

Basketball has always been a tall man's game.... except when it isn't.

A realization that their mostly immigrant clientele included a lot of short people, coupled with a desire to involve as many youngsters as possible in healthy afterschool recreation, prompted founding administrators to adopt a two-tiered system of basketball: heavyweight and lightweight when the Catholic League was formed in 1912.

The league would feature separate levels of varsity competition for players of varying sizes. Weight was, originally, the determining factor. Later it was changed to height: a 5foot 8 inches limit, then a still less-than-towering 5 foot 9 inches.

The names never changed; the bigger team was known as the "heavies" and the smaller one as the "lights" for the 60+ years the system existed.

Lightweight basketball went away when the Catholic League joined the IHSAA for the 1973-74 school year. Mendota, which also has gone away, holds the distinction of being the last lightweight league champion, crowned in 1973. Some still mourn the passing of short-guy basketball.

"It gave guys like me a chance to play," said Dick Devine, the former Cook County State's Attorney who jumped center at 5foot8 for Loyola Academy's Catholic League North lightweight champions in 1962. "There was no way I was going to play on the heavies."

Whatever was in the water that restricted growth might also have fueled the political ambitions of certain players. In addition to Devine, former Mayor Richard M. Daley played lightweight basketball at De La Salle in 1959-60. Retired State Senator Ed Maloney (Leo '64) was a slick-shooting lefty lightweight for the Lions.

Basketball wasn't exactly a career option for vertically challenged lightweights, no matter how talented they were. Mike Harrigan, a lightweight standout at Brother Rice in the mid-60s, is a longtime Chicago-area golf pro. Jim Dwyer, who starred for St. Laurence's lights in the late '60s, played 18 years of major league baseball as a left-handed-hitting outfielder. Dr. Jim Stankiewicz (Leo '66), a starting forward for the Lions' Catholic League lightweight champs in 1966, is a nationally recognized surgeon at Loyola University Medical Center and a professor at Loyola med school.

Playing on the lights was a preferable alternative to sitting on the bench with the heavies or not playing varsity ball at all, so extraordinary measures to "measure in" were often undertaken in preparation for the fateful day.

Over time, sleep deprivation and many hours of standing came to be regarded as a reliable method of shrinkage for a youngster at or slightly over the 5'9" limit. A player who measured in successfully on the specified date was good for the whole season, so a night spent standing up with weights draped around one's shoulders was a small price to pay for a shot at glory.

Of course, some players were so talented that height or the lack thereof was not an impediment to heavyweight success. Johnny Egan, starting point guard on Loyola

University's 1963 NCAA champions, began his St. Rita career as a lightweight. Sam Puckett, silky-smooth point guard for Hales' 1970 Catholic League champions, played lights as a Hales freshman and was MVP of the prestigious Fenwick tournament. Lloyd Walton, a starting guard on Marquette's 1974 NCAA runner-up team, was a Mt. Carmel lightweight before he became a Mt. Carmel All-stater.

The tales were taller than the tellers at a "lightweight reunion" Sen. Maloney sponsored at a South Side bistro in 2008. More than 200 undersized but highly competitive former ballplayers were on hand.

Wardell Williams was not among them, but the consensus among those in attendance was that the powerful and relentless St. Rita star was the greatest lightweight of them all.

Along with Gene Burkauskas, Bill Daly, Jack Gardner and Bill Bonoma, Williams played on a St. Rita team that won 52 consecutive games and two Catholic League titles in the early 60's.