

- *Top 20 teams in each class
- *PC trips Lakeville No.
- *Big wins for Becker, BSM, Minnehaha, Stillwater

Year of the Bear

Lake of the Woods looks back on one bittersweet season of hoop glory

By Bruce Strand

They came out of nowhere, flashed brilliantly in the sky for three days, then were never heard from again. That's how it was Lake of the Woods, which, in the sport of boys basketball, caught lightning in a bottle 42 years ago.

The Bears, from the tip of Minnesota that juts into Canada, their school named after the immense lake that straddles the border, made the six-hour journey for their first, and still only, state hoops tournament, in 1980, and almost won the whole thing at St. Paul Civic Center.

In the Class A finals (just two classes then), the Bears battled Bird Island-Lake Lillian and its charismatic superstar Barry Wohler, took the Panthers to double overtime, and lost 78-74. If not for a missed last-second shot and their best player fouling out, the Bears might have been champs.

This from a school that has been anemic in boys hoops since the mid-1980s, with an average record of 3-20 since the last winning season in 2007. They do better in hockey, the preferred sport.

"We were kind of a novelty. We were a good basketball team in the middle



Dejected following the double OT loss to Bird Island-Lake Lillian in the finals were, from left, Coach Ron Omerza, Tom Omerza, John Oren Jr., Spencer Pickering, Todd Robinson and John Koller.

of Hockey Land," said John Koller, who scored 33 points in the championship game.

"When we were in school, that's when (future NHL players) Neal and Aaron Broten and Butsy Erickson were playing for Roseau and Dave Christian for Warroad. We'd go watch them when they played our team. One of my friends was our goalie and those guys just murdered him."

The Bear hockey team wasn't very

good at that time, nor were the football and baseball teams. The basketball team got all the attention. It didn't hurt that the local paper's owner had a son on the team.

Lake of the Woods was 22-3 that year with a front line that went 6-7, 6-6 and 6-4, coached by the late Ron Omerza, whose son Tom started at guard. That season capped a five-year run in which they went 93-20.

The Bears lost to International Falls and Warren in the regular season,

then avenged the loss to longtime nemesis Warren 40-37 in the Region 8A finals at UND in Grand Forks. In the state tournament, the Bears beat Pine City in overtime and got past Kenyon by a relatively comfortable six points before losing the meat-grinder to BI-LL.

Wohler, then a junior, in the process of leading BILL to four state titles, two each in basketball and football, later named to the All-Tournament Team of the Century, scored 25 against LOW, and their other guard, senior John Clouse, scored 23.

Koller, a 6-foot-4 junior, shot 15-for-23 for his 33 points and grabbed 10 rebounds. Another junior, 6-foot-7 John Oren, scored 15 while his newsman dad took photos. The others were seniors. Brad Troxel sank 11 points, 6-foot-6 star Todd Robinson scored nine before fouling out, Omerza had four points, and their lone sub, Spencer Pickering, scored two after replacing Robinson.

“When I watch the tournament now, I look at the players who lose in the finals, because I know exactly what they are feeling,” said Troxel, son of the assistant coach, now an automation engineer and electrical supervisor at a plant, living in Plymouth.

“But I also know, just like the announcers always say, that you will remember this the rest of your life. Because you really do. We are kind of glued together forever, and that means a lot to everybody.

