

The Basketball World Series

This is the next installment in the series of articles by Br. Neal Golden '57 CJ



The 1957-8 basketball season was one of the oddest but most exciting in New Orleans Prep history. Because of some strange rules in effect at the time, St. Aloysius and De La Salle played seven times, including two games decided in an NFL-style sudden death period.

Coach Ernie Smith, newly arrived from St. Stanislaus, fielded a veteran starting lineup: seniors Alex Arnold, Ed Blais, Gasper Cardinale, and John Gibrant (an SSC transplant also), plus junior Sam Bruiglio. The three front-liners, Arnold, Blais, and Gibrant, were all well over 6'

The team made a smooth transition to a new coach, winning their first 13 games, some by monster scores: McGill (Mobile) 65-34, West Jefferson 82-21, Nicholls 64-36. That cleared the decks for the January 17 tussle the city had been waiting for – the district opener against De La Salle, the defending state champions. Johnny Altobello's Cavaliers were equally experienced and talented with the likes of Wayne and Bryan Pietri, John Chavanne, and two giants, 6'9" Mel Songy and 6'10" Tom Conklin. (The Pietris and Chavanne, along with Altobello, are all in the De La Salle Hall of Fame.)

The 1,500 who overflowed Fortier Gym (De La Salle had no gym at the time) got the game they came to see. Ahead with three minutes to play, Smith called for a freeze. However, the tactic failed as DLS came back to win 37-34.

When the Cavs came to Esplanade Avenue for the second round opener on February 4, athletic director Brother Gregory announced that there would be no tickets sold at the gate as the game was a sellout. The teams boasted identical 18-1 records, De La Salle having lost in December at Baton Rouge 52-48 without Wayne Pietri. This time the Crusaders eked out the win, 52-50. Officials Jackson and DiNicola called 32 fouls in the first half alone. Bryan Pietri sat out most of the third quarter and Wayne Pietri and Conklin fouled out early in the last quarter. Cardinale's 13 points led the Saders.

Both teams breezed through the rest of the second round to tie for the Catholic league championship. According to LHSAA rules, the two district representatives would have to play in order to determine positioning for the first round of the playoffs. But before that could happen, the teams would meet again in the CYO tournament at Loyola Field House. As defending CYO champion, DLS received a first round bye. Then the bracket for some reason called for them to face the Crusaders in the semifinals on February 24. This clash was even tighter than the first two. Smith's squad led 28-21 at the half only to give up 6 in a row to start the second stanza and set up another nail-biting finish. Cardinale's basket with 23 seconds left sent the game into overtime at 43. Under the rules in effect that season, the game went to sudden death when the first three-minute OT ended 47-47. The Crusaders controlled the tip, but Songy was fouled rebounding Cardinale's field goal attempt. However, Songy missed the free throw, and Gibrant claimed the



The starting lineup, Ed Blaise, Sammy Bruiglio, Alex Arnold, John Gibrant, and Gasper Cardinale

carom. This time Cardinale hit from the side to win 49-47.

Four days later, the teams met again at Loyola before 3,000 fans in the district playoff. Amazingly, this game went into sudden death also. As in the first game, SA hit a tying basket at the end of regulation, only this time Lou Comeaux, who scored 19 off the bench, was the hero. After each team scored two in the first extra period, De La Salle had the first crack at victory, but a walking violation nullified the basket. On the other end of the court, Gibrant tipped in Joe

Spano's miss for the Crimson's third straight win in the series, 43-41. The victory enabled SA to host Byrd (at the larger Jesuit gym) to start the playoffs while DLS visited Ouachita in Monroe.

After dispatching both foes easily, the teams had to play again to determine who would play whom in the next round. So March 6 brought 3,500 to Loyola again. This time Altobello's crew prevailed 57-53, which, amazingly, was the largest margin of the five games thus far between the rivals. When each school won the coin flip to host their next playoff games, they scheduled a doubleheader at Loyola for March 8.

2,000 watched the Crusaders dispatch La Grange 44-32 and De La Salle clobber Lafayette 56-30. So guess what? Another game to determine placement for the LHSAA semifinals. 3,000 trooped to Loyola two nights later to watch De La Salle eke out a 47-44 win, aided by three missed Sader free throws in the last minute. The Cavaliers won the rebounding battle by an astounding 49-24. Again both teams won the coin flips to set up another playoff doubleheader at Loyola.

Istrouma provided the Crusaders with their stiffest opposition all season except for DLS. SA came from behind in the final seconds to take the lead 54-52 on Cardinale's basket at 0:26, then survived an Istrouma shot that went in a moment after the buzzer. The Cavaliers got revenge on Baton Rouge in the nightcap, 68-38. Now there would be no need for a hokey positioning game. The seventh meeting of the two squads would be for all the marbles.

The largest high school basketball crowd in Louisiana history gathered at Loyola for the rubber match between two evenly matched teams. However, the game disappointed all 6,000 fans but especially the Crimson followers. It was nothing like any of the other six. Officials from Shreveport called 67 fouls, 37 on the Saders, to foul out six of Smith's crew along with two Cav starters. De La Salle made a mind-boggling 48 free throws in a 78-53 romp. The 25-point margin of victory exceeded by 9 the combined total of the margins in the previous six meetings.

St. Aloysius finished 30-4, with all four losses to De La Salle (31-4). The 1957-8 Crusaders were one of the finest teams in Louisiana prep history. Unfortunately, they finished second to another of the state's greatest quintets.