



The 1965-66 Huntington Vinson Tigers Class AA state champion basketball team. All photos courtesy of our author and Huntington Publishing Company unless noted otherwise.

The Penicillin Kids and an Improbable Basketball Title

By Dan Kincaid

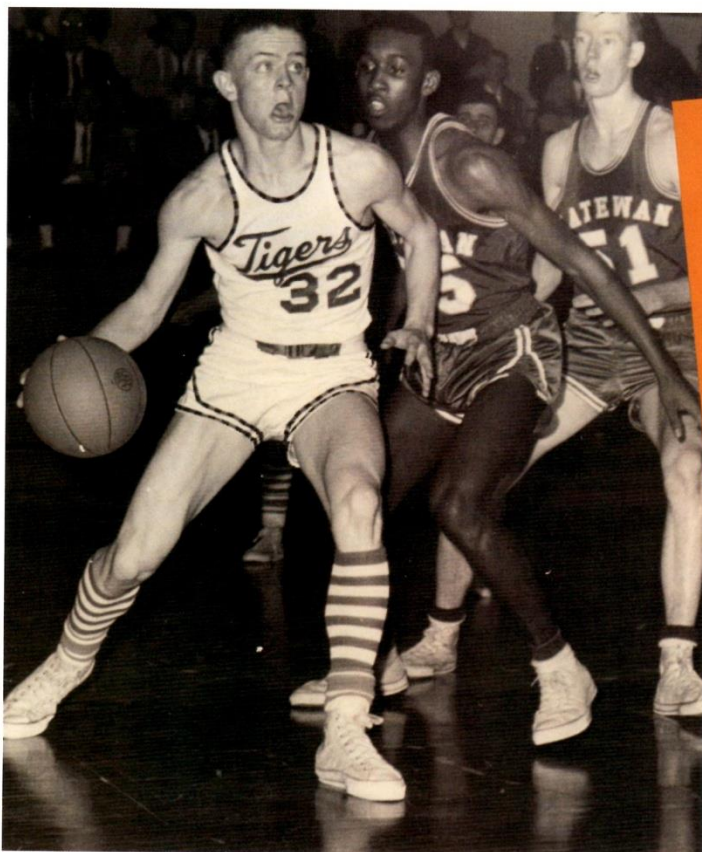
It was fall 1965. Basketball season was about to begin. Vinson High School was located in Westmoreland—also known as the Wayne County section of Huntington. It'd been known primarily as a football school, winning five state grid-iron titles in the 1940s and 1950s behind stars like Buzz Nutter, Dale Boyd, and Tom Perdue.

There were a few “might have been” basketball seasons. The Tigers, led by Keith Ross, went to their first state tournament in 1954 but lost by one to Pax in

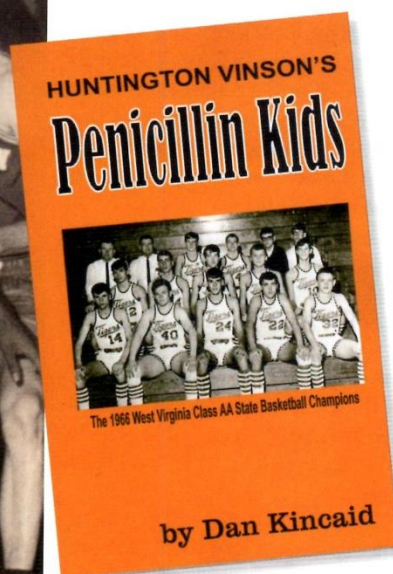
the Class B semifinals. In 1955, Vinson fell one game short of the state tournament, losing to Chat-taroy in the regional finals. That Tigers squad was led by Benny Coffman, who later starred for Adolph Rupp's 1959 and 1960 University of Kentucky teams. The 1960 Vinson squad, led by Donnie Smith, also fell one game short of the state tournament. Smith went on to play for the University of Dayton.

