

# Leavenworth Wyandottes, 1966-67

*Written by Mark Buxton, PhD*

The town of Leavenworth today sits atop a bluff overlooking a bend in the Ohio River, a breathtaking view especially when taken in at The Overlook Restaurant. The town was originally laid out down near the river in 1818 by cousins Zebulon and Seth Leavenworth. The town grew steadily and by the 1870s its population was estimated to be at least 1200. In the early 1890s the townspeople of Leavenworth and English were engaged in a battle as to which town would be the county seat. From a story in the English News Messenger, the battle was a literal one as “the fight was climaxed in 1894 when an armed band from English, consisting of 96 two-horse wagons, 82 mounted guards and 478 infantrymen entered Leavenworth and carried the records from the court house. English became the county seat in 1896”. Leavenworth slowly lost some of its significance and the great flood of 1937 finished off the town. The extent of the destruction was so great that the town had to be rebuilt on its current site on the bluff. By the time the 1960s rolled around, the town had had a fairly steady population of about 450.

About five miles north of Leavenworth are the Wyandotte Caves, the caves being named after the Wyandotte River, the original name of the current Blue River which empties into the Ohio River about a mile east of Leavenworth, hence the team name of Wyandottes.

Coach Don Denbo had grown up near French Lick and played for the Red Devils, graduating in 1956. When Denbo was in junior high in 1950-52, the head coach at the high school taught PE and health for all of the grades including the 7th and 8th graders. That coach was fresh out of Butler and would go on to bigger things in 1953 and '54 at Milan, some folks might have heard of him – Marvin Wood. Denbo on Marvin Wood – “Best coach ever. I will never forget sitting in the front row, me and a couple of

other guys who played ball, we didn't do much talking about health, it was all about basketball. Little guy, biggest smile, just a great guy, I thought God had come back. He would diagram all of the Butler drills and by god, I had 'em for years and that's exactly the stuff I used when I went to coach.”

Denbo first had been an assistant coach at Pe-kin when the job at Leavenworth came open for the 1964-65 season. Jim Cawood had been coach for Leavenworth, Denbo said the boys had been taught well, Cawood had instilled discipline. Denbo said for his first year Leavenworth was about 8-12 and that he felt he had done a good job, especially given he only had one senior and had played a lot of juniors and sophomores. His principal told Denbo he deserved a raise and for him to go see the township trustee. But when Denbo went to see the trustee who was out in his field plowing, he was told, “Don, I tell you what, I'm thinking about let-

ting you go.” Denbo had almost unknowingly been caught up in small-town politics.

Denbo – “I just flew out my damn head, man, I said ‘What in the hell are you talking about?’ Later on, down the years later, one of the



Leavenworth Wyandottes Sectional Champs

boys that was a senior that year, his dad was a big politician, a Republican politician, and it just so happened, I was playing this other boy quite a bit more and his dad was a Democrat! I had no idea, I didn't know anybody in Leavenworth when I went there, zero. But anyway, he (the township trustee) said, ‘I'll think about it, Don, just give me a few

weeks. Then he said, 'Naw, we're gonna hire you back'. Well, everything was OK from that point on."

Leavenworth had a 9-11 regular season record in 1965-66 and lost its first game in the sectional to Dale, 70-59. The Wyandottes went into the 1966-67 season with only three returning seniors, 5'10" sharp-shooting guard Russ Breeden, 5'9" guard Roger Wade and all-Blue River Conference forward, 6'2" Fred Ridge. Also returning were 6'2" Earl Parkhill who was expected to be the number one sub along with other returning letter winners, 6'0" forward Scott Benz, 5'9" junior guard Doug Breeden and 5'7" junior Charles Tower, "the best defensive player on the squad" as described by Coach Don Denbo.

Chuck Tower on Coach Denbo – "He was strong on physical conditioning and rewarded people who worked hard, I felt. I found out that I could run longer and harder than I ever thought I could my freshman year (Denbo's first year).

Denbo spent the summer of 1966 out of town working on his master's degree and was unaware of some news that would affect the upcoming season – "Russy (Breeden) came to me and said, 'I got bad news, Freddy's not gonna be able to play with us next year'." Ridge's crime in the eyes of the IHSAA? He had gotten married and the IHSAA had a 'morals clause' in its participation rights. Yet, without Ridge, Leavenworth had a great season and won the sectional. Coach Denbo, was the team better off without Ridge?

"No, not with him. He was a straight-A student, good family, strong-minded kid, just a tremendous jumper, six-foot, 195, he was solid, good baseball player too ... he, it hurt the team, you just don't lose your damn best player, he was the leader, he was the leader as a sophomore actually, because he was just that kind of a person, he was a smart kid. That was amazing how my team related to that deal, you know we never discussed it, none of us ever discussed it, we just went, 'Well, he graduated.' But Fred's attitude was good, he came to the games, he sat right there in the front row, he didn't act sour, you'd think he might have been withdrawn, but no. I saw a kid who was very smart."

Fred Ridge – "Coach Denbo was always a coach that built up his players and got them to perform at their highest potential. I went to most of the games, they were still my teammates even after I wasn't on the team, we had been together since we were, most of us started playing basketball together in the fifth grade or before."

Junior Doug Breeden began the season as the fifth starter replacing Ridge, but he was 5'10" and more of a guard than a forward. Coach Denbo though was still optimistic and was quoted in a pre-season newspaper article that the 1966-67 team was "bigger, deeper and stronger physically than last year, is fundamentally sound and works better as a unit than any club he's ever coached". But he also said in a present-day interview that, "The negative part about that team, they were slow, and not many people realized that, thank the Lord!"

