

## The Champions from Joes

By Dennis Payton Knight

“Go due east and drive toward the morning sun. Drive till your eyes glaze over and your knees lock. Drive till you’re in country where, if you had a rattlesnake you cared about, you wouldn’t turn it loose.”

That will tell you where Joes, Colorado is, and it’s how author Nell Probst opens her book, *The Boys from Joes* (Pruett Publishing Co, 1988). It takes us to 1929 and a most improbable championship in the years that high school athletics weren’t divided into classifications based on school size to protect the Davids from the Goliaths. The opening round of the district basketball playoffs in Limon pitted a big school in Denver East against a team made up of half of the boys of the 38-member student body of Joes. The city goliath could have used protection against the bully David.

East brought cheerleaders, a band and snazzy warmup suits. Joes had none of that. In fact, most Joes’ players had never practiced indoors. They developed their skills on a dirt court not conducive to bouncing a ball, and so they passed more than they dribbled, a forerunner of the modern era. The boys from Joes who would become known as the Wonder Boys would, as soon as their chores were finished every morning, run miles to school to practice until the morning bell rang.

And the man who came to be known as their Wonder Coach, Richard Lane Sullivan, was a natural musician, poet, psychologist and gifted teacher, but never an athlete. He worked briefly for the *Denver Post* and had a year of teaching under his belt. When he took the job at Joes, he was stunned to learn he would be the principal, coach basketball and organize a school band.

Above all else, Lane Sullivan was an optimist, and among all else, he taught optimism. All he had for coaching credentials was Phog Allen’s *Bible*, which the legendary Kansas basketball coach sent him when he pleaded for advice. The neophyte coach instructed and drilled his players until they could run Allen’s plays in their sleep, and concurrently the neophyte bandmaster put together a school band that won a state contest for best performance. Maybe *that* book he got from Sousa. The neophyte principal also saw to it his 38 charges progressed as students, and he had time left in the day to teach English and History.

After beating Denver East and taking district, the boys moved on to the state playoffs in Greeley, defeating Julesburg, Gunnison and Fort Lupton. Finally, the boys from Joes whipped Fort Collins 37-14 and became the 1929 Colorado State High School Basketball Champions. Winning state earned them a place in the national playoffs in Chicago, where they proceeded to beat teams from Delaware, South Dakota, and Louisiana before finally losing in a close semi-final game to an Oklahoma team. Joes won the consolation game and emerged from Chicago as the third best high school basketball team in the United States, against goliath schools twenty or forty times its size.

Joes took state again the following year in the same dominating way, but for some reason the folks administering Colorado high school athletics decided our state would no longer participate

in the national tournament. It's too bad the Wonder Coach and his Wonder Boys didn't get a second chance at the national title but they are a terrific part of our history, and their story deserves to be told and celebrated again.