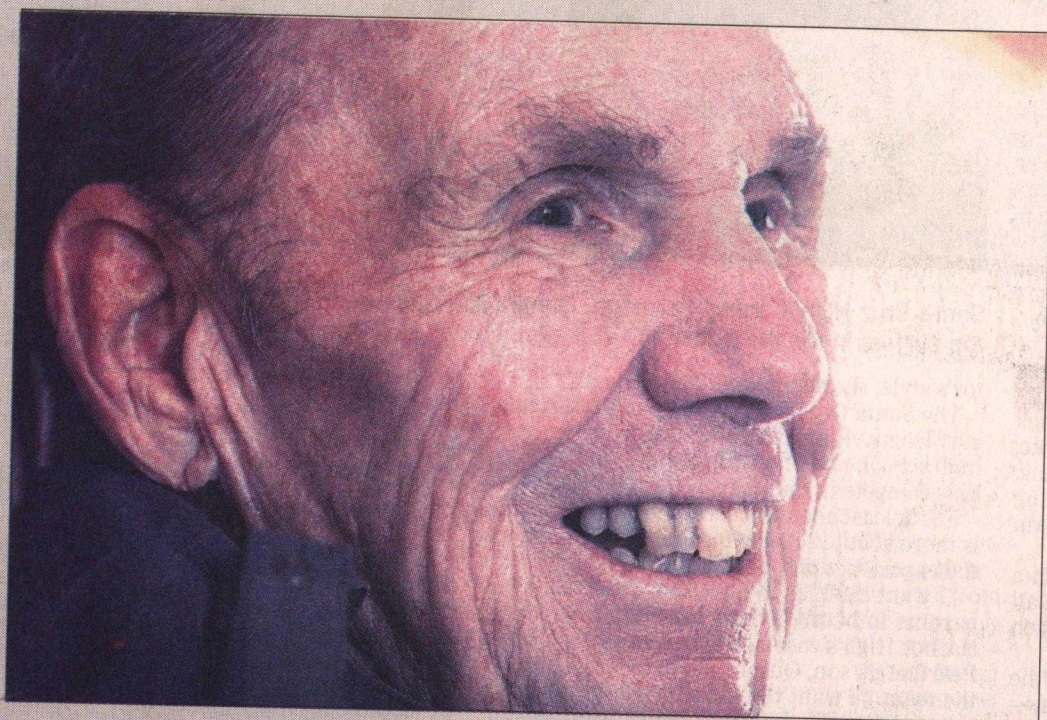
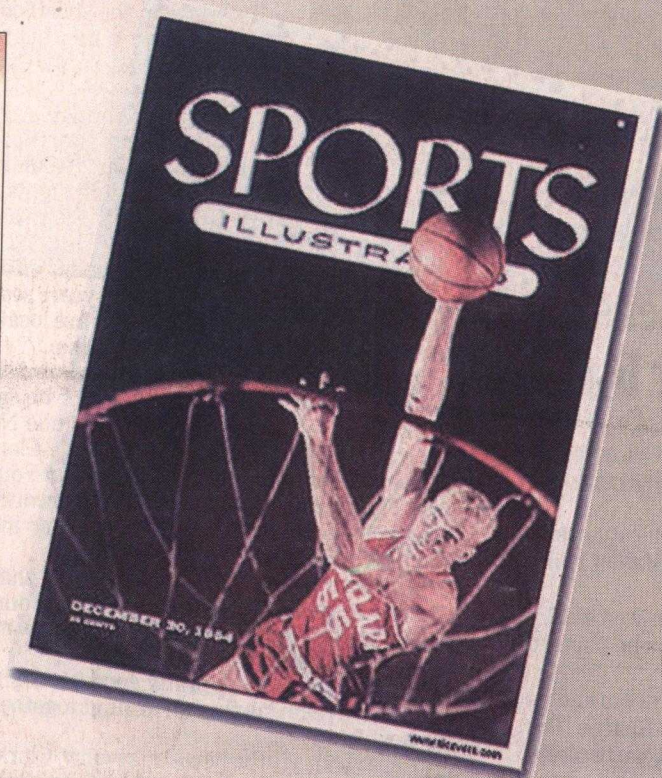


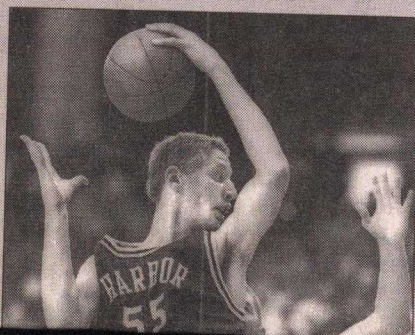
THE SENTINEL'S ALL-TIME ALL-COUNTY BASKETBALL TEAM



Kenny Sears, 73, enjoys a rare look back to the day he was on the cover of Sports Illustrated. Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel



JUNIOR RUSSELL



The Original

Watsonville's Kenny Sears was an All-Star in New York. He's now reeling in fish and playing Santa Claus every winter in Mexico

By **RYAN PHILLIPS**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

He was one of the best players in the country and the No. 1 draft pick of the New York Knicks. But no one in New York knew who he was, not even the coach.

Kenny Sears was alone when he arrived at LaGuardia Airport in the fall of 1955. The kid from Watsonville who developed into an All-American basketball player at Santa Clara didn't have any friends in the Big Apple, and he didn't pack any winter clothes. He had no idea what to expect.

He paid the cab driver to take him to Madison Square Garden. When Sears arrived, there were a bunch of players hanging around, and coach Joe Lap-



The 1922 Watsonville High girls basketball team played in uniforms that included caps and bows. The girls game has taken a few strides since.

Inside

The All-Time girls team PAGE C5

— come calling about reunions, Sears politely declines. He'd rather stay away.

His Watsonville home is without much NBA memorabilia, save a couple of his All-Star trophies.

"I've been to his house many times, and I've never seen them," said close friend and former Santa Clara teammate Dick Garibaldi of the trophies.

Sears would rather let his actions do the talking. It's a theme that has carried throughout his life and continues today.

