



After winning the 1933 Region 8 championship, the Bemidji High School boys basketball team was disqualified from competing at the state tournament and forced to forfeit its hardware. The decision was the first domino to fall in a series of dramatic events.  
Micah Friez / Bemidji Pioneer

## THE CASE OF MARTY CONNELLY

A wild tale of rivals, revenge and the 1933 Bemidji basketball scandal

By Micah Friez  
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When Marty Connelly raised the bronze Region 8 championship plaque in 1933, he and his Bemidji High basketball team were the gold standard.

Victory over heated rival and defending state champion Thief River Falls had secured the Lumberjacks their second regional title in three years, plus a trip to Minneapolis as one of eight teams dancing all the way to the state tournament.

But, as Marty Connelly would soon learn, the story was far from over.

Two days later, the Minnesota State High School League ruled Connelly ineligible. On those grounds, Bemidji was stripped of its title and disqualified from competing at state.

From championship darlings to ousted

swindlers, a wild 72 hours spoiled the Jacks' state title hopes and forever left a "What if?" stain on a legendary program's otherwise decorated history.

Nearly a century later, revisit the scandalous tale with a turbulent ride through a suspicious protest, a second disqualification and good, old fashioned revenge.

### 'A battle royal'

You know the feeling. It's the air that surrounds playoff basketball, the stakes as high as ever with a state tournament berth on the line. It's the oh-so quiet empty gymnasium, soon to be erupting with passionate fans hooting and hollering into the night. It's the butterflies that only fly in stomachs on special occasions.

Marty Connelly knew the feeling. Bemidji's senior center – a captain, no

less – guided his Lumberjacks through a 12-4 regular season and four effortless games of District 29 play. That sent BHS back into the four-team Region 8 Tourney, where Bemidji had little trouble with Ada in the opener.

The Jacks won 21-10 in an era when such a score was ordinary, and the victory set up a championship rematch with Thief River Falls.

"A battle royal it will be as the two finalists from last year clash again for the 1933 regional title," the Bemidji Daily Pioneer previewed. "The longstanding rivalry between the two high schools, brought to a high point last year when they fought for the regional title in the tournament finals here, will be fanned to a white heat tonight as the schools meet again to battle for the same honor."

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Steve Kohls / Forum News Service

Bill Israelson, golf pro at the Vintage Golf Course in Staples, tees off on the 10th hole Tuesday, July 14. He got his start caddying at Bemidji Town and Country Club.

## Bill Israelson has a grip on golf

By Conrad Engstrom  
Forum News Service

STAPLES — Bill Israelson wakes up every morning to the 10th hole at the Vintage Golf Course at Staples in his backyard.

His dog, Chubber, rides along in his golf cart with him as he heads over to the golf shop to start his day.

The 63-year-old is in his 27th year working as the PGA head professional at the Vintage Golf Course and living on the property all 27 years.

"Our first house was right on the first hole there," Israelson said. "We haven't really left the course since."

Israelson's love for the game of golf goes back as far as he can remember. He grew up caddying at Bemidji Town and Country Club when he was 10 years old.

"I worked my way up from a caddy, to the shoeshine guy and just about every other job," Israelson said. "For me, my summers were at the

golf course at the crack of dawn and never coming home until dark."

He met his wife, Sarah, when he was 13 years old after he defeated his now father-in-law in the men's club championship at Gonvick.

"They wouldn't let me play in the juniors because I won the junior flight two years in a row," Israelson said. "So they said I had to play in the men's championship. I ended up competing against (Sarah's) dad in the championship flight and won the tournament."

Sarah works at Lakewood Health System as a physician.

Israelson went on to play on the PGA and Asian tours. He stopped after the 1992 season when his first son, Zach, was born. He estimated he played in about 40 tournaments a year.

"When we came to Staples I was still playing regularly on the Asian Tour," Israelson said.

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## Bemidji Speedway holds 2nd week of season

By Dennis Peterson  
Special to the Pioneer

BEMIDJI — Ninety-two race cars and drivers put on a show for fans on Sunday, July 19, at Bemidji Speedway with the second night of racing in 2020.

Once again, track safety rules were in place for social distancing for both drivers and fans due to coronavirus concerns.

The Northern Vintage Racers joined the regular lineup of car classes and brought 13 of their classic race cars from throughout the Midwest to race on the track.

Several drivers made clean sweeps with Davey Mills winning both his heat and feature in the Wissota Modified class, Skyler Smith in the Wissota Midwest Modified class and Dexter Koch in the Wissota Super Stocks.

Races resume Sunday, July **SPEEDWAY: Page B3**

26, with all regular classes on hand for a 5 p.m. starting time.

