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TODAY'S WEATHER

 **HIGH** **LOW**
51 **32**
Scattered rain and snow showers
6-day forecast / B6

SNOWFALL TOTAL

YTD snowfall	All-time record	To break record
95.2"	98.7"	3.5"

Billings Gazette

SATURDAY,
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24-HOUR UPDATES AT
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LOCAL EDITION

MONTANA BASKETBALL HISTORY



■ 45 years ago,
Laurel captured a
state title for the ages

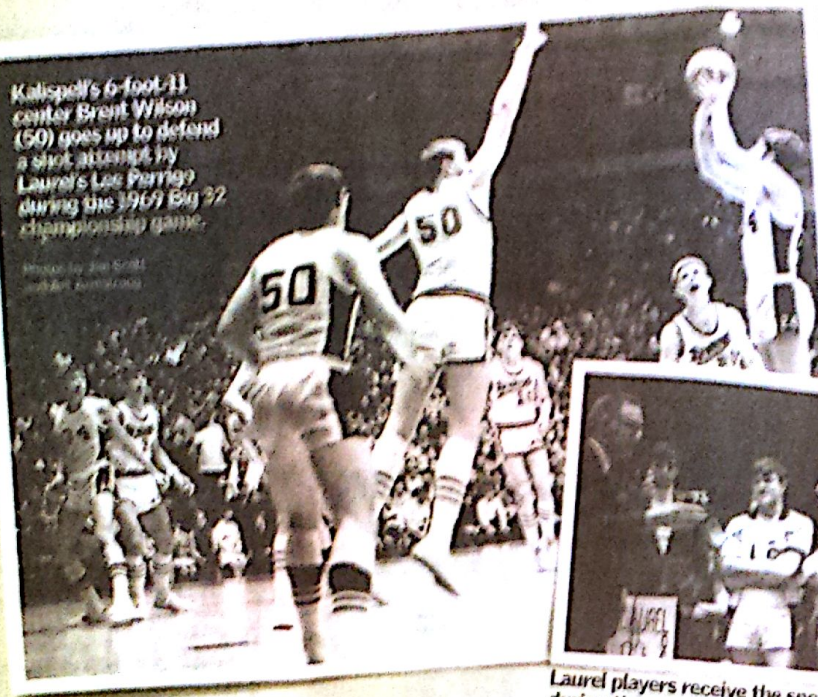
■ Locomotives
put a memorable
end to Big 32 era

SPORTS / C1

45 years ago, Laurel captured a state title for the ages

Kalispell's 6-foot-11 center Brent Wilson (50) goes up to defend a shot attempt by Laurel's Lee Perrigo during the 1969 Big 32 championship game.

Photos by Jim Scott and Art Armstrong



Laurel players receive the spoils of victory during the postgame ceremony.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dennis Gaub is the author of the forthcoming book "Dream Season: How the little Laurel Locomotives steamed to an unbeaten season and captured an historic Montana basketball championship."

By DENNIS GAUB
Special To The Gazette

Perfection on hardwood occurred 45 years ago tonight — and I was among nearly 11,000 people who witnessed the historic feat.

On Saturday, March 15, 1969, 10,700 fans packed the Montana State University Fieldhouse, as it was known then, to watch the final Big 32 boys championship game and the last Big 32 game ever played. That attendance and the same attendance for the semifinal round the night before remain the largest crowds to ever watch any Treasure State basketball games.

Total tournament attendance at the 1969 Big 32 tournament in Bozeman was 41,000, which is also believed to be the all-time state record.

Those who got inside on the last night — about 500 people were turned away due to fire safety regulations — were treated to a classic game. They saw Laurel defeat Flathead of Kalispell, 57-54, in overtime to capture the championship.

I experienced that saga as a 17-year-old high school senior. As a student at Billings West, I had landed what was for me a dream job the previous fall. Famed Gazette sports editor Norm Clarke had hired me as a weekend sports clerk at the newspaper. My responsibilities entailed writing brief game articles based on results phoned in from dozens of high schools in the Gazette's circulation area.

Norm, however, had given me opportunities to attend and report on several tournament games in Billings that winter. Those assignments bolstered my confidence as I got ready

Please see Laurel, C7

Locomotives put a memorable end to Big 32 era

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ed West is a former Gazette sports writer and is widely recognized as one of the foremost authorities on the history of high school sports in Montana.

By ED WEST
Special To The Gazette

When the championship games of the boys and girls State AA tournament finish Saturday night, it will not only mark the passing of another season, but also of one

of the greatest eras in the history of Montana high school basketball.

