

# Banner day for basketball Rebels

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The lucky ones are in Florida, playing golf; others decided the drive back home on a February night was too much for a ceremony that would take just a few minutes.

But four members of the 1970 Inverness Rebels who brought a provincial championship to a town that had only recently been introduced to basketball basked in the applause from hundreds of spectators as their recreated banner was raised to the rafters.

"They're all still alive, even the coach, many still living in the place one described as 'the best place on Earth for six months of the year, and the worst in the world for the other six.'"

"We were a small town in the middle of nowhere basically, our nearest opponents were Antigonish, New Glasgow, Sydney or farther up to the mainland. Basketball wasn't a thing around here but somehow we started playing. There was nothing else to do," said Doug Ryan, one of the 1970 Rebels, who was in grade five or six when Avery Kempton, a United Church minister, got basketball started in the town.

Ryan's cousin was one of 20 boys who tried out for that first team.

"And Mr. Kempton said, 'Tomorrow you guys are going to have to wear shorts, you have to wear shorts when you're playing basketball.' Half the team quit, they were playing in pants, they didn't know, they never wore shorts in their lives, maybe they did to go to the beach, that was it," Ryan said.

By the time Ryan was on the high school team, it was coached by Gary MacInnis and it was good enough to beat most schools its size and to give big schools a game, sometimes more than that. An Inverness yearbook



From left, Wayne Smith, Alex Ryan and Doug Ryan played on the 1969-70 Inverness Rebels team that won a provincial high school basketball title. The team's original championship banner was lost when their school was torn down. A new banner was presented to the team during a recent ceremony. CONTRIBUTED

records a one-point win over Queen Elizabeth High at a tournament, though one of the Rebels says he can't be sure because it was a long time ago, but that might have been QEH's JV team.

"We were the best team in this area," asserts Ryan. "Years later Margaree Forks had some real good teams, they won provincials, but not in our time. And Hawkesbury and Isle Madame and Guysborough weren't as good

as us, but they were decent. Then you'd go to Sydney side, and they were competitive with us but we used to beat them. And we played big schools, the QEH and them. We'd win some but most times we didn't, they were just too big."

Doug Ryan's cousin Alex Ryan was in Grade 11 during that championship season, playing with guys he'd known all his life.

"It was just a group of

guys in a small town trying to entertain themselves. Our school here was P-12 and I don't know if we even had 500 kids," Alex Ryan said. "We'd sneak in the gym and we had wicked support from every corner of the administration. The janitors would come in on Saturday and we'd be in there playing, they'd sit and watch us for a while, they'd do a bit of cleaning and when they were leaving they'd say 'lock 'er up, boys.'"

Players remember suiting up for about 50 games in 1969-70, but no more than five at home before provincials, which Inverness hosted.

"We had to go on the road, they wouldn't come over here, they wouldn't have to," asserts Doug Ryan.

At the four-team B provincials, Inverness beat Hantsport in the semis and Bridgewater in the final.

"They had a bigger team than us but we went hard and we had great fan support," Doug Ryan remembers. "Our coach, Mr. McInnis, was fantastic. We were pretty close, a small town and we knew each other so well."

And, if not for some bureaucratic vandalism decades in the future, that would be the end of a nice story.

Since the Rebels win, Inverness Consolidated High School amalgamated with other schools and, in a new building, became Inverness Academy.

Among the victims of the wrecking ball was the school's collection of trophies and championship banners, including the one presented to the 1969-70 Rebels.

"It went missing," Doug Ryan said. "Somebody put it in the garbage."

Enter Phil Blackwood, who grew up in the basketball mad town of New Waterford and is in his second year as gym teacher and basketball coach in Inverness.

He re-started the school's basketball program after an absence of seven years and wanted to mark the 50th anniversary of the Rebels' championship, so he commissioned a re-creation of the championship banner.

"So we're trying to build up momentum again and we get a lot of support in the community, especially from those guys that won that. So we said what better way to honour and perhaps spark a little interest in the school again for basketball than to honour those guys," Blackwood said.

CONTINUED ON C2

## FROM PAGE C1 REBELS

"I actually have the 1970 team picture in my office and every now and then the kids will be walking by and I'll show it to them. So they had a little understanding already. We're a small town, and those guys that won in 1970 are still here."

Blackwood invited everyone, especially 1969-70 alumni, to turn out for a regional championship game Inverness Academy was

to host.

"He said, 'The gym is going to be full and we're going to put the banner up and the kids will see that other people did something kind of half special.' And the gym was full, they had three or four hundred people there, everybody dressed in red and they made a big to do over it," Doug Ryan said.

"They raised the banner and it was kind of nice."

One member of the Rebels went on to play for St. F.X. and another for Dalhousie.

But, it was announced to the crowd, it was Alex Ryan who scored 19 points in the 48-39 win over Bridgewater in the final to lead his team to victory.

"They read that out and I never knew that," he said. "I must have known it at some time but I was kind of surprised, because there was four or five guys on any night could have been the leading scorer. We were all pretty decent."

The 1969-70 Inverness Rebels. CONTRIBUTED

