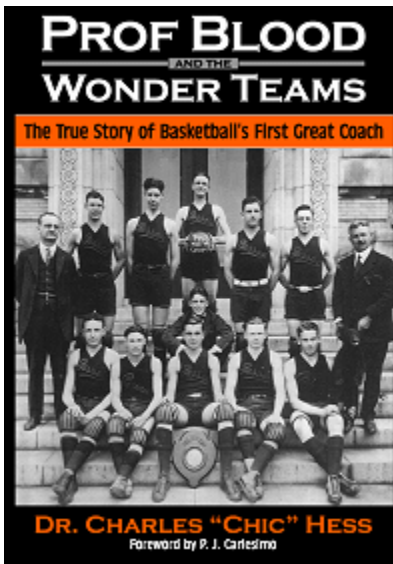


## Comets Basketball: 1925 (Great Story)

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### **Prof Blood and the Wonder Teams: The True Story of Basketball's First Great Coach**



This biography has been billed as the greatest sports story ever told. It is the story of how the 1925 *Hackensack Comets* stopped the longest winning streak in boys' basketball history.

#### **Game #158**

William Cullen Bryant (Saturday, January 31, 1925) at Passaic HS. In what was to be the penultimate game of the streak, the Long Island City boys exhibited an air of confidence that was no act. The Bryant team had won seventeen of its last eighteen games. They were good; in fact, they were currently rated the best scholastic five in the NYC Public School League. Long Island City's Coach Henry Farb had boys who were serious about defeating the Wonder Team, and when the score read 9-5 in their favor, no one doubted them. Trailing slightly at half time, their resolve was still strong. Bryant's star player, Jimmy Platz, had already netted 15 points.

These two fine teams deserved a better gym in which to exhibit their talents; Passaic's court hampered the effectiveness of both clubs. As time wore on, the quickness of Pashman and the team's passing clearly made the difference. Although the visitors learned they could stop Pashman if they fouled him, they never came across a solution to counter Passaic's passing attack. Final score: Passaic 51-Bryant 38.

After the Bryant game, everyone was predicting that Passaic would again go through the season

undefeated. The team's poor foul shooting and early season slump appeared to be over. With Passaic's reputation, who would have bet against them?

### **Game #159**

Lawrence, Long Island, (Wednesday, February 4, 1925) Smith Academy. Even though Arnold wanted to appear very supportive, basketball had long been a nuisance to him. Why Arnold didn't schedule the high school facility or look into securing one of the armories for this game is certainly an interesting query.

The Lawrence team became the latest to receive a lesson on the advantages of passing as opposed to dribbling. Trying to defend Passaic, Lawrence's defense quickly tired and became less and less effective as the game continued. Long Island's Ryan, a diminutive, fleet-footed forward, exhausted himself trying to get the ball.

Captain Pashman was beginning to play with the minds of his critics; he was now passing the ball. The speedy forward was taking the ball to the basket and scoring or passing off for assists. Another bright spot was the play of second team captain Johnny Harwood. The "Play of the Day" went to Moyer Krakovitch who, while leaping for a long rebound to the left of the foul line, caught the ball and released it back to the basket for a clean two before returning to the floor. Final score: Passaic 69-Lawrence 22.

Game played in eight minute quarter. Score by quarters:

Suddenly, all sights were set on the tiny Hackensack Armory. The Hackensack administrations did not want to move the game to the Paterson Armory as suggested by many of their own fans. The Passaic fans would like to have had the game moved, but they were too proud to recommend. In the minds of most people, moving to a larger armory, as Passaic did, was would have been a sportsmanlike gesture. In the final analysis, everyone knew that Hackensack had a better chance of winning if the game could be played in its armory.



The teams had two completely different mental approaches to the game. To Passaic it means just another basketball game, even though a hard one another milestone in the road of seemingly endless basketball supremacy.

Speaking for Hackensack's chances, Captain Bollerman had this to say about the game and the publicized doomsday forecast of prophetess Margaret W. Rowan in California predicting the end of the world. "We don't know whether the end of the world is coming today. But we feel confident that it will be doomsday for Passaic High. We're not superstitious, but don't forget it's Friday and Passaic's thirteenth game this season."

For this clash, Hackensack's previous game scores became meaningless. The fact remained, the Wonder Team did not match-up well with the (9-3) Comet squad.

Passaic gave away height and weight at every position.

