

# Thorp Boys Basketball Memorable Seasons

## *1951-1952 Season*

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In 1951, the boys' basketball program was unknowingly about to begin their journey into the history books for Thorp High School. With five returning lettermen at the heart of the Cardinal lineup, including seniors Don Rubisch, Jay Glasshof, and Bob Wojtalewicz, they were anticipating a first-rate season with their new coach, Stuart North. Even with illness and injuries plaguing them left and right throughout, the team still managed to produce a history-making season.

At the beginning, Thorp opened their season with a tough loss, falling to the non-conference Cadott Hornets and the Altoona Railroaders. Little did the Cardinals know, but they were playing against a future Green Bay Packer—Fuzzy Thurston. Thurston was one of the league's leading basketball players on Altoona's team.

Following the tough losses to their non-conference opponents, the team pulled together to take down both Loyal (59-38) and Neillsville (40-27) led by the high-scoring center, Don Rubisch. After a disappointing loss against Black River Falls—never trailing until the whistle as the game winning shot was taken by Black River Falls—the Cards were back in the Conference game, taking down the Owen Eagles, 67-45. Senior Jay Glasshof was the night's leading scorer with 26 points.

Starting to build a little momentum in their play as a team, Thorp was scheduled to go up against the Western Division's co-leader, Colfax, who was undefeated. Thorp hit consistently from a forward spot and took down Colfax by two points. The team's pestilent problem of flu and pneumonia hitting their players struck again just before the non-conference match-up against Augusta, with two of Thorp's players out, including their center and leading shooter, Don Rubisch. Augusta beat out the Cardinals, 52-65, but with their teammates back, ready to play, Thorp's conference winning streak was able to continue in the Cards' game against Withee, 46-35. With the fourth conference win, Thorp was tied with Stanley for first place—a place that would be contended in Thorp's next game against the Orioles themselves. Thorp enjoyed one of their best nights of the season thus far, racking up a 23-9 lead in the first quarter and riding the lead to a 63-42 win over the neighboring rival.

The win against Stanley solidified their position in first place, and the Cards were ready to fight to stay there. Thorp racked up three more wins, taking down Neillsville (50-30), Owen (48-46), and Cadott (58-52), before returning to Stanley once again. The Orioles pressed with an aggressive defense against Thorp's well-known shooters, keeping the Cardinals' scoring to an unusually low number, but with a big crowd of red and white fans in the stands, the boys persevered. Thorp earned yet another conference win against the Orioles, 31-30, placing them atop the Cloverbelt Conference standings.

In the Cards' next game, the Cards were in a rematch game against Altoona and Thorp's boys kept the game close—tying the game at the end of the third quarter. But a 17-point fourth quarter was the deciding factor, the Cards losing with a final score of 55-61. Even though the team fell in the end, there was still reason to celebrate. Don Rubisch scored 15 field goals and five free throws, breaking the school's record for individual scoring in a single game with 35 points.

With two regulars once again out of play, Bloomer was able to take down Thorp, 34-42, despite

Rubisch's 22 points. The Cardinals were all back to play again in their next game, but they were without adequate practice because of bouts with the flu and pneumonia. Thorp was hoping to claim their fifth Conference title, but it wasn't meant to be. Coach North said it was no disgrace to lose to the Rails (56-59) because the Cards put up a valiant fight. Altoona's team was also one of the eight state tournament teams. In fact, in '52, the West swept the East in the Conference playoffs.

The Cardinals finished the regular season with two wins, taking down Loyal, 77-35—the team's highest scoring game of the season—and Black River Falls (63-60). In the game against Black River Falls, Rubisch was on the track of reaching his own personal record, but came up one point short, scoring 34 points.

For the Sub-Regionals, Thorp journeyed to Ladysmith's new school gym—entering the playoffs. In 1952, Thorp had been rerouted to the Heart of the North Conference rather than the Eau Claire Conference they had been a part of previously. Entering into the playoffs, the ten players on Thorp's bench became known as the “solid six and fearless four.”