After 1960, sports at Vinson were more or less average. Heading into the 1965-66 bas-

ketball season, there were no high expectations for the Tigers. To the close observer, however, there were some positive signs. The team had five seniors, including three who'd started for all or part of the previous season: Bill Thomas, Wally Snyder, and Gary Norris. Two others, Ty Tomlinson and Bill Beldon, had seen substantial playing time. There was also a good group of juniors, including Tony Ritter, Tucker Lynch, Danny Kincaid, and Norman Myatt.



Vinson's Danny Kincaid (32) drives for a basket against Matewan in the regional championship game.



You can read more about the Tigers' championship run in Dan Kincaid's book *Huntington Vinson's Penicillin Kids*, available through Amazon and other online sites.

Another positive was the return of Donnie Smith—this time as head coach. Smith brought with him a winning attitude from his years at Dayton. He switched Vinson from its traditional zone defense and run-and-gun offense to a patterned offense and man-to-man defense. This style required great physical conditioning, so the players ran, and ran, and ran. When they weren't running, they were practicing defense. One commented, "There were

times we hardly used a ball during practice."

As the 1965-66 season approached, most observers gave little thought to Vinson. The best local AA team was thought to be Ceredo-Kenova. C-K was coming off a state football championship and was loaded with talented athletes. Huntington St. Joe (St. Joseph's) had a very good team, as did a couple of Ohio teams, Chesapeake and Fairland, which Vinson would face.

The season opened on December 7 with a win against Buffalo

of Wayne and an unexpected victory over C-K. Then came three straight losses to St. Joe, AAA-power Logan, and Fairland.

As January approached, the Tigers were 2-3, and most fans were settling in for another mediocre season. Several nagging injuries and illnesses forced Donnie Smith to experiment with new lineups. A number of backups got substantial playing time. By late season, this would prove highly beneficial.

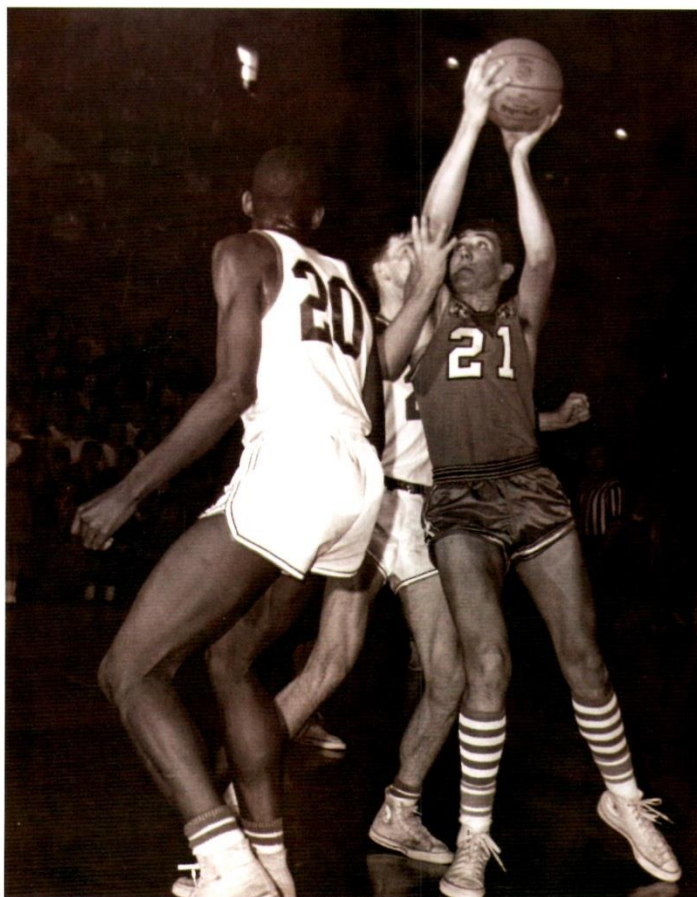
During January, the Tigers began to jell with another win over C-K and a payback victory over St. Joe. By the end of the month, Vinson was 7-5, and enthusiasm was building in Westmoreland.

Thomas was scoring over 20 points per game with Norris and Snyder also averaging double figures. Kincaid offered a scoring boost off the bench in wins over C-K, Milton, and St. Joe. He soon joined the starting lineup, alongside Snyder, Tomlinson, Norris, and Thomas.

