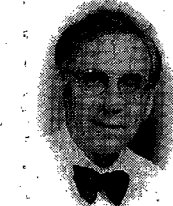


FORUM

The 'Crimson Horde' captured the soul of New Haven

MARCH 23, 1958. Sunday. The crowd enveloped the New Haven Green. Twelve thousand people — joyous, filled with pride, deeply moved in ways that were simple and complex and enduring — had come to share in the triumph of the Wilbur Cross basketball team. With a determination borne of a hardened schoolyard sav-



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and the poise derived from relentless practice, Cross had won the New England high school basketball championship. They had mastered the fabled, raucous and, in their triumph, the poisoned aura of the Boston Garden. At stake that day on the Green, reflected in the expressions of awe and conviction and vindication of those standing, hugging and moving in the March chill, was a powerful cultural transformation.

The children of immigrants, largely Italian American, had elevated New Haven with the same quiet dignity that had tempered the lives of their parents.

The Cross team took their seats on the makeshift stage: Donnie Ferrara, Johnny Coppola, Dominic Perno, Bill Hulteen, Dick Proto, Don Sorcinelli, Bobby Melloto, Bobby Esposito, Gennaro Germe, Mike Nasti, Mike Gore and manager, Joe Wood. City Hall provided the backdrop. Thousands of people had greeted the victors at the railroad station.

Dressed neatly in thin ties, overcoats and, for some, suede shoes, the team was led by coach Salvatore "Red" Verderame — who died Feb. 16 at age 81 — and his wife, Ann. In open convertibles with high fins, horns blaring, people cheering, the caravan had made its way to this moment. Mayor Dick Lee already was seated. His presence

was irrelevant to the deeper triumph felt in the hearts of the crowd.

I was twelve years old. I had sat intently on the floor level of the Boston Garden with my three cousins during the final contest: Cross versus Somerville of Massachusetts. Somerville was tough, cocky, with mostly Irish kids tempered by the roughness of the urban experience and the boisterous dominance of a hometown crowd.

My parents were in the stands. They had attended every one of the team's twenty-four straight victories. They were with people they knew since childhood on Legion Avenue and Wooster Street, the Independent Club on Chapel, and the Holy Name Society at St. Rose's: the Ferraras, the Coppolas, and the Sorcinellis. All were Italians intent on establishing themselves as Americans on their own terms in a city that had been unwelcoming and now threatened to take away their neighborhoods through urban renewal. Their children, perhaps unwittingly and with grandeur, were defining terms they could embrace.

My brother, Dick Proto, was on the court, ball in hand. I was on the edge of my seat, and then stood. Cross was ahead 66-53.

"Red sent me in as point guard when Ferrara fouled out," he told me. "I bounce passed the ball



Register file photo

The Wilbur Cross High School champions. Seated in front (from left) Dick Proto (on chair arm), Donnie Ferrara, Johnny Coppola, Bill Hulteen. Standing (from left) Gennaro Germe, Dominic Perno, Bobby Melloto, Mike Nasti, Don Sorcinelli.

for dinner. Protection remained throughout the night. Somerville's thugs lay frustrated in their failure. The team sat warmly in a triumph no mere riot could take away. Home and the New Haven Green awaited.

On stage, standing in the rear, was the Journal Courier's Bob Granger. He and Register sports-writer Bob Casey — when two newspapers moved throughout neighborhoods and into homes daily — understood the culture of sports. In a town filled with the knowledge of industrial, recreational, and parochial school basketball, both writers had become household names. It was Granger who dubbed the Cross team "The Crimson Horde." The name stuck.

to Coppola. He held it. The clock kept ticking. It was ours." Coppola flipped it to Perno, who moved with a swift sleekness toward the basket and banked in the jump shot.

With thirty-three seconds remaining a fight erupted in a harsh scramble for a rebound. Mayhem spread quickly. Police rushed to the floor. Bottles and bags of garbage splattered loudly. Somerville fans rushed to the fray. Melloto was shoved and punched or kicked. Blood oozed. When the fisticuffs ended, it was plain that no one would ever forget Somerville's shame and envy.

The Boston police took the Cross team to the North End

“(T)his was a team effort,” Verderame told the Register after Cross won the Connecticut championship. “I had the most unselfish kids I have ever seen.”

During the previous summer, Verderame scheduled games in New Haven's playground courts and in the armories of Hartford and Waterbury. He looked for smart teams; tall, fast, with sharp elbows under the basket. His boys roamed the city, attracting crowds, and learning poise under pressure. They scrimmaged against Quinnipiac College, taking turns guarding All American and the nation's most prolific scorer, Porky Viera. The effort worked.

Verderame reached the podium. He was 31 years old. He was the John Wooden of his era; able to teach and hone the most basic and sophisticated of skills.

The Cross cheerleaders welcomed Red's introduction of each player. Long before this day, player's moves were emulated in playgrounds: Perno's jump shot from high above his head; Proto's running one-hander; Coppola's deadly jump shot moving right; Ferrara's penetrating and unpredictable pass. With each name the crowd erupted. Tears fell.

For all the global reach of Yale University, its successes were largely insular. They rarely reached deeply into the roots and soul of the city's neighborhoods. The remarkable and, in important respects, "worldly" accomplishment by schoolyard kids had brought a transformative force into their lives. They also brought an enduring legend to the place they called home.

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