

ILLINOIS SOJOURN / BASKETBALL DREAMS AMID THE ORIGINAL “MARCH MADNESS”

After just two plus years in La Crosse, we moved again-- just as I was finishing sixth grade -- to Bloomington-Normal in central Illinois. Once again, my Dad was transferred to another store. So I had to get used to listening to St. Louis Cardinal games. That was the only team you could get on the one radio station in Bloomington, WJBC. So I became a Stan Musial and Cardinals fan.

Q: Oh yeah, well it was a good time --

QUINN: Harry Carey was the Cardinals’ announcer, and his sidekick was Jack Buck, the father of current TV sportscaster Joe Buck. Radio was magic, as the duo would describe how after the game they would go over to Stan and Biggie’s Restaurant and have a steak. I dreamed of the day I could ever go and see that. I loved baseball. My dream had always been to one day become a major league baseball player. While that didn’t happen, my knowledge of 1950s baseball trivia was key to my being nominated for an ambassadorship later in my life, but that is another story for a later day.

It was in Illinois that I became enamored of basketball. Illinois was this huge, huge high school basketball state, akin to Indiana. We had TV there, even though it was just one station, WCIA, channel 3 in Champaign- Urbana, where the University of Illinois is located. So when we arrived there in 1954, I saw my first ever Illinois High School Association Sweet Sixteen Basketball Tournament, televised from the U of I campus. It was known as “March Madness,” the appellation now reserved for the NCAA basketball tournament. I watched and absorbed all the passion of the little town schools with just 40 to 50 students playing against the big city ones in a David and Goliath type struggle. I just fell in love with the entire pageantry of it all. To just once be able to step onto the floor as part of a team playing in the Sweet Sixteen at George Huff Gymnasium, my life would be complete.

I would practice shooting at night when it was so black you could barely see the rim of the basket and on snow covered outside courts in the dead of winter. I dreamed about making jump shots. I was tall, almost 6 feet and I was pretty good grade school basketball player. I probably had the apogee of my athletic career in eighth grade at Trinity Grade School when I scored 30 points in one game against Saint Mary’s Grade School in Bloomington. That is a big total even in a 40 minute college game, but it was an unheard of amount since the quarters of a grade school game were only six minutes long. I averaged more than a point a minute, hitting jump shots from the free throw line area and grabbing rebounds and putting them back in. As I recall, I had 20 points by half time. I was doing so well, that our coach, Ed Tully, smiled and didn’t yell at us during his half time talk, which was a big change in his demeanor. I was so pleased that 40

years later, my friend Marty Capodice, still remembered my feat, and talked about it in amazement.

My second best game came against St. Patrick's of Lincoln whom we beat 36 -34. I think I scored 16 points including making the go-ahead shot. That game took place in the Trinity High School gym, where I dreamed I would star when I enrolled there the following year. That win qualified us to go to the finals of the Catholic Diocesan Tournament on the floor of Spalding High School in Peoria. We lost badly, scoring only 15 points total as team, our worst game of the year.

We had a hard edged, demanding coach named Ed Tully, whom I revered, but who was just a college student from Illinois State Normal University. He told someone that I would be a star player in high school, but that never came to pass as that summer we moved again to Dubuque, Iowa and another new school. After that, my athletic career was sort of a slow glide downhill, despite whatever avocation I might have had. Eventually, I came to realize in high school that I wasn't going to be good enough to ever do any of those things in sports.

Although much later in my career, I did have another exceptional basketball memory when I played in the Embassy Manila employee basketball league when I was DCM in the Philippines. I had one of the truly memorable moments of my Foreign Service career when the Motor Pool team that I coached won the embassy wide championship and the Filipino drivers triumphantly carried me off the floor on their shoulders. There is a photo of that moment on display in my office even today.

Q: (laughs)

QUINN: (laughs) You never give up.

Q: No.

QUINN: And then you live on through your children.

Q: When did you start getting interested in girls?

QUINN: Sixth grade.

Q: Sixth grade?

QUINN: Sixth grade at St. Joseph's School in La Crosse. I remember there were a couple of girls who came up to me after school one day, named Harriet Jungen and Gloria Kruschek. Harriet had kind of blondish gold hair and wore it short, and Gloria had long flowing black hair. And they said, "We want to tell you something."

And I said, "Oh, what is it?"

They said, "Oh, it's a secret."

I said, "Oh, OK, what is it?"

And they said, "We like you!" And then they ran off giggling. They were so shy. Nothing ever came of it.

Q: No.

QUINN: That the two of them thought I was cute made me feel special. So that is my earliest memory of girls interacting with me. I do remember back in the Bronx thinking that Clare Reilly, who lived across Decatur Avenue and up in an apartment, was pretty, but that was in first grade.

Q: Oh yeah, well it's a nice early memory.

QUINN: But then I moved away from La Crosse to Bloomington, Illinois where I went to sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. It was there that I had my first serious girlfriend. Her name was Mary Shanks and she was a year younger than me and had a cute black pony tail. She was the first girl I ever kissed.

Q: Well, why you were in La Crosse, did you get involved with your father's store?

QUINN: No. I was too young.

Q: At Bloomington you were how old about?

