

Hoops Heaven

by Jay Copp

Massive glaciers, snow-capped peaks and towering forests dominate rugged southeast Alaska. On one of its thousands of isolated coastal islands is Hoonah, the state's largest Tlinglit community with 823 people. Most villagers scrape a living out of fishing. The dreary, slate-gray skies emit steady showers of rain or snow and daylight dwindles to six hours at the peak of winter. Hoonah has one convenience store, no stoplights and no streets at all aside from hundreds of miles of rough-hewn logging roads. Yet Hoonah has three gyms and four outdoor basketball courts. The native Alaskans love their hoops.



Village pride is at stake, and the competition at Gold Medal is ferocious.

Longtime Alaska Tournament Unites Friends and Foes



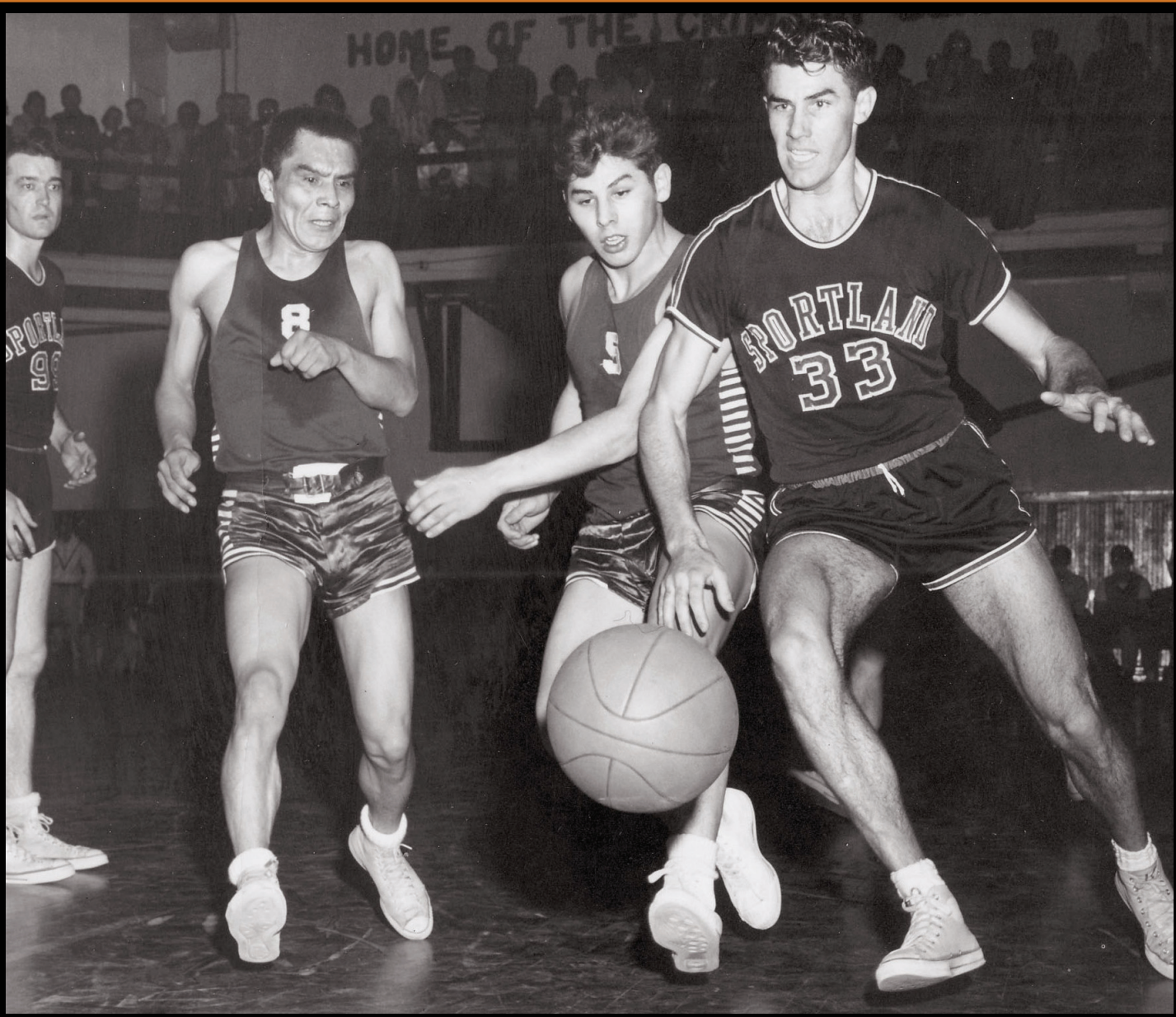
Winning at Gold Medal is joyous.

