



SEE YOU, HOOSIER CROSSROADS

Harrison, Jeff, McCutcheon headed for NCC in fall

By Sam King | sking@jconline.com

The soothing sounds of Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York" blared from the speakers Friday evening, always the case after a McCutcheon home baseball victory.

In 36 years as the Mavericks' coach, Jake Burton has won nearly 800 games. He made sure to enjoy this 5-1 victory over Hamilton Southeastern, though. It marked the end of the Hoosier Crossroads Conference's ties to Tippecanoe County.

From 2002 to 2004, Burton's Mavericks won three straight Hoosier Crossroads Conference titles. McCutcheon exits the league with its third straight runner-up finish.

McCutcheon, Harrison and Lafayette Jeff were ushered out of the conference and will become members of the North Central Conference next school year.

"This has been the most fun in my career playing in this conference, because you've got to come ready to play every day, and it can be against ninth place, eighth place, it doesn't matter," Burton said. "We're not going to face any better competition than we see here in this conference with the one and two pitchers."

In 14 years competing as a member of the Hoosier Crossroads Conference, McCutcheon baseball has finished in the lower half of the

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ANDREW SCHEIDERICH & JEFFREY MORRIS / GANNETT MEDIA ILLUSTRATION

Heat erase early deficit to seize Game 3

Associated Press

MIAMI — LeBron James scored 26 points, Dwyane Wade added 23 and the Miami Heat shook off a horrid start to beat the Indiana Pacers 99-87 on Saturday night in Game 3 of the Eastern Conference finals.

Ray Allen added 16 points and led a late-game charge for the Heat, who lead the best-of-seven series 2-1. Game 4 is Monday night in Miami.

The Heat trailed by 15 in the first half and never led until early in the third quarter.

GAME 4

Indiana at Miami
When: Monday, 8:30 p.m.
TV: ESPN

Paul George scored 17 points for Indiana, shooting 5 for 13 in his return after being concussed late in Game 2. Roy Hibbert scored 16 points, David West added 13 and Lance Stephenson had 10 for the Pacers.

Miami started the game 2 for 10 from the floor. The Heat then made 21 of their

next 31 shots, including eight straight in the third quarter that gave the two-time defending NBA champs their first lead.

James' dunk with 7:36 remaining in the third put Miami up for the first time, 52-51. That was the first of nine lead changes in the quarter before the Heat did what coach Erik Spoelstra implored his team to do in a pregame locker-room address.

"Impose our identity," Spoelstra said.

Eventually, the message reached the Heat, and their two best players led the way.



LeBron James and George Hill battle for a loose ball during Game 3. USA TODAY SPORTS

HCC

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league just once and posted an average finish of third, the best success story among the three Tippecanoe County schools.

"If you're going to win a state tournament, you're going to have to beat these guys," said Burton, who has won two state championships. "(Former La-Porte coach) Ken Schreiber, when I first started coaching, he told me that if you want to be the best you can be, then you have to play the best teams."

Burton is not the first person to advocate being a member of the league because of the postseason preparation the schedule provides.

McCutcheon and Harrison were original members of the HCC, which began competition in 2000. Lafayette Jeff joined in 2004 after an ugly exit from the NCC that involved that conference terminating relationships with the Bronchos.

Jeff was supposed to enter the Hoosier Crossroads Conference in the 2005-06 school year, but a premature entrance resulted in the Bronchos winning their first sectional baseball title in 16 years in 2004.

"Nothing against the (North Central Conference), they were great competition, but the HCC got us ready for this moment," Jeff first baseman Paul Jordan said after the title win.

On the unfortunate other end was a plethora of embarrassing defeats, a struggle to be competitive in some sports and the unceremonious removal from what will now be a seven-team league with the suburban Indianapolis schools that remain.

Was the move right when each made the move to the HCC? It's hard to say, and it depends on who you ask.

"A lot of times we get killed in soccer, so it would kind of put you in your place when you come back and go against teams that aren't as good, but it gave us something to shoot for," said Harrison junior Georgia Lawlor, who competes in girls soccer, gymnastics and track and field. "Getting to play teams ranked in the state is always a great thing. Going into a new conference, we're probably going to do a lot better, but it's bittersweet."

The beginning

Long trips to Jay County and Connersville were not ideal for Harrison and McCutcheon as members of the Olympic Conference. When Westfield began initial plans in the fall of 1998 to create a new conference, Brownsburg was the initial invitee.

According to Harrison athletic director Jerry Galema, who has served in that capacity since 1994, Brownsburg agreed to attend a meeting only if Harrison and McCutcheon were invited.

"At the time, it was very enticing," Galema said. "We picked up the Indianapolis media. Our distances were reduced. When we first started looking at this, we didn't know the level of competition that was going to be there."

Those early years in the league, which included Avon, Zionsville, Nobles-



Clayton Richard led McCutcheon to an Hoosier Crossroads Conference football title in 2002. FILE/J&C

ville and Hamilton Southeastern in addition to McCutcheon, Harrison, Westfield and Brownsburg, were strong for the two Tippecanoe County schools.

McCutcheon won the inaugural titles in volleyball and boys and girls basketball. Harrison was the first HCC softball champion, then backed it up with a repeat title in 2002.

In all, Harrison won six titles between 2001 and 2004. McCutcheon won nine titles in the same span, excluding gymnastics, which never had more than four teams competing in the league.

"A thing to think about, too, is the size of the schools were different," McCutcheon athletic director Ryan Walden said. "We were probably third or fourth or fifth biggest back then. That plays a big difference."

