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MIRISSA LACRY/JOURNAL-WORLD PHOTO

**Verner Newman III began playing on the Promoters basketball team in 1946 while attending Liberty Memorial High School.**

## *League of their own* Basketball team offered outlet for black players

● **The Promoters**, an all-black high school basketball team from the 1920s to 1950, traveled throughout the region and won at least two league championships.

By TOM MEAGHER

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Jesse Newman Sr. will never forget the White Shadow.

If it hadn't been for him, Newman says, Lawrence's black Liberty Memorial High School students would not have been able to play basketball in the early 1930s.

Without the White Shadow, the Promoters basketball team would have disbanded, and Newman's nephew, Verner, would not have had a team to play on 15 years later.

Forrest L. Noll was the White Shadow, a nickname he earned as a white junior high school teacher who coached the Promoters, Lawrence's black basketball team. High school basketball wasn't integrated in Lawrence until 1950.

Newman, now 88, played center for Noll's teams in 1930, 1931 and 1932, the year the Promoters won their league championship.

"There wasn't any black teachers," Newman said. "There wouldn't have been a team had it not been for him. He was a godsend as far as I'm concerned."

Noll, then a young mathematics teacher, put in his own time and



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**Jesse Newman Sr., 88, played center for the Promoters basketball team in the early 1930s.**

See Promoters, page 4A

The 1930 Promoters basketball team from Lawrence Memorial High School were Kansas champions of the black division during school segregation. Coach Forrest L. Noll, in rear center, then a young mathematics teacher, put in his own time and money to make sure all of Lawrence's youths got a chance to play basketball.

With segregation still strong in the late 1940s, the Promoters basketball team black pep club called the "Red Peppers," shown in this 1947 yearbook photo, and its cheerleading squad (in white in front).

# Promoters filled segregation void

Continued from page 1A

money to make sure all of Lawrence's youths got a chance to play basketball.

"This white junior high school teacher took it upon himself to buy eight suits for eight boys," Newman said. "He paid the \$50 fee" to enter the team in the all-black league.

He said he never understood why a white teacher would coach the team.

"I didn't find out until the war broke out in 1941," Newman said. "I found out then that he went into the Army as a chaplain. He had that much religion, it caused him to do that much for the black boys here in Lawrence."

## 'A rough time'

Noll took over the team in 1928 or 1929. Newman said he's not sure when the Promoters were first organized. Liberty Memorial High School yearbooks contain references to the team dating to at least 1926.

He remembers that black Kansas University students such as Dixie Wilkerson coached the team before Noll. But the black collegians didn't stay long in Lawrence.

"It was kind of a rough time, you graduated from KU, you had to go south to teach school," Newman said.

When Newman went to high school in 1929, he began as a substitute on the team. He became the starting center in 1930.

That year, the Promoters played in the Missouri Valley Invitational Athletic Assn., winning the conference tournament, placing third in the league.

"The thing about it, there wasn't enough black high school students to make a team. So they had to reach into the junior high school to get players."

## Living by the rules

As Newman recalls, it wasn't easy for the team to even exist. The high school wouldn't allow the black players to use its basketballs. The Promoters couldn't wear a large "L" on their game jerseys like the white team.

Prospects were bleak in Lawrence for anyone who was not white.

"Jobs were few and far between, because of the fact that there was no places where you could go to find a lifetime job," Newman said. "You couldn't work at the gas company, you couldn't work at the flour mill. You could work at the paper mill, but you couldn't work at the box factory. You couldn't work at the organ factory."

The Promoters afforded one of the few opportunities for black youths to play. The team traveled around Kansas and Missouri playing other black teams. They played in St. Joseph and Kansas City, Mo., Kansas City, Kan., Topeka, Ottawa and Leavenworth.

The players couldn't practice during the regular school day.

"Most of the practice that we had was we went out to the high school at night for two hours, from 7 to 9 p.m.," Newman said. "And the fraternity boys used to come down and practice with us."

Noll coached the team until 1936. By that time, the Promoters were in the Kansas-Missouri

Athletic Assn. They were co-champions of the league that year.

The Promoters did the same in 1938, and in 1940, they were the sole league champions.

## Getting the green light

In 1946, Jesse Newman's nephew, Verner Newman III, began playing for the Promoters. By then G. O. "Doc" Watson, a white journalism and social studies teacher and football coach, was coaching the team. He also was the president of the conference beginning in 1945.

The same year that Verner Newman began playing with the Promoters, several teammates went to Watson to ask permission to play football on the white team.

"He just said, 'I'll take it to the principal,'" Verner Newman said. "He went straight to him. Before the day was over, we were in."

Verner Newman said the basketball teams he played on in 1946, 1947 and 1948 were decent but not great. In 1947, the team tied for fifth in the seven-team league.

The play, Verner Newman recalled, was rudimentary compared to today.

"Some pro basketball player had made a film on the jump shot; nobody had seen that before. I was in junior high and they showed it to all of us in gym class. I was still shooting underhanded," he said.

The Promoters could travel

out of state for games against Missouri schools, something the white team was not allowed to do. But traveling brought its own set of problems.

"We didn't have any transportation; we had to take Lawrence Rapid Transit to Kansas City,"

Verner Newman said. "After the game, we'd go to some parent's home to eat. We couldn't go to any restaurant."

Segregation was still strong in the late 1940s, not only in basketball. The Promoters had their own pep club, the "Red Peppers." They also had three female cheerleaders.

Verner Newman said when the team played in Kansas City, there were at least black restaurants to eat in.

"In our hometown we couldn't eat out at all," Verner Newman said.

In 1950, when the high school basketball team was integrated, the Promoters disbanded.

## History teachers

Verner Newman is disappointed that today's high school students don't know the Promoters existed.

About four years ago, he said, he was pleased to be invited to Central Junior High School to talk to students about the team.

"They saw our book out

*"Most of the practice that we had was we went out to the high school at night for two hours, from 7 to 9 p.m."*

—Jesse Newman Sr.

there, and they didn't understand why we had separate teams and clubs and separate cheerleaders," Verner Newman said.

He and several teammates explained to the schoolchildren what it was like to be black in Lawrence in the 1940s.

"You know there was only one black in that class, and they sent us real nice letters, thanking us for coming out there," he said.

Verner Newman graduated in 1948. He studied briefly in college before joining the Navy. In 1954, he became a police officer in Lawrence. He went on to become the first black captain on the force, before retiring.

After graduating in 1933, Jesse Newman went to work for the Civilian Conservation Corps, and also as a mechanic, a janitor at Crown Drugstore and First National Bank, and a railroad clerk. He retired in 1977.

He said he recently had copies made of the Liberty Memorial High School yearbook for 1933.

"I didn't have a chance to buy a yearbook in 1933," Newman said. "I didn't have the money to have my (senior) picture put in it. My name is in there, but my picture's not in there."

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