

2019-2020 marks the 100th anniversary of one the most remarkable winning streaks in athletic history.

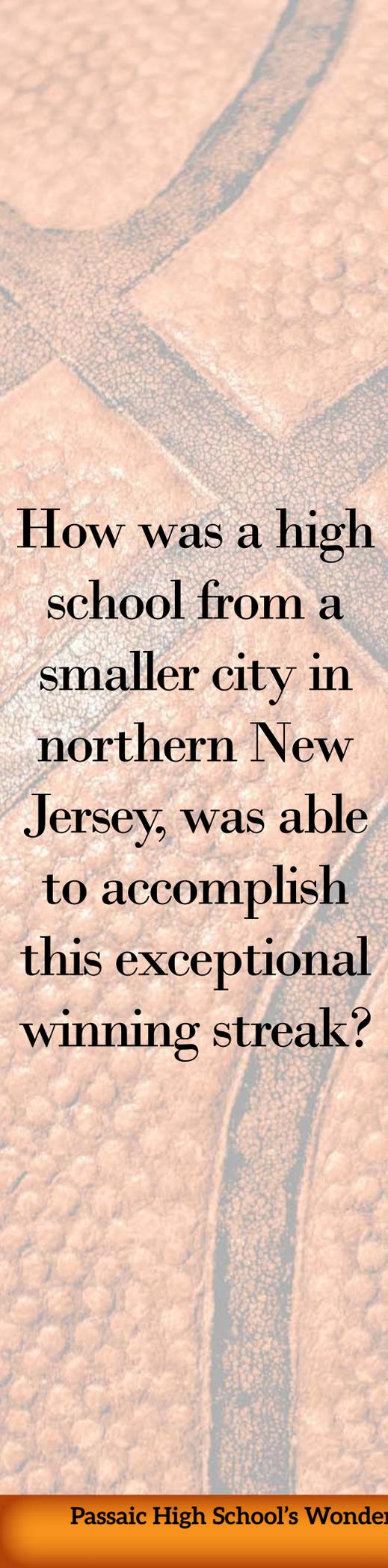
Background: Coach Ernest Artel Blood  
Left: The 1918-1919 Passaic High School basketball team  
Right: The 1919-1920 Passaic High School basketball team

*Courtesy of E. A. Smyk  
Passaic County Historian*



# Passaic High School's Wonder Team

by Robert Cohen



## How was a high school from a smaller city in northern New Jersey, was able to accomplish this exceptional winning streak?

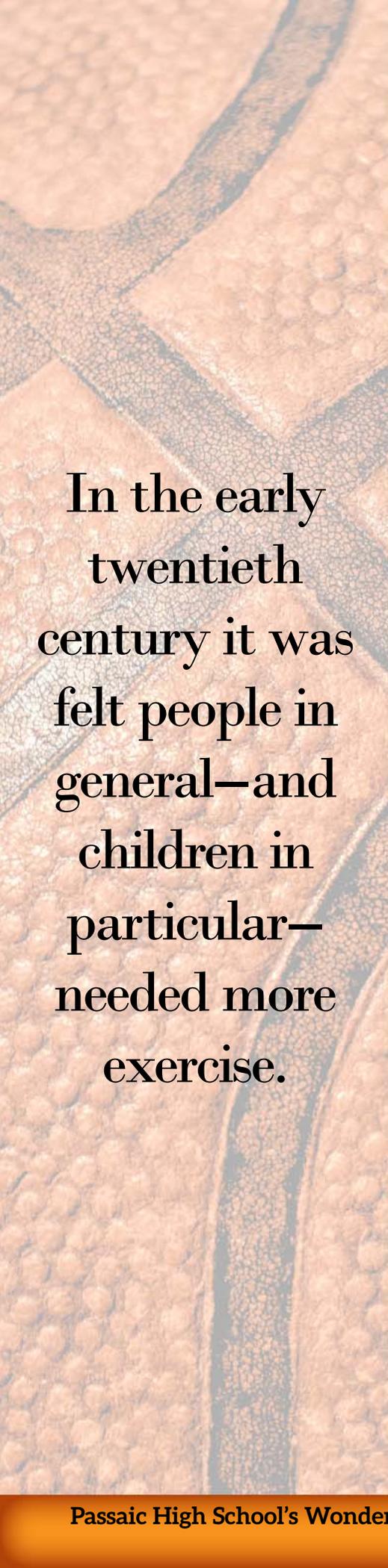
In the annals of sports, where winning is the ultimate goal and defeat can be agony, there is only one team that had a winning streak of 159 games over five years. It was Passaic High School basketball teams that achieved this remarkable feat, from the 1919-1920 season through the 1924-1925 season. It has not been repeated since, throughout the nation—not in high school, college, or professional basketball or in any other sport. The Passaic High School teams became legends in their time and were called the Wonder Teams. During this time period, they were crowned New Jersey State Champions four times. They also played teams with excellent records from other parts of the country, who requested to play with them, and these teams met the same fate as the New Jersey hopefuls. The Passaic High School teams became so well-known that a lot of their games had to be moved to the Paterson Armory five miles away, to accommodate the up to 3,000 fans who wanted to see them play.