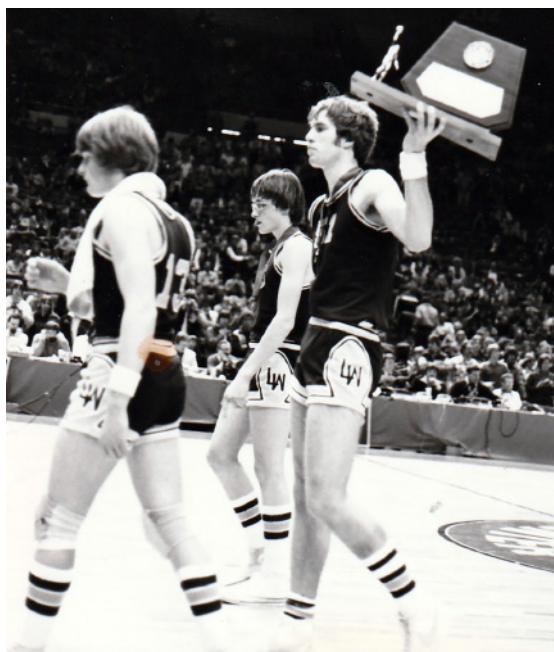
“But it was pretty sad at the time.”

Koller reflected, “The memories are mostly good. We did the best we could. No regrets. We were just young kids from a small town and nobody expected us to be there.” He noted, with a chuckle, one less pleasant memory: “The state tournament program the next year had Wohler on the cover, and he was scoring over me!”

Normally a pass-first forward who averaged 12 points, Koller had the game of his life, shooting mostly from the left wing and corner. A corporate financial planner who lives in Corcoran, west of the metro area, he recalled,

“Bird Island wasn’t guarding the outside for some reason, so I kept shooting. Three or four of them would have been 3-pointers today. The surprising thing was, I was not nervous at all. The Warren game, that was pressure. But at state, I was just having fun.”

For Todd Robinson, the state finals has always been a bitter pill to swallow. He averaged 20 points per game, went over 1,000 earlier in the season (much more rare then than now due playing more games now) and finished with 1,120. He made the WCCO Radio Team of the Year. But he wasn’t on the court at the end.



Todd Robinson carried the runner-up trophy, flanked by fellow seniors Tom Omerza and Brad Troxel.

“I fouled out with three or four minutes left. They had a drive on the baseline, I can’t remember who. I was a half-step slow to get there. It was excruciatingly difficult to watch the overtimes.”

Robinson, the class valedictorian, had a successful career as a CPA for Proctor & Gamble, living in a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio, and was able to retire at 55. But he’s still bugged about that state final. “Just speaking for myself, that game haunts me, forty-two years later. A lot of people think it was a great accomplishment. But, for me, losing the game, and fouling out, and not being able to help in the overtimes, it’s still painful.”

That said, he added, “It was an absolutely fabulous game. We came out on the wrong side. Wohler was a phenomenal athlete. He did marvelous things.”

The Bears came within a heartbeat of winning. At the end of regulation, with the score tied, after a missed a free throw, Oren grabbed the rebound, and had a four-foot shot that missed. “That would have won it for us,” said Omerza.

The state finals was the last roundup together for a group that grew up in rather single-minded fashion.

“We were great friends. We lived and breathed basketball,” said Omerza, now president of Frandsen Bank and Trust in Ely, his dad’s hometown. “We idolized the high school players that came before us in the 70’s. We spent a lot of time at the gym. With my dad as head coach, I could grab the school keys and get us in anytime.”

Robinson echoed: "Along with a lot of talent, we had better team chemistry than any team I have seen before or since. We grew up together, and that showed on the court." His sophomore year, he played on a 17-1 team that was upset by Newfolden in the first round of district. "That team, we hated each other. Fighting over girls and things like that. But we got along great (as seniors)."

Another thing the Bears had going for them was a tiny gym they called The Crack-erbox. Other teams hated to play there. The Bears were 40-0 at home in the four years the Class of 1980 played.

"The center court circle overlapped the free-throw circle," Robinson said. "The walls were out of bounds. There were six rows of seats on one side for fans, and a balcony where the pep band was, and a lot kids watched from there. The players sat on the edge of the stage."

Tiny arenas like that gave little schools a huge advantage, as any player from that era knows. International Falls, a much bigger school with a strong team, came in 1979. "We absolutely destroyed them, by over 20 points," Robinson said. "Their coach was so mad, he said he would never bring another team back there."