6'0" junior forward Scott Benz would be one of the starters. Denbo on Benz – "His dad died early in his life, he lived with his mom out on a little farm, lived right across the street from Fred Ridge, they were right there together and they competed. Scottie was a good student, not an excellent one, but a good student, he loved to play. For a boy six-foot, Scottie could use his butt and play with his back to the basket just about as good as anybody I ever seen. I saw that early because I saw how he could move people around. He was the leader after Fred left, he was pretty head-strong, easy to coach though. Benz was special, he had a little bit of showoff, cockiness, I guess, good ballplayers have that. One game, he was a sophomore, he could handle the ball pretty well too, he had the ball out front, we had a four- or five-point lead at English who had all seniors and they had only lost one game at that point, he was waving at them like 'come out and get me'. I felt like ripping his ass, but he pulled it off."

Russ Breeden on Scott Benz – "He was always talking to the other team, Scottie knew everybody on the other team, he was always talking to them, he had his own way of keeping them off-guard, yet he was strong, he was very well-built, he had a humorous streak."

Benz described himself as "If I got my butt planted down there to get a rebound, it was hard for somebody to move me out of the way ... also, I think I averaged 4.2 fouls a game."

Likewise, Russ said that Chuck Tower could also talk a little trash to the opponents, "Scottie's (talk) was more friendly and so was Chuck's, but Chuck always had something going on with the other team, it wasn't beyond him to walk by (before) shooting free throws and have a few words about where that ball may end up. Chuck had an edge to him, but it was a competitive edge. You had to be ready to play him."

Russ Breeden on Gerald Austin – "He was quiet,

he really came into his own that year, 6'4", 6'5", he and Scotty complimented each other well because Gerald was tall and Scotty was more of a bulldog and the fact that we had two guys underneath kind of opened things up a bit more too."

Gerald Austin agreed, "Scott was like a chunk of concrete, you couldn't move him. Me, I was taller, they could hit me and knock me around... I was kind of like a beanpole out there. Chuck Tower, was so fast, I don't think there was anybody that could go past him, I don't know how many pairs of tennis shoes he went through that year, burnt the sole right off of them."

Denbo on Earl Parkhill – "He didn't play basketball, he was out on the farm, he had to work at home. He didn't come out for the team as a sophomore, he did as a junior and he was on the B team. I don't know how I got him out but I got him out, 'cause I was looking for someone with some height. I had him in English class and he was intelligent. He wasn't a smooth player, but he was a hard worker. He was a kid who knew where his place was, he helped the team." Parkhill would hit an important shot in sectional.

Randy Coleman had been the leading scorer the previous year for the 8th grade team which had gone undefeated and he earned some playing time on the varsity as a freshman and made the tournament roster – "I had a hard time in my studies, I wasn't concentrating in the 7th and 8th grades, but when I got into high school I began applying myself, that's the only thing that kept me in school, basketball, I really loved basketball."

The players were close-knit and all of them recall the parties after the games, Doug Breeden – "Seems like the party always came up to our house, we had a big house, we always opened it up, so the famous line that we all said, 'We'll have a victory party whether we win or lose'. My parents were always very open about it, everybody felt like our house was their house and it was."

Game 1 – Leavenworth opened the season on November 5th at home against Perry Central which had opened its season with a win four nights earlier over Holland, so perhaps the Commodores had a slight advantage. Before an overflow crowd,

Leavenworth jumped out to a quick 6-0 lead on buckets by Russ Breeden, Benz and Austin. Though the Wyandottes struggled from the field the rest of the half, they did manage to hang on to a 17-15 lead at intermission. When their shooting woes continued in the second half (28% from the field), the game was lost, final score 42-33. Benz and Russ Breeden each scored nine points and Benz also had 11 rebounds.

Game 2 – The Wyandottes played their second game at home on November 11th against the Birdseye Yellowjackets. Leavenworth led most of the game and won 47-38. Neither team shot very well, the difference was Leavenworth controlled the boards and held Birdseye's leading man, Persohn, to a single basket. Benz and Russ Breeden each scored 15 to lead the way while Doug Breeden had seven and Austin had five.

Game 3 – The next night the Wyandottes traveled to Georgetown to take on the Bearcats and came away with the win mostly due to their rebounding where they won the battle of the boards, 44-28, cruising to a 69-54 win. Gerald Austin connected on 11 of 14 from the line for most of his 19



*Randy Coleman's Jersey*

points and also snared 11 rebounds. Benz scored 15 points, Russ Breeden had 12 points and nine rebounds while Chuck Tower, smallest player on the floor, snagged ten boards to go along with five points. Doug Breeden contributed a shot in the arm by nailing six of seven shots during the middle two frames to tally 12 points and help break open a tight game at halftime.

Austin recalls, "I remember that they said we didn't have any business playing them, they were so much better than we were. I went home very satisfied that night, very happy with ourselves, I think that was the beginning of our great season."

Game 4 – On November 18th South Central came calling on the Wyandottes and tried to rattle the hosts with a full court press. All that got the Rebels was a 26-11 halftime deficit as the Wyandottes were able to break the press. South Central was able to close the gap all the way down to five late in the game, mostly because Benz and Tower fouled out but Leavenworth also struggled at the foul line, making only 4-10 in the fourth quarter. Still, the Wyandottes were able to hang on for a 47-41 victory, their third in a row.

Gerald Austin had another big game with 18 points and 17 rebounds, Benz added 12 markers and Russ Breeden chipped in with 10 points.

Game 5 – County rival Marengo, sporting a 5-0 record, came calling on Nov 23rd. The Cavemen had just set the school record for points, blasting English 109-46, though in this game Marengo would be without starting guard Terry Stroud. The game was tied five times early on including 11-11 at the end of the first quarter but Leavenworth connected on 8 of 11 in the second quarter to lead 31-23 at the break on its way to a 67-50 win. Russ Breeden and Benz each scored 21 while Austin added 19. Doug Breeden and Robbie Williams rounded out the scoring with four and two points respectively as Leavenworth upped its mark to 4-1 and gained possession of the Blue River Conference Gold Ball.