They were a national sensation and made headlines in newspapers throughout the country. Damon Runyon, the famous *New York America* reporter, noted the teams in his columns. Runyon wrote for the national William Randolph Hearst organization, therefore his columns reached millions of readers. Passaic's winning streak was followed in cities, towns, and hamlets throughout the country. A way to get publicity was to play the Passaic team by challenging them to a game. In many cases, schedule permitting, games were set up with challenger teams. But Passaic continued its winning ways.

So where did the appellation "Wonder Team" come from? It seems in writing about the team's fifty-first straight victory, against Plainfield High School in the second round of the 1921 New Jersey State Tournament at Stevens Institute, the *Passaic Daily News* headline stated "P. H. S. Wonder Team Plays at Stevens Gym this Evening." This seems to be the first mention of the term Wonder Team, which followed Passaic High School on its run to 159 straight victories.

How was it that a high school from a smaller city in northern New Jersey, was able to accomplish this exceptional winning streak?

First, a little about the town. The area including Passaic was originally settled by Dutch settlers in the seventeenth century, and they called the area *Acquackanonk*, or peaceful valley, from the language of the Lenni-Lenape, the true first settlers of the area. But the Dutch were the first of many immigrants who came to Passaic that included Irish, English, Scottish, Austrians, Hungarians, Germans, French, Italians, Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Scandinavians, Jewish immigrants, and others. In fact, Passaic had churches of more denominations than virtually any other city in the country. Many if not most jobs could be found in the local woolen mills. The two biggest companies were the



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Botany Worsted Woolen Mills, which was German-owned, and the Forstman Woolen Mills. Passaic also developed other industries and, for the most part, people had ample opportunities to earn a livelihood. There developed along Main and Lexington Avenues a very vibrant and active business district, with the Erie Railroad running between the two avenues. So Passaic, with its proximity to rivers, railroads, and good roads for travel, became a fairly prosperous blue-collar city. Its school system developed into quite a good academic institution. Along with the schools, there were also a YMCA and a YWHA, where Passaic's young people could go to socialize and exercise in the gyms.

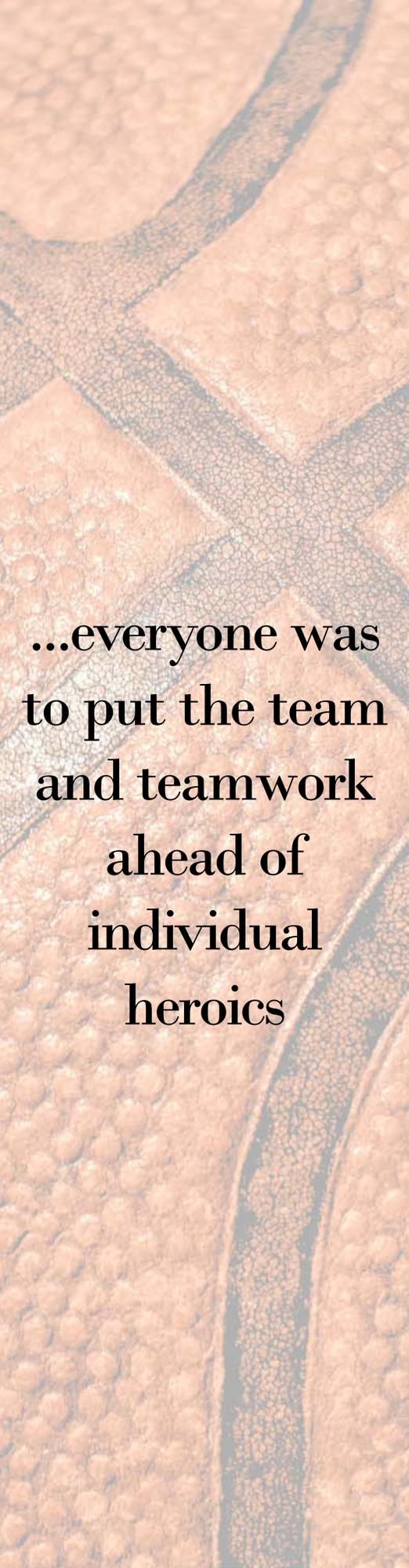
It was also during this time, the early 1900s, that interscholastic sports such as baseball, football, and basketball were introduced at the high school level throughout the country as their professional and college counterparts were gaining huge popularity among the public. Baseball, at least the modern version, was developed in the mid-nineteenth century and was well established by the early 1900s. Football took off after the first intercollegiate game in 1869, where Rutgers defeated Princeton six to four. Though it gained popularity especially at the college level, it was considered a dangerous sport with some serious injuries and even some deaths. Even President Theodore Roosevelt, an ardent athlete himself, called for reforms during his presidency. Basketball, the third of the major sports, was invented at the Springfield, Massachusetts YMCA by James Naismith in 1891. He was looking for a way children could get exercise while playing a game. It was also an indoor game that could be played in winter.

