

Southwood SS Basketball

2007 OFSAA AAA Basketball Champions

When Rob Baird's senior boys basketball team captured the OFSAA championship in the spring of 2009, it was the first all-Ontario basketball title ever won by a Cambridge high school.

Their 39-37 win over Windsor Catholic Central was one of the biggest wins in any sport by a Cambridge high school ever.

Josh Crone, one of the stalwarts of the team, would go on to be five-year student athlete at Bishops University in Lennoxville, Quebec, playing varsity basketball and lacrosse. Indeed, he was the top CIAU lacrosse player in 2011 and was also named the school's athlete of the year, just like he had done at Southwood.

But unquestionably, Southwood's strength down the centre, led by 6-foot-11 pivot Zach Nagtzaam, was the key to their championship run.

Southwood played a tough schedule that season, exactly what was required to capture the title at season's end.

"Our record wasn't great during the year because we played most of the top teams in the province," said coach Baird.

The team won some and lost some, but they more than held their own against the best teams in Ontario.

"We beat the 'A' OFSAA champions, we beat the 'AA' OFSAA champion. We played the 'AAAA' champion and we lost by about nine points."

At one point the "AAAA" silver medalists came to Southwood to play an exhibition game and we lost to them by five.

The Sabres beat the "AAAA" bronze medalists during the season.

When they got to the OFSAA "AAA" finals, they had already played against their opponents twice before. The title game was their rubber match.

They had been preparing for the title game all season. And when it mattered, they rose to the top.

"OFSAA wasn't even the hardest tournament we were in," said Baird. "The Silver Fox in Hamilton was harder."

Windsor's centre was later drafted in the third round of the NFL draft.

The following account appeared in the Record at the time of their OFSAA victory:

One by one, members of Southwood's senior boys basketball team climbed a ladder armed with a pair of scissors and cut a strand of mesh from around the hoop.

The ceremonial action is customary after every big basketball victory. And Southwood had just pulled off a whopper a gold medal at the Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations Triple-A championships in Hamilton.

The 39-37 win over Windsor's Catholic Central Saturday night was the biggest high school sports moment in Southwood's history. And the players wanted a



Front Row: David Mendicino, James Badder, Jake Rose, Zach Nagtzaam, Tyler Vandonk, Evan Wyse, Josh Crone
Back Row: Rob Baird (Coach), Ian Watkins (Coach), Andrew Wright, Robby Thompson, Steve Kargus, Dan Watkins, Mark Bevan, Adam Gascho, Trent Faus (Manager), Greg Toth (Manager)

permanent reminder. So up the ladder they went. When only one strand remained, coach Rob Baird was called to do the honour.

Baird, a five-year coach at the school at the time, had groomed his squad, taking them as juniors and sticking with them as they advanced into the senior ranks.

But the title didn't come easily. The Sabres had the lead with four minutes to go in the game, but Catholic Central came on strong in the closing minutes to close the gap to a single point. Within a point. They had the momentum, and more importantly, the ball, with 11 seconds to go.

That's when Nagtzaam showed his mettle. He was bound for Ohio University, but he had some business to settle before then. Stealing an inbound pass, he abruptly ended any hopes Central had as the waning seconds played out, though Central had one final chance with a three-pointer as the buzzer sounded.

"It's a perfect ending," said Nagtzaam. "This is just the best feeling on earth. I couldn't ask for a better season." Southwood's six regulars, guards Mark Bevan and Dan Watkins, forwards James Badder, Adam Gascho, Crone and Nagtzaam, savoured the victory. They had been teammates on the same floor since Grade 9 and had formed a strong bond through years of practice and games.

It was a team effort, and if the regulars were on the top of the world, the entire team, including the bench strength, knew it was a special moment in time.

With the gold medal hanging from his neck, Bevan summed it up: "We had every component," he said. "We had the big guy. We had three-point shooters. And we had guys who could get to the rim. We just had the best chemistry. I think that's what you need to win it all."

And true enough, each of them has a strand of mesh to prove it.