Game 6 – On December 2nd Leavenworth traveled to county rival English to take on the winless and rebuilding Raiders. The Wyandottes jumped all over their much shorter opponents leading 13-3 at the first quarter break, 29-13 at the half and cruised in the second half to win 66-30. Benz scored 18 of his game-high 22 in the first half, Gerald Austin added 18 points and dominated the boards with 20 rebounds while Doug Breeden also chipped in with 18 points.

Game 7 – Archrival and county foe the Milltown Millers came to town on December 9th with a 3-2 record having just been blasted by a tough Morgan Township ballclub from neighboring Harrison County. Leavenworth found itself down 24-17 at halftime on Homecoming Night. The Wyandottes managed to narrow the deficit to 35-29 at the end of the third quarter but things still looked bleak as they were having trouble making their free throws and for once they weren't dominating the boards. Leavenworth had the gap down to two and had the ball when Earl Parkhill knotted the game with a one-hander from the side with 58 seconds to go. The Millers held the ball for a last shot to win the game but came up empty when Atz' shot rolled off the rim. Parkhill connected again to open the overtime and from there the Wyandottes were in control, winning 52-44. Again, Gerald Austin was the big gun with 24 points while Benz added 17. Parkhill's two huge shots accounted for his four points, the Breedens each chipped in with three and Tower added two free throws. Leavenworth held John Hammond, Milltown's leading scorer, to six points by using a 1-2-2 zone to up its record to 6-1.

Game 8 – Leavenworth hosted Lanesville on Dec 13th and had no problem with the Eagles, leading 15-5 at the first quarter break, 35-11 at halftime and coasted to a 67-40 victory, their seventh in a row. Eight players saw action and all contributed, Austin led with 19, Benz and Russ Breeden added 10, Doug Breeden nine, Wade had eight, Parkhill and Williams chipped in with four apiece and Tower rounded out the scoring with three points.

Game 9 – On December 16th the Wyandottes traveled down-river to visit the Cannelton Bulldogs. Cannelton jumped out to a 24-18 first quarter lead and when Scot Benz was whistled for his third foul at the end of the first quarter, things looked bleak for Leavenworth. But the Wyandottes were able to hang in there with Benz on the bench and went to the locker room at the halftime intermission trailing by eight, 40-32. With Benz back on the floor to start the second half, Denbo's boys got hot in the third quarter to take a 50-47 lead going into the final eight minutes. The lead went back-and-forth so the game came down to a last Leavenworth possession, Cannelton leading 60-59. The Cannelton News reported, "Victory hung in the balance right down to the end of the spectacular skirmish with the Wyandottes. A shot by the game's top scorer, Scottie Benz, hung on the rim and rolled away at 10 seconds to go in the last quarter. A couple of wild rebound tips went awry for the losers before Bob Cronin of Cannelton went up, grabbed the rebound and was fouled as time ran out", snapping Leavenworth's seven-game winning streak. Only five players scored for Leavenworth, Benz led the way with 26 points and 11 rebounds, Gerald Austin had 16, Russ Breeden chipped in with 11, Tower had four and Doug Breeden added two free throws.

Games 10 and 11 – Leavenworth had a nearly three-week break at Christmas and opened the second half of the season with the county tourney at English on January 6th and 7th. Leavenworth went into the county tourney with a 7-2 record, same as Marengo, Milltown was 4-4, English was winless, 0-9. Marengo's two losses were to Leavenworth and Perry Central when its leading scorer, Terry Stroud, was out of the lineup.

Four weeks earlier Milltown had forced Leavenworth into overtime and many fans thought this game might be a little easier since the Millers were only 4-4. The game was tied at 32 at the end of the third quarter. The Millers gambled and paid extra attention to Gerald Austin, holding him to one point for the entire game and fouling him out with 6:32

remaining in regulation. Trailing by two with time waning, freshman Jerry Conrad connected for Milltown to tie the game with five seconds remaining to force overtime. Both teams had butterfingers in the overtime, Milltown turned the ball over all three times it had possession and Leavenworth the first two times it had the ball. With one last chance, Benz connected with three seconds remaining. A desperation shot by Hammond was partially blocked and the Wyandottes had escaped, 47-45. Benz poured in 24 points on eight field goals and eight free throws. Russ Breeden had 12 points though he too had fouled out with 24 seconds remaining. Randy Coleman chipped in with four, Doug Breeden, Tower and Parkhill all had two and Gerald Austin had his single point. One reason the game went to overtime was Leavenworth connected on only 15-29 free throws while Milltown made 11-13. The win put Leavenworth into the finals against Marengo which stomped winless English 71-35 in the nightcap.

Terry Stroud, Marengo's leading scorer, had missed the game early in the season but would be full strength for the county championship. Chuck Tower would draw the tough assignment to slow Stroud and he was successful, limiting Stroud to a mere five points. However, forwards Jerry Stroud (cousin) and Mike Sloan controlled the boards and pumped in 18 and 16 respectively to lead the Cavemen to a 60-44 win.

Denbo – "Sloan just simply overpowered us. He took the ball off the board and drove to the basket and we failed to stop him". Benz had 19 in the final game but "rebounding keyed the Marengo victory, the Cavemen dominating the boards by a comfortable 50-35, including a 17-6 edge in the crucial fourth quarter".

Game 12 – On January 10th Leavenworth had a return game with 1-11 Birdseye, this time on the road. The Wyandottes did not have a good night shooting from the field, connecting on 19 of 66, but it was good enough to beat the Yellowjackets and upped their mark to 9-3 overall with a 49-33 victory. Balanced scoring was the theme of the night as Austin had 12, Russ Breeden nine, Benz had eight, Doug Breeden seven, Parkhill, Lutz and Williams all had four and Tower had one point.

