

# WHERE IN THE WORLD?

## Oliver High School Athletics

### Part 1

**Harry G. Enoch**  
**December 27, 2015**

During my many trips to Kroger, I enjoy brief conversations with Joe Allen about sports. Joe keeps up with basketball, football and baseball. A while back he suggested that Oliver High athletic teams were deserving of an article. Having grown up in Mt. Sterling and not moving to Clark County until 1999, I was clueless about Oliver High. After finally looking up some of the old records, I was amazed. Joe told me Oliver had been a powerhouse. He was right. The school's athletic accomplishments deserve a book.

Space limitations only allow a taste of the subject here. I will focus on the basketball and football teams at Oliver during the 1955-56 season, the year before integration. Black schools did not play white schools then, so one cannot directly compare the quality of the teams. Some idea of the prowess of Oliver athletes can be judged by the effect they had on the Winchester High teams in 1956-57, the year after school integration.

Oliver had a new coach for the 1955 football season. Charles Black replaced the legendary Joe Gilliam who coached for three seasons. He had won the state football championship at Oliver in 1954 with an 8-1 record, losing only to perennial power Lexington Dunbar 7-6. Gilliam went on to a successful career at Tennessee State University and earned a place in the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame. And his son, Joe Jr., played quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Black's team returned some talent from the previous year, in particular, Arthur Lee Brooks who had been the leading ground gainer. In their first game, the Oliver Bobcats crushed Danville Bates 31-0. The game unveiled a new star, halfback Ed Jones, who rushed for 170 yards and three touchdowns. Next up was Paris Western, and they went down 28-12. James Williams ran for two touchdowns, and quarterback William McButts passed for two more. Brooks gained 143 yards on the ground. The streak continued with a 47-13 whipping of Versailles Simmons. Jones, Williams, Brooks, McButts and Charles Davis all had scores.

A wheel came off at Lexington the following week, as Dunbar posted a 24-7 win on a muddy field. Jones threw a pass to end Philip Lee for the Bobcats' only touchdown. Dunbar would go on to claim the Bluegrass conference championship.

Oliver continued their winning ways with a pasting of the Richmond Ramblers 67-7 in a game that saw Brooks and Jones each score four touchdowns. Against Hazard Liberty Street, Brooks scored on the second play from scrimmage, and the Bobcats held on to win 6-0. They closed with a 33-6 romp over Mt. Sterling DuBois to finish the season with a 6-1 record. Brooks earned all-conference honors.

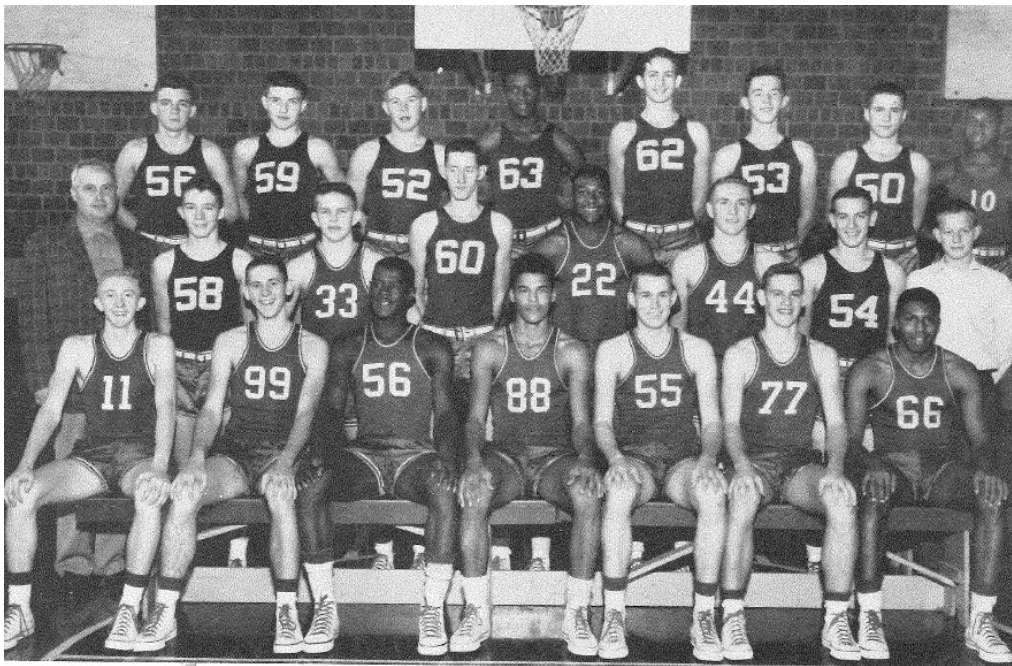
Basketball season began with high expectations, the Bobcats having gone 20-8 the year before. They returned co-captains James Williams and Charles Davis, as well as center Arthur Brooks, forwards Cecil Bell, Philip Lee and James Lewis, and guards William McButts, Eugene Haggins, Henderson Lee and John Laine. Charles Black also