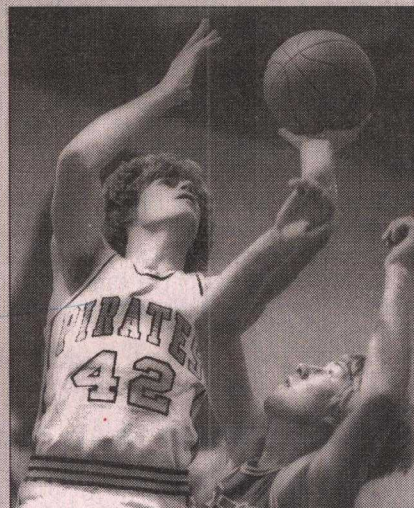
Every winter for the past 32 years, Sears has left Watsonville to take a fishing trip to Mexico. Most years, Sears would drive a pickup truck down, filling it with different items to deliver to kids in the community where he stays. One year it was 400 or so bikes, another it was shoes. Last



TIM YOUNG



JEFFY CONNELLY



JIM HART

Sentinel file photos by Bill Lovejoy

enick talking to some of them. Sears approached Lapchick and introduced himself.

"He said, 'Which one are you?'" Sears recalls. "The coach didn't even know who I was."

The Hall of Fame coach, and the rest of the NBA, would soon find out.

During the next six seasons, Sears developed into the best player on the Knicks and one of the best in the NBA. He never averaged less than the 12.8 points per game he averaged as a rookie while playing in New York, and made three All-Star teams. He averaged 21 points and 9.3 rebounds one season, and 18.5 points and 13.7 rebounds in another.

Sears headlines the Sentinel's All-Time All-County team, chosen this year in the paper's 150th year of publication. He's one of the thousands of basketball players who have grown up in Santa Cruz County, but the only one to play in the NBA All-Star Game.

Santa Cruz County's best teams. **PAGE C5**

The list of Sears' accomplishments as a basketball player is lengthy — he appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated in 1954 while at Santa Clara. The issue was the first to feature basketball on the cover. He played in the Final Four and was named one of the 50 greatest athletes in the history of the West Coast Conference. Santa Clara plans to retire his number. His professional career spanned nine seasons.

But if it was up to Sears, people would treat him as Lapchick did. That is to say, like they didn't know who he is.

The son of a lettuce farmer, Sears, now 73, is a small-town guy who prefers to stay out of the limelight. When the NBA teams Sears played for — the Knicks, or Golden State Warriors

year his wife Eunice had a hip injury, so they decided to fly. They took a flight this year, so a friend is driving down with about 150 pairs of board shorts for Sears to distribute.

"I sure have got a lot of board shorts," Sears said. "It's going to be fun trying to pass those out without hurting anyone's feelings."

There, on a beach in Mexico, the shy, easy-going "Okie" as he calls himself, will drag his boat out across the sand to the bright blue ocean and spend hours fishing and chatting with a friend. Sears prefers it out there, among the waves, whales, dolphins and mahi-mahi, no matter the haul he brings in. For Sears, it's not about how many fish he catches, it's fully enjoying the process of fishing and being out there. Actions, not plans, promises or acknowledgments, matter most to Sears.

See **SEARS** on **PAGE C4**

The Dream Team

Like gravity, they pulled basketball fans into the gyms; like a force of nature, they willed their teams to victory

By **RYAN PHILLIPS**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

The players appear so rarely. The combination of breathtaking skill and ultimate resolve that shocks and awes those who witness their rise to amazing heights.

The type of player whose talent is remembered 50 years later, like Watsonville's Ken Sears. Or whose extraordinary talent is a fresh memory, like Santa Cruz's Junior Russell. There are players whose unique talents are glimpsed once in a generation, if so lucky, like Harbor's 7-foot-1 center Tim Young. And there are the times when lightening strikes

twice, like Jeffy Connelly building his legend at Harbor immediately in the footsteps of Jim Hart.

These are the players that highlight the Sentinel's All-time All-county basketball team, chosen this year in the paper's 150th year of publication. The ultimate county starting five, consisting of Russell, the play-making point guard who led Santa Cruz to the county's only state basketball title; Hart, the county's best pure scorer; Connelly, an all-around talent with an incredible leaping ability; Sears, the only county player to make an NBA All-Star

The Roster

The 12-man team:
Junior Russell, Santa Cruz, 2005
Jim Hart, Harbor, 1983
Jeffy Connelly, Harbor, 1985
Ken Sears, Watsonville, 1951
Tim Young, Harbor, 1994
Steve Smith, Santa Cruz, 1962
Jeff Jones, Aptos, 1986
Dave Mercer, Watsonville, 1965
Gary Ghidinelli, Santa Cruz, 1969
Rich Montgomery, S.C., 1953
Larry Griffin, Santa Cruz, 1965
Dick Fassio, Santa Cruz, 1943

See **THE PLAYERS** on **PAGE C4**

M A T H E S E N T I N E L ' S A L L - T I M E

Sears

Continued from Page C1

"He catches a lot of fish," Garibaldi said, "but you have to pry that out of him."

■■■

Sears grew up in a single-parent home, raised by his father Mark, a lettuce farmer who worked as a foreman in the off-season. Though his mother, Vivian, lived in San Jose while he was growing up, Sears didn't have much contact with her. One of the few times he remembers seeing her was in the stands for his last college game at Santa Clara.

"For some reason, I felt kind of abandoned," Sears said. "I was a daddy's boy."

He started playing basketball in the seventh grade, and made the lightweight team at Watsonville as a 5-foot-11 freshman, "strictly because they thought I would be tall." They were right. Sears sprouted up to 6-3 by the time he was a sophomore, won a starting job, and kept growing. He was 6-9, and a rail-thin 205 pounds when he graduated in 1951. Though growing pains in his knees and ankles kept him up at night and he felt awkward at school, Sears found a use for his height.

"The only place it came in handy was the basketball court," Sears said. "That, and we didn't need a third guy to load the truck when we were stacking lettuce."

Sears didn't overpower opponents. He was the rare big man in those days who preferred to play outside, taking advantage of his unusual athletic ability to draw the more plodding big men away from the basket. That skill, along with getting him a scholarship to Santa Clara and propelling him to the upper echelon of college players, helped him carve out a career in the NBA.

