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SPORTS

86-87 Giants: The ‘Dream Team’ of Hoosier Hoops

By Sean Douglas

In 1985, the Marion Giants defied all odds, becoming just the sixth team in Indiana state history to win the state championship and finish the season undefeated.

In 1986, despite some middle of the season hiccups that resulted in losing three out of five games by a total of seven points, they went on to win their second straight championship behind their junior cast of Lyndon Jones, Jay Edwards, Kyle Persinger, Daric Keys, and Eric Ewer.

But the crown jewel of Marion’s historic three-year run was the 1986-1987 team.

“I’ve seen all the teams that have gone undefeated,” long-time Giants play-by-play announcer and Grant County legend Jim Brunner said. “I’ve seen those Lawrence North teams with Greg Oden and Mike Conley, who were unbelievable ball players. I will tell you right now that the ’87 Giants, on a neutral floor, would beat any team that has ever played in this state.”

Marion would finish the season 28-1, going undefeated against Indiana teams for the second time in three seasons. The team’s lone loss came to a team they played in Lexington, Ky., in the middle of the season. All five starters went on to be Indiana All-Stars after the season concluded, and both Jones and Edwards were named co-Mr. Basketball before going on to play four years at Indiana under legendary coach Bob Knight.

When talking about Purple Reign and the Dream Team, the 1987 Giants, to this day, are among the most revered and highly touted teams to ever take the floor in the illustrious history of Marion Giant basketball.

“All year long, everybody knew that this team was going to win the state championship,” current Marion SID and former ACTS Network play-by-play announcer Greg Keeton said. “There wasn’t going to be a hiccup. The confidence from the coach and the players spread so much to the fans that the fans all knew going into games [that] they were going to win.”

“It was like a coronation season. We were just getting until March to get the three-peat. I don’t know too many situations...where you have a team that has won two straight championships going into that third season knowing they were going to win it that year, too.”

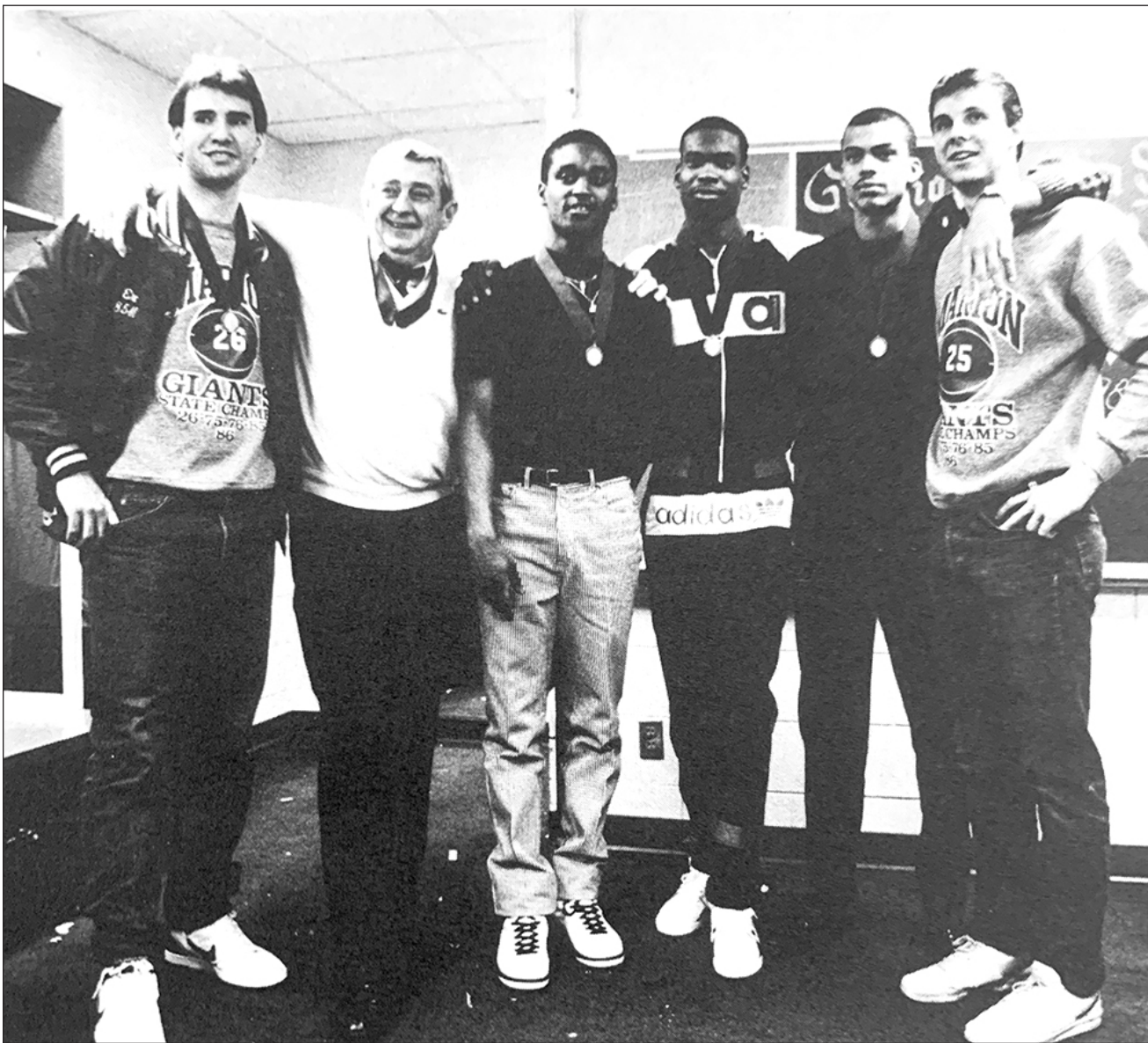
Heading into each of their championship seasons during their three-year reign, the Giants played the game of basketball with a confidence that stemmed from Head Coach Bill Green’s belief in them, as well as their tremendous talent.