On March 15, 1969, a crowd of estimated at 10,700 — regarded as the biggest in Montana high school history — jammed into the Montana State University Fieldhouse for the last game of the Big 32 state tournament.

It was a memorable end to a memorable time when the under-sized Laurel Locomotives outlasted the Flathead Braves of Kalispell 57-54 in overtime. Playing without a starter over 6-foot-2, the Locomotives,

coached by legendary Don Peterson, outdueled the Braves, who towered over them with the likes of 6-foot-10 Brent Wilson (he was listed at 6-11 the following season) and 6-7 Don Grovom.

The victory capped a magical season for Laurel which finished 26-0 and claimed the school's first state championship.

Along the way the Locomotives beat Billings Senior, Great Falls CMR

Please see Big 32, C7



Photos by Jim Scott and Art Armstrong

Laurel coach Don Peterson is interviewed by a radio broadcaster after the championship game.

Laurel

Continued from C1

to start college that fall and helped launch my 25-year career as a newspaper reporter and editor.

When the week of the state Big 32 tournament arrived, Norm made an offer I couldn't refuse: would I like to accompany him and Gazette columnist Addison Bragg in Bozeman during the event? Although I didn't write stories from the tournament — I was a "gofer" grabbing statistics and refreshments for Norm and Addison — I saw Laurel's march to the title from a prime spot, the court-side press table.

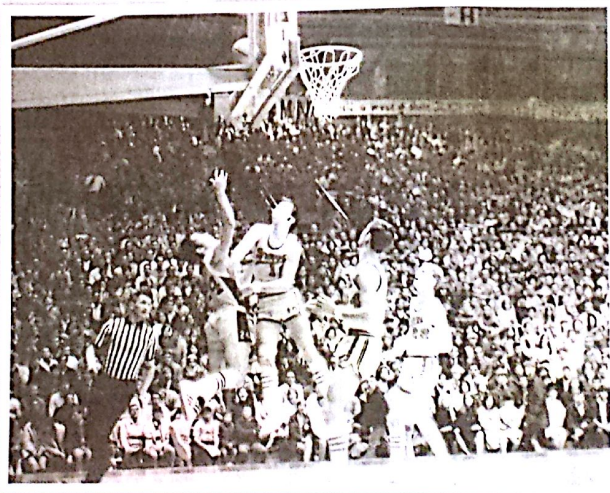
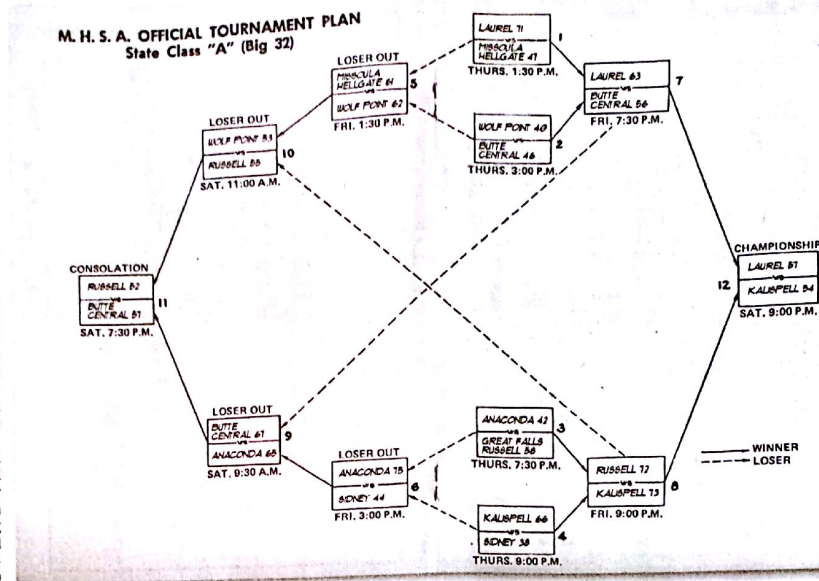
Laurel finished 26-0, and the Don Peterson-coached Locomotives tacked on four more wins the next season to extend their winning streak to 30 games. Kalispell finished with a sterling 22-4 record and won the 1970 state AA championship.

If ever there were a David vs. Goliath matchup, Laurel vs. Kalispell was it. Laurel had 431 students at the start of the 1968-69 school year, compared with Kalispell's enrollment that was more than three times larger, 1,378 students.

Kalispell wasn't the only large school the Locomotives defeated that year. They edged Billings Senior (nearly 2,000 students) at the Brones' gym and easily beat Bozeman (902 students) twice during the regular season. They outlasted Great Falls Russell (about 1,700 students) at the Rustlers' gym to win the divisional championship. And they opened state tournament play by whipping Missoula Hellgate (more than 1,700 students).