"Not too many big men had that specific capability," said for-

mer NBA center Charlie Share, who played against Sears with the St. Louis Hawks. "Very few guys could put the ball on the floor and drive to the hoop and shoot from the outside. He had all those capabilities."

By his last two years of high school, Sears was one of the top players in the Central Coast Athletic League, and led Watsonville to the prestigious Tournament of Champions postseason tournament at Cal.

But Sears never thought he'd go to college, until Bud Rowland, a teacher at Watsonville, convinced Sears that he should take some college preparatory classes in case schools were interested in him for his basketball ability. Sears soon found out that Stanford was, but he'd have to go to junior college first because of his grades. Sears was all set to start the process when Santa Clara came calling, offering a full ride right away.

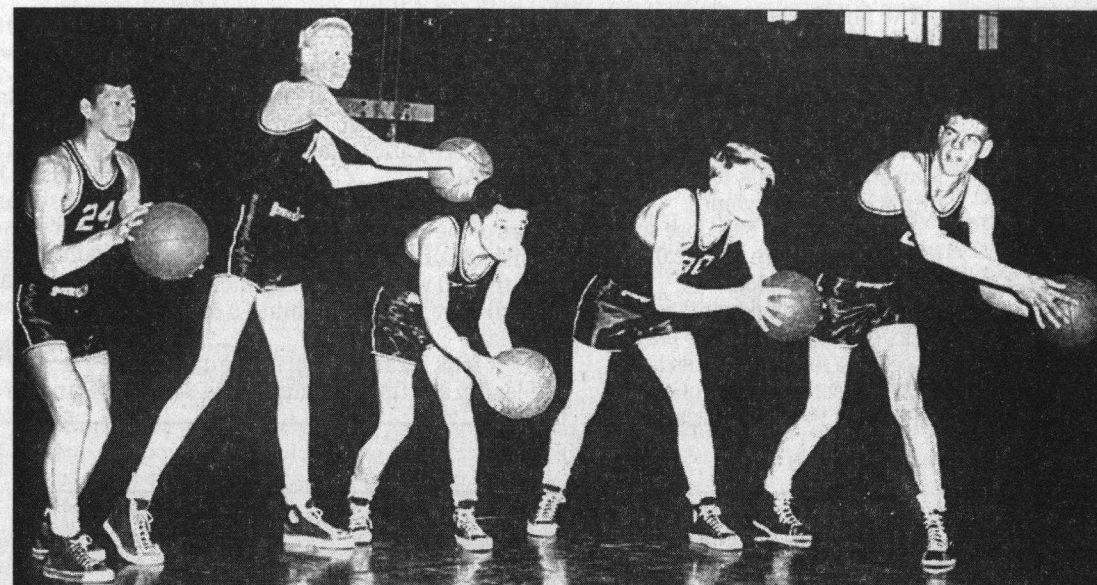
Sears was playing heavy minutes by the midway point of his freshman season on a team that finished the year playing in the NCAA Final Four. Santa Clara would make two more appearances in the tournament, both times making the elite eight, with Sears there. By the time he left college for the NBA, Sears was an All-American and two-time West Coast Conference player of the year.

A photographer from Sports Illustrated showed up at practice one day during his senior year and set up behind a glass backboard. He took a couple photos of Sears hitting a hook shot. Sears didn't think much of it.

"I guess I was one of the better players," Sears said. "But it wasn't a big deal at the time."

■■■

Sears was the first draft pick [No. 5 overall] of the New York Knicks in 1955. But he wasn't ready — for the big city, the cold weather, the cold reaction from fans. The City College of New York point-shaving scandal of 1951 was still fresh in the minds



The 1949 Watsonville High team was led by Kenny Sears, second from left.

of the New York fans, some of whom, Sears remembers, unabashedly bet on games at the arena.

"Many games, it would get close at the end," Sears said, "and they would be rooting for the other team."

Sears developed into the Knicks' leading scorer, and an All-Star who led the NBA in field goal percentage in 1959 and 1960. He was one of only 12 players ever to lead the league multiple seasons [others include Shaquille O'Neal, Kevin McHale and Wilt Chamberlain] in the category. He averaged double-digit points and at least eight rebounds per game during all six of his seasons with the Knicks. But even as he was developing into an All-Star, Sears wasn't happy. He never felt comfortable in New York, the Knicks always struggled [188-262 record while he was there, a .418 winning percentage] and management low-balled him in negotiations each year [he never made more than \$20,000 a season], telling their leading scorer how disappointed they were with his play every year.

"I was young enough to believe

it all," Sears said.

Sears did his best to escape. He threatened to remain in Watsonville one summer, until Eunice agreed to marry him and move to New York. When the American Basketball League formed in 1962, Sears was one of the first players to jump leagues, eagerly returning to the West Coast with the San Francisco Saints. The league folded after one season, and Sears went back to the Knicks. But before he did, he returned the money the Saints had given him up front for a two-year contract.

"I had no one to advise me," Sears said. "I thought it was the thing to do."

Sears was traded to the San Francisco Warriors the following season, as the team was looking for a big man who could shoot from the outside to take the pressure off center and future Hall-of-Famer Wilt Chamberlain. Sears, shy and modest, was also the perfect complement to Chamberlain and his out-sized personality off the court. They became friends, and Sears taught Chamberlain his favorite card game, Pedro. They often gambled on plane

trips, and Sears said the since-passed Chamberlain still owes him money.

"He took it to the grave with him," Sears said. "He wasn't the type where you could say, 'Hey pay me my money.'"

Sears played two seasons with the Warriors, then turned down an offer to play for the Los Angeles Lakers. At age 31, his NBA career was over.

"I didn't want to go anywhere," Sears said. "I was done."

Sears returned to Watsonville, worked in the bar he owned, "Kenny Sears and I" then sold it and started selling RVs. His NBA pension kicked in when he was 55, and he retired three years later.

