism which they**

**had just witnessed.** The Braves fans stirred in disbelief as the Hopkinsville High fans breathed a collective sigh of relief. However the game was not over yet.....2 seconds remained on the scoreboard clock.

Again, Union County coach Cunningham called time out and huddled for one last opportunity to make history. After the timeout the Braves 6'4" Junior Center, Tom Johnson was handed the ball by the referee underneath their goal to inbound for the final play. As the referee began his 5 second countdown, the Braves players quickly shuffled from side to side around the basket and suddenly George Wilson their "All State" 6'3" junior forward appeared wide open under the basket. Johnson promptly inbounded the ball to Wilson who gave a quick head fake and leaped into the air, At that moment.....**Every Hopkinsville High School fan's Heart completely exploded in a moment of utter Shock**.....unbelievably, as fate would reveal.....Wilson had positioned himself too far under the basket and as he leaped back to lay the ball in the hoop he jammed it underneath the bottom of the backboard.....**FINAL HORN SOUNDED!!!!**

The Hopkinsville High School Fans completely **Erupted**. It can only be described as **Mass Pandemonium**.

**THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM HAD JUST BEEN ACHIEVED  
BLACK AND DECKER WAS GOING TO STATE**

Two weeks later we headed up the Pennyryle Parkway to Louisville Kentucky for the boys state basketball tournament in Freedom Hall. **THE SWEET SIXTEEN. THE FIRST TIME IN THE HISTORY OF TIGER BASKETBALL.**

We performed well. We won our opening round game against a determined team from Hazard Kentucky. A game in which William Bird Averitt was discovered. Playing an unbelievable game, Bird dazzled the crown in Freedom Hall with his unique skills and his uncanny southpaw style of dribbling and scoring he single handedly lifted the Tigers to victory with an astounding 35 point performance.

It's a Train, It's a Plane, No it's "Super Bird" read the headlines the following morning in the Louisville Newspapers.

Later that same afternoon the Tigers played well but lost by 20 points to a powerful Louisville Central Team who were adorned with the likes of Ron King and Otto Petty (who would go on to play for Florida State). Louisville Central would go on to win the tournament for the first time on Saturday night.

But somehow losing was really not losing.....for we accomplished far, far more than we had ever dreamed possible when we set out on this journey. **FOUR BLACK KIDS AND ONE WHITE KID..... HAD NOW BECOME MEN.**

As the bus cruised down the parkway on Sunday morning towards home it was time to relax and reflect. For in many ways it really did seem like a dream.....in a few short years **so much had changed.**

- The fear and uncertainty that followed the announcement at Crispus Attucks High School..... that at the end of the next school year the school would be closed forever, and all students would be transferred to the cross town white high school.
- Meeting strangers who at times seemed as curious and unsure of this new arrangement as you were.
- The class officer elections which seemed to result in attitudes of separation and division.
- The internal strife with the team in year two..... which threatened to destroy and undermine all that we worked to accomplish
- **Attitudes**.....

Yes, it really was like a dream, **but a dream with promise and purpose.** A dream that was destined to change people and change lives. In three very short years, so much had been accomplished. Overcoming the fear of the unknown, the unforeseen, the unforgettable.

The strangers during integration were now friends, comrades and trusted confidants. The internal strife within the team was now a distant memory. **And the class officer elections.....**Ah Yes, the class officer elections. In two short years we witnessed the **Possible**. The 1968 Class officer Elections were interesting and revealing.....The ballots were distributed, collected and counted. Students were nominated to four class officer positions, students were elected to four class officer positions. The Results.....TWO WHITE OFFICERS AND TWO BLACK OFFICERS.....**Friends elected Friends.**

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As the bus entered Hopkinsville, it was escorted by local police into the parking lot of Hopkinsville High School. I could not believe my eyes. What was going on? All the cars.....why were all the people here? The parking lot was completely full, full of people, all kinds of people, full of smiling faces, full of outstretched arms, full of warm hugs and embraces, full of kind words and sincere expressions.....**but most of all FULL OF LOVE!!**

**Hopkinsville had come out in huge numbers to welcome home Their Very Own....BLACK AND DECKER.**

So, I guess it's true. Sports like True Love.....If but for a moment..... **can transcend all things.....** Bias, hatred, economic disparity, injustice and adversity.

**If someone should ask, what does Towson, Maryland and Hopkinsville, Kentucky have in Common?**

**NOW YOU KNOW.....THE REST OF THE STORY.**

Wendell Lynch  
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