QUINN: So when I got to Bloomington I was in sixth grade, so I would have been 12 or 13. We arrived in the spring, so I went to the last part of sixth grade for a couple of months, and then seventh grade and eighth grade at Holy Trinity Grade School in Bloomington. We lived in three different houses in two and a half years. The first was in Bloomington at 406 Jefferson Street.

One of my first experiences that summer was playing first base on the 7-UP team made up of my Holy Trinity classmates in the “1030am League” of the American Legion baseball program. I hit two home runs during the season, which helped bond me to the other athletes in the class like Jimmy Arteman, Mickey Robinson, Marty Capodice [who remained a lifelong friend] and Bobby Uhlrich. A great pleasure was stopping at the Zesto [soft ice cream] shop for an Orange Freeze while bicycling my way home.

The next two houses were in Normal, the then small college town just north of Bloomington. The first house in Normal was on Main Street next to a trailer park and a block from the original Steak N Shake drive in restaurant. The last one was a farm house with a barn located right on the Illinois Central railroad tracks and near Illinois State Normal University [ISNU]. My bicycle was essential to getting around, since we lived several miles from school and most of my friends and my girlfriend lived in Bloomington.

When we lived next to the trailer park, I started hanging around with some questionable slightly older kids. One, Jack Jones, was particularly into petty theft. I remember being with him, when we went into the locker room at ISNU, and he started going through lockers and stealing money out of the wallets left in clothes by people working out in the gym. He also would steal food items out of Lutz’ grocery store which was along the Main Street strip as you entered Normal. I never stole anything, but I could feel myself being drawn into his circle and easily could have ended up a thief.

I was saved by our move to the smaller former farm house at 100 Irving St. I loved that it was right next to the Illinois Central railroad tracks, as I could sit on the lawn and watch freight trains go past, counting how many different exotic railroad company names and mottoes you could see, such as the Lackawanna and The Route of the Phoebe Snow.

The most significant cultural development that occurred during my grade school years was the birth of rock n roll. I have one foot in the juke box, swing era of popular music that spread around the country after World War II. The familiar setting was bobby sox wearing teen age girls jitter bugging with boys at the malt shop while songs popularized on the American Hit Parade TV show [sponsored by Lucky Strike every Saturday night] blasted out of the ubiquitous juke box. Snooky Lanson and Dorothy Collins were the leading crooners performing the top 7 songs every week. Boylans Malt Shop near Trinity High School was the hang out with a juke box for high school kids which featured this ambience.

And then,...and then, without warning, the movie Blackboard Jungle with its theme song Rock Around the Clock sung by Bill Haley and the Comets hit movie theaters across the country. I recall sitting in the theater in Bloomington in 1955 with the Jackson sisters [Jane and Rosie]

transfixed by the power of the beat of the music. It was so completely different than anything before it. Soon it was at the top of the Hit Parade, but those singers couldn't do it justice.

A year later, Elvis made his debut on the scene and music for teen agers was forever transformed. I remember watching Elvis' first ever television appearances on a summer replacement program named Stage Show, featuring Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. "Heartbreak Hotel" and "Blue Suede Shoes" soared to the top of the charts. A few years later, with the introduction of the twist, dancing while touching hands was gone as well.

The central experience of my two plus years in central Illinois was becoming obsessed with basketball. If baseball had been the passion of my life in New York, and I started playing football in La Crosse, it was in Bloomington-Normal that I would discover the infectious allure of March Madness as the Illinois State High School state championship tournament was called. All schools, no matter how large or small, all played in the same tournament, with the final 16 teams qualifying to travel to Champaign-Urbana for the final four rounds of play at George Huff Gymnasium on the campus of the University of Illinois. Known as the Sweet Sixteen, these teams would each be represented by a light bulb on a giant map of Illinois. As teams lost, their lights would go out until at the end of the week on Saturday night only one lit bulb remained.

And, best of all, it was all televised on WCIA, channel 3, which was the only television channel you could receive in Bloomington. While we were there, we eventually bought a new UHF TV set which could get channels 14 to 83. This then permitted us to see programs on WTVH channel 19 and WEEK channel 43.

The broadcasters of those state tournament games wove a tale of the great David vs Goliath victories by tiny high schools over big city schools, very similar to the movie Hoosiers [which while about Indiana high school basketball, still makes me cry]. I would be cheering for little schools like Shawneetown and Pinckneyville to beat the big schools and make it to the finals. As I told Dr. Robert Easter, the Chancellor of the University of Illinois, 50 years later, my dream in eighth grade was to just once during high school to step onto the floor of Huff Gymnasium in a Sweet Sixteen state tournament game. Then my life would be complete.

Of course, I never had that opportunity, since we moved away to Dubuque, Iowa just as high school was about to begin, and my hopes for an Illinois basketball experience faded away in the rear view mirror of the car as we left Normal, and eventually crossed the bridge over the Mississippi to the "West Bank" and headed north to Dubuque.

By the way, at the end of eighth grade at Holy Trinity School, there was a class prophecy written by a girl named Sally Cushing. She was a favorite of our teacher Sister Henrietta, so she got this

assignment. Some of the predictions were pretty funny, but when she got to my name, she read aloud “Kenny Quinn will be a garbage man.” I was nonplussed when I heard it. I never knew where she got this idea from or whether it was meant to be ironic or truly prophetic.