In Ladysmith, Thorp downed the Heart of the North co-champions, Hayward (49-45) and Ladysmith (57-46). The 1952 team wrote a new chapter in the history books for Thorp High School in their game against Spooner in Rice Lake for the Regional Championship. The gym was packed, and included the two of the team's biggest supporters—Coach North's parents. Players remembered the voice of Mrs. North from the stands, calling out to the players. That night, Thorp's fans saw history made—twice. Not only did Don Rubisch match his record-breaking personal total in a single game with 35 points for the second time in the season, the Cardinals brought home their very first Regional Championship trophy.

Going into the Sectional playoffs, Thorp was rated the underdog, but they played as one, ending Shell Lake's record of 18-straight victories with a 53-41 defeat. The Cards claimed the win, but in doing so, they lost starter Jerry Phillips to a sprained ankle injury. Coach North had a friend in Rice Lake who was a doctor, and that night North took Phillips to see him. He tried his best to prepare him, and managed to get him well enough to get on the court, but Phillips was playing nowhere near his usual level of precision. Without Phillips feeding Rubisch the ball, Thorp's scoring suffered. Superior Central quickly caught on to the team's handicap, and put on the press. The Cardinals were just one game shy of making it to the State Tournament when their journey was cut short by Superior Central, 40-53.

“For a bunch of farm boys, it was a big treat to get that far,” said Bill Urban, former player on the 1952 team. The 1952 season was not the school's winningest year. It was filled with ups and downs, but the accomplishments the “solid six and the fearless four” made—individually and as a team—got the ball rolling for all seasons to come. The 1952 Cards put Thorp on the map for boys' basketball.

Much of the success in Thorp athletics in the 1951-1952 school year—especially the boys' basketball program—is highly attributed to the Stuart North. North was a young shop teacher and a newlywed, married to Mary, another first year teacher, educating students in Home Economics. The two cared greatly for their new town and the students they taught. Stuart and Mary North took their first paychecks as new teachers and made a very special purchase for the students at Thorp High School: A new phonograph for Friday night dances.

Stuart spent his first year building up the football, boys' basketball, and baseball programs, serving as Head Coach for all three sports. When the couple first arrived in Thorp, they stayed with Arthur Soderberg—a former boys' basketball coach. It was Soderberg's encouragement that earned Stuart

his first break as coach, but it was Stuart who made a name for himself. But he didn't just care about winning; he cared greatly for his players as individuals. In a time before night buses, Stuart took on a lot of added responsibility for the boys on his team. The young coach made sure his players got home safely, driving them home himself.

Stuart North was also a considerably strict coach. In order to play on his team, his players had to follow his rules regarding training and practice. He trained his players hard, but made sure the boys were ready and able for anything. One player specifically remembered Coach North's instruction on shooting the proper hook shot—making sure to have his players know how to sink one from the left and the right.

Coach North was also a trailblazer in keeping meticulous records, utilizing his analytical mind in creating charts and finding his team's percentages. Today, this is a common practice, but in 1952, not many teams were taking the time to complete such a time-consuming task.

The history of Thorp High School boys' basketball is deep and rich—full of cherished memories for all involved. Each and every season has its ups and downs, and in one way or another, deserves recognition for their achievements. This eight-week series, which featured 10 individual seasons, was just the tip of the iceberg. Finding a select few was a difficult task because of the decades' worth of incredible teams and players.

Congratulations to **every** season's lineup of players for being a part of the incredible history that is Thorp boys' basketball.



**Pictured: The 1951-52 Thorp varsity basketball team. Front row (L-R): Jerry Phillips, Jay Glasshof, Don Rubisch, Tom Qualle, and Coach Stuart North. Back row (L-R): Bob Wojtalewicz, Bob Badzinski, Roger Turenne, Bill Urban, Donray Izydorek, and Bob Mertens.**