Embellished by the apparent discrepancies in anthropometric measurements, the mad rush to the armory had begun. Hundreds were leaving the night before to increase their chances of seeing the game. With signs that read, "Hackensack Our 160th Victim," two hundred PHS students decided to bag school, hire jitney buses, and leave Passaic at 9:00 A. M. Shortly after arriving, the two hundred proceeded to Hackensack High School where they sang cheers for both teams. Within minutes, the police were called to the campus, and the Passaic teenagers were led back to the armory where they queued up for the game.

With 600 Passaic fans, young and old, milling about the armory since the mid-morning hours, it was apparent that a problem was in the making. The tiny armory sat only 450 people. A little after three o'clock, long after the doors were to open, the tired but still full of life Passaic rooters

learned that the doors wouldn't open until the Hackensack fans were admitted through a different door.

An administrative decision by Hackensack Vice Principal George Merrill was responsible for this special privilege to the home fans. And when the Passaic followers were about to be admitted, the local police greeted them with harsh treatment. When a Passaic woman fainted because of the trying circumstances, an annoyed Hackensack policeman was overheard saying, "Let her faint."

If Passaic prevailed, the late afternoon game would decide the league championship and provide a clear path for another undefeated season. In light of how the two teams had been playing lately, the diehard Passaic fans were spotting Hackensack twenty points, but others were not as confident.

One of those who was less than confident was Prof Blood. He more than anyone else understood the complexities of the rematch. Long before the Hackensack game had become a must-see, Prof had obligated himself to an out-of-town speaking engagement. Invited by the Schoolmaster's Club of Greenwich, Connecticut, Prof was the guest of honor at a dinner attended by teachers, BOE members, and other community dignitaries to honor their basketball team. It was this commitment that would keep him from attending the big game.

While en route to Greenwich, Prof's thoughts were on the proceedings taking place in Hackensack. In his mind, he could see the game unfolding on the small armory floor. He could see the seats stuffed with mostly Hackensack spectators who were reaching into the playing area trying to disrupt the Passaic players. He could see the five tall Hackensack boys playing hard and with nothing to lose. Prof knew that the 6'6" Bollerman was ready to secure the center jump making it difficult for Passaic to get the ball. He doubted his team would be able to adapt and overcome this disadvantage.

Traveling away from the Peaceful Valley, the Passaic Miracle Man could visualize the waylay his boys were walking into. These Wonder Team kids were local celebrities, but they were also the naive heirs to a 147 game yoke. The pressure that accompanied the bondage was the real curse, and it had been getting tighter with each succeeding Wonder Team. Prof had known these boys since elementary school; they were his kids. Today in the Hackensack Armory there was an opponent with a plan, the talent, and the determination to best the program he had built. He could feel that this was the day.

Prof also felt for Marks whom he knew lacked the necessary basketball acumen to guide the boys

in a game like this. It was a haunting thought; in fact, it was painful because he was helpless to influence the outcome. He could see it clearly-history was about to be served. Knowing what he knew about the rematch, perhaps it was better that he wasn't going to be there to witness it. During a poignant moment in his address to the Schoolmaster's Club, Prof foretold to a disbelieving audience that the famous streak would end that day. No, they would reply, you must be joking. Prof was not in a mood for joking.

### **Game #160**

Hackensack, (Friday, February 6, 1925) at Hackensack Armory. The day that was bound to come came. A Passaic Daily News headline that fell far short of expressing the grief that engulfed the city of Passaic read: **PASSAIC HIGH LOSES**

There were no alibis, just depression followed later by relief. The Passaic Wonder Team had been beaten at their own game. The great Passaic passing and shooting team was out passed and out played. Hackensack Coach John W. Steinhilber, a Springfield YMCA Training School product and an astute disciple of the Blood short passing system, had a game plan, and his boys were prepared to execute it.

The players took the loss better than their fans. The young warriors were crushed, devastated, shattered. At first, it seemed there would be no tomorrow. Prof had taught them how not to lose, but this time they had fallen short. Stunned and shocked, they could control their posture but not their tears. With heads held high and with their vision distorted by tears of disappointment, they sought their adversaries to congratulate them. The compassion of their victors helped ameliorate the pain of defeat. They could not have lost to a classier group of young men. Final score: Passaic 35- Hackensack 39.