Welcoming Jeff

In January 2003, the HCC extended an invitation to Lafayette Jeff, which had over 70 years as an NCC member.

A month later, Jeff accepted the invitation, effective for the 2005-06 school year. Fishers High School, which was nonexistent at the time, was set to join in 2006-07.

"I really don't want to do it, but it's the right thing to do," former athletic director Maurie Denney, a Jeff graduate, told the J&C at the time.

A Dec. 12, 2002 column by Jeff Washburn in the J&C assisted in speeding up Jeff's exit from the NCC and ultimate arrival in the HCC. Washburn wrote: "Some NCC schools are dangerously close to inner-city environments, where safety is an issue."

When Jeff made its official announcement as

a future HCC member, the North Central Conference officials sent a faxed letter to former principal Vince Bertram explaining the Bronchos were no longer considered members of the NCC and were ineligible to compete for conference championships.

The softball program still owns a 53-game winning streak in NCC play. Jeff still owns six NCC track records. The Bronchos won 164 North Central Conference team titles in 72 years.

Like their Tippecanoe County counterparts, the Bronchos had success early in the HCC, winning boys tennis titles in 2004 and '05, a gymnastics title in 2004 and shared a baseball title in 2006 with Brownsburg. Jeff went undefeated in volleyball in its first season in the league, winning a five-set thriller 15-11 over McCutcheon to claim the title and then defeating Hamilton Southeastern to conclude a perfect run.

Jeff's only other team championships have come in boys basketball (2007-08) and girls basketball (2009-10).

"It was a good thing at the time, and I think there were some sports being looked at that they were trying to make the move a good thing for," former Lafayette Jeff volleyball coach Gail Gripe said. "We always feel like we can compete with some of the best schools. But over time, what happens when we weren't successful and then we weren't successful in a lot of sports, it really kind of works on the spirit of the kids and the coaches."

The struggle

While there is proof the three Tippecanoe County schools could win in the

HCC CHAMPIONS

A look at the Hoosier Crossroads Conference championships won by the three Tippecanoe County schools:
Baseball: 4 (McCutcheon 3, Jeff 1)

Boys basketball: 3 (McCutcheon 2, Jeff 1)

Girls basketball: 3 (McCutcheon 2, Jeff 1)

Football: 2 (McCutcheon 2)

Gymnastics: 6 (McCutcheon 5, Jeff 1)

Boys tennis: 3 (Jeff 2, Harrison 1)

Boys track: 1 (Harrison)

Softball: 5 (Harrison 3, McCutcheon 2)

Volleyball: 3 (All with 1)

Wrestling: 3 (Harrison 3)

Hoosier Crossroads Conference, there's the notion that certain sports will never be able to compete.

For others like Lafayette Jeff baseball a year ago, facing HCC competition strengthened its lineup and pitching staff for the postseason.

"You never get a day off," Jeff baseball coach Scott McTagertt said in early April. "It's just like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. Week after week after week, you are going to face incredible competition."

McTagertt spoke specifically about baseball, but his statement applies across the board.

Burton recently compiled a spreadsheet of each sport at McCutcheon's individual success in the HCC. Boys soccer has finished last in all but two seasons, when the Mavs were ninth out of 10 in 2011 and 2013. True to Burton's words, though, that program also produced three sectional titles since 2008, the same number as the girls soccer program that finished a program-best sixth in the HCC in the fall.

The HCC is considered the state's elite soccer conference, often filling at least half of the top 10 coaches' poll. In the fall, Avon and Fishers played each other in the girls state championship and Avon was the boys state runner-up.

Like soccer, football programs suffered while preparing for top-10 opponents sprinkled throughout the schedule.

The high points were fabulous. Rare football victories in recent years against anyone not from Tippecanoe County became reason to celebrate, such as when Lafayette Jeff students stormed the field following a 30-27 victory over Avon on Sept. 28, 2012. It is Jeff's only regular-season victory over a non-county rival since 2008.

Harrison has lost 36 consecutive football games. Since winning the HCC title in 2002, when Mr. Football Clayton Richard was the quarterback, McCutcheon has not finished above .500.

"Football is a little bit different. I think I can support that statement by the IHSAA going to six classes in football," Walden said. "So what it is indeed saying is that it makes a bigger difference in football with the number of athletes that you have."

The future

Harrison softball will go down as the last HCC champion from Tippecanoe County. The second-ranked Raiders recently finished the league schedule unbeaten.

As the postseasons approach for softball, baseball and boys golf and continue for track and girls tennis, the reality is Harrison, McCutcheon and Lafayette Jeff have a new slate of NCC foes to prove themselves to, some of which appear on schedules already and others that are unfamiliar to the Raiders, Mavericks and Bronchos.

It surely was disheartening to be removed from the HCC, at least for some.

Galema was Harrison's AD and had a big part in developing the skeleton of the conference.

No one likes to feel like they're not wanted. It was a harsh reality that perhaps will work out in the form of more wins, more excitement and hopefully more athletes wanting to compete because of newfound success.

With the NCC littered with institutions more closely resembling the makeup of Tippecanoe County's three largest schools, it could be an ideal fit for two new members and a returning one that burned bridges with administrators in the conference just over a decade ago.

"For us, moving forward, we're in this situation of getting into the NCC, and we are excited about it," Stovall said. "Our coaches are excited about it. Our students, they don't know much about the NCC. Now it's coming to, educate about the tradition and how great this conference actually is, and let's move forward and be excited about it."

"There's a lot of pluses. Down the road, I think they will look back and say this was a good decision."

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