### Bemidji Mini Stocks Feature

The Bemidji Minis was first feature on the track with Waylon Current powering to the lead over his father, John. Dad showed son how to make a pass on the back straight, taking the lead before a tangle up in turn four brought the first caution.

John Current held the lead until late, when third-row starter Conrad Schwinn charged up on the inside. Schwinn took the lead and raced to his second feature win of the 2020 season. Current was second with Connor Drewry, Kalin Honer and Waylon Current trailing.



Dennis Peterson / Special to the Pioneer

Blake Erickson celebrates in Victory Lane on Sunday after winning the Wissota Mod Four championship at Bemidji Speedway.



## CONNELLY

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“Last year Thief River won after a hard fight. This year the Prowlers, defending state championship team, are no better than they were last year and perhaps not quite as good, while Bemidji boasts a much stronger team than last year’s aggregation. The Robbinsmen (named after head coach H. M. “Buck” Robbins) are given, therefore, at least an even chance of upsetting the champions in the fray tonight.”

The stage was the new gymnasium at the Northwest School of Agriculture in Crookston, which offered “perhaps the best floor in the northern half of the state.” As the United States crawled out of the Great Depression, 50 cents could buy one’s admission to the game and a respite from everyday hardships.

A capacity crowd of frenzied fans witnessed Robbins’ Bemidji boys challenge Roger Dooley’s Thief River Falls quint. Many more listened from home on the radio, which, five evenings prior, had transmitted the inaugural “Fireside Chat” by a new president named Franklin D. Roosevelt.

In championship form, the Lumberjack defense was “almost impenetrable” that night. The Prowlers didn’t muster a field goal until the title was all but won.

“It was Bemidji’s brilliant defensive play that won the championship game in an exhibition such as is seldom seen on a high school floor,” the Pioneer awed. “Every man on the floor for Bemidji played superb defensive ball, stopping the vaunted Prowler attack cold and not allowing a field goal until there was but one minute and 15 seconds left to play in the third period.”

The game faced “a needless interruption” between the third and fourth quarters – with BHS leading 15-5 – when Coach Dooley tried to protest Connelly’s eligibility because of his age “in an evident effort to throw the winning team off its balance.” The game continued to completion, and afterward, TRF school officials offered their sincere apologies for their coach’s misconduct.

No matter for the Lumberjacks. The local



Micah Friez / Bemidji Pioneer

The Bemidji High School boys basketball team has won 30 region or section championships in program history, most recently in 2019. Missing from the banners, however, is the 1933 title that the Minnesota State High School League stripped from the school.

contingent scored a lopsided 20-10 victory and captured the program’s third-ever state berth.

“Another regional crown rests on the brow of the Bemidji high school basketball team, a crown evidencing a definitely proven superiority over the field at the regional tournament,” the Pioneer chronicled. “... To select a player on the Bemidji team who was outstanding among his team mates Friday night would be an impossibility and, if attempted, would work an injustice on those not mentioned. In the same manner that all the players worked together defensively, they all combined in the scoring, every man registering points in the scoring column.”

Marty Connelly tallied a team-high five points for the Jacks.

After the game, Region 8 chairman and Ada superintendent A. C. Peterson presented “Captain Connelly” with a bronze plaque that should have served as Bemidji’s golden ticket to the state tournament.

But that wasn’t the last time Connelly and Peterson were destined to intersect.

### Protest, proof and purge

Saturday was a day for celebration.

The Jacks had lost 31-17 to Thief River Falls in the regular season finale, but they reversed their fate with a 24-point turnaround when it mattered most. They were

going to Minneapolis, doing so with the added satisfaction of ending the Prowlers’ season.

But the house of cards came crashing down on Sunday.

“The severest blow ever dealt a Bemidji high school basketball team was suffered Sunday afternoon when Superintendent J. W. Smith and Coach Buck Robbins were notified that the local quint had been disqualified from entering the state tournament at Minneapolis because of the ineligibility of Martin Connelly, center,” the Pioneer lamented. “The blow was all the more severe because it had been entirely unexpected.”

Coach Dooley’s protest, only made when defeat was nearly certain, reached the Minnesota State High School League. Dooley himself was in violation of two league rules – information regarding the eligibility of players should not be kept from school officials by a coach more than five days, and any protest should be entered before the start of a game (which shall be played under protest if insufficient time remains to settle the matter before tipoff).

“On that ground,” the Pioneer documented, “the state committee assured local authorities Sunday morning that the protest would be thrown out and Bemidji allowed to play in the tournament.”

The league met anyway. They called Morris Bye, Thief River Falls superintendent of schools, but Bye refused to enter a

protest. The league then called A. C. Peterson, the Ada superintendent who had just handed over the championship plaque to Connelly himself.

