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*Headnote by Alexander Wolff*

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# Edith Roberts

The credo alongside the senior photo of Edith Roberts (1902–1966) in her high school yearbook read, “I always say just what I mean.” And say things Roberts did, particularly in seven novels, several set in small midwestern towns like Huntington, Indiana, where she grew up. Four of her books became movies, including *Reap the Whirlwind* (1938), based on time she spent in the Balkans, and which with its setting in Belgrade amid political turmoil seemed to foretell world war, and *That Hagen Girl* (1947), a vehicle for Ronald Reagan and Shirley Temple. Born Edith Elizabeth Kneipple and educated at the University of Chicago, Roberts took a staff position at *Coronet*, the Chicago-based monthly that resembled *Reader's Digest* in its trim size and mix of celebrity profiles, advice, and condensed books. In 1944 the magazine sent her to Kokomo for a report called “The Town with the Funny Name.” By the 1950s, having set aside fiction entirely, Roberts returned to small-town Indiana for *Coronet*, filing this dispatch from little Milan, whose high school's defeat of mighty Muncie Central would inspire the 1987 film *Hoosiers*. Longshots though they were in 1954, the real-life forerunners of fictional Hickory High had reached the state semifinals the year before, alerting *Coronet's* editors to the story brewing to their southeast. With its color and detail, Roberts's story could pass as notes for a Hollywood set designer.

## Indiana's Town of Champions

THE DAY the Milan High School basketball team played in the state championship finals, the little Indiana whistle-stop became a ghost town. Every man, woman and child in Milan (pop. 1,200) who was fit to travel had made the pilgrimage to Indianapolis to cheer the boys on to victory.

The extraordinary support and enthusiasm of the townsfolk, which had carried an obscure high school squad to the final round of the championship in a conference of 751 schools, stood solidly behind the Milan Indians on that memorable Saturday.

By noon there was no one left in town but a few dogs, the postmaster and barber Russel (Rabbit) Hunter, who explained his odd behavior by stating he didn't deserve a ticket because he hadn't attended all of the school's games during the season. But to show his heart was with the boys, a sign in his window read: “CLIP 'EM CLOSE, INDIANS!”

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To help out while Milan was deserted, neighbor communities stood by valiantly. Batesville sent over a fire-truck and crew so that the Milan Volunteer Fire Department might enjoy the game without worry. Madison lent part of its police force in order that town marshal Roy LaFollette could root for the Indians without fear that burglars might be busy back home.

Indianapolis, where the big basketball final was being played, had become accustomed to the delirious descent of the Milan motorcade. "Seems like they hardly go home but they're back again," commented Indianapolis motor patrolman Pat Stark. But he said it good-naturedly, for Milan was the popular choice to win.

He vowed that if its Miracle Men won the championship, he'd escort them against traffic around the city's famous Circle. And when they won the 1954 championship by beating the Central High School of Muncie, 32–30, he carried out his promise.

What Milan did in support of its Indians before the game was mild compared to what it did afterwards. Anyone seeing the 500 cars full of cheering fans escorting them home from Indianapolis would certainly have recognized it as a triumphal procession. But then, Milan's feat in reaching the finals was in itself something of a miracle. The escort was 13 miles long, and an estimated 40,000 people managed to cram themselves into a town normally holding 1,200.

"*Menus?*" cried restaurant-owner Frank Arkenberg incredulously. "Say, when our team wins, you're lucky if you get anything to *eat* here, let alone a menu!"

"Is this *heaven?*" Pete Nocks at the filling-station kept shouting after the victory, spilling half the gas he was pumping.

Some practical soul calculated that the cost of attending the tournament, plus the loss due to closing of business, had cost Milan at least \$50,000 each Saturday it closed up. But someone immediately countered with: "Who cares? We won, didn't we?"

Win or lose (and it has been mostly win), Milan has been setting basketball records the like of which no community of equal size has ever matched in this basketball-crazy state.

The Milan High School has an enrollment of only 83 girls and 84 boys, which is infinitesimal compared to the hundreds of larger schools in Indiana. Yet in two successive years, this virtually unknown

team reached the final tourney, winning the championship in 1954 with a victory that Hoosiers will talk about for years.

By the time the second triumph came round, Milan had proved beyond doubt that its brilliance was no fluke, but the result of a team's skill, a coach's inspiration, and a whole town's faith and enthusiasm. And all those qualities were needed to turn the kids from an obscure tank town into state champions.

Milan, now a familiar name to every Indiana basketball fan, is no more than a dot on the map. The tiny town straddles the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, its stores and houses bunched round the main street.

Every storekeeper and householder in Milan works or roots for the Indians in some way. Drop into Frank Arkenberg's restaurant, or Emmett Lawless' drugstore, or Louis Kirschner's dry-goods emporium, and the chances are they will be discussing the basketball squad.

The same holds good for Bob Peak's law office or Red Smith's insurance agency or Chris Volz's garage. It was Volz who sent the team to the regional games in Pontiacs, to the semi-finals in Buicks, and to the state championship finals in Cadillacs.

