



Oil City's Steve "Ike" Cleaves is No. 8 in this photo. He led Princeton in scoring the year the Tigers won the "Ivy League" in 1924. So he was the real deal.

Very late toward dawn one Sunday morning as I was drifting off, Al Foster's basketball exploits came to mind. You know Al: Oil City guy who scored 51 points in a 1918 game for the Oilers. I wondered how many points he ended up with that season. Hmm...

So, I started googling. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, I was reading a column by Joe Szafran in the Blizzard about the scoring feats of Dutch Burch and Lou Kraft in the season just completed – 361 for Burch and 345 for Kraft in 1950.

And then I did a double take. The column went on to say that Ike Cleaves scored 545 points for the Oilers in 1920, the year before they won the district title.

Who knew?

I. Was. Gobsmaeked! And that's the school record – set in 1920!

Oil City has never been known for routinely filling up the hoop with points. The Oilers have only one player score 1,000 points in an OCHS uniform: Ben Schill. Two others, Jay Schill (Venango Christian) and Jackson McFall (CLA), scored some of their 1,000 while attending other schools.

What's more, the Oilers never had a player score as many as 500 points in a season. Mike Emick held the school record with 498. Until now.

So Cleaves' feat called for a Tweet because in case you haven't noticed it's now 2023.

What's more, George Chacona, another Oiler of the time, told Joe Szafran in 1950 that Ellis Hall probably scored more points than Cleaves in 1921. "However," wrote Szafran, "we could not find figures in the 1921 papers to substantiate this."

I then went through the 1921 papers to see what I could find. The Derrick was of little use because the print on microfilm was too blurry. The Blizzard only went back to 1942. But The News-Herald: Ahhh. The print was clear as can be and the '21 Oilers were covered and then some along with the Franklin boys and girls teams. Yes, girls. Big write-ups for them.

I started with the season opener, jotting down the points for Hall game-by-game. It soon became apparent that while he had a ton of points, he wasn't going to have more than 545. But when I got to the end of that season, the Herald not only had season wrap-up stories for the Oil City boys and Franklin boys and girls, but final scoring charts!

Who knew? All this in 1921? Gobsmacked again. And it showed Hall with 466 points.

Early scoring feats at Cranberry, Grove

I thought nobody scored any points in those days, except for the oddball game (see Al Foster). Or Jimmy Shaffer, who tallied "an unheard of" 305 points for Rocky Grove in 1927 *AND* in 1928. Or Norma Vogelar, daughter of the River Ridge gardener, not only stood 6-3 in 1939, but hit the record book for a 38-point game for Cranberry that season. Move over Susan Blausler.

Hall, who backed Cleaves with 266 points in 1920, totaled 728 after his 466-point senior season. Then I learned that Hall had played on the Oiler varsity since his freshman year, so he could have approached 1,000. Same is true of Cleaves. But, as I said, the print in The Derrick was unreadable and The News-Herald didn't cover Oil City before 1920 unless the Oilers were playing Franklin, so I guess we'll never know.

I did think maybe other schools had players like Cleaves and Hall that could boast of similar heroics back when the final scores were usually like 30-28. But, No. 1: the Oilers were very formidable in 1920 and 1921 when they were whipping the likes of Farrell, Sharon and Braddock. And, No. 2: I checked out Franklin, and the then-called Nursery didn't get that kind of individual production in those days, although Dick Shorts scored 377 points and Bill Forbes 230 in 1918 when FHS was 20-6. Not quite Cleaves/Hall, but that would mean Chuck Snell broke Shorts' school standard when he finished the 1956 season with 502 – not records held by Bob Andres, Ralph Musser or Larry Gent.

Designated foul shooters

In those days, basketball had a form of the “DH.” Only this would be called the DFS – designated foul shooter – where only one player would shoot all the team’s free throws.

Who knew?

I ran this past knowledgeable sports buffs Mark Oliver and Ed Brannon, and they had no idea. Cleaves and Hall were the DFS for the Oilers in 1920 and 1921. Many of the players in those days were not adept at shooting fouls, for whatever reason. I knew from earlier research that Oil City fans were calling for Hall’s head — or maybe the coach (Bill Fountain) for not making a change. And stats show Hall was not good: 178/342. You do the math. Players would start shooting their own free throws in 1923-24.

While Cleaves and Hall benefitted from shooting all the team’s fouls, both made a lot of field goals. Cleaves averaged 6.1, Hall 5.9, and it wasn’t unusual to see either with 10 or 11. From what I read, they played in postage stamp gyms where the center and free throw circles overlapped. Hall was *very* accurate from midcourt. To me, over the 100-plus years of high school hoops, you play the hand you’re dealt. Today, this would include three-pointers and expanded playoffs.

A sad footnote on Hall: He died shortly after graduating from high school of typhoid fever and other complications. This was when he was enrolled at Cal-Berkeley as a pre-dentistry major.

Getting back to Foster: I did find a 36-point game for him in 1918. He scored a record 270 points for Grove City College in 1922 and once led a mighty upset of Pitt. Lots of guys from that era played/starred in college, including Foster teammate Dale Lash who went on to make his mark at Springfield College in Massachusetts. Cleaves, a Harvard Law School graduate, joined his football star brother Jack at Princeton and in 1924 captained the Tigers who won the Eastern Collegiate League, forerunner of the Ivy League.

Shorts’ long list of lifetime achievements includes a college basketball career at Grove City. Teammate Bill Forbes played at West Point. Another FHS grad, Dick Lamberton, was at Amherst.

What I don’t understand is why all these heroics and stats by early 20th century athletes have gone by the wayside. They got decent writeups in the papers at the time, but since then they are long forgotten and not known by baby boomers and others born later than that.

Bummer.

