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Part 6 of an ongoing C&P series

By LEE CARYER
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Last week we met Cleo Vaughn, a three sport athlete at Lima Central, recruited to Ohio State despite the fact that he intended to help support his family. However, his mother and grandmother wanted him to have a college education, so off to Columbus he went.

Not eligible for the varsity as a freshman, he became a starter on the varsity with classmate Robin Freeman as a sophomore. The team started the season 3-0, then traveled to Louisville.

Freeman has no difficulty recalling what happened.

“The hotel where we had reservations refused to give Cleo a room. Blacks did not get rooms in Louisville, but (Coach) Floyd Stahl did not know that. Finally they gave Cleo a cot in the basement. He had to eat his meals down there, too. The players on the team took turns eating with him.”

Vaughn started, but missed both his shots and got only one rebound in the 85-76 loss to Louisville. If he was distracted, he had a valid reason. Then the Bucks checked into the Venetian Hotel in Miami, Florida. “Whites went in the front door, the Black guy went in the back,” recalls Vaughn. “I had to eat my meals in my room. But it was my best game at Ohio State,” referring to his 12 points and five rebounds as the Bucks beat Miami (Fla.), 106-81. It was also his last effective game.

Cleo started three more games, but was zero of 10 from the field in two losses and one win. An ankle injury kept him out of the Pittsburgh victory. Writing for The Columbus Citizen, Tom Keys speculated that he “may have a tough time rewinning his old job.” Vaughn did not remember exactly when the injury took place, saying only “back then there was no whirlpool. You would just wrap it up and go play.”

He finally missed three games with the bad ankle, and fellow sophomore Don Kelley was effective in his absence. When Kelley struggled against Illinois, Vaughn got two quick baskets.

“We were down by one point, with a couple of minutes to go,” recalls Freeman. “The play was designed for me or Ebert to get the shot, but when the ball went to Cleo, he took a very long shot. After that the team sort of lost confidence in him. I think he had been listening to people who told him he should shoot more, that the offense should be geared to him, that sort of thing.”

“It was a shot I usually made, and went in and out,” remembered Vaughn immediately. “No one spoke to me for a month, not the coaches, not the players.”

In the remaining 10 games, Vaughn saw spot duty in five, did not play in the other five. During

his time as a starter, the last 14 games of the year, Kelley averaged more than eight points. In several of those games he rebounded effectively as well. The team finished 11-11, 5-9 in conference. Vaughn played 14 games, averaging 3.6 points. But Vaughn was not discouraged. “I didn’t think of it like that,” he says. “There are ups and downs. I intended to learn from what happened and play next year. Then baseball came along.

“(Baseball coach) Marty Karow came to see me and said, ‘I heard you are a baseball player. What position do you play?’”

“I was tired of catching,” Vaughn said, holding up a right hand disfigured from many fouls tips. “I said, ‘First base and outfield.’ That spring Cleo earned a reserve letter and played in two varsity games, getting a double in four at bats.

“The next fall I went back to Ohio State but it was a combination of academics and basketball - I just wasn’t interested anymore.”

When the 1954-55 season was previewed in The Columbus Citizen, an article without a byline reported, “Cleo Vaughn, the springy, Lima soph who had trouble getting started last year, didn’t bother to start at all this term.”

Those who had watched the team closely knew that the analysis was not correct. Cleo Vaughn had a great start to the season, immediately moving into the starting line-up, Coach Floyd Stahl called him a “can’t miss star,” and he was the fourth leading scorer on the team after two games. Did the experience at Louisville and Miami of sleeping on a cot in the hotel basement crush his spirit? At 6-2, was he just too small for Big Ten play as a forward? Was Don Kelley, a starter and double figure scorer the next two years, merely better? Did Vaughn listen to the wrong people? Was his ankle a lingering problem?

An analysis of those questions would have provided a better explanation of why the first African-American to play varsity basketball at Ohio State did not play another year. However, his high school teammate Ron Bell, who earned three degrees at Ohio State, has an opinion.

“Cleo needed a mentor. Someone to guide him, protect and support him. He never had that at the high school level or at Ohio State. He certainly didn’t have it at home. It was a different time, but he had the potential to do something special. I was too young and immature to be of any real help and was pretty involved in my own goals. Makes me a little sad,” sighs Bell.

Next week we will learn what happened to Cleo Vaughn after he left Ohio State, for a life which included college football, minor league baseball, and a date with a member of the Supremes and a devotion to young basketball players in Toledo.

We hope you will want to follow the story of The Integration of Ohio State Basketball is it unfolds in future weeks.

Lee Caryer grew up watching Dick Ricketts and Tom Bowman play Fred Taylor’s style of basketball, which caused a life-long devotion to the school and the sport. He has written "The Golden Age of Ohio State Basketball: 1960-1971," "Bobcat Pride" and "The Recruiting Struggle."