“(Peterson) entered an official protest on behalf of Ada which was accepted by the state committee, ruling Bemidji out of the state tournament and giving Ada a chance to play Thief River at Crookston Monday evening for the regional title,” the Pioneer reported.

Marty Connelly, proven to be 18 years old by Coach Dooley’s investigation, was therefore ineligible because of the number of semesters he had been enrolled at Bemidji High School. The team’s 1933 postseason run was in the middle of Connelly’s 10th term. His length of enrollment at BHS was never in question, but Connelly was previously ruled eligible because he was listed as 17 years old.

Marty Connelly was certain he was born on Dec. 26, 1915. But unbeknownst to him, Marty Connelly was actually born on Dec. 26, 1914.

When Connelly had filled out his registration with 1915 as his birth year, the information was never doubted by local school authorities. “The fact that he actually was 18 years old last Dec. 26 was not known until Saturday afternoon by school officials or the contested player himself,” the Pioneer explained.

“The proof, however, was all against him.” But how did Coach

Dooley secure the proof of Connelly’s ineligibility in the first place? According to the Pioneer, it was through the local clerk of court’s office. After obtaining the documents, Dooley then double-checked his findings with the baptismal records at St. Philip’s Catholic Church in Bemidji. Whatever prompted Dooley to begin his investigation against Connelly remains a mystery.

Dooley’s tactics were poorly received by Bemidjians, certainly, but the same was even true in the TRF community.

“Thief River Falls school authorities showed their stand on the question Sunday when they refused to enter an official protest and citizens of that city expressed their regrets over the trouble that had been caused in telephone messages to friends in Bemidji,” the Pioneer read. “At the regional committee meeting Saturday evening at Crookston, the Thief River Falls coach was the object of condemnation... by school authorities from various sections of the region.”

The Thief River Falls Chamber of Commerce even adopted a resolution “regretting the... unsportsmanlike manner in which Coach Dooley of Thief River Falls presented a protest against the Bemidji team when his team was losing in the regional championship game. (The resolution) regrets the making of the protest under the conditions in which it was made.”

Nevertheless, with the Lumberjacks out, Coach Dooley and his Prowlers had a second chance at the region championship. They were to face Ada, winner of the third-place game, for the right to go to state.

Thanks to Buck Robbins, the game was never played.

### An eye for an eye

Hours before tipoff of the second Region 8 championship game, Coach Robbins found his needle in the haystack.

Robbins examined eligibility lists that Thief River Falls submitted in October 1931 and January 1933 “largely out of curiosity and the mere chance that there might be a discrepancy.” The first document listed TRF guard Arnold Stadum’s birth as in November 1912, while the second document listed his birth as in November 1913. If the first

document was correct, Stadum would have been ineligible at 20 years old.

Bemidji superintendent J. W. Smith telephoned the Thief River Falls school district around 3:30 p.m., explaining that Stadum’s eligibility could be contested on the grounds of being too old to play high school basketball.

TRF immediately checked Stadum’s age, and, shortly thereafter, called Ada to forfeit the game. It was the region’s second forfeiture in two days.

Robbins went the extra mile – nearly 100, in fact – by driving himself to Crookston Monday evening and taking with him the eligibility lists from Thief River Falls. When he arrived, he learned Dooley’s Prowlers had already forfeited and the playoff game had been called off.

Ada was granted the right to represent Region 8 at the state tournament, but they were greatly outmatched in a 34-12 loss to Chisholm in the first round. Red Wing, Region 4 champion, defeated Minneapolis North 16-13 in the title game.

Bemidji and Thief River Falls both stayed home.

### Moving on from mayhem

Whatever heartbreak the Lumberjacks endured in 1933 was soon forgotten. The 1935-36 Bemidji team, led by Coach Robbins and leading scorer Norman Galloway, defeated Wadena 26-20 to capture the school’s first of three state championships.

Under new head coach George Lee, Thief River Falls finished 27-0 in 1938 and won its second state championship. The Prowlers have won just three region titles since, and none since 1974. The Lumberjacks have made 30 state appearances all-time, most recently in 2019.

Robbins coached Bemidji through the 1939-40 season, finishing with five region championships and a 281-104 career record. He was also the school’s football coach from 1923-32 and the Activities Director from 1945-48, serving in World War II in between. Robbins was a 2003 inductee to the BHS Athletics Hall of Fame.

And although most Bemidji basketball fans never knew of the Case of Marty Connelly, one thing is for certain: You won’t soon forget it.