The school is located in Baudette, which bills itself as the Walleye Capital of the World. "I caught quite a few walleyes," said Troxel. "I worked as a fishing guide from when I was about 14 at the different resorts. Summer time was all about being outside and on the water."

Koller moved away his senior year when his father, the school principal, took a job at Dassel-Cokato. Oren, the only returning starter, had a big senior year, but the team slipped to about .500.



Todd Robinson shoots against Rock Schindler of BI-LL.

After high school, three of the Bears played junior college ball, Troxel for Rainy River and Omerza and Koller for Vermillion, so they went against each other.

About his father, the coach, Omerza said, "He worked us hard. We were in really good shape. And he and (assistant coach) Mr. Troxel spent a lot of time teaching us different offenses and defenses. Dad was super thrilled to be down there. It was great to see that we could compete with anybody at the state tournament."

One hockey-like goal Coach Omerza instilled in them, Koller remembers, was "to try to shut a team out in the first quarter." They came close a couple times, leading about 20-2 at the first stop.

When the coach passed away in 2017, Robinson, who grew up next door, made the trip from Ohio for the funeral, joining Tom and Troxel there. "He was my coach in basketball, and my boss in the summer when he ran the golf course. His wife was like a second mother to me. So I absolutely made it back for the funeral."

Robinson has two sons who played basketball, the younger one captain of his high school team. The boys saw the videotape of the state championship game that Todd got from Channel 9 and were not quite as solemn about it as their dad. "They love to give me crap for losing the game and fouling out," he said, with amusement. Omerza has four kids. Three played basketball, he said, "but nothing stellar, nothing like we did." Koller has two athletic daughters who played college soccer, one for the Gophers, one for Augustana.

LOW won another basketball district title in 1984, but after that, there's been scant basketball success. Samantha Lyon, activities director, contacted by MBBN, explained that it's a small school — about 35 kids per class, roughly half the 1980 class — and most of the top athletes prefer hockey, in which the Bears have averaged about 10 wins per year over the last 15 seasons.

Lake of the Woods has enjoyed just one state championship in its history, by the volleyball team in 2006, occurring during a run of six state trips in nine years; they were also runner-up in 2003. Otherwise there's been four state trips in football (between 1997 and 2007), two in baseball (1967 and 1985), and one each in girls basketball (2006) and softball (2003).

And that one glorious basketball season of 1979-80.

MBBN GIRLS TOP 20

CLASS 4A

1. Hopkins 5-0
2. St. Michael-Albertville 6-0
3. Eden Prairie 7-1
4. Chaska 6-1
5. Wayzata 6-1
6. Rosemount 5-0
7. East Ridge 8-1
8. Minnetonka 5-2
9. Maple Grove 5-3
10. Lakeville South 7-0
11. Anoka 6-1
12. White Bear Lake 8-1
13. Lakeville North 5-2
14. Stillwater 6-1
15. Rochester Mayo 5-1
16. Rogers 4-2
17. Champlin Park 3-2
18. Elk River 4-3
19. Blaine 6-1
20. Cambridge-Isanti 4-1

CLASS 3A

1. Becker 4-0
2. Benilde- St. Margaret's 5-2
3. Jordan 5-0
4. Holy Angels 7-1
5. Marshall 2-1
6. Grand Rapids 6-2
7. Alexandria 3-1
8. Byron 6-1
9. Stewartville 5-2
10. Red Wing 5-1
11. Orono 3-2
12. Cloquet 6-1
13. Detroit Lakes 4-1
14. Mahtomedi 4-2
15. North St. Paul 7-0
16. Monticello 6-1
17. St. Peter 4-2
18. Hill-Murray 3-3
19. Austin 5-2
20. New Prague 5-2

