

# HOOOPS HEAVEN

Henry County Home to Basketball History

By Tom Schuman

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Each 2018 issue of BizVoice® will feature a Road Trip Treasure, highlighting Indiana destinations and activities.*

If you've seen the movie *Hoosiers* – and who hasn't – the Hoosier Gym in Knightstown looks familiar.



For basketball aficionados, Indiana has no shortage of historic locations that offer vivid reminders of Hoosiers' passion for the sport. Three of the most special destinations can be enjoyed within 15 miles of each other in Henry County:

- Hoosier Gym in Knightstown is most famous as the home of the Hickory Huskers in the 1986 movie *Hoosiers*. More than 65,000 people were expected to visit in 2017 to enjoy the nostalgia as well as the more than 80 high school basketball games scheduled for the facility in the 2017-2018 season.
- The Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame has welcomed more than 300,000 guests from around the country and globe since relocating to New Castle in 1990. Chris May, executive director for the last eight and half years, appropriately refers to his job as “walking into arguably one of the holiest of holy places in Indiana.”
- A short walk from the Hall of Fame takes you to New Castle High School Fieldhouse, with the banner inside proudly proclaiming it as the “the largest and finest high school fieldhouse in the world.” Its 9,300-plus seats exceeds the capacity of, among others, the basketball homes of both Duke and Notre Dame universities.

### Indiana's game

Bob Garner played – “well, let’s say I was a benchwarmer,” he clarifies – on the last Knightstown High School team (1966) to host its games there. He returned to the community just three years ago and is now the events coordinator for the historic venue. It is run by the non-profit Hoosier Gym Community Center of Knightstown. No tax dollars are used and the gym is open to the community any time it is not rented.

“Those of us from Knightstown who played ball here, there’s obviously a warm spot. People who loved the movie, there’s a warm spot for the place,” Garner offers. “But it amazes me, the impact this has had. Adult men, walking through the door there, and breaking out in tears. It had gotten to a point where I was worried a little bit (about whether younger generations would have the same feelings).

“Parents and coaches want their teams to come and play here because they love the movie; the impact on the kids after they are here is equal to the parents.”

Need proof. On December 22, two Mississippi rivals and their fans traveled to Knightstown to play four games. It all started with a dad and his son visiting Hoosier Gym the previous summer.

“The son says, ‘Dad, I’ve got to play a game here,’ ” Garner recalls. “The dad, who was his coach, says, ‘I don’t know how we can pull that off.’ ” (He asks Garner about help in scheduling an Indiana opponent, but the Indiana High School Athletic Association has travel limitations on teams Indiana schools can play).

“He calls me up a few days later and says one of our rivals wants to come here and play,” Garner continues. “About three days later, he asks if they could play two games that day. My parents said, ‘If the varsity is coming, the JV is coming.’ Not a week goes by before I get a call from the athletic director, asking, ‘Can we play two more games (varsity and JV girls)?’

That’s how East Webster and Pontotoc – and many fans – came from Mississippi to Indiana three days before Christmas. Area hotels, restaurants and businesses were among the beneficiaries.

A team from Syracuse, New York, has played in the Hoosier Gym. An Illinois athletic director told Garner he “would like to play here every year if he could.” Two Ohio schools are set for this season, and the Ohio High School Athletic Association wants an OHSAA day next year to bring 12 teams in for a six-game extravaganza.

### The movie about the game

The expansive number of high school games are a recent phenomenon, following in the footsteps of the popular Hoosiers Reunion All-Star Classic. Indiana high school boys and girls have battled in an all-star doubleheader (matching the Hickory Huskers from the movie against the rival Terhune Tigers)



Daily tours allow visitors to shoot baskets and check out the Hickory Huskers' locker room, complete with key movie phrases and plays on the blackboard.



for the past dozen years.

But the Hoosier Gym has long been a shrine to the film that tops more than a few “best sports movie of all time” lists. Photos and other memorabilia greets visitors upon their arrival. But the true attraction is the facility built for \$14,000 in 1921 to serve as home for the Knightstown teams.

They come to see the locker room. And the bench where Gene Hackman (playing *Hoosiers* coach Norman Dale) sat while famously proclaiming “my team is on the floor” in refusing to put a player he disciplined back into the game. As well as where town drunk “Shooter” Flatch (played by Dennis Hopper and father of one of the team’s players) was positioned in the stands during various scenes.