Kalispell also had a decided height advantage over Laurel. The Braves' front line included 6-foot-11 all-stater Brent Wilson, 6-7 Don Groven and 6-4 Greg Ellingson.

The Locomotives answered with quickness, an outstanding matchup zone defense and, on occasion, a full-court press. Those traits helped overcome the fact that no starter on Laurel's senior-dominated team was taller than its 6-2



Laurel's Lee Perrigo (24) and Kalispell's Gary Stoick (10) jump for a rebound during the championship game.

stalwarts, smooth-shooting all-state forward Tom Perrigo and steady rebounder Jerry Bygren.

The Locomotives had reached the previous three Big 32 state tournaments, but the addition of senior guard Alan Campbell put them on top in 1969. Camp-

bell, one of the finest play-makers in Montana prep history, earned all-state honors at Billings Central as a junior before transferring to archival Laurel for his senior year.

One unforgettable memory I have of championship night is the almost-deaf-

ening cheers for the Locomotives from the packed arena. Besides apparently everyone living in Laurel, the Locomotives seemed to have nearly everybody else on their side. Their support certainly dwarfed that provided by the smaller section of Kalispell fans.

When the final buzzer sounded, I stood perhaps six feet away from Wilson. Laurel had double- and triple-teamed him — sometimes putting even four players on him, daring the Braves to try scoring from outside. The tactic worked, despite Kalispell's rebounding advantage. It didn't help the Braves' cause that Wilson and Groven fouled out late in regulation play.

I remember Wilson shaking his head in disbelief at the outcome, but I didn't clearly hear what he may have said.

Perhaps he was thinking about what had happened with less than a minute remaining in the fourth quarter and the score tied at 53. Laurel, trying for a final shot, lost the ball when Campbell was called for traveling. Braves forward Jim Otten tried a long jumper, missed, and Wilson grabbed the rebound. He saw Ellingson alone underneath the basket and passed to him, but Ellingson lost the ball out of bounds.

Conversing recently from his home in Arizona, Braves' center Wilson recalled the lasting what-might-have-been for the Braves and their fans:

"I somehow got it,

turned and saw Greg Ellingson standing under the basket. He looked up, the ball hit him in the hands and bounced out of bounds."

Wilson then got called for his fifth foul. That sent Perrigo to the line for a one-and-one with two seconds left in regulation play, but Perrigo missed the first shot, preserving the tie.

In overtime, Bygren sank two free throws to give Laurel a 55-53 lead. Both teams squandered subsequent opportunities, Ellingson and Perrigo missing free throws before Ellingson sank a charity shot to make it 55-54. Seconds later, the Locomotives put together the play that iced their win.

Peterson called a timeout with about a minute left and positioned the Locomotives in a four-corner offense. The tactic required discipline and the patience to wait for a good shot.

The play paid off, thanks to the other Perrigo on the Locomotives' roster, Tom's 5-8 cousin Lee.

Lee Perrigo, a transfer from Worland, Wyo., at the start of his senior year, retired last October from the Cenex refinery after 37 years employment there. Interviewed at his home in Laurel in February, Perrigo said he remembered seeing the four-corner scheme made famous by North Carolina coach Dean Smith on TV.

"We had not used it (in a game), but we had practiced it."

"In that four corners, if somebody leaves you, you cut to the basket. I cut to the basket just like I was taught. I got the ball back and scored on a layup. They were the last points scored in the Big 32," he said.

Lee Perrigo's bucket made it 57-54. Kalispell's Gary Stoick missed a 20-footer and, although Laurel got the rebound, the Braves regained possession with nine seconds left. They couldn't get a shot off, however, and the Locomotives reigned over the Big 32.

"It was a good game, but we threw it away," a slightly rueful Wilson said almost 45 years later.

Later that night, the lights went out — in the fieldhouse and on a remarkable era in Montana sports.

Big 32

Continued from C1

and Bozeman. They also played familiar foes of today including Billings Central, Glendive, Hardin, Miles City and Sidney.

With players like eventual all-tournament selections, Tom Perrigo, Alan Campbell and Roger Seelye, Laurel didn't have too many scares. An efficient offense and sticky defense kept the Locomotives in control most of the time as they won 18 times by 10 or more points.

They could be a frustrating team to play. If Laurel got even the smallest lead, its defense and free throw shooting were too much to overcome.

Senior's Broncos came the closest to knocking the Locomotives off, falling 57-56 in a December meeting in Billings. Lewistown put up a battle, being tied after three quarters before losing 56-53.