In the early twentieth century it was felt people in general—and children in particular—needed more exercise. The army was having difficulty at the time of World War I because so many recruits couldn't pass their physicals. The population was moving into urban areas and, due to both living and working in enclosed areas, this led to lack of adequate physical conditioning.

Into this milieu a new director of physical education was hired by the Passaic Board of Education in 1915. The position called for training all children in the Passaic school system to become more physically fit. The man they chose for the job was Ernest Artel Blood. He was a physical education teacher and basketball coach at Potsdam Normal School and Clarkson Memorial College of Technology in upstate New York.

Blood was born on October 4, 1872, in Manchester, New Hampshire. Marital difficulties led to his father leaving the family when Ernest was about six years old. His mother settled in Charlestown, Massachusetts, a neighborhood in Boston. And here Ernest received his entire formal education, graduating from the Harvard-Kent Grammar School.

As the young man was growing up, he was attracted to all



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manner of athletics. He seemed to be naturally gifted as an athlete and spent a lot of time at the Charlestown YMCA. He not only played sports but lifted weights. By being so athletically gifted, he gained a good deal of confidence and self-esteem. He took up wrestling and, at fifteen, won the New England championship in his weight class.

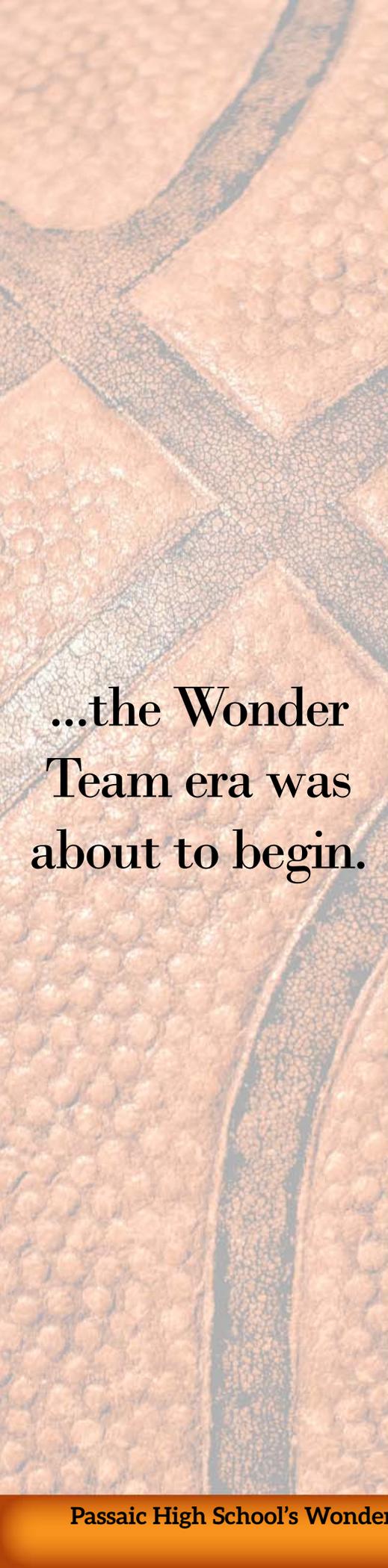
Since the young Ernest spent so much time in the local YMCA, he saw basketball being developed and played and he took an immediate and active interest in the new game. What he liked most about basketball was that it taught life skills that included teamwork, dedication, and self-discipline. Early basketball was a rough game that led to a lack of sportsmanship. He wanted to develop instead skills of the game, such as passing, shooting, and dribbling, as a part of life skills, not just physical force.