They were confident that they would win the state championship in 1985.

By the time they got to the second half of the 1985-1986 season, they were confident that they would win the state championship once again.

And in the offseason heading into the 1986-1987 campaign, the Giants’ confidence was at an all-time high.

“There was no doubt in our minds,” Jones said. “If anybody had any doubts, they didn’t say it, because we weren’t trying to hear it. We just felt like we had been through a war of a season in ’86, and we had learned so much about our-



The 1987 Marion Dream Team, left to right: Eric Ewer, Coach Bill Green, Lyndon Jones, Daric Keys, Jay Edwards, and Kyle Persinger.

selves as individuals as well as basketball players. We just knew going into our final year together...that nobody was going to stop us from getting to where we wanted to get to that year – and that was winning another state championship.”

“You always knew Jay and Lyndon had confidence because of how good they were, but going into ’87, they all had that confidence,” Keeton added. “You’ve got five players on the floor that have won a state championship and know what it takes.”

Edwards, who averaged 23 points per game the year before, and Jones, who averaged 20.9 points per contest, took their game to another level in their senior campaigns. While their points per game averages were slightly down in the 1986-1987 season – Jones averaged 19.3 while Edwards averaged 21 – their leadership, and their dedication to keeping Marion at the top of the Indiana high school basketball world, was evident throughout the course of the season.

“They just had the maturity and the experience,” Persinger said. “Everybody in the country wanted them to play basketball. They had recruiting pressures. They had a lot of different pressures than others had because they were so sought after. I think they handled everything very well, and still remained focused as a Marion Giant. That’s a testament to both Jay and Lyndon.”

Persinger (10.1 ppg, 5.3 rpg), Keys (10.9 ppg, 6.8 rpg), and Ewer (7.8 ppg, 6.0 rpg), returned for their senior seasons a year older, a year stronger, and most importantly, a year more experienced. With Persinger’s defensive acumen and unmatched work ethic, Keys’ remarkable athleticism, and

Ewer’s sturdiness and poise underneath the basket, the Giants were, once again, the team to beat.

“We started to become more aware of our place in history, what it meant, and what it meant for Coach Green,” Jones said. “That was one goal. We wanted to make sure that he was separated from everyone else. Our confidence was so high.”

Heading into the season, the Giants were not only the No. 1 team in the state, they were ranked by Street and Smith magazine as the No. 1 team in the nation, and in their first six games, they lived up to that hype.

“There was no doubt at all,” Persinger said. “We just had to play [our game.] We knew we had the confidence.”

In their home opener against Anderson Highland, the Scots certainly did not go down without a fight. The game was tied at 18-18 after the first quarter and 30-30 at halftime, and the Scots continued to stick right with the Giants until the very end.

With under two minutes to go, the Scots cut the Marion lead to two, but with 38 seconds to play, Persinger forced a turnover and moments later hit a wide-open to give the Giants a 64-60 advantage – one they would not relinquish.

Edwards led the way with 20 points and 11 boards, while Persinger put together an outstanding performance with 19 points.

After crushing Norwell 78-57 in their second contest, Marion hosted No. 10 Anderson in a rematch of the 1986 state finals.

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