Game 13 – Three nights later Leavenworth hosted Tunnelton from Lawrence County but the Wyandottes got off to a slow start only making 2-13 field goals in the first quarter and trailed 10-5. Leavenworth managed to tie the game at 18 at the

half and the game was close throughout the second half before pulling out a 46-40 victory. Gerald Austin led with 17, Benz added 11, Russ Breeden eight, Parkhill had four and Tower and Williams had three each as Leavenworth improved its record to 10-3.

Game 14 – On January 20th Leavenworth traveled to nearby Lanesville and after a close first half, went wild in the third quarter to lead 54-33 and win easily, 68-47. Benz hit 16 of 30 shots and finished with a career-high of 37. Coach Denbo was not sure if this was a new school record because many of the old records had been destroyed in the flood of 1937. Benz sat out much of the fourth quarter, only entering back into the game after Austin fouled out with about two minutes remaining.

Denbo – "We didn't feed him. He got them from our regular offense. It was just one of those nights when he had the range. He could probably have scored 50 had we set him up".

All season long Denbo had been searching for that fifth guy to replace Ridge – "We played a lot of basketball in my PE class, I mean a LOT of basketball ... I was looking for anybody 6'2. Jerry Lutz never played basketball in junior high, didn't play as a freshman, he lived down there almost to Perry County, his mother worked in Corydon, he had no way to get to practice, no way to get home after practice, but I had him in PE, I could see he had a lot of ability, natural ability, he loved to play. I said, 'Jerry, how can we get you out here to play?' So I talked to his mom, this was the middle of his sophomore year ('65-'66), she said, 'Well, if you will let me pick him up at 5 o'clock, I'll let him play'. Well, I ran it across the boys, you know, I mean here's a guy only getting to practice only an hour and not having to go through all of the hard drills, runs and all that stuff. The boys said, 'Oh yeah, we'd like to have Jerry', so he came to play with us the last half of the year on the B team and then he was able to drive on his own for his junior year and he was the star on the B team until we got to about to about middle of January."

Jerry Lutz – "I think Coach watched me play out there on the outdoor courts a lot when I was in school. He was a really good coach, a really good guy."

Lutz had played the JV game against Lanesville and Denbo inserted him into the contest to start the second half. Lutz immediately paid dividends by pouring in all of his 13 points in the third quarter

to spark the Wyandottes into a big lead. Benz and Austin teamed up to grab 31 rebounds. Austin had seven, Wade and Russ Breeden had four, Doug Breeden had three. Denbo decided from that point on Lutz would be the fifth starter in place of Doug Breeden.

Denbo – “That was a sensitive thing to do. Now, there’s no wealthy people in Leavenworth, but Doug and Russy’s (parents) were the ones that owned the Overlook and they had a hatchery there and they were wonderful people and that saved me. Now sometimes, that kind of thing will screw your community up, screw you up good, but it didn’t on that team, I never heard one negative word, that was a big plus.”

Russ Breeden on Lutz going into the lineup – “Jerry was a little more of a wild card which was great because the other four of us were a little more disciplined and Jerry would just fly around the court and take advantage of opportunities, not that we didn’t, but he was a little more opportunistic in that regard and it complimented the rest of our play very well.”

Doug Breeden – “I remember Jerry coming in and beginning to start in place of me, it’s a painful memory, it doesn’t feel very good to think about that. He was a good player, Jerry is a great guy, I kind of turned into a sixth man, I was still in at some crucial moments. Jerry was better, more exciting driving to the basket.”

Game 15 – Leavenworth hosted English on January 24th, the Raiders were still winless heading into this rematch home to English. Jerry Lutz started for the first time, scoring 18 points, Gerald Austin had a huge night with 30 points as Leavenworth coasted to an 89-38 romp. Denbo substituted freely, using nine players and all scored. In addition to Austin and Lutz, Parkhill had 10, Benz and Russ Breeden had eight, Doug Breeden six, Williams five and Wade and Tower added two as the Wyandottes upped their season record to 12-3.

Game 16 – On Friday January 27th Leavenworth traveled to Marengo for the rubber game of their season match. Leavenworth had won the first game back in November rather easily 67-50. The Cavemen though had claimed the county tournament championship three weeks earlier as Sloan had dominated. This game would prove to be the most exciting of the three. The two squads went back-and-forth, Leavenworth leading 12-8 at the first quarter, Marengo charged back to lead 30-24 at halftime and carried a 43-35 advantage into

the fourth quarter. Trailing by three with under a minute, the Wyandottes scored and added a free throw to tie the game at 55 and then got the ball again. Jerry Lutz then connected on two free throws with 13 seconds left to give Leavenworth its first lead since the second quarter but Mike Sloan scored for the Cavemen with two seconds left to send the game to overtime. Leavenworth won the tip in overtime and held the ball for the entire period but missed. In the second overtime, the Wyandottes quickly took control as Gerald Austin scored five points and Benz had four to lead the way to a happy locker room, 66-59. For the game Austin had 21, Lutz and Benz had 19, Doug Breeden had four, Russ Breeden had three and Tower played but didn’t score.

Game 17 – On February 3rd, Leavenworth traveled to Perry Central who had beaten the Wyandottes in their season-opener. This game was different, as Leavenworth broke fast and never looked back after building up a 17-8 lead at the first quarter break to score a surprisingly easy 63-46 win. The closest the Commodores could get was eight points early in the fourth quarter. Leavenworth shot 43% while Perry Central hit only 26%. Denbo – “We got the jump on them and then defended them tightly. They also got a little rough with their man-to-man defense in the second half and we made a lot of free throws as a result”. For the game Leavenworth made 25-35 free throws. Benz led the way with 21, Austin had 16 points and 16 rebounds. Lutz added 13 and Russ Breeden added 12, ten coming on free throws, Tower scored the other one point.