While Blood was hired as the physical conditioning instructor for the whole Passaic school system, he found out the high school lacked a basketball coach. He was appointed to the job for one year for the 1915–1916 season, until a permanent coach could be hired. Right after Passaic's final football game on Thanksgiving, Blood announced tryouts for the basketball team.

During the first meeting Blood stated two big items. First, he emphasized that he wanted his team to be primarily a passing team. Second, everyone was to put the team and teamwork ahead of individual heroics. These were to be Professor Blood's themes throughout his coaching career. Besides being physically fit and learning plays, strategy, and shooting skills, teamwork and quick, excellent passing skills were to be paramount. His teams would dribble the ball only when necessary, but would use an up-tempo precision passing offense the vast majority of the time. Blood felt keeping possession of the ball was also the best defense, and he drilled his teams over and over on his passing strategy. His teams coveted what he taught them. The players actually looked forward to his instructions and coaching and drills. His passing strategy on offense was to find the open man and pass the ball to him for the shot. Shooting skills were also emphasized on Blood's teams.

The 1915–1916 team, despite a cancellation due to a blizzard and two Rutherford forfeits, was 20–0. While this superb record smacked of a New Jersey state championship, it would be three more years before a state tourney was established.

While Blood's team was superb, believe it or not, he was *not* hired for the 1916–1917 season. It seems that Principal Arthur D. Arnold emphasized academics, and Blood returned to being physical conditioning instructor for the entire school system while Ralph E. Guillow took over as basketball coach. While this was, of course, a huge loss to the program, Blood developed athletic skills with kids from lower grades. He used this to his



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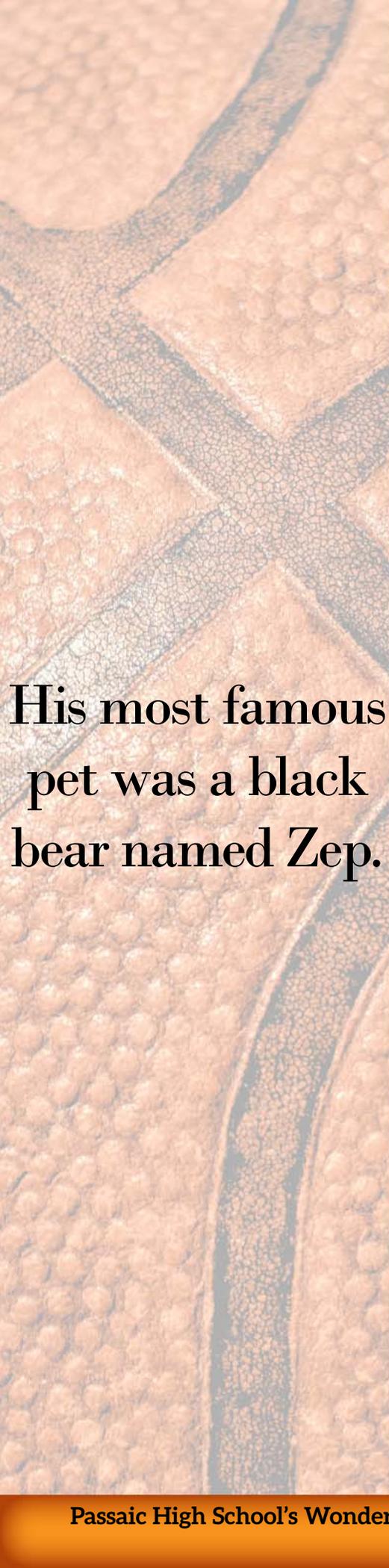
advantage later.

The Passaic team did not fare as well under Guillow, however, and Blood was invited back for the final ten games of the season—which were all wins. Despite this success, the next season another coach named Ozmun was hired as basketball coach and had a 12–5 record. But there was dissension on the team and Principal Arnold brought Blood back yet again.