CLASS 2A

1. Providence Academy 5-2
2. Minnehaha Academy 4-2
3. St. Croix Lutheran 6-2
4. Montevideo 5-0
5. Lake Crystal-Wellcome Memorial 5-0
6. New London-Spicer 5-0
7. Perham 6-0
8. Duluth Marshall 5-0
9. Albany 6-1
10. Goodhue 5-2
11. Rochester Lourdes 6-1
12. Sauk Centre 5-1
13. Holy Family 4-4
14. Luverne 5-0
15. Minneapolis Roosevelt 7-1
16. Pine City 3-1
17. Caledonia 6-1
18. Pierz 4-0
19. Southwest Christian 5-0
20. Chatfield 8-1

CLASS 1A

1. Hancock 4-0
2. Mountain Iron-Buhl 7-1
3. Buffalo Lake-Hector-Stewart 7-0
4. Minneota 2-0
5. Mayer Lutheran 8-0
6. Hayfield 6-1
7. Underwood 5-1
8. Fosston 5-0
9. Lac qui Parle Valley 4-1
10. Belgrade-Brooten-Elrosa 2-1
11. Grand Meadow 5-0
12. Tracy-Milroy-Balaton 4-0
13. Kelliher-Northome 6-0
14. BOLD 5-1
15. Braham 7-0
16. Henning 5-1
17. Badger-Greenbush-Middle River 5-1
18. Breckenridge 6-0
19. Goodridge-Grygla 6-0
20. Kerkhoven-Murdock-Sunburg 5-0

MBBN BOYS TOP 20

CLASS 4A

1. Park Center 5-0
2. Lakeville
North 4-1
3. Shakopee 4-0
4. Eastview 3-1
5. Hopkins 6-1
6. Maple Grove 4-1
7. Farmington 3-2
8. Eden Prairie 3-1
9. East Ridge 3-2
10. Wayzata 2-3
11. Robbinsdale
Armstrong 3-2
12. Robbinsdale
Cooper 3-1
13. Andover 3-2
14. Minnetonka 3-2
15. Prior Lake 3-2
16. Stillwater 5-2
17. Lakeville
South 4-2
18. Rochester
Mayo 5-0
19. Buffalo 4-0
20. Cambridge-
Isanti 3-1

CLASS 3A

1. Totino-Grace 2-1
2. Orono 4-0
3. Benilde-St.
Margaret's 4-0
4. DeLaSalle 4-2
5. Mahtomedi 2-1
6. Alexandria 4-1
7. Mankato
East 4-1
8. Austin 4-1
9. Princeton 4-0
10. St. Anthony
Village 4-1
11. New Ulm 4-0
12. Delano 5-2
13. Hermantown 3-0
14. Winona 2-1
15. Mankato
West 3-2
16. Jordan 3-1
17. North
Branch 4-1
18. Simley 3-1
19. St. Cloud
Tech 2-3
20. Marshall 2-0

CLASS 2A

1. Holy Family 4-0
2. Lake City 6-0
3. Minneapolis
North 3-4
4. Maranatha
Christian 3-0
5. Maple River 6-1
6. Minnehaha
Academy 6-2
7. Plainview-Elgin-
Millville 2-2
8. Perham 4-0
9. Pequot
Lakes 4-0
10. Watertown-
Mayer 4-0
11. Albany 3-0
12. Mora 3-1
13. Sauk Centre 3-0
14. Esko 3-0
15. Thief River
Falls 5-0
16. Rock Ridge 6-1
17. New London-
Spicer 2-0
18. Crosby-
Ironton 4-1
19. West
Central Area 4-1
20. Two Harbors 5-0

CLASS 1A

1. Cherry 2-2
2. Hayfield 5-1
3. Belgrade-
Brooten-
Elrosa 2-0
4. New Life
Academy 6-0
5. Cass Lake-
Bena 3-0
6. Deer River 5-0
7. Henning 6-0
8. Goodhue 5-1
9. Russell-
Tyler-
Ruthton 3-0
10. Mankato
Loyola 5-0
11. Fertile-
Beltrami 5-1
12. Legacy
Christian 5-2
13. Lakeview 3-1
14. Lyle-Pacelli 6-0
15. Border West 3-0
16. Browerville-
Eagle Valley 2-1
17. Battle Lake 4-0
18. Southwest MN
Christian 4-0
19. Ada-Borup-
West 5-0
20. Nevis 4-1

