

Title-winning team relishes hoop memories

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Fifty years ago, basketball was king in Great Falls.

And the Bison reigned supreme in the state.

"Fifty years. It seems like it went by in a jiffy, you know?" Gary Swartz said with a smile.

There were smiles aplenty last Friday as Swartz and many of his pals on the 1965 Great Falls High basketball team reunited for lunch and a golf outing at Meadow Lark Country Club.

"It's unfortunate a lot of the guys couldn't make it, but that's just the way it is," Swartz said. "We're making the best of it. We told a lot of stories over lunch and it's been a great time."

These days, large schools like the Bison and C.M. Russell High Rustlers are among 14 in Class AA. Back 50 years ago, Great Falls High played

in the Big 32. That's a few more teams to beat.

"And we prevailed," said Swartz. "Thanks to big Jack."

Jack Gillespie was one of the seven former Bison hoop stars playing golf on Friday. But, like always, his mind was on basketball. Memories of the 1965 state championship game in Bozeman are fresh.

"We had a little trouble with the zone at first, because they were throwing it inside to me," said Gillespie. "But when the guys started shooting it really opened things up and we played very well. But we only beat Columbia Falls by one point."

Then he smiled.

"We were up eight and went into a little stall," Gillespie said. "It was amazing. They had their whole town there. But we got them."

Gillespie was 6-9 and 185

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pounds then. He improved greatly as a Montana State star and went on to a tremendous professional career.

"We weren't picked to win it," Gillespie said. "Billings West had the great team, but they got upset."

Jim Kernaghan organized the lunch and golf outing.

"We got everybody here but three and it's been great," he said. "We told a lot of stories."

Marvin Smith, Randy Morrison and Bob Crnkovich were juniors on the 1965 squad. The rest were seniors. The Bison didn't lose much in those days.

"The one I remember we lost was in Lewistown," Kernaghan grinned. "Gillespie's going down for a layup and they threw a snowball out on the floor (in the old Civic Center). Jack hit the snowball, fell flat on his back and they



COURTESY PHOTO

In 1965, the Great Falls High basketball team won the Big 32 and the state championship for coaches Ray Dodds and Arnie Scott. Several members gathered in Great Falls last week for their 50th class reunion.

called him for traveling."

Kernaghan laughed.

"True story," he said.

Later this season, when Lewistown came to Great Falls High the crowd roared as the Bison scored a basket. And the roar didn't stop—be-

cause back at the other end Swartz and a Lewistown player were engaged in some fisticuffs.

The guys all laughed at that recollection. And Swartz just smiled.

For sure, those were the



TRIBUNE PHOTO/SCOTT MANSCH

Members of the 1965 state champion Great Falls High basketball team gathered last week for lunch and a golf outing. Pictured are, from left, Roger Jones, Bob Crnkovich, Marv Smith, Jack Gillespie, Jim Kernaghan, Ron Madeen and Gary Swartz.

glory days of Great Falls High basketball. The Bison beat Missoula 62-59 for the 1962 state championship, then the next season GFH finished second following a 67-64 loss to Billings West.

Two years later the Bison

were back on top after the 62-61 victory over Columbia Falls.

"We had 32 teams to beat," said Kernaghan. "That's our claim to fame."

The starters in 1965?

"It varied," Kernaghan

said. "But Jack and Marvin (Smith) and Ron (Madeen) and myself and Gary Swartz and Tom Winters and Randy Carlson ... It was pretty much seven or eight guys that played a lot."

Madeen, Crnkovich, Smith, Roger Jones, Swartz, Gillespie and Kernaghan all played golf.

"It's really something," Kernaghan said. "I decided to give them all a welcome letter and see if they wanted to have lunch and a golf outing. It's really great."

The men came from as far as Dallas, Phoenix and Salt Lake City. Kernaghan, Smith and Gillespie all still live in Great Falls. Madeen resides in Hamilton.

Those who could not attend were Tom Winters, Randy Carlson, Randy Morrison and Jerry Sabol.

"It was a great team," Swartz said. "We had a lot of fun playing together."

And that still holds true 50 years later.

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