It seems throughout Blood's tenure in Passaic, while the players, fans, and most area newspapers and people in Passaic generally liked the Professor, some members of the school board and Principal Arnold were often at odds with him. There were controversies, meetings, admonitions, and newspaper articles between the two sides. This would probably be unimaginable today with all of the favorable publicity, prestige, and income generated for winning programs throughout the country. Look at the favorable national prestige of sports programs in colleges such as Notre Dame, University of Southern California, Penn State, Syracuse, Alabama, and others. Administrations really like their sports programs and for the most part glory in them. Even high school programs in New Jersey, such as at St. Peter's, St. Joseph's, and others have the full backing of the administrations, but not Passaic High School during the Wonder Team years. It finally led to Blood's leaving in 1924.

But during the 1918–1919 season, though, Blood was back at the helm, believing his method of coaching and basketball was a great activity for physical and life skills development. It was during the Wonder Team years that, while coach Blood emphasized teamwork and the quick passing game, there were some talented players who also developed. Players like John Roosma, "1,000 Point" Bobby Thompson, and others would all contribute to the 159-game winning streak. Despite a 21–1 record—the only blemish being a 32–20 loss to Union Hill in the 1918–1919 season finale—the Wonder Team era was about to begin.

To the astonishment of the basketball team, Principal Arnold tried to hire Amasa Marks to coach the 1919–1920 team, but the players revolted. After a meeting of the school board, Arnold gave the coaching reins back to Blood. And so, at last, began the reign of the Wonder Team in earnest. And win they did, and sometimes by big scores, too. In game two, Passaic beat Springfield 92–2. In game three—it was not unusual for high school teams to play college freshman teams—Passaic beat the N.Y.U. freshman team 32–6. It should be mentioned that there was a center jump ball after each score, so teams were coached how to use this play to their advantage. In 1936 this play was discontinued, and so in some fundamental ways the game changed and scoring in general increased. Another difference is when there was a foul in those days, a designated foul shooter would shoot the foul shots. Today, the person fouled goes to the foul line.



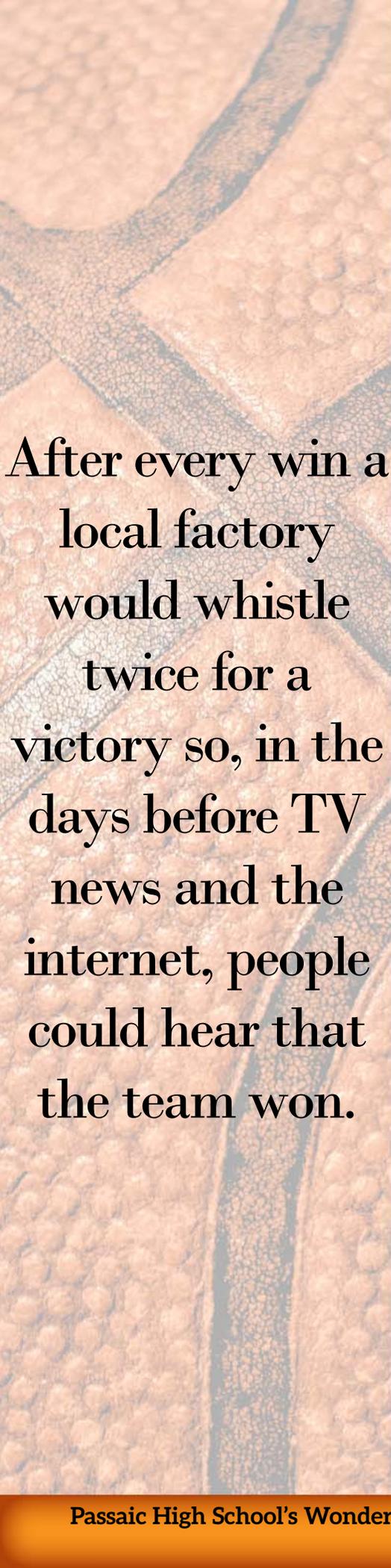
## His most famous pet was a black bear named Zep.

Throughout the Wonder Team era there were many lopsided scores. For example, in the state tournament's second game played on March 10, 1921 at the Stevens Tech gym—when the *Passaic Daily News* first dubbed them the Wonder Team—Passaic defeated Plainfield 70–8. During this five-year streak Passaic averaged 59.5 points a game, while their opponents averaged 20.2 points a game.

