

A light at the end of a long tunnel

by **BLAIN CLICK**
Special to The Estill Tribune

This year marks the 100 year celebration of the Kentucky High School Athletic Association. Estill County high school has chosen to make history in their own right by winning the 14th regional basketball tournament and making their first ever appearance in the Sweet 16 at Rupp arena. Kentucky remains the only state left in the United States that still plays single class basketball. That means that every single high school in KY competes in the same division all vying for the same goal, a trip to the Sweet 16 and a state championship. School size is not considered as it is in all the other states. The reason for this remains in protecting the tradition of the Sweet 16 basketball tournament which has always been labeled "The greatest show in hoops". Near the end of February each year, 267 high schools from across the Commonwealth both public and private, all begin play in one of the 64 districts across the state. Each of the 16 regions contains 4 districts and the winner of each region advances to the state tournament also known as the Sweet 16. The Engineers have been competing in the KHSAA since 1940-41 and until this year, remained one of the schools in the state who had never made that trip. Irvine High, which consolidated into the Estill County School system in 1971-72, made the sweet 16 in 1948 led by Coach Joe Ohr and star player Guy Strong before losing to Louisville Male in the state tournament.

They say to win a region you must frequently advance to the region over time. The Engineers have not made a lot of regional appearances in their history. For many years, Estill County competed in the brutally competitive 44th district and 11th region with Madison and Fayette County Schools. Some of the better teams in Engineer history could have won other districts and regions but struggled against some of the biggest schools in the state from the Lexington area. The Engineers did have one magical run in 1955 making it to the finals of the 11th region after upsetting number one ranked Henry Clay on 2 free throws by Red Roberts. The Engineers would eventually lose to future UK signee, Don Mills, and his Berea Pirates in the regional finals. Estill County finished that year 29-8 which still remains as an Estill County record for most wins in a season. Don Williams and Paul "Red" Roberts were team co-captains that year on a team with many good players including the all-time leading scorer in Estill history, Delmar McGee. Delmar held the scoring record for 63 years before relinquishing his record this year to

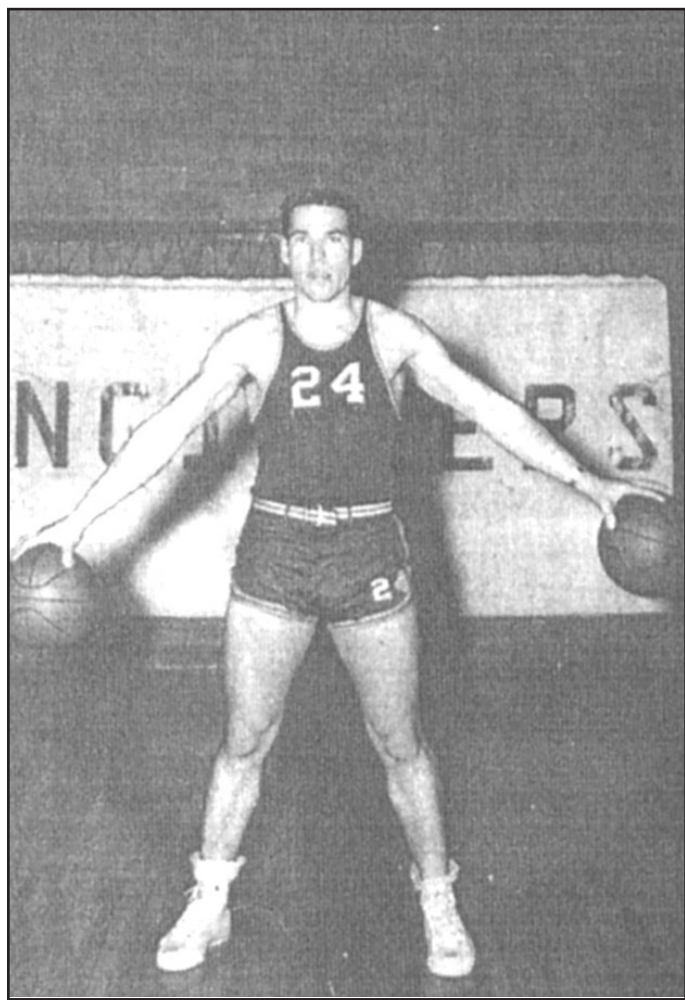
current Engineer superstar, Caleb Bonny. It would be 19 more years before Estill would win another region game when in 1974 future Estill coach, Bart Rison, would lead his talented team to a late season surge and an upset of the super talented Madison High School Purples in the district tournament. Gary "Moon" Mullins buried two charity shots with little time remaining to preserve the victory. The Neers defeated Model in district finals and then loaded up 7 pep buses and went to the Frankfort Civic Center to compete in the 11th region tournament. There, they defeated Jessamine County in the opening round but were defeated by James Lee and his Henry Clay Blue Devils in the semifinals. James Lee would go on win a National Championship at KY in 1978.

