

Thorp Boys Basketball Memorable Seasons

1981-1982 Season

By Annaka Isenberger
Thorp Courier Reporter

The 1981-1982 school year was quite possibly “*the year*” for Thorp High School athletics: The football team ended with an undefeated conference record and headed to State, two wrestlers made it all the way to the State Tournament, the girl’s basketball team ending their season in the top spot in the Western Cloverbelt Conference, and it was the initial year of the Thorp Athletic Booster Club. Adding to this extraordinary year’s athletic achievements and headline news was the 1981-1982 boys’ basketball season.

With school spirit and adrenaline still coursing through the veins of THS from the successful football season, and with a long list of veteran players returning to the court, expectations for the ‘81-’82 team were running high. Coach Tetzner described his lineup as full of unusual size and depth, made up of well-seasoned players who were ready for fast-paced, physical ball. Led by seniors Gary Pszeniczny, Bob Kotecki, Richard Sonnentag, Bill Rademaker, and Dennis Postler, as well as a strong junior class, the team was full of depth and speed.

In the early games, Thorp dominated their opponents—winning over Owen-Withee 82-40 and Cornell 84-38. In these games, Coach Tetzner pulled from and utilized his bench, experimenting with every combination available. Tetzner’s experimentation gave his younger players varsity experience and helped intensify the team’s overall strength. Still early in the season, Thorp faced back-to-back close-call losses, losing by only one point against Altoona (57-58) and Cadott (54-55)—both in overtime—putting them in third place in the Cloverbelt standings as 1981 came to a close.

Coming back from their holiday break, the Cardinals began 1982 with incredible victories over Gilman (72-38) and Flambeau (68-48), but it was the key win over Fall Creek (52-43) that kicked off their emergence in the Conference standings, making the public take notice of the boys in red and white. Bob Kotecki, who was averaging 18 points a game, and Gary Pszeniczny with 11 points per game, were also gaining recognition for their scoring capabilities. In January of ‘82, the two were named a part of the Chippewa Herald’s Prep Scoring List. But it wasn’t just the Cardinals’ intense, high-scoring game that earned them every victory. In their rematch against Altoona, the Cardinals utilized their height and aggressive defense to keep the game close. The support brought to the gym by Thorp’s fans was deafening as the Cards led 46-45 with only two minutes remaining. Thorp connected on almost every free throw to claim the win, 56-49.

After their win against Stanley-Boyd (42-26), the Cardinals met up with the Cadott Hornets a rematch against the only other team who had come out on top over the Cards. Bob Kotecki and Gary Pszeniczny were an unstoppable duo on the court, scoring 20 and 25 points each.

In the following weeks, Flambeau, Gilman, and Stanley-Boyd were left in the wake of the Cardinals’ shooters, unable to even come close to closing the extraordinary gap produced by Thorp’s precision shooters. In late February, Thorp met up with the Fall Creek Crickets once more, and it was their win (59-43) that officially claimed the first place spot in the Western Cloverbelt Conference standings. The Cardinals came from behind to earn their 13th straight victory and the right to keep “The Can” in their win over Owen-Withee (53-42)—also sending them to the Cloverbelt Championship game.

In early March, Thorp traveled to Stanley’s gym to face Nekoosa for the east versus west Cloverbelt

Championship game. It was a truly physical battle, but it was Thorp's boys who came out on top thanks to a true team effort. Bob Kotecki led with outstanding 32 points and eight rebounds and Gary Pszeniczny scored 21 points and 10 rebounds, making up 53 of Thorp's 77 points over Nekoosa's 58.

Tetzner's boys plowed through the Regional playoffs, taking down Owen-Withee (58-33), Athens (66-54), and Marathon (69-55) in the Regional Finals—the audience of fans growing with every victory. As the Cards began their journey in the Sectionals, going up against Iola-Scandinavia in Marshfield, they began building on their already highly skilled level of play. Everyone but the Thunderbirds knew Thorp was going to win, as the Cards had virtually already claimed the win by halftime with a score of 47-22. “Consistency was key,” Coach Tetzner explained following the 93-52 win. Five of Thorp's players had earned double digits and 12 players from Tetzner's deep bench saw time on the court.

The Cardinals, moving through the WIAA playoffs with great skill and intensity, was only one game away from heading to state when they were paired up against Niagra. The Cards were controlled, powerful, patient, and undeniably determined in Wausau West's host gymnasium. A true team effort, spurred by dynamic coaching earned Thorp its very first Sectional Championship and their first trip to Madison in the school's history of boys' basketball with the 77-68 win. Gary Pszeniczny had his personal best game of the season, scoring 32 points, and Bob Kotecki was on his heels with 29. According to the season's players, the welcome home after the win in Wausau was one of the season's highlights—seeing people of all ages and walks of life pour out of their cars, which lined Thorp's main drag—just waiting to celebrate the history-making game. But Thorp wasn't done just yet. In some ways, it was just the beginning.

That following Friday, after a royal sendoff by the Thorp community and student population, the Cardinals entered that field house in Madison, ready to fight for the chance to play in the State Championship game. The game against Eleva-Strum was a big one for Coach Jack Tetzner as well—who was looking for his 450th victory as a Head Coach. Tetzner's boys not only earned him that milestone; they broke the glass ceiling once again, winning with a final score of 65-47 and heading to the Championship game the next day.

Out of the 178 schools in Class C, only two remained: The Thorp Cardinals and the Kohler Blue Bombers. With the field house packed to the rafters, the Cardinals came together in a way that was unlike any other—playing as a group that fate brought together: an entire line-up with one heartbeat. The game was evenly played, but Thorp struggled to close the gap. In the fourth quarter, Thorp tied the score, 54-54. Described as the longest and most anguishing minute and forty seconds in the team's history, Kohler broke free from Thorp's defenders to take the win.

Thorp may not have had the gold ball in their hands as they returned to their hometown, but the boys in red and white—the boys with the hearts of true champions—were welcomed back like heroes the next day. One of the '81-'82 players compared those moments with Thorp's fans to Christmas, saying it was a moment for people put all differences aside and became one—a real *community*—for something as simple as a basketball game. It was a moment that emulated the representation of community. Blessed with great teachers, parents, and countless fans, the 1981-1982 team became an extremely tight-knit group—a collection of former athletes who went on to do and become great things due to the confidence brought on by achieving groundbreaking accomplishments—even when the odds were against them.

That year, Coach Tetzner not only reached a milestone in his number of victories and saw his first State Tournament for boys' basketball, but he was also named the Associated Press's Coach of the Year.



Pictured: The 1981-1982 Thorp Cardinal Varsity basketball team. Front row (L-R): Manager Gary Konieszny, Marty Olsen, Kert Boie, Bob Czech, and Manager Scott Hubbard. Back row (L-R): Hans Hallanger, Bill Rademaker, Steve Merlak, Jay Stuttgen, Bob Kotecki, Eric Zoromski, John Rademaker, Richard Sonnentag, Dennis Postler, and Gary Pszeniczny.