Game 18 – Leavenworth had beaten Milltown twice, both times in overtime, this time Milltown won a back-and-forth contest on its homecourt. “The game was tied four times and the lead changed hands five times in the first half before the Millers rallied for a 37-30 edge midway of the third period.” Leavenworth never got closer than five points afterwards and the margin at one point was 17 in the 55-44 Miller victory, snapping the five-game Wyandotte winning streak. Austin led all scorers with 18 before fouling out late in the tilt. Benz had 12 points and nine rebounds, Lutz chipped in with three field goals, Russ Breeden had four points and Williams and Wade added two points apiece.

Game 19 – On Valentine’s Day the Wyandottes hosted nearby North Central and were victorious, 52-44. Benz led the way with 17, Lutz added 11

and Austin had 10. Only the five starters are listed in the box score, Russ Breeden chipped in with nine and Tower had five as Leavenworth improved to 15-4.

Game 20 – For the final game of the regular season on February 17th, the Wyandottes were at Morgan Township and won 61-52. Morgan led 11-8 at first quarter, Leavenworth led 27-26 at the half and pushed the lead to 44-35 in the third quarter. The lead grew to as much as 15 but the final margin settled down to nine. Russ Breeden popped in 13 points, Benz bounced back from early foul trouble to also finish with 13 while Lutz chipped in with 10. Doug Breeden added nine, Austin and Tower had six apiece and Parkhill and Williams added two each as the squad rounded out the regular season with the best record in school history at 16-4. Scott Benz and Gerald Austin were chosen first five, All-Blue River Conference with Benz as the second overall vote-getter, Denbo was named Coach of the Year while Jim Dupont of Perry Central was named player of the year for the second consecutive year.

**Sectionals** - Tell City hosted the sectional and The Evansville Press had the 10-10 Marksmen as its #1 choice, Ferdinand as #2, then Cannelton followed by Dale, Leavenworth and Perry Central. The Dubois County Herald picked 15-5 Ferdinand to win its first sectional title ever. Perry Central and Leavenworth both sported 16-4 records. Ferdinand had beaten Evansville Rex Mundi in double overtime as well as Evansville Mater Dei, 59-52. Perry Central also beat Mater Dei, 54-52. Tell City played four of the Evansville schools as well as New Albany and Vincennes. Enrollments for the schools were Leavenworth, 142 students; Ferdinand, 302; Perry Central, 353 and Tell City 830.

The Tell City gym held 3576 and would be packed of course. Leavenworth caught a break in the draw, being matched up against winless English. Russ Breeden on drawing English for the first game – “We knew we had, I don’t want this to sound wrong, that we had a fairly easy draw in the first game against English, I think that was comforting because Leavenworth, I’m not sure how many games Leavenworth won in the Tell City sectional before that night.” (note – none, last sectional win was in 1958 against Marengo in the New Albany sectional)

The Wyandottes had no trouble with the Raiders, winning 70-36. Austin led with 16, Benz had 14, Roger Wade had 11, Lutz had nine, Russ

Breeden had eight, Doug Breeden had six, Parkhill had four and Coleman and Kenny Austin had one point each.

The first Saturday afternoon semi-final tilt saw Perry Central paired up against host Tell City. Though Perry Central was 17-4 it was considered the underdog. The Commodores roared to the lead in the second quarter and the Marksmen never came back, Perry Central winning 42-34.

The Saturday afternoon semi-final would be against 16-5 Ferdinand which had rallied in overtime to knock off Cannelton. Like Leavenworth, the Crusaders were searching for their Holy Grail of a first sectional championship in school history. Ferdinand was led by 6’4” senior Don Barth and 5’11 Gene Vaal who each averaged 14 points per game.

Denbo – “They were the best team in the sectional, in my mind they had the most talent. They were well-coached, you couldn’t find many weaknesses there. We got there in Tell City (for pre-sectional practice) and Barth was out there dunking by himself, our guys were kind of in awe of it, I think a little bit. Robbie Williams came over and said, ‘Coach, did you see that? He was dunking with both hands.’ I said real loud so everyone could hear me, ‘Yeah, but he’s not gonna do that to us’. Coaches, we gotta do the psychological stuff.”

Trailing 18-17 with three minutes left in the second quarter, Austin made two free throws to start a 7-0 run which culminated in a 26-20 halftime lead for Leavenworth. Both squads shot about the same percentage, but Leavenworth outrebounded the Crusaders and got a few more shots from the field. Ferdinand managed to slice the lead to 38-35 entering the final eight minutes, but Leavenworth was able to spread Ferdinand out and draw some fouls, sinking eight of thirteen charity tosses in the final period while at the same time fouling out Barth who would finish with only 10 points on 4-15 field goal shooting and two free throws. Scottie Benz had a huge game with 25 points, Austin tallied 16 including eight free throws, Russ Breeden had 10, Doug Breeden had two and Lutz one, Tower played but did not score. Denbo said he double-teamed Barth with Austin in front and Benz in back, Barth scored when he got the ball but they couldn’t get him the ball enough. So this set the stage for the rubber match between Leavenworth and Perry Central, this time for the sectional championship, both school sporting 18-4 records.

Between games, the Wyandottes went to a mo-

tel in Tell City. Denbo – “I told the boys before that practice in Tell City, ‘Boys, pair up because after we win that afternoon game on Saturday we’re gonna stay at a motel here’. We hadn’t even started yet. Well, they paired up. Later, one of the players asked me who was going to pay for the hotel rooms if we had lost that afternoon game. I hadn’t asked the principal about staying at a hotel, I said, ‘Well, I guess I would have had to pay myself’. But I knew the principal would pay. But we had to prepare in case we won that afternoon game, I knew we would have to go somewhere to eat and rest.”