Photos by Michael Penn/Juneau Empire

The gyms and courts are especially packed in the late fall and winter. Crowds gather to watch the young men rush up and down the courts. A sense of urgency grows as the days pass. The villagers know that in other southeast Alaskan communities young men also are working on their jump shots, conditioning and team strategies. In March, nearly all of Hoonah will empty out and take a ferry or fly to Juneau. There they will join other villagers to fill a large gym and cheer raucously as they have done for 60 years. The Gold Medal basketball tournament is a rite of spring for southeast Alaska. “Every community has lots of pride,” says Dennis Gray, 68, who first played in Gold Medal in 1960. “There’s just a lot of strong competition. We grew up together [playing other villagers in school]. There’s a powerful rivalry on the court. That’s just how it is in sports.”

In the 1940s Lions in Juneau went door to door selling light bulbs and brooms to raise funds for their charitable projects. Then a Boy Scout official named Del Hanks who had traveled throughout southeast Alaska spoke at one of their meetings. Hanks knew that Alaskans in remote villages were basketball fanatics. Driven indoors by the intemperate weather and lacking any sort of entertainment, villagers played hoops with a passion. He proposed to the Lions, “Why not hold a tournament here in Juneau?” Thus in 1947, the Gold Medal tournament, named after the company that initially provided the gleaming trophies, began.

Gold Medal was an instant hit and remains deeply woven into the fabric of life of many communities in southeast Alaska. Schools schedule their spring vacation to coincide with the March tournament. Parents take off work. Communities hold bake sales, raffles and seafood dinners and schedule games against other villages to raise funds for the costly trip to Juneau. Family members who moved away from their village, often in search of work, travel to Juneau to reunite with relatives and to cheer on their village. Gold Medal combines the edge-of-your-seat drama of a do-or-die sports competition with the warmth of a family reunion and reassurance of a tradi-



Sitka takes on Fairbanks Sportland in 1955.
Photo courtesy of Juneau-Douglas City Museum

tional community event. For small villages spread out over 43,000 square miles, the annual trek to Juneau is “like a religious journey,” according to one fan.

“It’s a blast. It’s electric. It’s like the Final Four. I don’t think one person is left in the community when Gold Medal is going on,” says Greg Indreland of Yakutat, a sleepy village of 800. The fans are as invested in the game as the players. Says Ted Burke, president of the Juneau Lions and two-time co-chair of the tournament, “It just blows you away. Hoonah is beating its drum and running with its flag. Yakatuk has its own 10-foot-high flag.”

The whole city pulses with a special beat. Groups like Rotary hold their boat show and otherwise capitalize on the extra people in town and the charged-up atmosphere.

“You’re bowled over by how much is going on besides what’s going on in the gym. ‘I haven’t seen you in three months.’ ‘I’m here for Gold Medal,’” says Ross Soboleff, a Lion whose father, Walter, has been part of the tournament since the beginning.

The tournament encapsulates and embraces the contradictions of Alaska. The region is vast, isolated and barren of roads. Yet villagers somehow know one another. Community pride makes the games ferocious. Yet after the game the warriors become friends. “Even though there are no roads everybody is related to everybody,” says Burke. “Alaska is an enormous place. But when you come here there is no such thing as distance.” Indreland, 46, recalls a tense game against the always formidable Hoonah



It's trophy time in 1949.

squad. “There was a loose ball and Stu Miller and I dove for it. There were some wrestling after the whistle. They separated us. There were 80-year-old ladies in the stands giving me hell. Stu and I became friends because of that. That defined our relationship.”

