

CHAMPIONS!



They traveled the region, sinking shots, defeating rival teams and then eating from their opponents' home dinner tables—part of the peculiar but triumphant story of Lawrence's all-black, segregation-era, title-winning high school basketball team

Story by Doug Vance

Photography by Jason Dailey and courtesy *Red & Black* yearbooks (various years)

PROMOTERS TIE FOR CHAMPIONSHIP

Dan Mitchell, '38

The Promoters started their practice season the week after Thanksgiving under the new coach, Mr. Ed. Dissinger from Junior High School. He lettered in football and track at Baker where he was graduated.

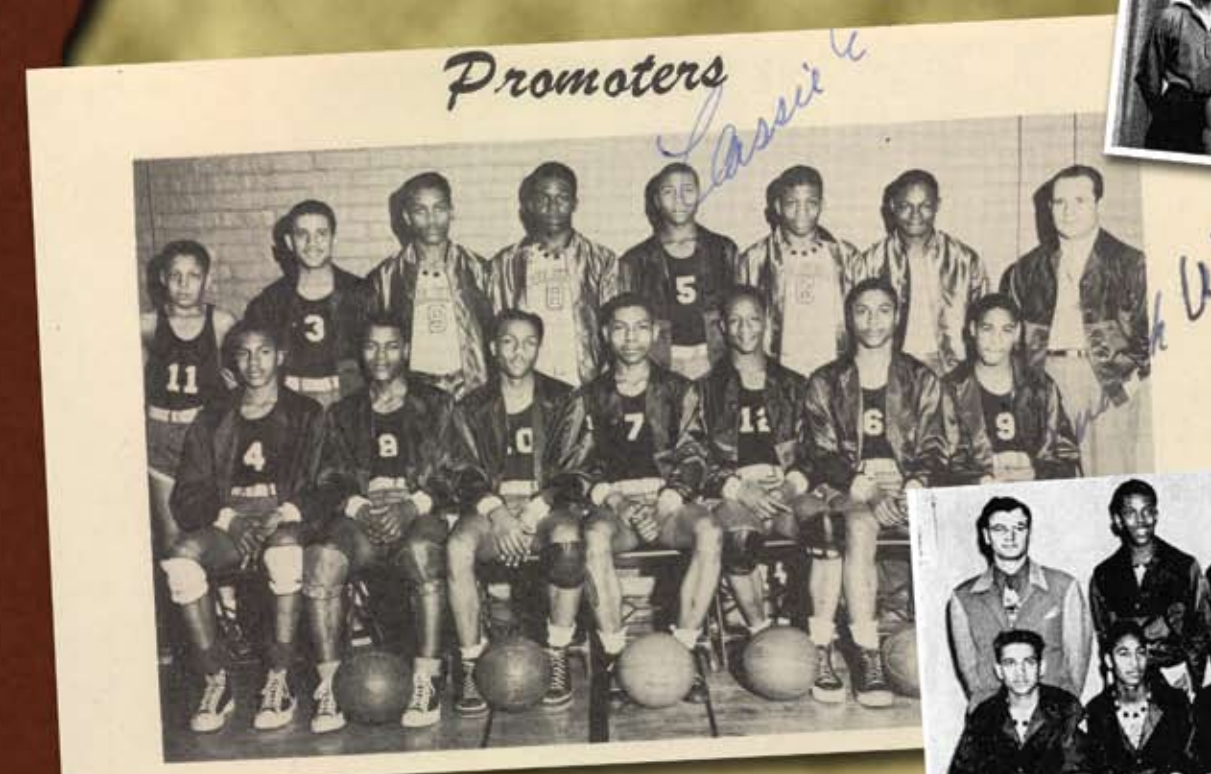
About 25 boys turned out for the first practice, including three lettermen, Walter Peterson, Wilbert Whiteside, and Otis Bowers. The prospects for a good season were good, and a light ball-handling drill was started. After the first week of practice the squad was cut to about 15 men.