Another (mostly) psychological ploy by Denbo prior to the championship game against Perry Central – “I do remember calling them all into my room before we played that night, I said, ‘Now boys, I’m gonna give you chocolate candy because we’re gonna need that extra energy at the end of this game’. Well, they just dove into that chocolate like a bunch of hound dogs. It may have given more energy, I don’t know, but they thought it did.”

Russ Breeden – “I think what Coach Denbo did at that time too, was he kept us settled, he’s a calm guy, he wasn’t worked up, he didn’t work us up, he kept us focused on playing the next game.”

Seven schools – Oil Township, Leopold, Derby, Tobinsport, Rome, Union Township and Bristow – had consolidated to form Perry Central which, like Leavenworth, also had never won a sectional title. Bristow was the only school of the seven to ever have cut the nets, having won four sectionals between 1926 and 1934. So Commodore fans were just as hungry as those for the Wyandottes.

The game was tied late in the first quarter when Lutz scored to put Leavenworth up 11-9. In the second quarter Perry Central led 17-14 when Austin connected, but Dan Peter countered to keep the Commodores in front at halftime, 19-16. Russ Breeden nailed a long fielder with 2:30 left in the third to knot the score at 22. After a Commodore free throw, Earl Parkhill scored from the corner to put the Wyandottes up at the end of the third frame, 24-23. Parkhill then sank a freebie at the start of the fourth quarter, but Dupont tied it for PC. From this point forward, newspaper reports conflict with each other and even Denbo and the players are not 100% sure of the exact sequence of scoring. Absence of further evidence, the Tell City newspaper was relied on as the most accurate. According to the Tell City News Russ Breeden fired in another long field goal but the Commodores right back came as Peter made a jumper. After Leavenworth

scored, Peter tied it up again. With about a minute to go, Earl Parkhill made his important shot to put Leavenworth up 31-29.

Denbo – “They were so concerned with Benz, Parkhill was wide open, about twelve feet out and he put it in. My god, that was a big score right there. The game could have gone either way.” Dan Peter was then fouled and went to the line for a one-and-one. He made the first but missed the second. The newspaper reports Leavenworth then traveled but none of the players recall that. Perry Central then held the ball for a final shot but Gordy Frakes missed from the corner with five seconds left and Chuck Tower tracked down the long rebound and “put on a one-man dribbling performance that had the Commodores running all over the floor trying to stop him.”

Tower was intentionally fouled and he made the second of two free throws. Tower – “I remember being on the line for an enormous free throw of my life.” Tower also adds, “The only other thing I can remember somehow or other I was inbounding the ball (late in the game) and somebody from my hometown came out of the crowd and grabbed me, dragged me back, and the game wasn’t even over, he said ‘you’re gonna do it, you’re gonna do it, you’re gonna do it!’ I don’t even know where he came from.”

After Tower’s free throw, a final desperation attempt by Perry Central went awry and Leavenworth had indeed done it. Russ Breeden led the way with 12 points on six buckets against a Perry Central zone which sagged in on Benz. Russ – “They were leaving the top of the key open and they didn’t want the ball going to the sides, they were watching Gerald and Scottie carefully, and so I had more than my share of opportunities for the jump shot and that’s what I was supposed to do and I was fortunate enough to get it done. The thrill of it all at the end.”

Denbo in a present-day interview – “They were so convinced on stopping Benz, he only took three shots. I don’t fault Joe LaGrange for his theory, he knew he had to stop this guy, he (just) didn’t realize that Benz was pooped, he had played a helluva game that afternoon, we had played the second game, he was tired.”

Almost all of the players interviewed distinctly remember a ‘Welcome home’ victory banner that greeted the team on their arrival in Leavenworth that night. There were two bonfires going and a pep session in the gym went on past midnight.

The whole town was celebrating except for Coach Denbo who was battling a 103 temperature, he also suffered the headaches of his parked car being hit in Tell City after the game.

Scott Benz – “I think the next day they got the fire truck out, we kind of rubbed it in, we rode through Milltown, Marengo and English.” The fire truck was followed by a caravan of nearly 100 cars that stretched out to almost two miles long. Marengo and Milltown fans might not have minded the intruders too much as Leavenworth did not play in the same sectional with them.

Evansville Press columnist Tom Tuley wrote, “It’s undoubtedly the biggest thing to hit Leavenworth since the 1937 flood wiped out the town and those who remained decided to rebuild on a high hill overlooking the Ohio. That’s where Leavenworth still stands today ... unless celebrators have wrecked it already.”

Don Denbo was sick all week prior to the regionals, he was not able to get out of bed, the team didn’t even practice until Thursday. They traveled to Evansville on Friday afternoon to practice and spend the night. Randy Coleman on the trip to Evansville on Friday – “Today, you have big buses and all, we just packed into cars, I don’t know how many, three or four cars and we left the school and went down on the highway, the whole school body came out, they were on the grounds and waved good-bye, we had a little celebration right there as we headed toward Evansville. We went our separate ways, we didn’t even follow each other. The car I was in had a flat tire in St. Croix (part of Perry Central). We pulled in there and they were so nice to us, they congratulated us, they fixed the tire and we were on our way again. Roger Wade was driving our car, everybody was ahead of us, they didn’t know we had the flat tire, we didn’t have cell phones and all that stuff at that time of course.”

Chuck Tower on the flat tire – “It was two flat tires,

our spare was flat too. We had to pool our money, the spare was no good. Mr. Denbo was less than pleased with us when we got down there. We were by ourselves, nobody knew where we were at. (imitating Denbo) ‘WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?’”

Before about 8,000 fans in Roberts Stadium Leavenworth would play an 8-15 Boonville team in the second game at the Evansville Regional. The first game would pit 6th-ranked (AP) Evansville North against undefeated but unranked Oakland City. North had conquered an Evansville Sectional field that had four squads ranked in the state’s top twenty. In a game much closer than the final score would indicate, North knocked off Oakland City 71-60.