■■■

Since moving back to Watsonville after his playing days ended, Sears has been spending about half of each year at his condo in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Sears loves the outdoors, being on the ocean and taking in the scenery. He fishes every morning he's there, with the same guy the past 25 years. There's no place he'd rather be than out on the ocean with his

Kenny Sears

AT A GLANCE

6-foot-9 forward ... 1951 Watsonville High graduate ... Third Team All-American at Santa Clara, 1955 ... Fifth overall pick in 1955 NBA Draft by the New York Knicks ... Led NBA in FG percentage, 1959, 1960 ... NBA All-Star appearances 1958, 1959.

foot propped up against the side of the boat, fighting to haul in a 25-pound dorado. He has a lot of friends in the town, people willing to help him drag his boat out in the morning, and distribute the catch when he returns.

But the past few years have become increasingly difficult to make the trip. He misses his two kids and three grandchildren back in California. Eunice's broken hip cut their trip short last year; this year's trip was shortened when Sears had brain surgery in the fall, which he is recovering from well.

"It's too much," Sears said. "We're getting close to maybe ending that lifestyle."

If he does, there will be a whole town sorry to see him go. Sears has become known as "Santa Sears" for his generosity, and can't walk around without being noticed. But Sears doesn't care about that. He prefers to let the results of the life he's lived do the talking. That's evidence enough. He doesn't need a ceremony, or the memories of others, to tell him what he's worth.

Garibaldi visited Sears in Mexico a few times, and accompanied him on some fishing trips. He's seen Sears struggle and fight to catch the fish, and the look on his face when he reels in a big one. But Sears usually is empty-handed when he returns home.

"He just gives the fish away," Garibaldi said.

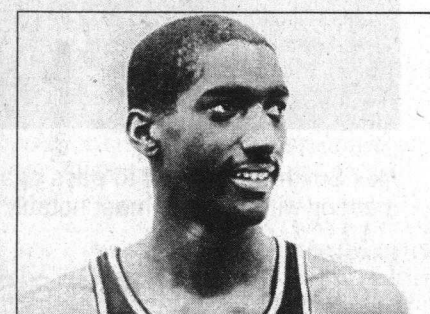
Contact Ryan Phillips at rphillips@santacruzsentinel.com.

The players

Continued from Page C1

team; and Young, the county's most sought-after player by colleges, a tall package of skill and smarts. The sixth man on the team is Steve Smith, a do-everything guard from Santa Cruz who went on to star at Cal.

The rest of the 12-member team features



best players to ever grace the county's hardwood. They include Gary Ghidinelli, Santa Cruz's all-around point guard and, before Russell, the standard for which all other county point guards were measured; Jeff Jones, Aptos' tenacious guard who took the 1986 team to the brink of a state title; Rich Montgomery, Santa Cruz's star center of the 50's; Larry Griffin, Santa Cruz's legendary, high-flying guard; Dave Mercer, Watsonville's multi-talented guard; and Dick Fassio, the star of the Santa Cruz City League when it captivated the town.

Thousands have played basketball in the area since 1893, the year the game was first played, as an exhibition, at the Santa Cruz YMCA. So much has changed — the game certainly has, but so has the county, growing from two high schools to 13 that now have varsity programs. And players have come and gone, some going on to star on a national stage like Young at Stanford, or an international stage like Connelly, who played professionally in Brazil.

What remains are the memories, the images of strength, fortitude and talent these kind of players evoke. Here's a closer look at the Sentinel's All-Time All-County basketball team:

The Playmaker

JUNIOR RUSSELL

SCHOOL: Santa Cruz
YEARS: 2001-2005

POSITION: Guard, 5-foot-6

CREDENTIALS: State Division III player of the year; MVP of D-III state championship game; California Community Colleges all-tournament team.

He made an impact right away. As a freshman, Russell was called up to the varsity team for the playoffs after a stellar on the JV team. With star senior Josh Rhodes limited by an ankle injury, Russell helped key a 15-0 run by the Cardinals in the second half after Santa Cruz trailed by three at halftime. Darting around the court, dishing to teammates and disrupting on defense, Russell gave a glimpse of his vast potential on his first big stage. "I can't say enough about the way he played," said Santa Cruz coach Pete Newell after the game. Russell would leave many speechless during his career at Santa Cruz. Newell called Russell "the most dynamic player to play in this community in the 30 years I've been involved," and that was before Russell's senior year, when he put together the single best season ever for a county high school player. The 5-foot-6 playmaker led his team to a state title while winning league, section and state MVP awards. And all that happened after Russell missed his entire sophomore season with a knee injury that limited and later sidelined him during his junior season. In 2006, Russell put together another terrific freshman season, this time in college, leading West Valley College to the California Community Colleges championship game, where he was named to the all-tournament team. Now a sophomore at West Valley, Russell has received a scholarship to Long Beach State and plans to enroll next fall.



The Scorer

JIM HART

SCHOOL: Harbor
YEARS: 1979-1983

POSITION: Guard/Forward, 6-foot-4

CREDENTIALS: Three-time SCCAL MVP; led CCS in scoring (32 points per game) senior year, second in state; scored 50 points in a game senior year; all-NorCal senior year; CCS junior and senior of the year; received scholarship to play at Fresno State and also played at Nevada-Reno.

Hart was leading the state in scoring his senior season, until the final game. "I scored 16, but Kevin Johnson scored 48 to beat me by one-tenth of a point," Hart recalls. Two years later, Hart met up with Johnson, by then the Cal point guard and one of the best players in the country, while Hart was playing for Nevada-Reno. Johnson told Hart, "I got you Hart. I got you by one tenth." An outstanding shooter, Hart was one of the best players in the state during his senior year of high school, and had many schools to pick from before settling on Fresno State, a defensive-oriented team. "It was a mistake," Hart said. "I was a scorer." He transferred to Nevada-Reno, where they played a fast-breaking style that suited him better. Now a first-year varsity coach at Scotts Valley, Hart is molding his team in his image. "I'm really enjoying it," Hart said of coaching. "These kids can really score."

The All-around Athlete

JEFFY CONNELLY

SCHOOL: Harbor
YEARS: 1981-1985

POSITION: Forward, 6-foot-4

CREDENTIALS: Two-time SCCAL MVP; led SCCAL in rebounding as a junior and scoring as a senior; recorded a triple-double as a senior; accepted scholarship to USC and also played at Santa Clara; played professionally for 13 years in Brazil and in the Western Basketball Association.