At this point Sam Wilburn, a graduate of L. M. H. S. and an ex-promotor player was appointed Assistant Coach. With two men it made it possible to devote more time to an individual. After Christmas the squad started a strenuous drill on both offensive and defensive work in preparation for their first game which was to be played January 8.

Unfortunately Lawrence lost their first game by one point. The Promoters led all the first half and part of the third quarter, but after this the score stayed tied until the last seconds of play when a foul was called on Lawrence and St. Joseph made the free throw winning the game by one point. The game stressed the strength of the freshman on the defense. They are Elenora Bell and Homer Thompson.

To an outsider losing the first game of the season may seem discouraging to the team and its coach, but in this case it just started the fire burning and the team went through a perfect season only three losses and tied for first in the Conference of 10 teams.

Otis Bowers was placed on the all-conference first team at a forward berth and as captain. Walter Peterson was placed on the second team at center and William Moore, a senior, was given a guard position on the second team. Homer Thompson, Jacob Talls, and Elenora Bell were given honorable mention.



From top: 1937-1938 League Co-Champion Promoters Squad
 1935-1936 Promoters Squad (John McLendon is first on left in second row)
 1947-1948 Promoters Squad (Verner Newman is third from right in front row; Leonard Monroe is third from left in back row)
 1946-1947 Promoters Squad (Verner Newman is third from left in back row)



They are proud but modest black men,

now in the twilight of eventful lives, who are among the few left to preserve the fading memory of the Promoters.

“The kids today don’t really know about us or what we were all about,” suggests Chuck Newman, a lifelong Lawrence resident and youngest of four family members who are a part of the Promoters’ lore.

“We talk about those teams in front of young people when we can,” adds Newman. “But many kids really are not real interested in that history and don’t understand how different a time it was when we played.”

SEGREGATION SPORT

For nearly 30 years, from the early 1920s through 1949, Lawrence had an all-black high school basketball team called the Promoters. Beyond city league teams, it existed as the only organized competitive outlet for black high school boys because the school—known as Liberty Memorial at that time—had not yet integrated its basketball program.

For Chuck Newman, his older brother, Verner, their uncle Leslie Newman and other Lawrence residents such as James O. Barnes, Bill Jeltz and Leonard Monroe, the Promoters were a significant part of life while growing up in the local school system.

Their legacy—all but forgotten in a community that boasts a proud basketball heritage—is in stark contrast to today’s world where black players largely dominate the rosters of high school and college basketball teams.

“I don’t think it really bothered us at the time,” says Verner Newman, 78, in reflecting upon his feelings of being excluded from the Liberty Memorial team because of the color of his skin. “We enjoyed being on the Promoters and the opportunity to play organized basketball.