‘We Had Sports’

Gray worked for three decades in Hoonah fishing salmon until regulations hampered him. He also logged for nearly 30 years but the logging industry was curtailed by environmental concerns. He now teaches truck driving. Basketball has been a mainstay. A clever 5-9 point guard, he styled his play after Bob Cousy of the Celtics. When his Gold Medal days ended, he instructed first his sons and

then his grandsons. His own father had signed him up for a “pins and diapers” league when he was 7.

Basketball was part of Gray’s daily routine. The older kids in town commandeered the better outdoor courts so he and his friends used the beat-up court by the tidal flats. “The tide changes every six hours. Then we couldn’t dribble any more so we became shooters and passers,” he says. “We were running all the time so our feet were OK. But our hands got awful cold.”

Gil Truitt, 80, is from Sitka, which counted 1,200 people in the 1940s when he was a kid. He and six siblings lived in “a shack. We were very poor. We didn’t know it.” Basketball was in his blood. “It was the only game in town. There was no TV. We had no money. We had sports.” At his first Gold Medal game in the 1940s, when high school-age players were still allowed and the tournament was single elimination, his team from Sitka dropped its first game and was out of the tournament. “We played against men all the time but it was frightening to play against them at Gold Medal. They didn’t take pity on us because we were in high school,” he says.

The next year, his team was more prepared and they took third. Truitt became a teacher, administrator and coach. He still attends Gold Medal. “It creates community pride. It’s a great social event. You see old friends,” he says.

The open bracket of Gold Medal welcomes the most competitive teams and two brackets exist for older players. Thus villagers who played on school teams against other villagers can continue the competition at Gold Medal. “You get to compete against them for the rest of your life,” says Indreland, a self-described Army brat who married a local girl after moving to Alaska from Montana.

Indreland worked the “slime line” at a fish processing plant before becoming an owner of a plant. As a non-native, he especially appreciates the lure of basketball. “It’s

the one thing that ties a community together,” he says. “It’s the sport you do when you are old enough to dribble a basketball. It’s what you do when it’s snowy and gloomy every day.”

Life can be harsh in Alaska. Jobs disappear. Prospects are bleak. Prices keep rising. “Nobody can understand what it’s like to live in Alaska until you’ve lived here,” says Indreland. “It’s \$10 for milk. \$4.75 for a loaf of bread. \$9 for a block of cheese.” Young people especially are susceptible to losing a sense of purpose. “Going three nights a week to the gym keeps kids out of bars. You run around for two hours and you’re too tired to get arrested. You may be frustrated but when you run around like that your anger goes away,” says Indreland.

Billy Bean, 71, played in Gold Medal for 10 years for Kake, a village of 900. A logger, he devoted his non-working hours to sharpening his game. “We’d run and run and run. I was in the gym from 7 to 11 in the morning and then from 6 to 9. We knew we had to get ready or they’d eat us up and spit us out.”

Then, as now, there were no roads to Juneau. Nor did the “blue canoes,” the Alaska state ferries, exist then. Some villagers flew to Gold Medal in rickety “puddle jumpers.” Many hunkered down in the smelly, frozen holds of fishing boats for the trip of 18 or more hours over the rough seas. Getting to Juneau was victory all its own. “There were a lot of super-nasty storms,” recalls Bean. Boats sometimes were forced to tie up to a dock midway and players, anxious about missing their game, hurriedly chipped off the sheet of ice that encased the ship.

In Juneau, players slept in the hold for the week on makeshift bunks made from two-by-fours. Or they stayed with relatives or in the homes of Lions.

In the first decade some teams slept and ate at Presbyterian Memorial Church, where Lion Walter Soboleff was a minister. There wasn’t extra cash. That holds true today with the average family income in many villages hovering below \$15,000, necessitating the fundraisers to help defray the cost of attending the tournament.

Alaska can be a seat-of-your pants proposition. Even Lions working the tournament find themselves in a bind. Years ago a Lion who took the ferry to Juneau to work the tournament had hocked his transistor radio pay for his fare. He came with empty pockets. So a Lion gave him \$20 for food and friends took him in.

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More Than Hoops

Two dozen or so teams typically play in Gold Medal. Each year tournament officials must decide what villages will be allowed to compete in Gold Medal. They decide based on team competitiveness, fan base and equity such as last appearance. Lions must break the unpleasant news. “The guys that can handle that have skills I can’t even begin to understand,” says Ross Soboleff.

