

Thorp Boys Basketball Memorable Seasons

1943-1944 Season

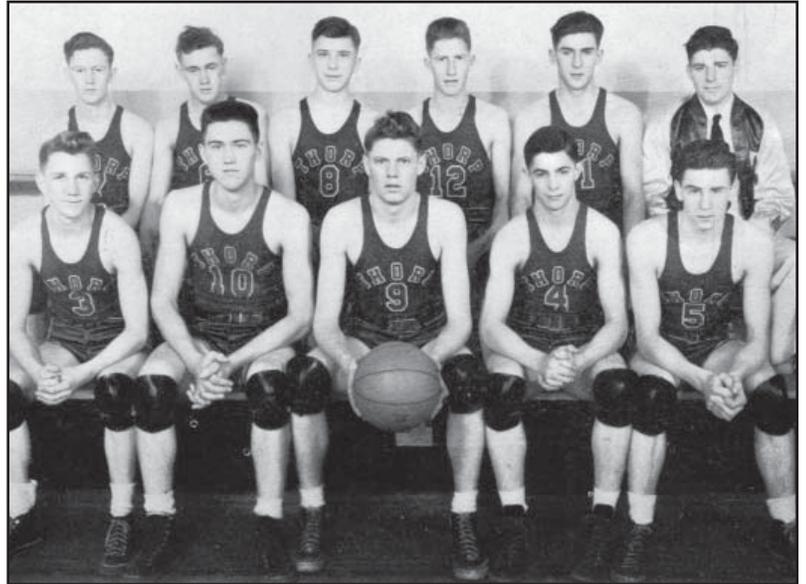
By Annaka Isenberger
Thorp Courier Reporter

In 1944, the United States was in the midst of World War II, and Uncle Sam's long reach found its way all the way into the Thorp High School basketball program. As the season began, ten young men—Peter Larson, Francis Helder, Don Huibregtse, Richard Turenne, Joe Pawlak, Gilbert Asselin, John Warner, Ken Bachmeyer, Carl Wyczawski, and Norman Maier—were ready to begin competing against area rivals under their Head Coach, Leslie "Hans" Hanson.

Coach Hanson seemed to inspire the team with his enthusiasm, leading the team to four straight conference victories, but in December of '43, Coach Hanson left his team to join the United States Navy. Even though Coach Hanson left with big shoes to fill—the Cardinals situated firmly in first place—it was a local farmer and very dedicated Thorp basketball fan, Arthur Soderberg, who stepped up and took on the responsibility of leading the group of boys.

Said to be aided only by his knowledge from wearing Thorp's red and white ten years before and his genuine love of the game, Coach Soderberg took over after the Christmas holidays and continued the strong work Coach Hanson laid out before him, which included seven consecutive victories and the eventual Cloverbelt Championship. Soderberg's passion for the game rubbed off on his players, inspiring some of the boys to sneak their way into the gymnasium after hours and on weekends. According to some of the 1944 players, some team members would slink in through the coal shoot in the back of the school, coming up through the school's furnace room just to get some extra time on the court and to prepare for their games.

But the seasons were played differently back in the 1940's. With no buses and gas still being rationed due to WWII, travel was limited, leaving the Cardinals playing Stanley, Owen, and Withee four times each. But once playoff time rolled around, Thorp's home gym—which was one of the biggest and best in the area—became the site for the first versus second place and the third versus fourth place games. Still holding on to their leading spot in the conference, Thorp was scheduled to play in the first versus second place game. While the third and fourth place teams played earlier in the day, Coach Soderberg and his team of Cardinals all piled into the home of teammate Joe Pawlak, gathering around the piano and singing songs to help keep their nerves under control. Their laid-back time together paid off. Thorp went on to claim the Conference Title—the first time in Thorp High School history.



Pictured: Front row (L-R): Peter Larson, Francis Helder, Don Huibregtse, Richard Turenne, and Joe Pawlak. Back row (L-R): Gilbert Asselin, John Warner, Ken Bachmeyer, Carl Wyczawski, Norman Maier, and team manager Ed Cotter.