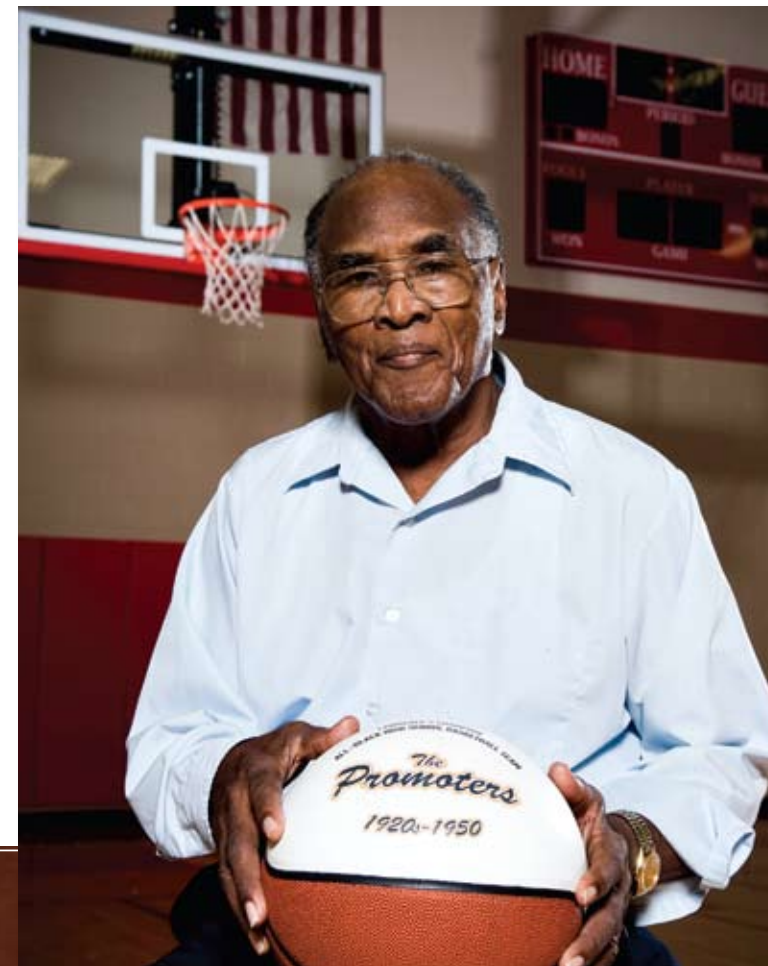
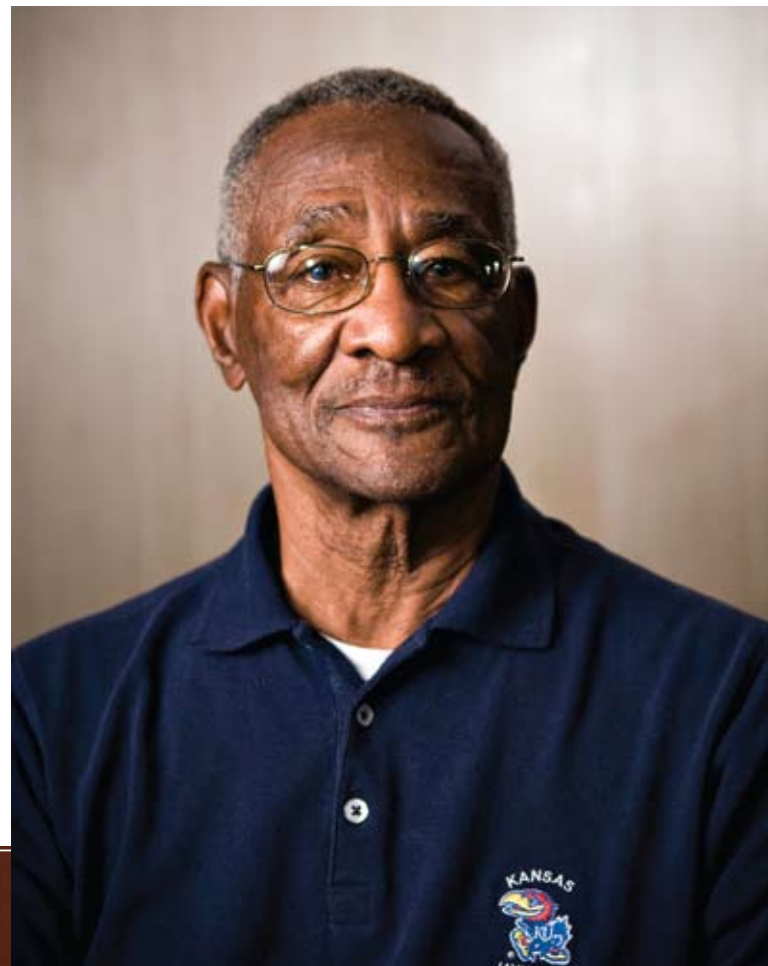
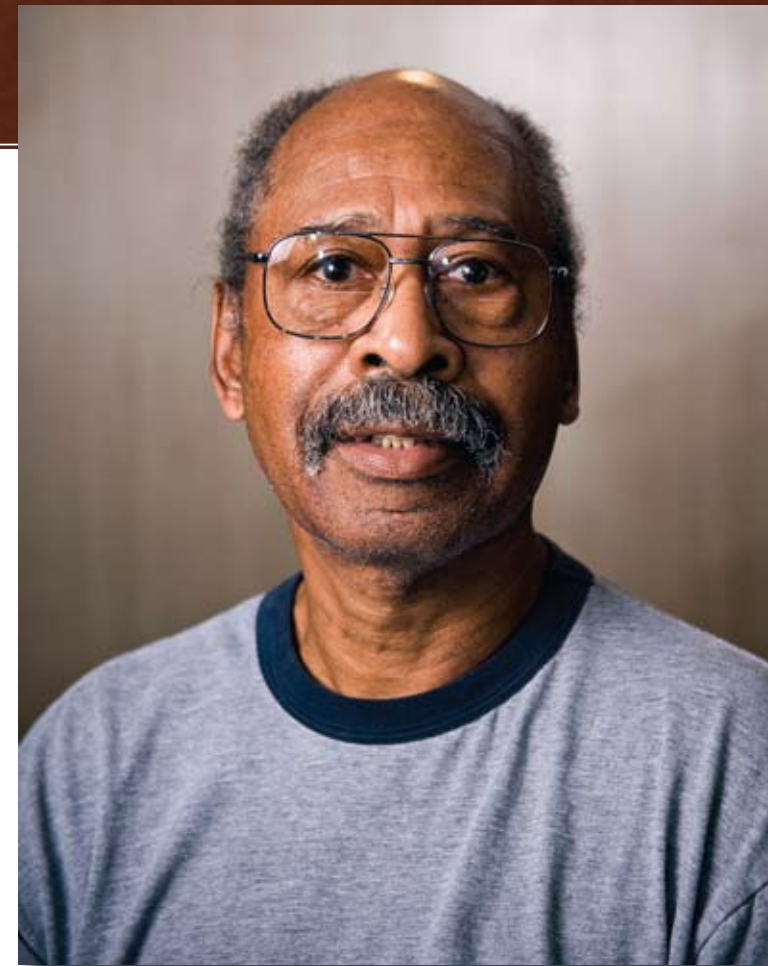