While Coach Blood got the moniker “Professor Blood” while coaching at Potsdam Normal School, he also got nicknamed “The Grey Thatched Wizard” during the Passaic High School winning streak.

He also had a great love of animals and was known to keep a number of pets at his home in Passaic. His most famous pet was a black bear named Zep, given to the coach when the team traveled to Potsdam in early April of 1921 to play Potsdam Normal High School. Passaic won the game 63–12. This was followed two days later by a game against the Potsdam Alumni Team, which Passaic won 47–22. The bear, no more than a cub, was given to the Professor and immediately became a hit with the team, who adopted it as their mascot. While no one knows exactly where the name Zep came from, one story has it that Zep was a nickname given to Blood while coaching there before going on to Passaic. Zep traveled with the team and ran onto the floor before the games began, to the delight of fans and the team. Paul Blood, the Professor's son and team member, led Zep into the gym. Zep often provided halftime entertainment as sometimes either the coach or his son Ben would wrestle with Zep. Zep was taught a number of tricks, including handling a basketball. But as Zep got bigger and stronger and taller—and reached 400 pounds—he became too much to handle for the coach and his family, and at the conclusion of the season Zep was given to an animal farm in Pompton Lakes.

The Passaic team continued their winning streak after the 1921–1922 season by winning all of their games in 1922–1923 and 1923–1924. As mentioned, many games were one sided and, while Passaic averaged 59.5 points a game, the opposition only managed 20.2 points a game. So during their 159-game winning streak, were there any close calls? There were a few, but the one that really stands out was against Clifton High School on February 28, 1923. It was game 113 of the streak. Passaic led early with a 9–3 lead after the first quarter and they continued winning well into the second quarter. But then Clifton, during the third quarter, came alive, took over the momentum, and actually tied the score 22–22. The Clifton home crowd went wild. Time had to be called to keep some of the fans off the court. Passaic had two of its starters who were injured and couldn't play, but in ordinary circumstances that shouldn't have stopped Passaic from easily winning. It seems Passaic, toward the end of the game, came out of their lethargy and won the game 36–34.



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Clifton was so proud of their close call they put the box score in their yearbook. Passaic then went back to their winning ways after that squeaker and went on to win the state championship. Passaic, during this year, played another undefeated team, Orange High School, who were 17–0. The game stayed close, but in the fourth quarter Passaic functioned in their best style and won 64–44.

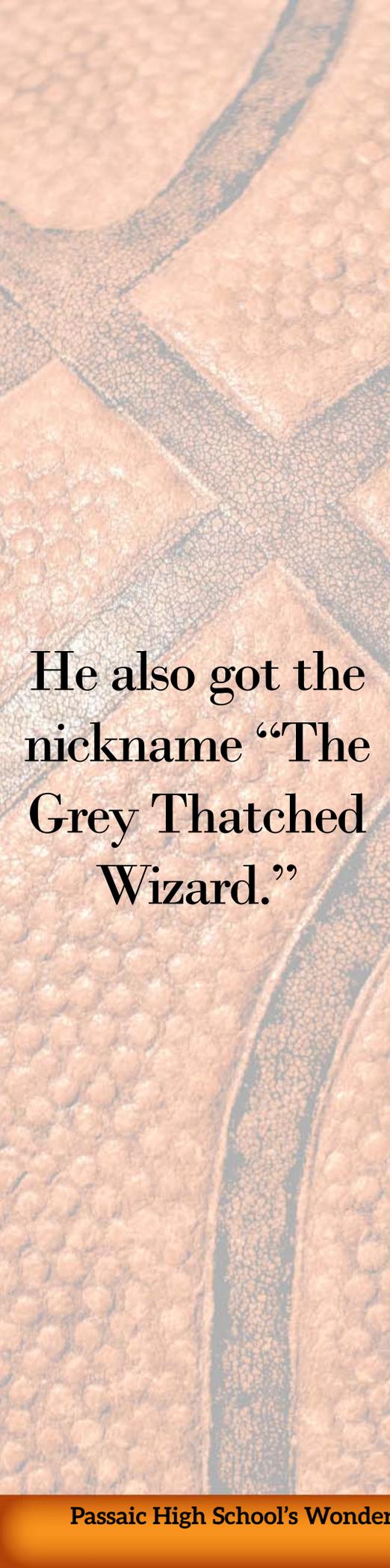
While the Wonder Team continued winning in the 1923–1924 season, unfortunately for the coach, there was more controversy with the school board and Principal Arnold. More and more animosity developed between both sides. It seems a lot of the problem was Arnold did not like too much publicity being given to the basketball team and not enough to academics. Also, accusations of insubordination and bad behavior were leveled against Blood. Finally, after all the controversy, accusations, and counter-accusations from both sides, Professor Blood resigned in May, 1924.