But there were still growing pains. Vinson lost its first three games in February, dropping to 7-8. The losses, though, were to very good teams: Oak Hill, Barboursville, and Chesapeake (Ohio). It turned out that the Tigers' overtime loss to Chesapeake on February 12 would be their last of the season. But no one could see that coming.

All of Vinson's players were finally healthy, nine had a lot of playing experience, the lineup and substitution patterns were set, and the Tigers had a four-game home stand coming up. The coaches, too, had become seasoned. Smith, the rookie head coach, was now comfortable with the team. Assistant coach Don Trimboli, who was also the head football coach, provided key help in practices and with conditioning.

On February 15, Vinson hosted the AAA Huntington East Highlanders, probably the area's best ballclub. East was led by two

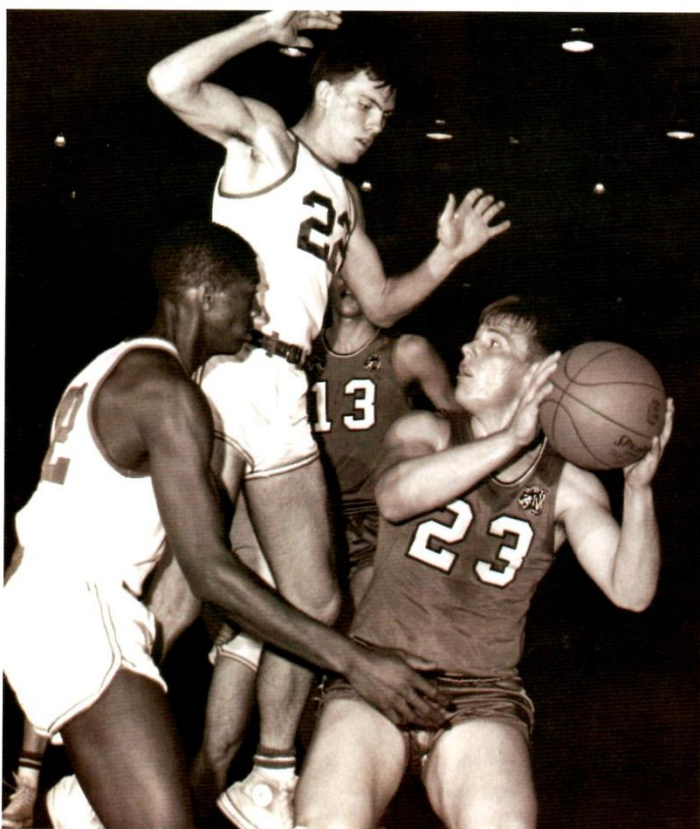


Vinson's Bill Thomas (21) is fouled and scores two of his 29 points in the state championship victory over Mullens. Danny Graves (20) guards for Mullens.

future Division I college players: Mark Dawson (WVU) and Bill McNeer (Virginia Tech). Vinson opened up a 60-51 lead at the end of three quarters. East cut the margin to five, but Vinson won it 76-71.

Vinson rolled over Wayne in its next game and then came away with a surprisingly easy 68-44 win over a tough Boyd County team out of Kentucky. With another easy win over

Milton, the Tigers had swept its four-game home stand. On the season, Vinson was now 11-8 with an upcoming rematch against East to end the regular season on the Highlanders' home court—Huntington's Memorial Field House. East was eager to avenge the February 15 loss to the Tigers. The Highlanders thought they were the better team, and maybe, on paper, they were. But as they



Wally Snyder (23) pump-fakes before scoring against Mullens in Vinson's 58-51 state championship victory. Ken Longwood is on the left, and Jerry McKinney is in the air.

say, "Games are not played on paper."

The game drew a lot of attention in Huntington. Each team was playing its best basketball, and the two teams didn't disappoint.