This night two longtime rivals, Hoonah and Kake, play each other. The listings for Kake in the phone book run a little more than a page. Hoonah runs two pages. Yet the 2,000-seat high school gym is sold out and the noise is deafening. “Kake!” shouts one side of the gym. “Hoonah!” shouts the other. A grinning man in the stands sports a shirt that reads: “Last one out of Hoonah going to Gold Medal turn out the lights.”

Gold Medal is a happening. The games are broadcast on radio. The *Juneau Empire* newspaper publishes a special section and offers blogs and video highlights on its Web site. Merchants reap a windfall. Spectators crowd the stores and restaurants, especially pizza parlors, which are rare in villages. Villagers who transported their vehicles on the ferry load them to the hilt with groceries, clothes, furniture and other items they can buy once a year in Juneau.

More than a basketball tournament, Gold Medal is part of the social landscape with shared memories, rituals repeated each year and well-known, highly regarded figures. Each tournament includes a memorial service, selection of players, coaches, referees, announcers or Lions to the Gold Medal Hall of Fame, and familiar entertainment such as the blanket dance by native children. The stands are filled with adults who as children listened raptly to Gold Medal on the radio, later played in the tournament and now bring their own children. Without hesitation, fans can dive into their memory bank and recall their favorite team, player or Gold Medal moment.

The level of play always has been high. The squads have included players from first-tier college programs such as the University of California, Santa Clara and New Mexico State.

“It’s phenomenal play. It’s fast-break, fast-paced basketball. It’s as good as basketball as you’ll see,” says Indreland.

Some players have not lived in their native village in years. The “descendancy” rule, in line with the village-pride spirit of the tournament, preserves their eligibility. Bringing back former residents also enhances the reunion-like atmosphere in the gym and city. “That’s one of the highlights of Gold Medal. You see so many old friends and rivals who are now lifelong friends. We all get together at Gold Medal,” says Gray. Adds Bean, “We get a cup of coffee and

talk about those days. We talk about what the young bucks are doing.”

The spirit of competition holds sway on the court; the bonds of friendship unite villagers after the final buzzer. “We were ferocious rivals on the floor,” says Gray. “Everyone wants to win. Nobody wants to lose. Once the game is over we sit in the stands and watch the other games.” Teams often consist mostly of members of one tribe such as the Tsimshian or Haida. But “our ethnicity doesn’t enter into it,” says Gray, a Tlingit. The biggest trophy awarded is the one for sportsmanship. “I’ve never seen a fistfight,” says Indreland. Adds Grey, “The Lions club really emphasizes sportsmanship. Hats off to them for that.”

Hats off to the Lions of Juneau as well for boosting the opportunities of young people through education. Each year with proceeds from the tourney Lions provide at least 10 scholarships of \$500. The communities select the student to receive the funds. The tournament also allows Lions to give more than \$15,000 annually to local groups.

The scholarship money comes in handy in a region torn by unemployment and dwindling prospects for young people. “It helps people with their education. That’s incredibly important. There’s not much hope for kids today if you don’t get out and go to college,” says Indreland.

The Juneau Lions Club has 33 members. Taking tickets, sweeping floors and providing crowd control, they typically work nearly 1,200 hours on the tournament. Tournament week is a blur of tasks, putting out fires and catching up with old friends. Members of the Juneau Mendenhall Flying Lions also help at the tournament.

The effort pays off in a big way, Lions believe. Walter Soboleff, 101, known as the “Lion Monarch” and a witness to the first Gold Medal tournament, maintains that suicide rates have dropped and alcoholism declined in villages because of Gold Medal. “Alcoholics quit drinking and became new people so that they could be the best they could be on the court, which carried on into life,” he said in an interview. Other Lions take the same stance. “I truly believe Gold Medal has been the saving grace of young men and women. It keeps them away from drugs and problems,” says Burke.

No one can quantify the effect of Gold Medal on young people. But those who have been a part of the tournament know it’s more than just a sporting event. In a region blanketed with cold and darkness much of the time, Gold Medal has provided the warmth and light of community. “I love Gold Medal. Everybody loves Gold Medal. It’s one of the best things Lions clubs has even done,” says Gray. “It brings all the communities of southeast Alaska together.” ■