Over on a side street lives Mrs. Anna Cross, who traditionally washes the Indians' uniforms and prays for the boys as she hangs up their jerseys. Out yonder is the Milan Furniture Company, the town's modest industry, whose general manager, Bill Thompson, had enough "LET'S GO, INDIANS!" placards printed to deck out everything on wheels in Ripley County. Up on a shady hillside stands the yellow-brick schoolhouse, no different from thousands of others all over America.

This is Milan, Indiana, the home of the champions, and it looks very much like any other country town its size. What made Milan great in the sporting sense is something you can't see. But it's there just the same, and you can find out what it is if you stay around and get acquainted.

Everyone is friendly and eager to talk, especially if it's about basketball and how the Indians got to be Champs. The townsfolk will tell you it was the kids and the coach. The coach will assure you it was the team and the town. The boys will declare it was the coach and fans. It was all of these, fired by an abiding faith and mutual confidence.

It all started two years ago with the new coach who came to Milan, one of the most remarkable figures in basketball today. No one

believed young Marvin Wood was remarkable then, except perhaps in a derogatory sense—for he had taken a decided step down when he left well-known French Lick to coach unknown Milan.

“Woody” himself admits it was a kind of self-imposed demotion; but he says that when he came to Milan to look over the “material” he’d have to work with and found it averaging a good six feet, clear-eyed, wonderfully nourished and healthy, with a history of playing “barn-door” basketball all its young life, he had such a strong hunch that this could be turned into a victorious team that he couldn’t resist playing that hunch.

Marv Wood, who is only 26 years old, had been trained under the veteran Tony Hinkle, coach at Butler University and now president of the American Basketball Coaches Association; and was wise enough about basketball to know that it required more than faith to make a winner. So, with characteristic thoroughness, he set about developing what sports writers have now made famous as “Woody’s cat-and-mouse technique.”

Disgruntled losers have been known to call it a “stall,” but it is really a highly controlled slow-motion game. To see Milan’s fine physical specimens carry this mental exercise in restraint and judgment to its utmost possibilities is a revelation in will power and nerve.

“We don’t freeze the ball,” explains Coach Wood. “We take our time and work it in for good shots. This type of game gives the boys a chance to *think*, and thinking enables them to take advantage of the breaks. It’s as simple as that. But it pays off.”

With this last, both his friends and his opponents agree. They’ll be telling in Indiana for years to come how during the final quarter of the 1954 championship game, with Muncie Central High School leading by two points, Milan actually retained the ball for 4 minutes and 14 seconds without even attempting to shoot. Later, with only 18 seconds left to play, the crowd in pandemonium and the score tied, Milan calmly called time!

Two years of patient, incessant, endless drilling on the part of Coach Wood to be deliberate, to think, to look for the break, and then—and only then—to act, were about to pay off. With three seconds left to go, Bobby Plump of Milan, as coolly as if he were practice-shooting in his own backyard, took aim and dropped in the winning basket.

"Marv's technique," says Willard Green, Milan Superintendent of Schools, "certainly turns out some fine basketball players. And we think it contains all the elements for turning out fine men as well."

A few minutes after his dramatic final shot, Bobby Plump was singled out for the tourney's greatest individual honor—the Arthur H. Trester Award—given each year by the Indiana High School Athletic Association to the player with "the best scholastic record and mental attitude." It was the first time that this trophy had ever gone to a player on the championship team.

Bobby won it, but it might with equal justice have been awarded to the team as a whole, for the majority of the Indians are leaders and honor students. As for the team's "mental attitude," attorney Bob Peak says, "Throughout the season I noticed that a boy would forsake a chance to shine, and pass the ball to a player in a little better position. That's teamwork!"

When Wood came to Milan with his "hunch," nobody else in the town shared it. The local citizens warmly supported their boys, of course, as they had always done; but they felt their team, which had done no more in 40 years than win an occasional sectional game, had as much chance of flying to the moon as of winning a championship.

But Marv Wood began urging "heads-up" ball and firmly inculcating the conviction that defeat is never inevitable. Practice and drill were incessant, while the townsfolk watched and cheered.

A month before his first 1953 sectional tourney, the coach startled the team by drawing up a program showing how Milan could go all the way to the finals. Everyone thought he was crazy. When subsequent events proved him right, team and town got behind him.

In 1954 they knew they could win—which is one reason why they did. The solid backing of Milan's citizenry was behind the team, and every player knew it.

When the season ended, the coach folded away his lucky green necktie till next year. People began to speak again of secondary things, like politics and the weather. The boys themselves settled down to books, home life and chores.

Back to Pierceville, a stone's throw from Milan, where there are 100 inhabitants and 100 fans, trouped three of the Champs—Gene White,

Plump, and Rog Schroder. Nor were they above joining in the games at the homemade basketball court behind the Schroder residence.

"We've got lights," explained Rog proudly, "and we play every night. Our dads play, too, and our mothers are real fans. The little kids use the court afternoons."

A visiting reporter who had come to Milan to see what it had taken to make a championship team, reached this conclusion: "It all adds up to a few sweating, panting boys in the driveway, the backyard or a vacant lot somewhere in Indiana. That's where champions start—and that's where they plan to stay."