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## SPEEDWAY

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### Wissota Pure Stock Feature

Fifteen Wissota Pure stocks roared onto the track, led by Austin Carlson on the pole and Jamie Chlebeczek to his right. Carlson powered to the lead with Devyn Weleski, Dusty Caspers, Michael Roth and Steve Nordhagen trailing.

Weleski caught and challenged the leader, racing side-by-side as did Caspers and Roth for third before the caution flag waved for an incident in turn four. When the green flag waved again, Carlson was out front with a three-wide battle between Weleski, Carlson, Harley Kroening, Roth and Caspers for second heating up.

Meanwhile, Carlson pulled out to a four-car length lead over his rivals. Carlson kept his advantage and powered to his first feature win of 2020. Roth finished second with Devyn Weleski, Deryk Weleski and Josh Berg in the top five.

### Wissota Super Stocks Feature

After two heats of Wissota Super Stocks, Nathan Higginbotham and Harley Kroening led the feature onto the track. Gordie Lancaster made his first appearance of the 2020 season in the fourth row, beginning the seventh decade of racing for the veteran racer after starting

his career in the 1960s.

Two failed starts due to cautions started the race before Higginbotham finally took the lead over Matt Sparby. Dalton Carlson, Butch Butcher and Nicholas Jacobson filled out the top five.

Once again, a multicar tangle up slowed the action for a restart. Sparby then dove low and into the lead in the 3-4 corner as Higginbotham got high and dropped back to fifth.

Sparby went high a moment later, and Dexton Koch powered by to take the lead. Carlson raced inside down the back straight into second as Koch quickly gained a sizable advantage over the field.

Koch took the checkered flag for the win ahead of Carlson, Harley Kroening, Tim Carlson and Butcher.

### Wissota Mod Four Feature

A total of 16 Wissota Mod Fours buzzed on track with Dean Shaver on the pole and Patrick Specht to his right. Shaver grabbed control early, ahead of Blake Erickson, Specht, Dean Larson, and Chad Funt.

Erickson moved up to challenge Shaver for the lead and, in turn four, took the top spot. Following a caution, Erickson led the charge with Shaver, Funt, Larson and Tommy Bawden chasing. Erickson drove out to a big lead over the field while the racing behind him was hot and furious.

Doyle Erickson, making his debut in the Mod Fours, charged up from his fourth-row start and into contention. Bawden got by Shaver for the back-up spot behind Blake Erickson while Doyle Erickson moved into third. Shaver settled into fourth with Funt fifth in an exciting race.

### Wissota Hornet Feature

A small field of Wissota Hornets were next on track with Lucy LaValley on the pole.

With the green flag waving, Travis Olafson took the lead with Kurtis Huseuth, Aiden Helwig and LaValley up next.

In a flag-to-flag race, Huseuth raced past Olafson to claim his first win of the season. Olafson was second, Helwig third and LaValley fourth.

### Wissota Midwest Modified Feature

A full field of 16 Wissota Midwest Modifieds next filled the track. Weston Ramsrud was on the pole with Alan Olafson to his right.

Ramsrud powered to the lead with Blake Higginbotham, Skyler Smith, Olafson and Gary James Nelson trailing after one lap. Higginbotham charged forward into the lead with Smith following him into second. Smith wanted more and tried for the lead with an inside move, but Higginbotham held strong.

A caution slowed the race for a restart with Higginbotham, Smith, Ramsrud, Olafson and Brandon Bahr in front. A few additional cautions slowed the racing before Higginbotham slid up high, giving Smith, Ramsrud, Bahr and Olafson the opportunity to pass.

Bahr and Ramsrud put on a side-by-side battle with Bahr gaining the back-up spot. Smith cruised to his first feature win of 2020 with Bahr, Butch Butcher, Olafson and Ramsrud in the top five.

### Wissota Modified Feature

Davey Mills led the night’s final charge to the green flag with Adam Johnson to his right. Mills took the lead as Doyle Erickson, Josh Beaulieu, Rick Jacobson and Johnson trailed.

A two-car spin in the first corner brought out a caution, sending Scott Engholm to the rear for the restart. Engholm was impressive on the restart, passing several cars to get back into top-five contention.

Out front, Mills quickly created space between the field with a six-car length lead over Erickson before another yellow flag and restart. The restart gave Jacobson the opportunity to pass for third as Mills created a quarter-lap lead over the field and cruised to his first feature win of the season. Erickson, Jacobson, Beaulieu, and Johnson finished in the top five.

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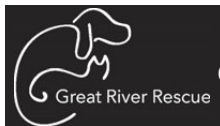


Congratulations to our Volunteer of the Month, Caleb McShane. Volunteers make a huge difference in the lives of our pets!

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