At that time the floor at Roberts Stadium sat far away from the stands, making it a tough background for shooting, Russ Breeden said it was like playing outdoors. Simply put, the game against Boonville was a disaster. Both teams played poorly

in the first half, Leavenworth only making six of 18 free throws, many of which were 1+1. Somehow the Wyandottes still led at intermission, 16-15. But Boonville, sparked by its guards, got going in the second half and won going away 58-39. For the game Leavenworth only shot 21% from the field and converted just 18 of 41

free throws. Benz scored 12 points but connected on only 3-15 field goals, Russ Breeden shot 0-9 from the field, Austin made three of six field goals attempts but only 5 of 12 from the charity line. The old saying of “couldn’t throw in the ocean” seems to apply. Leavenworth forced Boonville into 24 turnovers and the Pioneers committed 26 fouls, but Leavenworth just didn’t take advantage. Denbo



“V” for “Victory”

Cheerleaders – Doris Gibson, Niki Pelcharsky, Trish Merrilees, Billie Cole  
**2nd row** (kneeling) – Chuck Tower, **3rd row** (standing) – Robert Esarey (Principal), Richard Draper (student manager), Roger Wade, Earl Parkhill, Gerald Austin, Randy Coleman, Scottie Benz, Russie Breeden, Doug Breeden, Jerry Lutz, Robbie Williams, Coach Denbo

said it still bothers him to this day, asking himself why he didn't have one of his coaching buddies or his brother to run practices for him, his boys just weren't ready to play.

Coleman against Boonville – "I don't know why, but I think we were overconfident against Boonville. We had never won a sectional, they played better competition. I think we stayed up a little too late in the motel room playing cards that night."

Russ Breeden said he learned a life lesson from that game – "Clearly, we were satisfied to win the sectional, we didn't have any grand designs to do well in the regional, we wanted to play well, it wasn't like we were focused and locked in on a good game, we were just thrilled to be there. That's something, to be successful you have to be, you have to appreciate your moment, but you also have to stay focused and prepare for the next step, prepare for what you could achieve and I don't think we necessarily did that. Coach being sick, that was part of it, but the whole community, we were satisfied. Anybody that gets that far needs to be respected, but we should have beaten that team."

Evansville North, led by future Purdue great Bob Ford, would beat Boonville later that night and then go on to win the state championship.

Despite the loss Denbo said he told his team, "We wrapped up a great year. Don't let this one event bother you that much because we had had a great year, we got our goal of winning that sectional, there wasn't any tears or nothing."

Don Denbo left Leavenworth after that sectional title. His wife at the time wanted for them to pursue opportunities down south. He had stops in Florida and the Atlanta area as an assistant principal. Denbo – "I don't know what we would have done (in the tournament) if Fred (Ridge) had played, I don't want to even think about it. I know one thing, I wouldn't have taken that one fork in the road I took and left."

Denbo later returned to Marengo as principal and when the county went through the consolidation process, he became a guidance counselor for Crawford County High School for many years before retiring in 1997. Today, Don and his second wife of 38 years, Stella, live just south of French Lick on property he grew up on, a hillside with a beautiful view of Patoka Lake. Don plays a lot of golf or can be found mowing his grass.

Denbo has an older brother, Charles, who coached for 35 years and was inducted into the

Indiana Hall of Fame in 2004. Though Charles would later win three sectionals at Orleans, Don won a sectional first. Russ Breeden, laughing – "I was pleased we won that sectional because I think even in his own family, he had something to hold over his brother for a while, that was pretty meaningful."

Gerald Austin was self-employed for many years and later retired from the union as a heavy equipment operator, he still does some farming and lives in English. Gerald on his teammates – "The substitutes were responsible for our success, they forced us, they pushed in practice, they made us what we were. Maybe the only reason I got to play was because I was a couple of inches taller."

Scott Benz played for two years at North Florida Junior College in Madison, Florida and then went to college at Indiana State though he did not play basketball. He later worked for L&N Railroad, Louisville Gas and finally with the Crawford County Highway Department, retiring in 2015, he lives in nearby New Salisbury.

Russ Breeden went to DePauw and played basketball and baseball. He recalls the absolute thrill of being able to play in Hinkle Fieldhouse against Butler. He was president and CEO of stock brokerage firm Raffensperger, Hughes and Company in Indianapolis in the 1990s and later was top management in several community banks in Indiana. Today Russ lives in Boston but still has business interests in Indiana and spends quite a bit of time back in the area. His two sons played basketball for Indianapolis Pike, one, Drew, was on the roster for the 2001 state champions.

Doug Breeden whose parents owned the hatchery in town – "I started in chicken houses in Leavenworth, Indiana. I do remember my mother waking me up at midnight to go catch chickens, between midnight and 6am. I talked to my mom about this in later life, she said, 'Well, it didn't hurt you a bit, you all went out and did well'." After high school Doug earned an undergraduate degree from MIT and then a PhD from Stanford. He was founding partner in hedge funds and mutual funds while also teaching and later being the dean of Duke University Fuqua School of Business. Today, Doug and Josie, his wife of 45 years, live in Chapel Hill NC, he is still a faculty member at Duke. In an email Doug wrote, "That was one of the most exciting times of my life."

Randy Coleman stayed in school because of basketball, graduated and went on to college at

Indiana State and became an industrial arts teacher. His first school was Perry Central, the principal who hired him was Perry Central's former coach Joe LaGrange. He then went on to Corydon Central, retiring in 2004. Randy started going with Russ and Doug Breeden's younger sister, Kathy, in the 7th grade and they have been married for 45 years, they split their time between Leavenworth and Florida.