Connelly's 32-point, 23-rebound, 10-assist performance in a 65-58 win over Andrew Hill at the 1984 Independence Tournament ranks among the greatest single-game performances in county history. "It was absolutely the best game I've ever seen in high school," said Mike Gruber, Harbor's coach for the past 23 seasons. "They were a very good team, he just totally dominated the game." Gruber said one of Connelly's main weapons was his unique leaping ability which helped



LEFT: Watsonville's Dave Mercer. **ABOVE:** The Santa Cruz Civic was often packed for city league games, especially if Dick Fassio was on the floor in the 1940s. **RIGHT:** Santa Cruz's Larry Griffin starred in the early 1960s.

him become an outstanding rebounder. "He could do it three or four times in a row," Gruber said of Connelly's leaps under the hoop. "He was like a pogo stick, just relentless around the boards." Connelly played sparingly his first two years at Harbor as he sat behind Hart, before breaking out his junior year. By his senior year, like Hart, Connelly was among the most hotly-recruited players in the state, and turned down Cal and Stanford to play at USC. After his freshman season, he transferred to Santa Clara, where he was the Broncos' leading scorer his senior year, averaging 16.2 points and five rebounds a game. He was drafted by Omaha in the seventh round of the 1990 CBA draft before starring in Brazil for most of his pro career.

The Shot-blocker

TIM YOUNG

SCHOOL: Harbor
YEARS: 1990-1994

POSITION: Center, 7-foot-1

CREDENTIALS: Three-time SCCAL MVP; four time all-SCCAL; led SCCAL in scoring twice and rebounding three times; led Pac-10 in rebounding in 1997 and averaged 11.7 points and 8.7 rebounds in four-year career at Stanford; drafted by the Golden State Warriors in the second round of the 1999 NBA draft.

Young was already 6-8 in the eighth grade, too big for the desks at Branciforte Middle School. By the time he was a freshman, he was 6-10, and topped out at 7-1 by high school graduation. Mike Gruber remembers Young had more than 100 blocks as a freshman, and that number gradually decreased each season after that. "People just stopped going in there," Gruber said. "It was pointless." No player from the county was ever pursued by colleges the way Young was. Gruber started getting mail from colleges while Young was a sophomore, and it began to pile up big time after Young played well at the Nike Camp after his sophomore year. Gruber remembers a steady stream of coaches coming through during Young's junior year. "I was never lonely in open gym," Gruber said. Young played regularly at Stanford, though his sophomore season was basically wiped out because of a back injury. He was one of the best players in the Pac-10 his junior and senior seasons. After playing sparingly in his one season with the Warriors, Young went on to play with two different teams in Spain.

The Versatile Big Man

KENNY SEARS

SCHOOL: Watsonville
YEARS: 1947-1951

POSITION: Forward/Center, 6-foot-9

CREDENTIALS: Eight-year NBA career; three-time All-Star; led NBA in field-goal percentage in 1959 and 1960.

See Page C1 for more on Sears.

The Fully Loaded Bench

■ **STEVE SMITH, SANTA CRUZ, 1959-1962**

The All-County sixth man, Smith [6-3] won numerous awards and was named to many all-star teams during his final two years of high school, including third team All-Northern California by The San Francisco Chronicle in 1962. He became starter at Cal during sophomore season, and was also the starting second baseman on the baseball team. Smith wasn't just an all-around athlete, but a well-rounded person — he never got below a 4.0 grade point average at Cal, and didn't play either sport as a junior, instead studying abroad in Italy. "There are lots of things I'd like to do there which I would never have a chance to do if I stayed at Cal," Smith told The Daily Californian in 1964. "I haven't played soccer since high school, and I really like the game."

■ **JEFF JONES, APTOS, 1982-1986**

Highly-competitive 6-1 guard was one of the greatest scorers in county history, and usually saved his best efforts for the biggest games. In the 1986 NorCal championship game, Smith, already the D-II MVP for the SCCAL and CCS, scored a season-high 33 points as Aptos upset the No. 1 D-II team in the state, Mt. Eden. "He had the mind-set to take the big shot and the ability to make it," Pete Newell said. "Every team needs a Jeff Jones."

■ **DAVE MERCER, WATSONVILLE, 1961-1965**

An all-tournament selection for the prestigious Tournament of Champions as a 5-8 sophomore guard, Mercer may have played his best game after his high school and college careers were over. Playing in a fundraiser game that pitted the San Lorenzo Valley High faculty against the Oakland Raiders, Mercer scored 60 points as the SLV teachers upset the Fred Biletnikoff and Art Shell-led team. "I don't know how it happened," Mercer said. "I had a hot night, I guess."

■ **GARY GHIDINELLI, SANTA CRUZ, 1966-1969**



A three-year starter, two-time all-SCCAL selection and SCCAL player of the year in 1969, Ghidinelli was a 6-foot point guard for four league championship teams [Santa Cruz won the lightweight title when he was a freshman]. An outstanding passer and shooter, Ghidinelli picked up his scoring early his senior season to make up for the absence of center Tom Foster, who was injured. "He seemed to be everywhere, and just at the right moment," The Sentinel wrote of Ghidinelli in 1969.

■ **RICH MONTGOMERY, SANTA CRUZ, 1949-1953**

An All-West Coast Conference selection as a 6-6 junior at Santa Clara, Montgomery also played professionally in Italy and Spain. Montgomery was captivated by the European lifestyle and culture, and still lives overseas, in Switzerland. He speaks Italian and Spanish, and can also understand French. Montgomery played in Europe when the pro leagues were just forming. One game in Italy in the late 50's, Montgomery remembers playing in a building that had part of its roof still missing after being blown away in World War II. "It was so cold that sweat would freeze on the floor," Montgomery said. "It was amazing we didn't catch pneumonia, all of us. We'd hit ice on the court and slip and fall."

■ **LARRY GRIFFIN, SANTA CRUZ, 1961-1965**

Remembered most for his astounding athleticism and leaping ability, Griffin was also the consummate team player, according to his Santa Cruz High coach, Bill Dodge. Griffin averaged 20 points per game as a 6-5 senior, but it could have been a lot more, Dodge said. "He was unselfish with the ball, not worrying about scoring records," Dodge said. "If a teammate was open, he would get the ball."