Back to Garner and just a few of his experiences.

“A young man from Oregon comes in, walks in the door and starts crying. I didn’t know how to react. This place has this effect on a lot of people. He says, ‘I played high school basketball and my dad was the town drunk.’ I almost started crying.”

Or there’s the woman who informed her husband of his pending fatherhood by holding up a Hickory onesie she purchased at the gift shop. “What a way to find out,” Garner adds with a smile. “He (the dad to be) starts crying. That was a great one.”

Garner was a little skeptical when organizers of the American Angus Association convention wanted to schedule a visit as an optional side trip. “They all came in with

their big, black cowboy hats from every state in the union as well as Venezuela, Brazil. They loved the movie. The majority of them chose to come here and they bought thousands of dollars in souvenirs.”

### Taking the tour

On a Monday in mid-November, four different groups stopped in for a visit in a 90-minute period. One was a local couple that recently celebrated its 50th wedding anniversary, proudly bringing their nephew and his wife who were visiting from Florida. Two different families were Pittsburgh Steeler fans who had traveled to Indianapolis the day before to see their team defeat the Colts.

Matthew and Janae Urie and their children (ages 11 and 10) saw a billboard on Interstate 70 on their way from Pennsylvania. The parents were big fans of the movie. After receiving a guided tour and taking time to shoot some baskets in the historic structure, Matthew offers, “I think this is awesome – how authentic it is. It looks like it’s been untouched.”

Garner puts the visitor count at 62 countries. Fans from the Philippines in 2017, China and Japan the year before.

This interview had interrupted Garner’s work on a notice to local merchants about the upcoming game schedule. Shop owners had told him, “We’ve got to know when you’re having those big days.” Some have told him they haven’t done that much business in five years.

Garner informs one of the tour groups the only changes to the gym since the *Hoosiers*’ filming have been updated scoreboards and the three-point line on the court. He notes that 725 people can be accommodated on the “sardine seating” plan.

“When we showed the movie last Friday night (early November), 348 people showed up. The scene with the team clapping in the locker room, guess what everyone is doing in here. We’ve got popcorn, nachos, hot dogs,” he adds. “When we have games here, people stomping their feet in this old structure, the noise is outrageous.”

### HALL OF FAME

May’s description of the reverent nature of the Hall of Fame simply refers to the “impact of basketball in communities large and small. It’s a constant reminder of how significant basketball is in Indiana’s history and will continue to be.”

Not surprisingly, Indiana is a pacesetter in this field.

“We were the original statewide high school basketball hall of fame and museum in

the country,” he shares. “Others have tried. Kentucky is in the late stages of having one in Elizabethtown. Illinois is trying, with its second group. I was at a conference in Knoxville, Tennessee, and it’s clear the national women’s basketball hall of fame stole some elements (in a complimentary way) of their building and design from us.”

May recalls a family from Italy visiting during his first year in New Castle. The goal was to experience women’s basketball – from the college level at Storrs, Connecticut and Knoxville to an Indiana Fever game – and the Indiana Hall of Fame.

“There are hundreds of stories like that – native Hoosiers whose grandfather’s jersey might be in our collection to the emotional attachment if your school was swept away in the consolidation wave,” he continues. “About 50% of our visitors are from outside the state of Indiana. They’ve come from all 92 counties, all 50 states and as best we can track, 64 countries.”

The Indiana Hall of Fame’s original home was in Indianapolis. Danny Danielson, a business and community leader who served on the Indiana Chamber board of directors for many years until passing away at the age of 95 in 2015, was the driving force in the



The Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame offers 14,000 square feet of memorabilia and nostalgia.

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More than 6,000 fans converged on the New Castle Fieldhouse for the 2017 boys' sectional final between the host Trojans and Connersville (Michael E. Keating 2017).

construction of the new facility and the move east along Interstate 70.

Visitors often start their tour in the Danielson Theater, where a 17-minute film (which debuted in October 2016) features Hoosier basketball legends telling their stories about growing up and playing the game in this state. May calls that a special attraction, as well as the permanent exhibits honoring John Wooden, Oscar Robertson and Larry Bird.

### **Nostalgia on display**

But it's often the individual circumstances that resonate. I mention to May during our discussion that my brother played on the last basketball team at Sunman High School in southeastern Indiana before it was consolidated into what is now East Central. A short time later, during my first Hall of Fame visit in a number of years, I encounter an exhibit honoring Jim Lyttle (1960s star at North Dearborn, the other school with Sunman in the East Central merger), who went on to enjoy a long professional baseball career.

