



Mandi Singer/The Covington News

Local legend: Newton head coach Ron Bradley cracks a smile before reaching the 1,300-win plateau Thursday night.

COMMENTARY

We're seeing a magician at the height of his craft

MACON

Magic is one of those things that's a little hard to describe. Coming in so many forms and fashions, from slight-of-hand card tricks to the grandiose scale of theme parks created by Walt Disney, magic beguiles and entices us. Even as the intellect screams that a person cannot float in midair and defy the fundamental laws of gravity, magic can make it seem so.

With a little age, and study, we come to understand that

what makes great magic so wonderful is the magician's painstaking attention to the fundamentals of his craft. One careless slip, one rushed delivery, and the whole trick unravels right before the unforgiving eyes of the audience. The great magicians are those who master the fundamentals of their trade, then weave them into a magic that amazes and casts a spell over the beholder.

The old Macon Municipal Auditorium was a place that held that sort of magic for me about this time of the year, but in 1966. County school consolidation had been enacted by the wizards in the state house in Atlanta, and our lit-

tle Greensboro High School had combined with even tinier Union Point to create the brand new Greene County High School. Greensboro had a good football tradition; at Union Point High, however, life revolved around basketball.

The two schools combined my freshman year (1965-66), and the former Union Point coach, Harold Hammontree, took our Greene County Tigers to the state basketball tournament. Now, times were much different in the Georgia of my youth than they are today. A trip to Macon from Greensboro was a big deal, and if you didn't have a reason to go, you just didn't go.

But there was magic in the air in 1966. Two county schools that had never liked each other much had been forced to combine, and the basketball season had provided the magical spark that brought everything together.

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Harwell: Journey well worth it

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Our principal made an announcement the day before our team was to play in Macon, telling us quite sternly that in order to be counted present we had to stay in school until at least noon. Problem was, our team played around 1 p.m., and the latest we could leave town and get there was 10:30 a.m.

For a kid who had perfect attendance all the way through school, it was a hard thing for me to walk out that front door at 10:30 the next day. Hard as that was, though, it was like magic to walk into the Macon Municipal Auditorium. The stuff of dreams coming true happened on the hardwood there, and although our Tigers lost to Dacula at the buzzer, I'd been to the promised land and seen the magic show, and I wanted to go back.

I went back to Macon to visit that promised land Thursday, hoping to find the magic a teenager remembered from 39 years ago. And although the old Municipal Auditorium was added to America's list of historical places in 1971, the state playoffs are still held there in Macon at the newer Coliseum.

One of the greatest magicians of all was there, dapper in khaki slacks and blue blazer. Ron Bradley's Newton Rams were shooting at intermission of the preceding girls' game when I arrived. The opponents from Lowndes High were nowhere to be seen.

As the girls' game resumed, the Rams sat as a team in one corner quadrant, taking in the details — how the ball bounced off the Centreplex floor, the differences in the Hydra-Rib goals on either end of the court, the nuances of the lighting in the cavernous concrete building, the feel for the crowd, the position of the team benches and official scorer. The Rams soaked it up.

I watched the crowd. By ones

and twos, older but familiar faces from Newton began to appear along the walkways, settling into seats up away from the court but close enough to see the action. There was Kevin Price, who played for Bradley back in the glory days. Stan Edwards, Don Briscoe, Ron Manson and others whose faces I recognized but whose names eluded me, came to feel the magic, too.

Lowndes did not cooperate. The Vikings jumped out to a 10-point lead and nursed a 24-23 point advantage into half-time. They'd run a little man, shown a nice 1-3-1 zone and had knocked down a couple of 3-point field goals.

But the Rams had not panicked, having felt out what Lowndes could and couldn't do. The crowd waited fitfully for the intermission to expire.

The master magician brought his Rams back out onto the hardwood, and with renewed vigor, intensive defensive effort, domination of the defensive boards and aggressive attacks off the dribble, the magical blue sparkle of the Rams' Adidas carried them to an unbelievable 16-0 third quarter. The run reached 21-0 in the fourth stanza before Lowndes was finally able to score with exactly 5:30 remaining in the game. Newton's lead at that point was 44-27, and the Rams coasted to a 62-41 final.

This was magic, alright. A Sweet 16 team in the state tournament in Macon failed to score a single point in the entire third quarter. That was because the Rams claimed every rebound and committed no fouls while Lowndes was committing five in that period alone.

There was more magic at work in Macon that evening. The win was No. 1,300 for the ageless Bradley, and he and his bride embraced on the court in celebration after the announcement of the milestone was

made. He then shook hands with every assistant coach — and every player — as he made his way to the locker room.

I'd had a bird's-eye view of the magic, having sat on the front row in the end zone behind the north goal. From there, you can see the offensive spacing, the defensive traps and presses, the clear-out sets and the baseline action. As the game unfolded I watched Bradley coach, talking to his assistants, working the refs and making calls for different defensive adjustments to his players. One of his out-of-bounds plays, set up right in front of me, featured a cutter breaking straight to the hole past two picks for an easy layup.

That broke the Lowndes' coach's back. He'd been standing near midcourt, having set his players just so, and it looked to him for all the world like a basic defensive breakdown. He turned his back, threw his hands up and went back to his chair.

But that's the great thing about magic, you see. The Lowndes coach saw it as magic, but it was really fastidious attention to fundamentals. The Rams executed a perfectly designed play perfectly. They set two picks, the guard rolled and cut to the hole, the pass was there and the layup was uncontested.

As I left the building and pointed the nose of the old convertible toward home, I couldn't help but reflect on how so many things have changed since 1966. I know school was out for a week's vacation due to the current rage in education — the balanced schedule — but there were very few students from Newton in the stands, along with an Eastside jacket or two. Young folks today have so many distractions calling for their attention that maybe a trip to Macon to witness some magic is just not a big deal anymore.

But for this old geezer, it fundamentally was.