Jerry Lutz says he still has his letter jacket and even can still get into it, he remembers he wore it almost every day after high school, so much that he wore the cuffs off of it. He lives in nearby Sulphur where he grew up and is still working, delivering propane to his customers.

Earl Parkhill worked for many years as a recreational director of a prison in Branchville in Perry County, retiring in 2017. Sadly, he died of cancer at the end of September.

Fred Ridge, the all-conference player who wasn't allowed to play his senior year, went on to college at Purdue and then IU Medical School. Fred lives in Linton and is still practicing, having delivered over 3000 babies. He said he didn't live the sectional championship with the team on the floor but still lived it from the stands. He wrote in a 2016 email, "I have been the team physician for the Linton Miners football team since I

came to Linton. We won the state Class A championship (in 2016). So I finally got to accomplish my goal in a way – just 50 years late." Fred and Bille, his second wife, have been married 39 years.

Chuck Tower went on to Indiana State and earned a teaching degree in industrial arts. He mostly taught in the New Albany/Floyd County system but finished up his career as the construction liaison for the school system and contractors

who build the schools. Chuck married his high school sweetheart, Billie Cole, who was a cheerleader for that Leavenworth team. They have been married for 47 years and split their time between Lanesville and Florida.

Roger Wade went to Purdue and earned a degree in civil engineering, he is still working and lives in nearby Corydon.

The 1968 team went 17-3 with its new coach but lost to Cannelton 69-68 in the first game of sectionals. The final year for Leavenworth High School was 1975-76, that squad lost to Milltown 67-52 in its first sectional game.

Perhaps Gerald Austin summed up the sectional-winning team the best – "We pretty well surprised everybody we played against, they didn't think Leavenworth, a little school like us could do much of anything, but by golly, we showed 'em."



Cheerleaders (kneeling, l-r) Billie Cole, Trish Merrilees and Nikki Pelcharsky and Randy Coleman  
 Players (standing, l-r) Doug Breeden, Gerald Austin (yellow shirt), Chuck Tower (behind cheerleaders), Jerry Lutz, Russ Breeden, Scottie Benz, Coach Don Denbo and Earl Parkhill



Front Row (L-R) Trish Merrilees, Billie Cole, Nikki Pelcharsky, Randy Coleman (player)  
 Players - Jerry Lutz (kneeling) (Back Row-L-R)) – Doug Breeden, Russ Breeden, Coach Don Denbo, Earl Parkhill and Scottie Benz

**Tournament roster**

Russ Breeden	5'10" senior
Earl Parkhill	6'2" senior
Roger Wade	5'9" senior
Gerald Austin	6'5" junior
Scott Benz	6'0" junior
Doug Breeden	5'9" junior
Bert Collins	5'11" junior
Jerry Lutz	5'11" junior
Charles Tower	5'7" junior
Robbie Williams	5'6" junior
Randy Coleman	6'0" freshman
Kenny Austin	6'1" freshman

**Regular season**

Perry Central 42	Leavenworth 33 (0-1)
Leavenworth 47	Birdseye 38 (1-1)
Leavenworth 69	Georgetown 54 (2-1)
Leavenworth 47	South Central 41 (3-1)
Leavenworth 67	Marengo 50 (4-1)
Leavenworth 66	English 30 (5-1)
Leavenworth 52	Milltown 44 (ot) (6-1)
Leavenworth 67	Lanesville 40 (7-1)
Cannelton 60	Leavenworth 59 (7-2)
Leavenworth 47	Milltown 45 (ot) (8-2) (county)
Marengo 60	Leavenworth 44 (8-3) (county)
Leavenworth 49	Birdseye 33 (9-3)
Leavenworth 46	Tunnelton 40 (10-3)
Leavenworth 68	Lanesville 47 (11-3)
Leavenworth 89	English 38 (12-3)
Leavenworth 66	Marengo 59 (2ot) (13-3)
Leavenworth 63	Perry Central 46 (14-3)
12	
Milltown 55	Leavenworth 44 (14-4)
Leavenworth 52	North Central 44 (15-4)
Leavenworth 61	Morgan Township 52 (16-4)

**Sectional**

Leavenworth 70	English 36 (17-4)
Leavenworth 54	Ferdinand 47 (18-4)
Leavenworth 32	Perry Central 30 (19-4)

**Regional**

Boonville 58	Leavenworth 39 (19-5)
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**Leavenworth leading scorers**

Benz and Russ Breeden 9
Benz and R. Breeden 15
Austin 19, Benz 15, R. Breeden 12
Austin 18, Benz 12, R. Breeden 10
Benz and R. Breeden 21, Austin 19
Benz 22, Austin and R. Breeden 18
Austin 24, Benz 17
Austin 19, Benz and R. Breeden 10
Benz 26, Austin 16, R. Breeden 11
Benz 24, R. Breeden 12
Benz 19, Austin 14, R. Breeden 10
Austin 12, R. Breeden 9
Austin 17, Benz 11
Benz 37, Lutz 13
Austin 30, Lutz 18, Parkhill 10
Austin 21, Lutz and Benz 19
Benz 21, Austin 16, Lutz 13, R. Breeden
12
Austin 18, Benz 12
Benz 17, Lutz 11, Austin 10
Benz and Russ Breeden 13, Lutz 10

**Leavenworth leading scorers**

Austin 16, Benz 14, Wade 11
Benz 25, Austin 16, R. Breeden 10
R. Breeden 12, Austin 8

**Leavenworth leading scorers**

Benz 12, Austin 11
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## **Sources**

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## **Pictures**

1967 sectional photo courtesy of Don Denbo; present-day, April 2017 reunion pictures courtesy of Randy Coleman; Leavenworth jersey courtesy of the Indiana Hall of Fame.

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***“Honoring, Preserving and Promoting the Heritage  
of Indiana High School Basketball.”***