■ **DICK FASSIO, SANTA CRUZ, 1939-1943**

Fassio was the best player in the immensely popular Santa Cruz City League, which regularly filled up the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium's 2,000 seat capacity during the 1940s and 1950s. Fassio was a 6-foot star in high school, being named outstanding player in Northern California in 1941 by the San Francisco Chronicle and San Francisco Examiner, and was also a city league all-star at the same time. After serving in the Army after high school graduation, Fassio returned to Santa Cruz in 1946 and picked up where he left off. The Santa Cruz Hotel teams Fassio played on, which also featured another top city league player, Manuel Nieto, won six straight city league titles.

For more on how the team was selected, and the toughest missions, see Ryan Phillips' basketball blog at www.santacruzlive.com/blogs/offtheglass/

ALL-COUNTY BASKETBALL TEAM

THE GIRLS GAME

GRACE AND FIRE

By RYAN PHILLIPS
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

When Esther Wilson played basketball at Santa Cruz High, the guards guarded, the forwards shot, and the centers stayed in the center of the court. And that was it.

Wilson, who graduated in 1955, played a remarkably different brand of basketball than her daughter, Kathy, did 20 years later. Now, her son John is involved with the current generation as the girls coach at Soquel.

In Esther Wilson's day, the court was divided into thirds, and players were limited to their share of the court. Only two bounces each touch of the ball were allowed.

"The center job was so boring," Wilson said. "I was a forward mostly, so I got to shoot."

Watsonville and Santa Cruz had girls teams that traveled to play schools like Monterey and Gilroy during the early part of the 20th century — the 1915 Watsonville High yearbook said, "girls have taken a great deal of interest in basketball this year." But by the end of the 1920s, the traveling teams had been replaced by after-school, intramural contests with the peculiar rules.

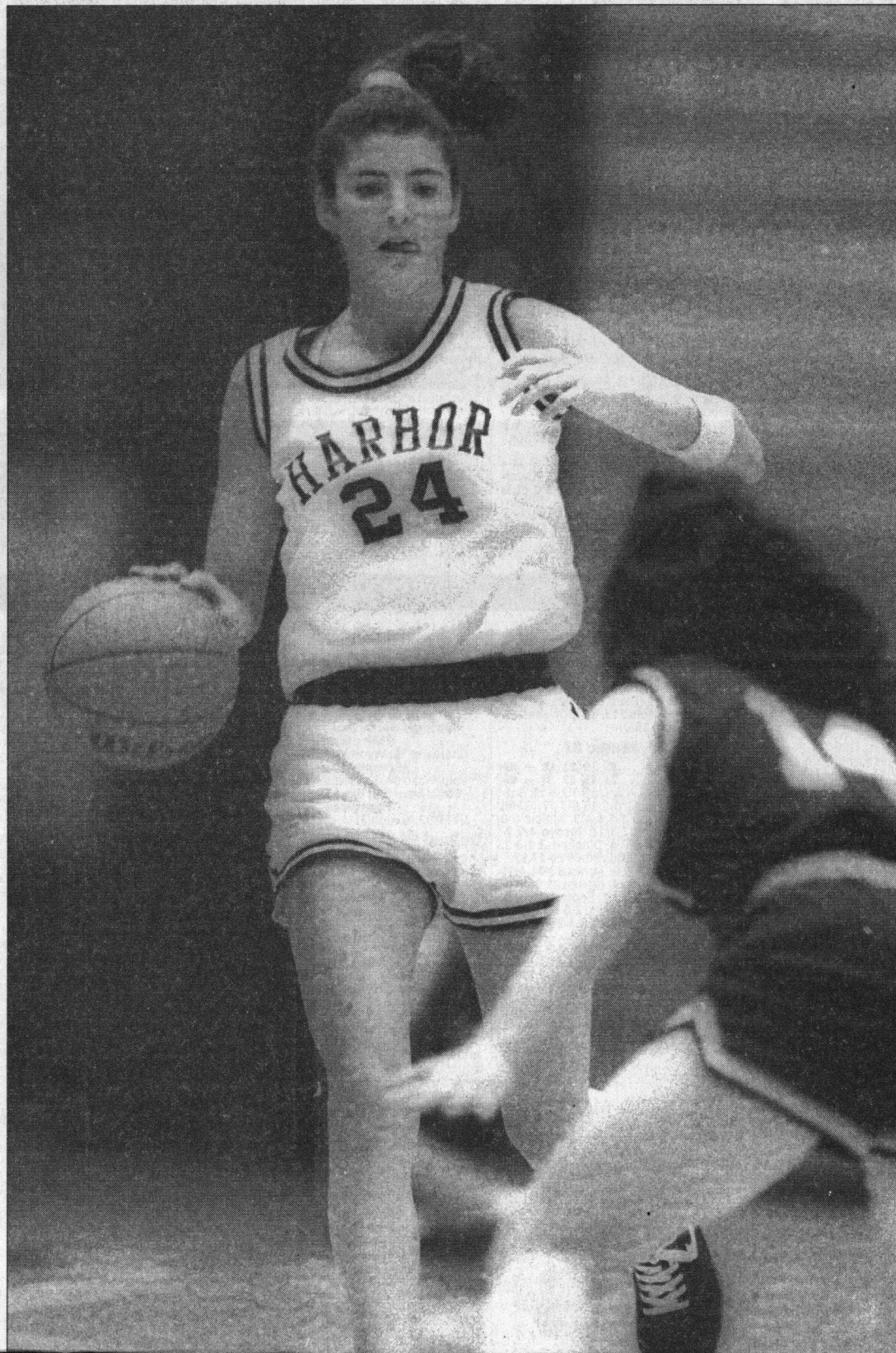
The modern era of high school varsity girls basketball in Santa Cruz County started in 1973, thanks to Title IX. Sue Dodge, who was a freshman at Santa Cruz that year, remembers the team wore old P.E. uniform tops and old track shorts.

