

YOU SHOULD HAVE MET FENNVILLE'S WES LEONARD

This story was also someone else's idea, coming from a sports editor at a national newspaper. But after I sent him the piece, he wanted me to add a couple paragraphs about March Madness, the NCAA basketball tournament that was just starting up that week. It struck me as inappropriate to tie this story of a tragic teenager with something so trivial that I ultimately decided to move the piece to the Detroit News, which eagerly accepted it as is. It might have cost the story an appearance in the "Best American Sports Writing" anthology, where it was listed as a finalist, but I've never regretted the decision. When I received an appreciative response from the family, I knew I'd made the right choice.

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FENNVILLE, MICHIGAN—On Monday, I drove across the state of Michigan to see a Class C regional semifinal basketball game, pitting tiny Schoolcraft High School against even tinier Fennville.

Both schools were undefeated—but that's not why I was going. I was going to see the impact of a young man who would not be there.

Before I drove back home, I learned how quickly a record-breaking basketball game can become utterly insignificant—and then, just a few days later, how the next game can matter so much.

Fennville is about two hundred miles from Detroit, but it might as well be two hundred light-years. When you approach Fennville, you pass a sign declaring, "Hometown of Richard 'Richie' Jordan, Member of the 2001 National High School Sports Hall of Fame."

You haven't heard of Richie Jordan, who graduated almost fifty years ago and stands only five-seven. But everyone around here has, and down at the Blue Goose Café, they still talk about all the records he set in football, basketball, and baseball. But the last few years, they've been talking about Wes Leonard.

When Wes's father, Gary Leonard, joined his brother's company in Holland, near Lake Michigan, the family could have moved to any number of nearby towns, but chose little Fennville, which has just 1,500 people, a third of them high school students. Here, the whole town comes out for football and basketball games—and musicals and graduations, too.

"I left Fennville for another place," Fennville High School English teacher Melissa Hoover recalled in the teachers' lounge, "and I kept saying, 'In Fennville they do this,' and 'In Fennville they do that.' Finally, one of the teachers said, 'Well, maybe you should go back to Fennville.' She was right. So I did."

The Leonards loved Fennville, too, and Fennville loved them back.

Their oldest son, Wes, often asked his teachers about their weekends, partly to avoid work but also because he was simply curious about people—all people.

Leonard, the most popular kid in school, would invite the special-ed kids to join him for lunch, and soon the other jocks were doing it, too. When English teacher Susan McEntyre read her students' journals last semester, "Just about all the kids wrote that Wes was their best friend. They always wrote about that."

No matter what you were like in high school, you'd want Wes Leonard to be your friend. And he would be.

As an athlete, Leonard was the best thing to come out of Fennville since Richie Jordan himself—something people around here don't say lightly. Leonard was the Blackhawks' star quarterback—he threw seven touchdowns in one game this past fall—but it was on the basketball court where the junior center really connected with the fans. Sitting so close, they could feel Leonard's energy and drive and passion—and see his trademark grin.

But even with Leonard leading the team, no one dared to imagine they'd enter their last regular season game with a perfect 19-0 mark.

When the Bridgman Bees jumped out to an eleven-point halftime lead, Leonard took over, pushing the game to overtime. Then, with about thirty seconds left, he drove the lane for a pretty layup—and the win. Fennville's fans rushed the court and hoisted their hero onto their shoulders.

It was the kind of ending that sends announcers into paroxysms of hyperbole: Incredible! Unbelievable! Unthinkable!

Then, just seconds later, the truly unthinkable actually happened: Wes Leonard's enlarged heart gave out, and he collapsed, right on the court.

His father ran down to him, yelling, "Breathe, Wes, breathe! Don't die on me!" The paramedics loaded Leonard into an ambulance, where they

worked to get his heart pumping again. His parents could only look through the back window, helpless.

Before midnight, the town pastor emerged from the hospital to tell the crowd gathered outside that Wes Leonard had died.

When a small-town hero fulfills his fans' every dream, they put up signs about him on the city limits. What happens to that town when its hero falls right in front of them?

The next day the grade school kids clutched teddy bears and cried in the corner. Wes's classmates hugged and sobbed in the hallways. The older townspeople gathered at the Blue Goose, talking about him softly, with tears in their eyes.

"If I was twice as good as everyone else, I'd be arrogant," said Mike Peel, fifty-seven, a real estate agent in nearby Douglas. "But he never was. Never even argued bad calls. He was the kind of kid who could hug his mom in front of a thousand people and not feel embarrassed about it."

Letters and posters came from as far away as the Philippines and Cambodia. The NBA's Golden State Warriors asked what they could do to help, Michigan State basketball coach Tom Izzo cut practice short to drive to Fennville to talk to the family and the team, and Bo Kimble, whose Loyola Marymount teammate Hank Gathers died on the court from the same condition in 1990, drove all night from Philadelphia to be with them for four days, arriving as a famous stranger and leaving as a close friend. The Blackhawks' archrivals in Saugatuck hosted the luncheon after the funeral.

Fennville's coach had to ask his players if they wanted to play their first-round playoff game that Monday. They thought about it. They discussed it. Then they decided, yes. This is what we do.

They moved the games to Hope College, where the Blackhawks drew over three thousand fans. When the other teams playing that day took the court, they were all wearing the same black T-shirts that Fennville wore, with Leonard's name and number on the back, and "NEVER FORGOTTEN" on the front.

The Blackhawks struggled in their first game, caught fire in their second, then came back in the district finals Friday night from nine points down to win by three.

"If you weren't there," Mike Peel said, "you wouldn't believe it."

This Monday, when Fennville faced Schoolcraft, the Blackhawks finally ran out of gas in the second half and lost, 86–62. But if you didn't see the scoreboard, you'd have no idea Fennville was getting trounced. The players kept working just as hard, and the crowd kept cheering just as loud, to the very last second.

Harder days are ahead. They know that.

They also know people like Wes Leonard come along in a place like Fennville every fifty years or so, and they might not see another like him the rest of their lives. But the very qualities Wes Leonard brought out in them—pride, unity, and joy—are the very traits they'll rely on to get them through.

The people of Fennville will never be the same.

But they will be okay.