In the regular season finale, Laurel met rival Billings Central. The game was moved from Central to West to accommodate a larger crowd. A packed-house watched the Locomotives subdue the Rams 71-62.

In the Division 1 tournament, the Locomotives had to face a good CMR outfit on its home court in the championship game. Laurel managed to pull out a 52-47 victory to put its record at 23-0.

Then it was on to state where a talented field, which included defending champion Wolf Point, awaited.

In a preview story for the tournament, Gazette sports editor Norm Clarke, listed the enrollments of the schools. CMR was the largest at 2,363 followed by Flathead 1,761, Missoula Hellgate 1,735, Anaconda 864, Butte Central 413 (boys only), Sidney 602, Laurel 559 and Wolf Point 458.

That was the thing about the Big 32. It came down to how good your team was rather than the size of the school.

The league began in 1963-64 and was originally 30 schools with nine from AA, 12 from A (including Laurel) and nine from B. Hellgate eventually joined in 1964-65 and CMR in 1965-



Laurel's Jerry Bygren (34) goes up high to grab a rebound during the Locomotives' semifinal win over Butte Central.



Laurel players watch from the sideline during the championship game.

66 to complete four divisions of eight teams each.

Powerful Missoula County began the new setup by steamrolling its way to the championship. The Spartans, in the midst of a 56-game winning streak, ran up a 27-0 record and won by an average of 33.5 points a game.

The smaller schools then began to make their mark. Columbia Falls, fresh out of the B ranks, made it to the championship game in 1965. The Wildcats fell in the final seconds 62-61 to Great Falls.

In the next couple of years, two other former B schools would surpass the Wildcats' accomplishment.

In 1966, Libby toppled Columbia Falls in the divisional tournament, and

went on to claim the state title. The Loggers, which had future Montana governor Marc Racicot in the lineup, edged West 62-61 in the semifinals and clipped Hellgate 72-70 for the title.

Two years later Wolf Point made its run. Led by 6-4 Willie Weeks and 6-9 John Weeks, the Wolves outlasted Great Falls (and 49 points by 6-7 Bison center Ray Howard) 82-79 in double overtime before polishing off Flathead 71-55 in the championship game.

Entering the 1969 tournament, Wolf Point was 21-2 and ready for a much anticipated matchup with Laurel in the semifinals. The dream game never happened, thanks to scrappy Butte Central, which slowed down the

high-scoring Wolves in the first round and won 46-40.

Laurel hadn't had any trouble with its opener, winning 71-47 over Hellgate. Undaunted by Butte Central's upset, Laurel managed to get past the Maroons 63-56 and then toppled Flathead to take its place in history.

But after that year, a school Laurel's size would not have a chance to compete with the largest programs in a state tournament.

In 1969-70, the largest 16 schools were designated Class AA and the rest, Laurel among them, became Class A. The present-day AA has 14 schools and A has 22.

Certainly, the larger schools probably didn't like losing to the smaller ones, but it wasn't like they didn't have any highlights during that period. Senior and West played one of the great championship games in 1967 with the Broncos winning 69-67 in overtime.

West qualified for the Big 32 tournament five of the six years it was in existence. Missoula County/Sentinel went four times and Senior made it three times.

Overall, 21 of the 32 schools appeared in at least one tournament.

The only larger school not to make it was Helena, although the Bengals were seconds away in 1966. Lewistown scored in the final seconds to beat Helena for the Division 1 championship and the Bengals then lost to Laurel in a challenge game.

But, on the other end, there were probably a number of smaller schools who didn't like their chances of getting to many state tournaments had the Big 32 remained in place.

There are still games between AA-A teams, but it's not quite the same as battling in a divisional or state tournament atmosphere. Laurel's current schedules include the Billings AA schools and the Locomotives did play the Great Falls teams in the early 1970s. But there's been no chance for them to play Bozeman or Flathead or the Helena schools since the Big 32 ended.

A big reason, of course,

is that economics have changed for activities budgets over the years, particularly with the addition of girls sports (You wonder what kind of memories a girls Big 32 could have produced). Regionalized scheduling has helped reduce travel. Overnight trips, except for tournaments, are mostly gone.

It's quite possible the interest in the Big 32 would have waned if the AA schools had started to dominate, which seems likely, at

least judging from the interclass results over the past 20 years or so.

Then again, you wonder what some of the Livingston and Glendive teams of the 80s, the Dillon and Columbia Falls teams of the last 15 years and the Laurel teams of the last few seasons might have done in such a setup.

Tonight marks 45 years to the day of the last Big 32 game. Maybe the Locomotives and a by-gone era deserve a tip of the cap.

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