Passaic had won 146 games with Blood as coach. Amasa Marks returned and took over for the 1924–1925 season with the majority of players left over from the Coach Blood era. The team continued winning until game 160. On February 6, 1925, Passaic was stunned by the Hackensack High School Comets, losing 39–35. Coach John W. “Steiny” Steinhilber’s players simply outplayed the Passaic team. After the game courtesy and good sportsmanship were shown by both teams. The streak had ended at 159. Passaic went on to win more games that season but at the end of the season lost to Hackensack again 37–26.

During the winning streak most people in the community took great pride in their high school team. After every win a local factory would whistle twice for victory so, in the days before the TV news and internet, people could hear that the team won in their homes or on the street.

Though Coach Blood left Passaic High School, he didn’t leave coaching. He went on to coach at West Point and St. Benedict’s Prep in Newark simultaneously for one year. The Prof would remain at St. Benedict’s for twenty-three seasons, garnering a record of 446–128. He retired in 1949, ending his fifty-five-year coaching career.

While the team as a whole was obviously strong, a few members stood out. John Roosma, who was on the early Wonder Teams, was a standout player in all aspects of the game, including being a prolific scorer. He went on to have an excellent basketball career at West Point, won honors there as the best athlete, and was probably the first college player to score over a thousand points in a collegiate career. He was elected to the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1961. Roosma retired as a colonel in the Army after a successful career. Another was Bobby Thompson, called “1,000 Point Bobby Thompson” for his scoring feats in the 1921–1922 season. And then there was probably the



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finest all-around player of the Wonder Team era, Wilfred “Fritz” Knothe. He was an exceptional passer, defender, and ball handler, and was known for his long-range set shooting. Today he would be known as a point guard. He could take over a game and lead Passaic to another victory. He, at times, was truly a shot in the arm to the team. He made first team All-State guard in 1923. Not only was he excellent at basketball, he might have been better at baseball. After graduation he played locally for the Doherty Silk Sox and was signed to a minor league contract, eventually getting to the major leagues with the Boston Braves in 1932. During the 1933 season he was traded to the Philadelphia Phillies, where his major league career ended that year. There were other standout players like Ira Vonk, Mike Hamas, the coach’s son Paul Blood, John Sipp, De Witt Keasler, Charlie Lent, and many, many others. But despite all of his players’ abilities Coach Blood preferred team discipline, a quick passing offense, and putting team above everyone else.

Coach Blood was elected to the National Basketball Hall of Fame in 1960, and in 1973 all the Wonder Teams were elected to the National Basketball Hall of Fame. These were well-deserved honors for a great era in local and national sports history. 

### Endnotes

The author wishes to thank Ed Smyk, Passaic County Historian, for the use of his Wonder Teams file. It includes several newspaper articles about the teams, including *The Herald and News*, February 6, 2000; *The Herald News*, June 28, 2004; *The Herald News*, October 9, 2003; *The Record*, May 20, 1993; a program celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Passaic High Wonder Teams from the Pennington Club in Passaic; and letters from and to Colonel John Roosma.

Thanks also to Patrick Byrnes, Library Research Specialist of the Passaic County Historical Society, who helped Ed Smyk garner the illustrations.

The author wishes to acknowledge and praise the seminal book written about Professor Blood and his teams: *Prof Blood and the Wonder Teams* by Dr. Charles Hess (Newark, NJ: Abbey Press, 2003). I stood on Dr. Hess’s shoulders, as he wrote so extensively about the life and times of Prof Blood. He even went game by game, giving synopses, high points, and other background information of the winning streak.

The author would like to express his gratitude and appreciation to the Gray Haired Wizard’s great granddaughter, Donna Mickolajcyk, for her knowledge and anecdotes about him from a family perspective. Donna’s mother Arlene was the daughter of Paul Blood, team member and the Professor’s son.