East took a 15-14 first-quarter lead and extended it to 33-29 behind Dawson's 15 first-half points. The Highlanders almost broke the game open in the third period, going up by nine. At that point, Coach Smith called

a timeout and threw a curve at East. He changed from a man-to-man to a zone defense, something Vinson had rarely used all season. The switch totally disrupted East's offense. Vinson scored 11 straight and was up one by the end of the period.

The fourth quarter was nip and tuck and ended in a 66-66 tie. During the three-minute overtime, Snyder canned two quick buckets for Vinson, and

Ritter added a free throw, giving the Tigers a five-point lead, 71-66. East went into a full-court press, which Vinson beat for two easy baskets. The Tigers ended up winning 80-73. The victory gave Vinson a 12-8 record and a lot of confidence heading into postseason play.

In its first sectional tournament game, Vinson beat Duval handily and then went on to defeat C-K for the third time that season. In regional play, the Tigers handled Cedar Grove and its star, Gary Selbe, by a 70-56 margin. Thomas poured in 31 points for Vinson.

In its next game, 15-8 Vinson played Matewan at a raucous Memorial Field House. Matewan had defeated Fayetteville in its regional finals and was considered by many to be the best AA team in the state. Matewan was led by high-scoring All-State guard Jerry Epling, who would go on to star at Georgia; 6-7 center Roger Gilliam; and 6-3 forward Robert Dandy. It shouldn't have been a contest, but Vinson's players were riding high.

Vinson continued its stellar play and took an eight-point lead into the locker room at halftime. Vinson never trailed and walked away with a hard-fought 68-65 victory and the regional championship. Four starters scored in double figures: Thomas with 28, Norris with 16, Kincaid with 12, and Snyder with 10. Epling was the only Matewan starter to reach double figures (30 points).



Vinson Coach Don Smith (Second from right) accepts the 1966 AA state basketball championship trophy flanked between co-captains Gary Norris (R) and Ty Tomlinson (with basketball). State Athletic Commission Chairman Dr. Ward Wylie is on the left.

Vinson was confident heading into the state tournament, which was played that year at the Memorial Field House. The Tigers' virtual home-court advantage was huge, but the season almost fell apart in an unforeseen way.

During the regionals, Tomlinson had come down with the flu, but it hadn't spread. By Monday, March 14, however, several players were suffering from the flu: scoring ace Thomas, Ritter, Carl Ray, and Steve Miller. The next day, Snyder and Norris joined the sick list. By Thursday, Kincaid and Coach Smith were feeling the effects. Things weren't looking good for Vinson.

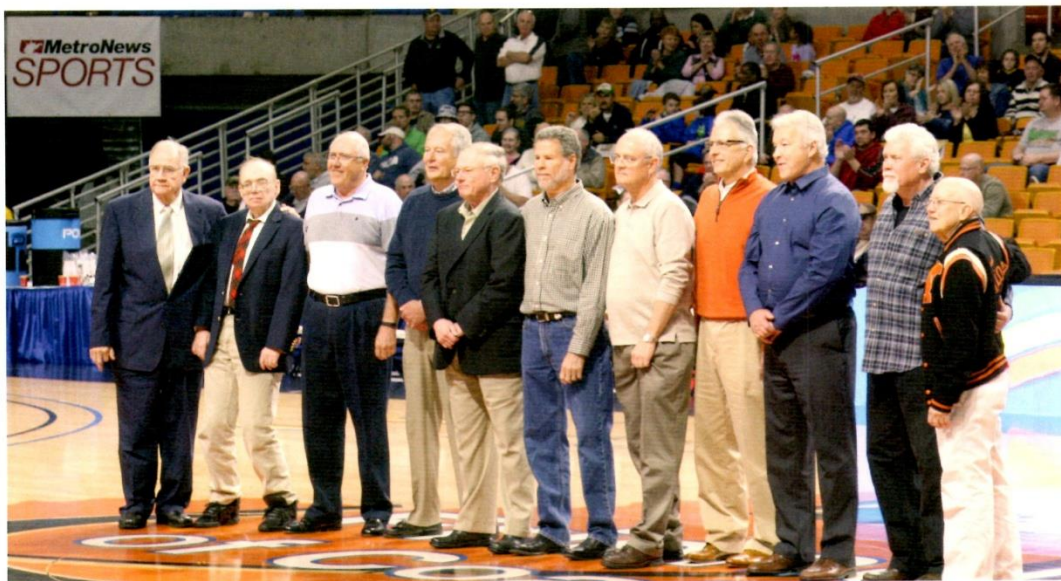
By game time on Thursday, all of Vinson's players were dressed and ready to go, but most weren't at 100 percent. And the coaches had virtually eliminated practice and pregame preparation. Somehow, though, the Tigers stormed out to a 21-8 first-quarter lead behind the scoring of Norris, Kincaid, and Snyder. But Thomas, the team's scoring star, wasn't nearly up to par. Webster Springs fought back and cut the deficit to nine points at half and to three by the end of the third.