By their senior year in 1977, Dodge said the crowds and uniforms improved, and Santa Cruz played in the first girls Central Coast Section tournament, placing third.

"We started out with absolutely nothing," Dodge said, "but we were very successful."

The county has seen many successful girls teams since, most notably Nick Adams' Harbor teams, which won 10 consecutive league titles from 1984-1994, and Dan Gruber's 1983 Aptos team, which played for a NorCal championship.

Recently, the most consistently successful girls team in the area has been Soquel. The Knights played in the NorCal Tournament last season for the second time in the past four years.



Santa Cruz County Teams of Destiny

By RYAN PHILLIPS
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

"A perfect storm," the on-line encyclopedia site Wikipedia says, "refers to the simultaneous occurrence of events which, taken individually, would be far less powerful than the result of their chance combination. Such occurrences are rare by their very nature, so that even a slight change in any one event contributing to the perfect storm would lessen its overall impact."

A great high school basketball team forms like a perfect storm — so many factors have to play out just right for a great team to become an immortal one. Combine the right players with the right coach, add the right style of play, mix in a little luck, and what comes out, ever so rarely, is a team that goes down as one of the greats.

Steve Miles, the longtime Monte Vista Christian boys coach, was an assistant under Bill Warmerdam at Aptos during the 1986 season, one of the greatest ever for a Santa Cruz County boys basketball team.

"They were a group of gym rats that grew up together," Miles said. "They just loved the game and they loved playing for Warmerdam. Who those kids were, and the style of play Warmer opened up, all turned into a fantastic year for them. It was a good match."

Miles could have been speaking about any one of the great county teams — each team had to have the perfect match to reach great height, so much had to go right for these teams to succeed, and be remembered as they are. In commemoration of the Sentinel's 150th anniversary, here's the Sentinel's list of the top 10 teams in Santa Cruz County boys basketball history:

No. 1 Santa Cruz High 2004-05

FINISH: Won state Division III title.

TOP PLAYERS: PG Junior Russell, F Cliff Sammet, G Austin Swift.

NOTABLE: Won Santa Cruz County's only basketball state championship in coach Pete Newell Jr.'s 30th and final season ... Led by the Russell's extraordinary play-making ability, team won 36 games, the most ever for a Central Coast Section basketball team ... Four players from team signed with Division I colleges as of this year.

No. 2 Aptos High 1985-86

FINISH: Lost state Division II championship game.

TOP PLAYERS: G Jeff Jones, F Warren Holt, C Cris Warmerdam, G Craig Holt.

NOTABLE: One of two county NorCal championship teams ... A tremendous offensive team, especially in outside shooting ... Jones, Warmerdam and both Holt brothers made All-NorCal team ... Ranked No. 1 in CCS all season ... Warmerdam had 13 blocks in NorCal championship game ... Finished 33-2, including 31 straight wins.

No. 3 Santa Cruz High 1952-53

FINISH: Won Tournament of Champions consolation bracket.

TOP PLAYERS: C Rich Montgomery, G Joe Monachello, F John Karsten.

NOTABLE: Lost to Alameda, the No. 1 team in Northern California, in opening round of TOC, but won two other games for consolation championship ... Montgomery (Santa Clara), Monachello (Fresno State) and Karsten (Sacramento State) all played college ball ... coached by Franklin "Lindy" Lindeburg, who left after the season to become the first athletic director at UC Riverside.

Though there have been many county girls who have gone on to play college basketball, former Santa Cruz boys coach Pete Newell Jr., also a longtime area girls coach, said he thinks Wilson's best player this year, Hannah Passafiume, will be ranked among the best when she leaves school. Newell compared Passafiume to Maile Jenkins, one of Adams' best players.

"Those two are on another level," Newell said. "They can play all five positions, and they're intelligent enough to take care of it."

The girls' game has come a long way since Esther Wilson picked up a basketball in the Santa Cruz after-school program. The game has evolved a lot, especially in the past 30 years — when Santa Cruz took the floor in the first CCS girls tournament, there were 14 teams in one division. Last season, 75 teams in five divisions competed at CCS.

Still, after seeing the game change in the county during the past 50 years, and watching her daughters, and now granddaughters play, Esther Wilson said she isn't surprised at how far the game has come.

"They're athletes," Wilson said, "If they're taught well, they'll be fine."

Here are the Sentinel's picks for Santa Cruz County's All-Time starting five, a talented group of all-around athletes, winners and ground-breakers:

Karen Cantoni

SCHOOL: APTOS
POSITION: FORWARD
YEARS: 1979-1983

CREDENTIALS: Player of the year 1983; All-SCCAL three times; led Aptos to 1983 Division II NorCal championship game; played college basketball at Southern Methodist University.

A stellar player all four years, Cantoni became immortalized during the Mariners' '83 playoff run. Down 13 points in the CCS D-II title game, Cantoni delivered a spirited speech in the huddle during a timeout, then backed it up. After missing four consecutive shots to start the quarter, Cantoni caught fire, scoring 10 points after that, as well as forcing turnovers at the top of the Mariners' halfcourt trap. Then, in the NorCal semifinals, Cantoni scored 28 points to help Aptos upset the state's top-ranked D-II team, Campolindo. Her competitive spirit, and her speech during the CCS title game are what stand out the most to Dan Gruber, the coach of that team. "She just kind of said 'It's time to step it up,'" Gruber said. "Those are the type of things I remember. She was always the one we wanted to have the ball in their hands down the stretch."



Evonne Sandas

SCHOOL: SANTA CRUZ
POSITION: GUARD
YEARS: 1973-1977

CREDENTIALS: Player of the year 1977; led Santa Cruz to third-place finish in first-ever CCS appearance; played college basketball at Texas-Arlington.

Sandas was the leading scorer for the first dominant county girls team, which lost in the CCS semifinals in the first year of the tournament in Sandas' senior year. The team was led by the backcourt of Sandas and Sue Dodge, both of whom went on to play college basketball. "She was the point guard and I was the wing," Dodge said. "She would run down the court and I'd huck it to her. That was the give-and-go. Give it to me, and go Evonne."

Rae Ann Pifferini

SCHOOL: SOQUEL
POSITION: GUARD
YEARS: 1983-1987

CREDENTIALS: Player of the year 1987; led Monterey Bay area in scoring junior and senior seasons; started every game from freshman

season on.