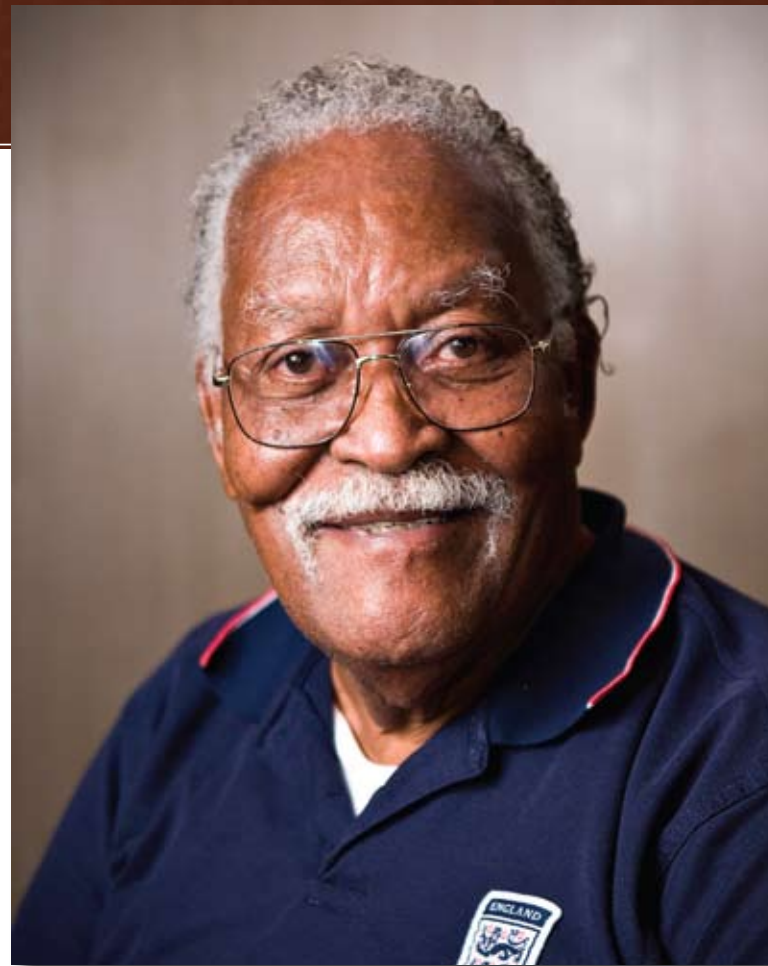
“It’s just the way it was back then,” he adds.