Vinson was hanging on by a thread. Smith rested Thomas by holding him out the entire third quarter and played Norris only sparingly. His strategy

worked. Norris scored the first seven points of the fourth quarter, and the Tigers opened up a 10-point lead. Vinson rolled to a 62-45 win and a berth in the state finals. Despite being under the weather, Norris had scored 25 points and pulled down 14 rebounds to lead the Tigers.

On Friday, March 18, the *Huntington Advertiser* newspaper ran a front-page headline: VINSON'S "PENICILLIN KIDS" IN FINALS. The catchy nickname caught on.

But there was one last task to accomplish. And it was huge. Vinson, a significant underdog, had to play Mullens, which had defeated Warwood in the other



On March 19, 2016—50 years to the day of their championship title—members of the 1965-66 Vinson Tigers were honored at halftime of the Class AA championship at the Charleston Civic Center. Pictured are (left-right) head coach Don Smith, student manager Ken Gallagher, and players Bill Thomas, Gary Norris, Wally Snyder, Ty Tomlinson, Danny Kincaid, Bill Beldon, Tucker Lynch, Tony Ritter, and Carl Ray. Assistant coach Don Trimboli, student manager Eric Smith, and players Norman Myatt, Steve Miller, and Jack Brammell were unable to attend. Courtesy of Carl Ray.

semifinal game. The championship game was set for Saturday, March 19, 1966, again at the Memorial Field House.

Mullens—led by its stars Danny Graves, Ken Logwood, and Jerry McKinney—opened up a 15-12 lead after one quarter, but Vinson cut the margin to one at half. Thomas, finally recuperating from the flu, poured in 18 points for Vinson. At the end of the third, Mullens was up 41-40.

With both squads trading baskets, it seemed like whichever team got the last shot would win. Vinson grabbed a 51-49 lead with less than five minutes to play. But the Tigers stepped up their defense, forcing six Mullens

turnovers. Thomas scored three times, Tomlinson made a free throw, and Vinson took a commanding 58-49 lead as the clock ran down. The Rebels scored an insignificant bucket at the buzzer, giving Vinson a 58-51 win. The Memorial Field House erupted as Huntington Vinson's fans cheered the school's first state basketball championship.

The next morning's *Huntington Herald-Dispatch* said it all: VINSON'S PENICILLIN KIDS A STATE CHAMPIONS! Sportswriter Keith Walters noted the Tigers' "gutty performance" and wrote that "the Penicillin Kids are well today."

Even now, if you ask folks of a certain age around Huntington

if they remember the "Penicillin Kids," you'll get a heart-warming smile. Then, get ready to hear about one of the most improbable basketball seasons in West Virginia history. 🍀

DAN KINCAID, a member of the 1965-66 Vinson team, was born in Pocahontas County and attended junior high and high school in Huntington. After receiving a B.S. in forestry from WVU and a master's in environmental management from Duke, he worked 31 years with the U.S. Forest Service and 5½ years with the West Virginia Division of Forestry. Dan is the author of *The Penicillin Kids* and four forestry-related books (available on Amazon), including *Kade Holley-Forest Ranger*, a fictional account of a ranger working at various national forest locations. Dan and his wife, Vicki, a Huntington native, currently live in Florida.