Pirates top Panthers in 1 vs. 2

By Bruce Strand

Park Center won a No. 1 vs. No. 2 duel over Lakeville North 78-71 on Saturday at a Breakdown event in Osseo. Point guard Casmir Chavis led the Pirates (5-0) with 20 points. Chiang Ring added 16 points, CJ O'Hara 15 and JJ Ware 10. "Fun high school game," said John Oxtan, Lakeville South coach. "Park Center is very good." The Panthers led by 11 early. Park Center surged ahead 40-37 at the half, forcing several turnovers and converting easy baskets. The Pirates expanded the lead to 10. North battled back for a brief lead with three minutes left but couldn't hold it. Nolan Winter, Lakeville North's 6-foot-11 Wisconsin recruit, scored 27 points and grabbed 10 rebounds. Jack Robinson added 18, Hudson Vaith 11, and Matt Drake 10.

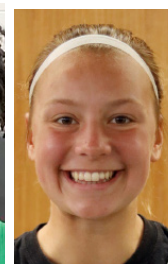
Braeden O'Neill, Norwood Young America senior, pumped in 61 points in a 90-82 win over Monticello on Dec. 9. The 6-foot-7 power forward shot 23-for-34 on field goals and 15-for-26 at the line while pulling down 23 rebounds against the Magic (0-4). He broke the 57-year-old school record of 46 points set by Doug Will in 1965, according to coach Kyle Strickfaden. O'Neill is averaging 31.6 points for the Raiders (6-1), after scoring 22 ppg as a junior.

Minnehaha Academy, perennial Class 2A state contender, out-dueled Class 1A's top-ranked Cherry 86-75 at home Saturday. Jerome Williams and Lorenzo Levy hit 23 points each for the Redhawks (6-2) while Rolyns Aligbe supplied 20 points, five blocks and six assists. "The game went well," said Jordan Christian, Cherry coach. "We had it down to four to six points for a majority of the second half but could not get stops when needed." Noah Sundquist led Cherry (2-2) with 26 points. Isaac Asuma had 18 and 13 rebounds. Noah Asuma added 14 points and Carson Brown 12.

Benilde-St. Margaret's savored a rare win over DeLaSalle in the Christian Brothers Cup game, 55-49, on Tuesday. DLS had won eight of the last nine in the series that dates back to 1958. The Red Knights (4-0) play three juniors, three sophomores and a freshman. "I think it's just the beginning for those guys," coach Damian Johnson told the Star-Tribune. BSM soph Abu Keita notched 21 points and 10 rebounds, broke a 44-44 tie with a three-pointer and sank two clinching free shots after forcing a turnover. Jaleel Donley added 11 points and Jayden Daisy 10 for BSM. For DSL (4-2), Nasir Whitlock sank 14 points and Israel Moses 12.



Casmir
Chavis



Ayla
Brown



Rolyns
Aligbe



Max Shi-
kenjanski

Max Shikenjanski pumped in 47 points as the Stillwater Ponies (5-2) tripped Class 3A's No. 5 ranked Mahtomedi 90-82 on Tuesday in Stillwater. The 6-foot-3 senior guard shot 16-for-24 from the field (4-for-8 on three's) and 16-for-17 on free shots. It was not quite a school record — the same player hit 49 against Cretin-Derham Hall as a sophomore. The son of former Gopher standout Jim Shikenjanski is one of the state's top athletes as a basketball guard and football quarterback. He was averaging 24.8 points coming into the game with a previous high of 28. For Mahtomedi (2-1), Will Underwood sank 27 points, Owen Carlson 25 and AJ McCleery 16. Stillwater outscored the Zephyrs 57-51 in the second half.