"I think nostalgia is the word that probably comes out the most," May reflects. "How it used to be – when high school basketball was the center of the town and you knew every Friday and Saturday night everyone was going to be at the games. When there was more demand for season tickets than even the 6,000, 7,000, 8,000

seats in the building.

"For Hoosiers, it's usually a connection to their alma mater or a person they grew up watching," he continues. "When we have field trips or team outings, it's not all about the past; it's also about inspiring the future."

Two Hall of Fame highlights each year: Honoring that year's induction class (both men and women): "That's a big part of why we exist and why people want to come here. It's a great reunion of Indiana basketball history when we have the ceremonies for our inductees."

Jerseys, trophies, newspaper clippings and more greet the Hall of Fame newcomers. Family members, teammates and coaches often accompany the honorees. "It takes them back in time pretty fast," May asserts.

Secondly, Hall of Fame tournaments (again for boys and girls) bring together four top teams from throughout the state during the holidays at the nearby New Castle Fieldhouse. Not surprisingly, those are the two busiest days of the year for museum visitation.

Just as Indiana showcases its basketball heritage, New Castle is proud of its identification with the sport.

"First and foremost, volunteer support is what has sustained our operation and is really what got the Hall here in the first place," contends May, who also notes some volunteers (60 to 70 active at this point) come from long distances to stay involved. "If you mention New Castle, people are most

likely to know that's where the Hall of Fame is. I think it's a huge part of the town's identity."

### **THE FIELDHOUSE**

The 14,000-square-foot Hall of Fame squeezes Indiana basketball history into its structure. Nearby, the New Castle Fieldhouse was known to pack more than 10,000 fans into its confines for North Central Conference or postseason games. Official capacity, once listed at 9,325, is now 9,314 – not sure what happened to those 11 seats.

The Fieldhouse was built in 1959 with the community raising more than \$1 million. Unassuming from the outside, upon entry one is mesmerized by the rows of seats leading down to the basketball floor. One will also find the "sunken" court at the Spartan Bowl in Connersville and at the college level in places such as "The Pit" at the University of New Mexico.

Although the days of 10,000 fans at a local high school game are in the past, New Castle athletic director Shane Osting says the high school boys still draw 3,500 to 4,000 for most contests. A 2017 sectional final between high-powered teams from Connersville and New Castle attracted over 6,000 – "it looked like Christmas in March with red on one side and green on the other."

A 2016 ESPN event that included prep schools from California and Virginia also produced "an outstanding environment,"



The New Castle girls' team goes through a workout on the parquet floor at the Fieldhouse.

place,” he shares. “Visitors say, ‘Can we go down and shoot a shot?’ They get their phones out, their cameras out.”

### Hometown heroes

The passion was obviously in place for New Castle to construct its cathedral in 1959 (reportedly due to being tired of traveling to Muncie for tournament games) and attract the Hall of Fame in 1990. In between were two Mr. Basketballs who went on to illustrious careers beyond high school: Kent Benson in 1973 and Steve Alford a decade later.

“Kent Benson is still in the community and shows off the facility as much as he can,” notes Osting, a former player at Winchester and coach at several east central Indiana schools who never played a game at the Fieldhouse. “It’s the same with Sam Alford (Steve’s father and longtime New Castle coach). It’s phenomenal how the community comes together for a basketball event.”

The track high above the playing floor is open to those community members in the morning and during lunch hours. Cheerleading and dance contests are among the events that take place in addition to basketball.

History is preserved with the school honoring individuals and teams that have achieved conference or state success with photos that adorn the concourse. The 25th anniversary basketball team is invited back each year for a banquet and game recognition.

It’s all part of New Castle, Henry County and Indiana’s love affair with basketball.

according to Osting. And whether it’s high school players from Indiana or beyond, Hall of Fame visitors or others, the reaction is the same.

“They walk in and just go, ‘Wow! Wow, this is a high school gym?’ It just has that awe effect for people who have never been in the

**RESOURCES:** Bob Garner, Hoosier Gym, at [www.thehoosiergym.com](http://www.thehoosiergym.com) | Chris May, Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame, at [www.hoopshall.com](http://www.hoopshall.com) | Shane Osting, New Castle High School

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