had coaching duties for basketball. The local newspapers failed to cover basketball with the same fervor as football, so most of the scores of Oliver games could not be found. The team ended the season with a fine 19-7 record.

In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” was inherently unequal and declared school segregation unconstitutional. Oliver closed in 1956, and most of their athletes enrolled at Winchester High. The Shawnee, who had endured a string of losing football and basketball seasons under Coach Eck Branham, were hoping for better days ahead.

The *Winchester Sun* reported that Branham’s football team would run the split-T offense directed by 143-pound sophomore Carl Puckett at quarterback with senior Eddie Guerrant at halfback. “Expecting to give battering ram power at the fullback position is Arthur Brooks, 185-pound Oliver transfer.”

In the opening game of the 1956 season Winchester notched a 12-0 win over Irvine for the team’s first victory since October 1953. Setting a tone for future games, Brooks scored the first touchdown on a 45-yard screen pass and Ed Jones scored the other on a 55-yard run. The Shawnee then edged Anderson County 12-7 in the rain with an 85-yard touchdown run by Brooks and a 5-yard plunge by Jones.



FIRST ROW: Winburn, K. Johnson, Brooks, Haggins, B. Johnson, Gibson, Bell. SECOND ROW: Coach Branham, Beckham, Puckett, Ferrell, Lee, Harter, B. Sewell, G. Sewell. THIRD ROW: Staton, Devary, Watts, Green, Clem, Phelps, H. Johnson, Jones.

#### **1956-57 Winchester High Basketball Team**

Oliver High transfers, Arthur Brooks, Eugene Haggins, Cecil Bell and Philip Lee, were leaders on the team.

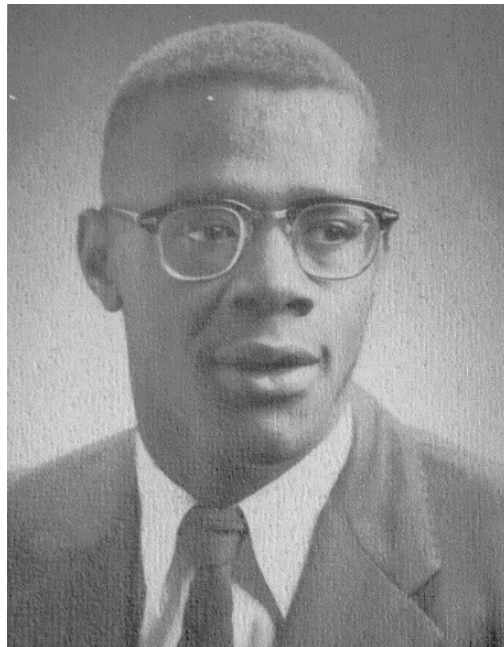
(1957 Winchester High School Yearbook)

In their first home game, Winchester lost to Shelbyville 20-0 before 1,800 fans, the largest crowd remembered in years. The following week the Shawnee pasted Versailles 40-19, with two touchdowns by Puckett, three by Jones and one by Brooks.

Three heartbreaking games followed as Winchester got nipped by Cynthia 7-6,

tied Paris 7-7, and lost to Frankfort 7-0. Each game featured long touchdown runs called back on penalties. The Shawnee closed out the season with a 44-0 thrashing of Mt. Sterling. Jones tallied three touchdowns, Brooks two, Guerrant and Charles Davis one each. The record for the year, 4-3-1, represented a sharp turnaround for a team that had not seen a victory in two and a half seasons.