The newspapers near and far had a field day relaying the details of Hackensack's stunning victory. It was the Bergen County lad's plan to get the center tap, and Howie Bollerman did. The plan also included running their forwards Johnny Fast and Ray Weatherby down to the corners by their basket to receive passes from Bollerman and score on the smaller Passaic guards, which they did. This basic strategy, along with superior foul shooting, enabled Hackensack to score enough.

The suspense and drama in the diminutive armory was unequalled in anyone's experience. It was a close game throughout, and after the first quarter, Hackensack maintained the upper hand. The challenger's strategy was to take Passaic out of their game, and Bollerman's controlling the center tap allowed them to stick with their script. Passaic could never get it going, which was a tribute to Coach Steinhilber's plan.

The Hackensack strategy was obvious to everyone but the Passaic coaches. Never did Passaic call a time-out, nor was a substitute injected into the game with instructions to counter Hackensack's plan. "Passaic Without A Leader", was how Wendell Merrill phrased it in his "Merrill's Sport Talk" column the next day. An outcry came forth to bring Prof back. On the streets, in the allies, and in stores all over Passaic, the conclusion was the same, "We wouldn't have lost if Prof had been in charge." The price had been paid.

Union Hill's Coach Skeets Wright had fine words of praise for Hackensack. "They deserve all the credit in the world," he said. But he wanted to add, "With all due respect to Coach Steinhilber and his boys, I do not believe they could have beaten Passaic had Blood been at the helm."

Further into his "Merrill's Sports Talk" column, Merrill referred to Passaic School Board President Robert Dix Benson who was believed to be wintering in far off Bermuda. Benson would probably learn of the game by telephone or an Associated Press write-up. How would Benson react if he had been present to see the sadness and depression that the boys and townspeople were experiencing? What might he have done to prevent further, unnecessary grief that was caused by a Blood-less Passaic team? Would he hesitate, reconsider, or come up with a plan to get the man back who was responsible for Passaic's pride? Could Benson, a giant in the financial world, be a big enough man to do this?

The Passaic Daily News mentioned that Prof Blood had refrained from commenting on the game. But the Passaic Daily Herald, sensing a juicy story, squeezed the Old Master for his thoughts on the loss. They wanted to know, in his opinion, what contributed to the loss. Prof calmly responded, "That's generally known. I didn't see the last game, but I have seen the team slipping. If jealousy hadn't crept in, if the people had left them alone, if the high school principal had kept out of it, all might have gone well." Searching for more bait for a story, the Herald writer finally asked him if he thought the team would win the state championship? The Grey Thatched Wizard replied, "If they have the proper supervision. Evidently they hadn't yesterday."

Out-of-town newspaper writers claimed that Passaic's defeat would be good for in-state scholastic basketball. Fred Bender of the Newark Ledger tagged this comment to the end of his column, "Passaic Blames it on a Trick Court." It was a fact; the armory court was very slippery, but it was slippery for both teams. Most Passaic people did not use the court as an excuse for the snapping of the streak. In Passaic, the loss was attributed to "the trouble that occurred last spring that caused the greatest coach in the basketball world to sever his connections with the team." The big question now was whether or not there were men big enough in Passaic to

correct the egregious administrative blunder.

The sun did rise again in Passaic. Even for Margaret W. Rowen, the Hollywood prophetess who had predicted the end of the world, life continued. Unlike Rowen and her disciples who remained in seclusion when the end of the world did not occur, the Passaic team and residents regrouped and soberly faced their future. Never did anyone anticipate that the loss would be a relief, but it did have a cathartic effect. Without the burden of the winning streak, life was actually okay. In time, the sun began to shine brightly and the air smelled clean or at least that was the way it seemed.

Philosophical explanations accentuating the benefits of losing a game were coming in from all over the country. Psychologically, it made sense that without the pressure to maintain the streak, the team would function better. It may have made sense, but there were those who continued to predict the team's demise. What happened was that the town rallied around the team even more. Because of the way the players handled the defeat, their appeal in the eyes of the fans increased. Coach Marks was neither tarred and feathered nor hung in effigy. You must recall that he never wanted the job, nor did he ever claim to know much about the game. Marks was a victim - a likable victim.

Team captain, Milton Pashman, who had been singled out in the past for his individualistic style of play, gave a heroic effort against Hackensack. His performance, even in defeat, would live long in the memories of those present. A few days after the game, he "modestly stated that he was glad he was captain of the team because his sadness at the time might have been greater had the burden fallen on the shoulders of some other youthful leader."

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