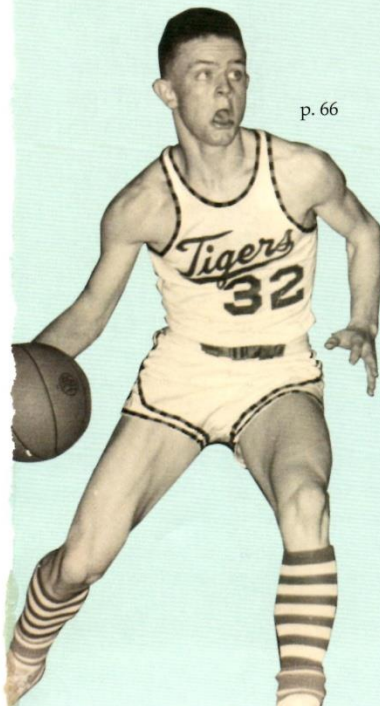
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IN LOVING MEMORY OF THE MEN
THAT LOST THEIR LIVES WHEN THE
COOLING TOWER COLLAPSED
APRIL 27, 1978

Joseph Baffle	Clayton Monroe
James Blouir	Robert Moore
Robert Blouir	Chet Payne
Steve Blouir	Edgar Phillips
Kenneth Boring	Raymond Poling
Richard Bowser	Fred Pride Jr.
Thomas Cross	Robert (Cliff) Riley
Roger Cunningham	Ray Rollyson
Larry Deem	Floyd Rupe
Roy F. Deem	Alan Sampson
Ray Duelly	Glen Satterfield
Darrell Glover	Jeffrey F. Snyder
Loren Keith Glover	Emmett Steele
Alvin Goff	Ernest Steele
Gary Gossett	Larry Gale Steele
James Harrison	Miles Steele
Claude Hendrickson	Ronald Steele
Dan Hensler	Richard Stoke
Ken Hill	Richard Swick
Gary Hinkle	Brian Taylor
Roger K. Hunt	Dale Wagoner
Tom G. Kaptis	Charles M. Warren
Randy Lowther	Jack Westfall
Ronald Mather	Louis Wildman
Howard McBrayer Jr.	Ronald Yocum
Willard McCown	

The Lord has loved the world, that he give his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. John 3:16

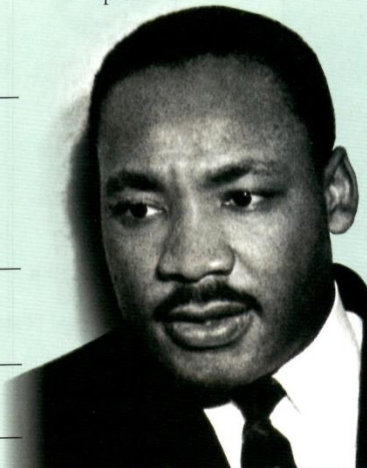
This monument came about when 12-year old, Anthony Laurer, grandson of L. Gale Steele did a Social Studies project (twenty-two years later) to honor these men that lost their lives for our community resources.



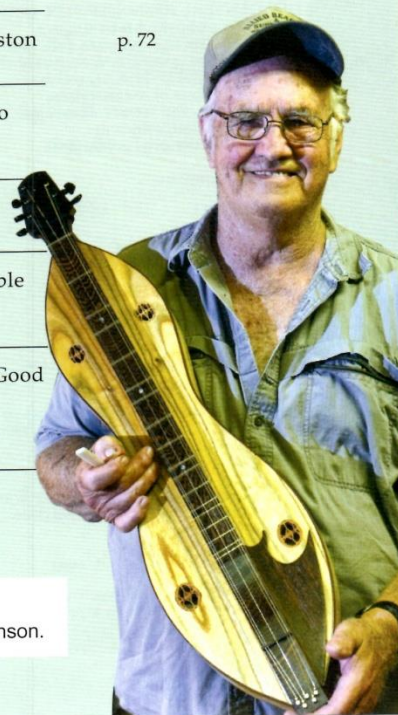
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On the cover: Frank George, ca. 1970.
Photographer unknown, courtesy of Kim Johnson.