The 1956-57 basketball season started with similar promise. Branham's three previous teams had gone 11-14, 13-14 and 6-21. Winchester opened with four straight wins; senior Billy Johnson was their most reliable scorer. In what became a season-long trend, Johnson was ably backed by Oliver High transfers Arthur Brooks, Cecil Bell, Philip Lee and Eugene Haggins. After tough losses to the Mt. Sterling Trojans and Clark County Cardinals, the Shawnee bounced back with four straight victories. They would lose once more to the Cardinals, in overtime, and twice to Cynthiana, finishing the year 15-8 for Branham's first winning season. Winchester had to face Clark County again in the first game of the district tournament. The Cardinals, eventual regional champs, overcame a 17-point halftime deficit to eke out a 79-73 win.



**Arthur Brooks Senior Yearbook Portrait**

Lettered in basketball, football and baseball, 9, 10, 11, 12; captain football team, 10, 11; president junior class; vice-president YMCA; junior play; student congress, 12; Key Club, 12; senior play.  
(1957 Winchester High School Yearbook)

One of the Oliver High athletes who will be long remembered is Arthur Brooks. After lettering in football, basketball and baseball all four years in high school, he earned a football scholarship to Ohio University. Playing fullback for the Bobcats in 1958, Brooks led the team in rushing yards his sophomore year and was named most valuable player. He led the team to win the Mid-America Conference championship in 1959 and 1960 and was voted All-Conference both years. In his 1960 senior year, Ohio University went 10-0, they won the small college national championship, and Brooks was named Little All-American. He still ranks as the eighth leading rusher in Ohio University history and was inducted into the school's Hall of Fame. He went on to play in the pros for the New York Titans of the American Football League. The Titans became the New York Jets when the

leagues later merged. Arthur Lee Brooks died in Mission Viejo, California, in 1998 leaving a wife and two daughters.

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The great teams of Oliver High's last years were by no means their best. Next week we will look at the historic accomplishments of their early athletic programs.

#### **Sources**

*Winchester Sun*, 1955-56-57 issues; Jeff Bridgeman, *Kentucky High School Basketball Encyclopedia, 1916-2013* (Morley, MO, 2013), pp. 165, 628; Winchester High School Shawnee Yearbook, 1957; *Athens (Ohio) Messenger*, October 11, 2012; Ohio Bobcat Football 2011, [www.ohiobobcats.com/sports/m-footbl/spec-rel/083011aac.html](http://www.ohiobobcats.com/sports/m-footbl/spec-rel/083011aac.html).

# WHERE IN THE WORLD?

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### Part 2

Harry G. Enoch  
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Oliver High was one of only eight African-American high schools in Kentucky in the 1890s. Oliver's storied athletic teams began early in the 20th century. Newspapers did not cover sports regularly in those days, so we must rely on other sources. Two of importance are the late Louis Stout's *Shadows of the Past* and Jeff Bridgeman's *Kentucky High School Basketball Encyclopedia*.



**1921-22 Girls' Basketball Team with Coach E. J. Hooper**  
(Collection on African Americans in Kentucky, 1870-1940, University of Kentucky Special Collections)

The first known Oliver coach was William Taylor, who headed the girls basketball team. Their 1921-22 team, coached by Ernest Jackson "E. J." Hooper, captured the Bluegrass league title with star players Rebecca Goodman, Lula Moore, Lena Bell, Mary K. Boone and Zelene Blythe. Oliver girls brought home another Bluegrass title in 1929.

E. J. Hooper also coached boys basketball and football. Hooper's 1922-23

basketball team won the Bluegrass league championship with a 12-4 record. His 1923 football team played powerful Lexington Dunbar to a scoreless tie and brought home yet another league championship.



**1923 Football Team**

The football is labeled “Dunbar 0-Shieks 0”—the tie game that resulted in Oliver being named champions of the Bluegrass.

