

Bell has seen many changes in girls' high school basketball

By **Bill Plott**
News staff writer

The first time Robert Bell watched the final of a girls state championship basketball game, the final score was 36-31, a total that would barely equal the halftime score of most girls games today.

The year was 1949 and Bell was the assistant coach for Wenonah High School, which was on its way to winning the first state tournament for girls in the old Alabama Interscholastic Athletic Association. The AIAA was the organization for black high schools prior to integration and the merger with the Alabama High School Athletic Association in 1968.

"The girls game is much faster today," said Bell, who is retired from Lawson State Community College. "The girls have developed so many more skills and they score more today. Back then a game might end 15-13."

Bell attributes the changes in the game to more emphasis, better coaching and extracurricular programs such as Amateur Athletic Union basketball that enable girls to play basketball throughout the year rather than just during the high school season.

In 1949, Bell was a volunteer assistant to Lillie Singleton Summers, a physical education teacher who was the Wenonah coach.

"I was just helping them after I got off from the pipe shop at 2 o'clock. They didn't have the luxury of assistant coaches like they do today. They didn't specialize back then. Wenonah only had one coach, Roscoe Wells, who was the football coach. He also coached basketball, baseball and track."

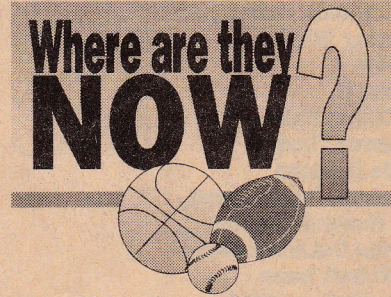
Wenonah was led by a lanky forward named Wilma Richmond. She scored 29 points in the Dragons' 36-31 win over Tuscaloosa Industrial in the championship game.

"You played a half-court game with two players on each side and one ballhandler who could go all the way, run the court," Bell said. "You kept your two good defensive players on one end and your shooters on the other."

"Wilma was a shooter. We called her the Golden Goose because she was a tall, light-skinned girl. She played with her back to the basket and would turn and shoot. It was like playing the post today. It was mostly set shots. There were no jump shooters, even with the boys."

Bell said the Wenonah community was more excited about winning the annual Jefferson County Athletic Association tournament the week before than the state tournament.

The AIAA had a girls tournament for only nine years.



NEWS STAFF PHOTO/JEFF ROBERTS

Robert Bell saw his first girls state championship basketball game in 1949.

It was discontinued after the 1956-57 season and the boys tournament was expanded from one to two classifications. Bell said economics was the reason given for dropping the girls program.

A native of Greensboro, Bell grew up in Birmingham, attending Powderly High School. He received a football "work scholarship" to Alabama A&M. He later taught and coached B-team basketball at Wenonah before going to Lawson.

What was the biggest difference in coaching girls and coaching boys? "It was a little harder to discipline girls because they talked so much, argued with you," he said. "And even back then you had to be very careful how you handled girls. If a boy talked back to you, you'd go upside his head, but you couldn't do that with a girl."