In 1978, the Engineers moved to the moved 40th district and 10th region which included Bath, Clark and Montgomery Counties. At that time, the competition in the 10th region appeared to be a lot weaker than that in the 11th region but it would take the engineers 14 years before they won another regional game. In the highly anticipated 1992 season, Coach Earl Kirby and 2nd team all-stater, Brian Kiser, took the Engineers to the Mason County Fieldhouse where they were a favorite to reach the regional finals. But in the opening game with around 4 minutes remaining in an Engineer blowout of Bracken County, Brian Kiser severely sprained his ankle and the Engineers fell in semifinal to Daniel Brown and his Nicholas County squad. Estill would graduate 4 fantastic seniors that year in addition to Kiser: Justin Snowden, Steven Honchell, Ryan Burchfield and Johnny Bennet all graduated and that ended the Estill County threat for several years.

When Estill joined the 10th region in 1978, it was the second biggest school in the district and one of the larger schools in the region. But the demographics gradually changed and by the early 2000's, Montgomery had double the enrollment of Estill County and Clark had nearly 3 times as many students. With multiple consolidations across the state, in 2006 The Kentucky High School Athletic Association completed a comprehensive basketball realignment. Estill County petitioned a move to the 14th region in the mountains where there had been multiple school closings. In 2005-2006, Estill began competing in the 56th district and 14th region. Since 2006, the Engineers have appeared in 5 regional semifinal games and this year, a regional finals appearance for the first time since 1955.

Estill County's first regional championship comes 78 years after beginning competition in the KHSAA.

In those 78 years, Estill County High School has won 9 district titles: 1954 (44th), 1974 (44th), 1985 (40th), 1992 (40th), 2008 (56th), 2013 (56th), 2015 (56th), 2017 (56th), and 2018 (56th). In the 11th region, Estill made 7 regional tournament appearances between 1953 and 1977. In the 10th region between 1978 and 2005, Estill made 8 regional appearances. And finally in the 14th region, Estill has made 11 regional appearances since 2006. On Wednesday afternoon at 12:00, the Engineers take the floor for the first time at the mecca of basketball, Rupp Arena. This fantastic group of young men will be playing for the many fine players, coaches and Engineer teams of years gone by who constantly had to compete against bigger schools with different demographics and never had a chance to make it this far.



Delmar McGee was easily named as "the greatest player" in Estill County basketball history for many years. His record of 1,943 points stood the test of time for more than 60 years until the record was broken last December by current Estill senior Caleb Bonny who now has 2,434 points with at least one more game to go in his career.

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*Good
Luck,
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Good Luck, Engineers!

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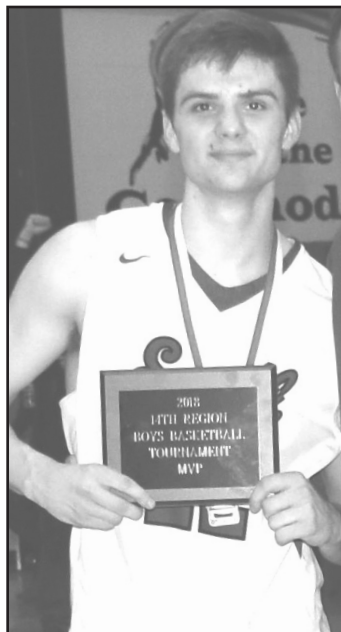
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*Good Luck from the
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Congratulations, Estill!



**Special
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to Caleb Bonny**
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