(Collection on African Americans in Kentucky, 1870-1940, University of Kentucky Special Collections)

Louis Stout provided names of the 1923 football standouts: Brent Pendleton, William Bean, John Mark Givens, Sidney Green, Arthur Mance, Brutus Denny, Barry Moore, Phillip Ecton, James Drummon, Robert Taylor, Carl Williams, Arlington Williams, William Didlick and Allen Burnam. Leading players on the basketball team that year included Pendleton, Bean, Green, Mance, Denny, Moore and Carl Williams. Coach Hooper was a respected educator who left Oliver for a teaching position at Louisville and then Indianapolis.

Over the coming decades, Oliver excelled in basketball and had their own gymnasium completed in 1923. Coach James Nance took over for the 1923-24 season. His first two teams went 14-2 and 14-3; they were the Bluegrass league champs again in 1925. Nance stayed six years and led the team to four winning seasons.



**1933-34 Basketball Team**

This William B. Ogden photo displays trophies and basketballs labeled Bluegrass Champions 1932-33 and 1933-34 and Bluegrass Tournament Champions 1934. On the back row, right side, is Oliver principal, Professor Scott Mitchell. Standing to his left may be Coach Hubert Page.  
(Kentucky Historical Society)

Winchester newspapers did not report the scores of Oliver High games. The African-American community had a regular column, called “Colored News,” which was usually written by a local minister and mostly covered church-related events. An exception was the January 29, 1926 issue of the *Sun* that featured “Oliver Hi Notes.” “The fans of Winchester will miss the fastest and most thrilling game of the season if they do not see the Fighting Sheiks in action against the highly touted boys from Louisville. It will be remembered that it was the Louisville “Y” that beat the Sheiks in ’23. Can they do it in ’26?” There were some familiar names among the Oliver players going against Louisville: Bean, Williams, Patton, Green, Didlick and Burnam. Sadly, later issues of the *Sun* failed to report the outcome of the game.

The school got a new gym in 1928. I have been unable to find when the “Fighting Sheiks” changed their name to the “Bobcats.”

Oliver High began a true basketball dynasty with the arrival of Coach Hubert Page in 1929. In Page’s first five seasons he racked up 104 wins against only 19 losses. He won the Bluegrass championship three years in a row—1932, 1933, 1934—with teams that went 21-5, 26-2, 25-3. The 1932 team finished third in the state tournament, and the 1934 team won it, beating Frankfort Mayo Underwood in the title game.

Page went on to coach 23 seasons at Oliver.<sup>1</sup> During that time he won 71 percent of his games, compiling a 470-196 record. Remarkably, Page’s teams suffered only one losing season, going 10-12 in 1938-39. Little information could be gathered about the teams in those years. Occasionally scores of the games would appear in the “Colored Notes.”

I have been unable to find more about Coach Page during or after his time at Oliver. Personal information in his 1969 obituary was disappointingly brief:

“Hubert H. Page, Louisville, former coach at Oliver School, died early Friday morning at a Louisville Hospital after a short illness.”

Joe Gilliam followed Page at Oliver. The noted football coach was almost as good at basketball. His three teams—1952-1955—finished with records of 17-8, 21-6, 20-8.

The Bluegrass Heritage Museum has a copy of Louis Stout’s hard-to-find *Shadow’s of the Past*, which details the history of teams in the Bluegrass League. The Museum also has two Oliver trophies, one for football and one for basketball. The Museum would be grateful to anyone who has yearbooks or other Oliver High memorabilia to donate to their collection.

#### Sources

Louis Stout, *Shadows of the Past: A History of the Kentucky High School Athletic League* (Lexington, KY, 2006), pp. 29-31; Jeff Bridgeman, *Kentucky High School Basketball Encyclopedia, 1916-2013* (Morley, MO, 2013), pp. 165, 628; Gerald L. Smith, et al., editors, *Kentucky African American Encyclopedia* (Lexington, KY, 2015), p. 251; National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places Application, Oliver School, 2004, [focus.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/NRHP/Text/04000795.pdf](https://focus.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/NRHP/Text/04000795.pdf); *Winchester Sun*, various issues 1951-1955 and February 22, 1969.

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<sup>1</sup> Bridgeman’s *Basketball Encyclopedia* lists Page as coaching 27 years at Oliver. This is in error, as shown in numerous newspaper articles. Of the last four seasons attributed to Page, three were coached by Joe Gilliam and one by Charles Black.