"In my eyes, she was the best," said Stu Walters, the former Soquel girls coach and current boys coach. "She was a competitor. I remember one night, a team tried to guard her with five players. It was one-on-five." Walters remembers Pifferini as the first player to show up and the last to leave. Often, she'd stay late and take on members of the boys team that showed up early for practice. "Some guys feel threatened by me," Pifferini told the Sentinel after winning her player of the year award in 1987. "I can't go out with a guy who gets jealous of that."

Maile Jenkins

SCHOOL: HARBOR
POSITION: FORWARD
YEARS: 1987-1991

CREDENTIALS: Three-time SCCAL player of the year; All-SCCAL four times; played college basketball at the University of St. Mary's.

Jenkins was a 6-foot point guard when she won her first player of the year award as a sophomore. "Early on, we had some ball-handling problems and we needed some-

Above: Bill Lovejoy. Left: Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

ABOVE: Maile Jenkins brings the ball up the floor for Harbor. **LEFT:** Rae Ann Pifferini of Soquel drives to the basket against Santa Cruz in 1986.

one to bring the ball up the court," Harbor coach Nick Adams told the Sentinel in 1989. "Maile did that, but she can post up, she can drive, she can shoot from the outside — she can play all five positions or any other you want to make up."

Jenkins' career at Harbor came right in the middle of a 10-year run [1984-1994] of SCCAL championships for Harbor under Adams. Though Adams had a number of great players, including Ellen Gordon who went on to play at the University of San Francisco, Kristen Dumford, Lori Cox and Cathy Mahoric, Jenkins, who grew up in North Carolina, stands alone.

Adams remembers the first day Jenkins walked through the door of the Harbor gym.

"It was wonderful to have a girl from North Carolina walk into open gym and say, 'Hi, I'm coming to Harbor,'" Adams said.

Ashley Dunn

SCHOOL: SOQUEL
POSITION: CENTER
YEARS: 2000-2004

CREDENTIALS: Player of the year 2003, 2004; All-SCCAL four times; started every game from freshman season on; earned scholarship to San Jose State.

Soquel has been the dominant team of the new century, and while John Wilson has had some very good players like Samantha Hart, Ashley Oakes and Lauren Passafiume, none were as dominant as Dunn. She averaged a double-double her junior and senior seasons, and shot almost 50 percent from 3-point range as a junior center. As a senior, she led the Knights further than they had been before, advancing to the semifinals of the Northern California playoffs. She was also the team's best defender and averaged 15 points per game.

"Her ability exceeded anybody," Wilson said. "We've had some talented girls since then, but we've never had a girl as talented and versatile as Ashley Dunn."

No. 4 Watsonville High 1950-51

FINISH: Won Tournament of Champions consolation bracket.
TOP PLAYERS: C Kenny Sears, F Roland Brooks, G Tony Russo.

NOTABLE: First Santa Cruz County team to place at Tournament of Champions ... led by Brooks' outside shooting and Sears' inside presence ... undefeated in Coastal Counties Athletic League play ... one of TOC favorites, Wildcats were upset by Mt. Diablo in first round on last-minute shot ... Sears scored 17 points in consolation final, finishing with tournament-leading 53 points and was named to the all-tournament team.

No. 5 Watsonville High 1962-63

FINISH: Lost Tournament of Champions consolation championship game.

TOP PLAYERS: G Jeff Mercer, F John Sipin, G Ralph Ramirez.
NOTABLE: Deep and balanced team ... Driven by guard play of Mercer and the speedy, 5-foot-1 Ramirez, teammates on the lightweight team the year before ... Mercer, a sophomore, was named to TOC all-tournament team.

No. 6 Watsonville High 1931

FINISH: Won North Coast Section title.

TOP PLAYERS: G August Varni, F Barney Perovich.

NOTABLE: First county team to win section championship ... finished season 6-1 ... beat heavily favored San Mateo 23-19 for NCS southern section title, followed by a 20-14 upset of Berkeley in the NCS title game ... Perovich was the high scorer in NCS championship game with eight points ... one of two county teams to finish season with a win in highest caliber postseason tournament in which it could compete.

No. 7 Santa Cruz High 1968-69

FINISH: Lost CCS title game.

TOP PLAYERS: G Gary Ghidinelli, F Tom Foster, C Kris Sorenson, F Dave Paul.

NOTABLE: Likely the deepest team in county history, with an outstanding starting five backed by six others who played regularly ... Tone was set by unselfish team leaders Ghidinelli and Foster, the two best passers on the team ... Finished year ranked No. 5 in NorCal by San Francisco Chronicle ... Four players went on to play college ball.

No. 8 Harbor High 1992-93

FINISH: Lost in first round of Northern California playoffs.

TOP PLAYERS: C Tim Young, F Sam Crosson, G Chris Shoemaker.

NOTABLE: Won first 31 games before dropping last two ... Led by Young, a 7-1 junior center who went on to star at Stanford and played in the NBA ... Crosson joined Young on All-SCCAL first team.

No. 9 Santa Cruz High 1998-99

FINISH: Lost in Central Coast Section semifinals.

TOP PLAYERS: F Josh Rhodes, G Derek McDougall, C Marcel Jackson.

NOTABLE: Won first 32 games before CCS loss ... Won by an average of 18 points per game ... Led by Rhodes, a 6-6 freshman forward and SCCAL player of the year who later accepted a scholarship to Iowa ... Deep, defensively superior team that started three players at least 6-5.

NO. 10 Aptos High 1977-1978

FINISH: Lost in CCS quarterfinals.

TOP PLAYERS: G Kevin Walters, G Dick Enzweiler.

NOTABLE: First team to finish season without a loss [15-0] in SCCAL play ... led by Walters, the SCCAL's player of year and leading scorer [19.7 ppg] ... First of the highly successful run-and-gun teams coached by Bill Warmerdam ... Finished 24-3 overall, at the time the best record in school history.

Throughout the season, the Sentinel will hold online voting for fans to choose the county's top team in a virtual tournament. Watch for the tournament at santacruzsentinel.com.