Becker, ranked No. 1 in Class 3A girls, came up with a big win Friday, handing Class 4A's No. 8 Eden Prairie its first loss 70-67. Last season, when the Bulldogs were state runner-up, they were humbled by two Lake Conference teams, losing by 28 to Wayzata and by 41 to Minnetonka. The Bulldogs also have the Lake's St. Michael-Albertville on the schedule Jan. 28. Against Eden Prairie, Ayla Brown, senior guard who's averaging 20.8 points, tallied 25 for the Bulldogs (4-0), Danielle Guest added 16, Maren Westin 13, and Alexis Rose 12. Eden Prairie led 38-32 at the half. For the Eagles (7-1), Annika Anderson sank 21 points, Rae Ehrman 16 and Molly Lenz 13.

Tessa Johnson of St. Michael-Albertville erupted for 51 points against Chaska, leading a 97-70 win over the Hawks in a duel of unbeaten teams on Friday night. Johnson, signed by NCAA champion South Carolina, shattered her previous career high of 36 points as she broke school records for points and three-point shots (nine). Ava Haus added 12 points and Piper Carlson 11. Johnson is averaging 26.5 points. The Knights average 81 points. Kennedy Sanders led Chaska (6-1) with 23 points.

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See schedule in ad on next page. Two regions are scheduled on each weekend with grade/genders scheduled on opposite days. Example: 7th grade girls are scheduled for Rochester on Sunday, March 26, and in Redwood Falls on Saturday, March 25, so teams could play 3-4 games each day and play in both tournaments.

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4B = 4th grade boys, 4G = 4th grade girls, etc. Teams may register for more than one region.

Region 1 Site	Date	Grade/Gender
Rochester-RCTC	March 25	4G, 6G, 8G, 5B, 7B, 9B
Rochester-RCTC	March 26	5G, 7G, 9G, 4B, 6B, 8B

Region 2 Site	Date	Grade/Gender
Lake Crystal	April 22	4G, 6G, 8G, 5B, 7B, 9B
Lake Crystal	April 23	5G, 7G, 9G, 4B, 6B, 8B

Region 3 Site	Date	Grade/Gender
Redwood Falls	March 25	5G, 7G, 9G, 4B, 6B, 8B
Redwood Falls	March 26	4G, 6G, 8G, 5B, 7B, 9B

Region 4 Site	Date	Grade/Gender
Moose Lake/Willow River	April 15	4G, 6G, 8G, 5B, 7B, 9B
Moose Lake/Willow River	April 16	5G, 7G, 9G, 4B, 6B, 8B

Region 5 Site	Date	Grade/Gender
Paynesville	April 1	5G, 7G, 9G, 4B, 6B, 8B
Paynesville	April 2	4G, 6G, 8G, 5B, 7B, 9B

Region 6 Site	Date	Grade/Gender
Alexandria	April 15	5G, 7G, 9G, 4B, 6B, 8B
Alexandria	April 16	4G, 6G, 8G, 5B, 7B, 9B

Region 7 Site	Date	Grade/Gender
Grand Rapids	April 1	8G, 5B, 7B
Grand Rapids	April 2	7G, 9G, 4B
Mt. Iron-Buhl	April 1	4G, 6G, 9B
Mt. Iron-Buhl	April 2	5G, 6B, 8B

Region 8 Site	Date	Grade/Gender
Bemidji	April 22	5G, 7G, 9G, 4B, 6B, 8B
Bemidji	April 23	4G, 6G, 8G, 5B, 7B, 9B

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MN State Championships	Location	Date	Grades
MIT - MN Invitational	College of St. Benedict	June 10	B & G 4-6-8
State Championship	College of St. Benedict	June 11	B & G 4-6-8
MIT - MN Invitational	College of St. Benedict	June 17	B & G 5-7-9
State Championship	College of St. Benedict	June 18	B & G 5-7-9



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