There is no hint of bitterness in the voices of the remaining Promoters as they recall their teenage years in Lawrence as members of a basketball team that was outcast from white society. It was, as they all stress, their team, and they take immense pride in their involvement.

“We all enjoyed being a part of the Promoters and didn’t look at the situation as a negative at that time or even now,” explains Monroe, now 77. “Life was different in those days. You learned to accept the way it was.”

The Promoters began as early as 1926. The players were coached by white teachers and black college students, including James Naismith protégé and future Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame member John B. McLendon.

As part of the Northeast Kansas League, the Promoters relied on older brothers and adults to drive them to out-of-



town games against other all-black teams in Leavenworth, Atchison, Topeka and the Kansas City area.

Because most public restaurants refused to serve the players—a legacy of the state’s unofficial but extensive segregation—the parents of the home team’s players would feed the Promoters before or after games. “Often, we went to someone’s house and we would eat in the basement,” recalls Verner Newman.

The Promoters played their home games at the high school, which is now Central Junior High, in front of an enthusiastic crowd that included the Red Peppers pep club and a group of cheerleaders. Practice opportunities and access to the high school gym, however, depended upon when the “white high school team” finished its workout session or games. On occasions when the high school facility wasn’t available, practices were moved to Woodlawn Elementary School, where the gym was “about the size of my living room,” recalls Barnes.

“Most practices were at the high school at night for a couple of hours,” says Verner Newman. “And the fraternity boys would sometimes come down and practice with us.”

Team uniforms varied through the years. Early team pictures of the Promoters show players wearing a jersey with a large “L” on the front or “Lawrence” above a number. Starting in the early 1940s, however, the players are posed for their squad picture wearing uniforms that say “Oilers” on the front.

“Someone donated those uniforms and none of us really know why they had Oilers on the front,” notes Barnes. “They were gold and white and really good looking.”

“They were the only uniforms we had,” adds Monroe, who played with the Promoters in the late 1940s. “We were the Promoters, but our uniforms said ‘Oilers.’ I guess it was kind of strange, but it didn’t really bother us.”

The team existed for nearly 30 years and had its moments of competitive success. The Promoters were league co-champions in 1938 and league champions in 1940. “My uncle, Jesse Newman, was on the team that won the championship in 1940 and said they had a trophy,” adds Verner Newman. “I never saw it, but he said it was on display in old Liberty Memorial High School.”



Top: James Barnes, guard 1949 team
Bottom: Leslie Newman, guard 1941-1944 teams
Insert: Members of 1943-1944 Promoters Squad

Top: Leonard Monroe, forward 1947-1949 teams
Bottom: Verner Newman, forward 1946-1948 teams

INTEGRATION—A BITTERSWEET END

By the mid-1940s, official segregation in Lawrence was slowly falling apart. Promoter Bill Jeltz, now 81, was one of three black athletes on the high school track squad in 1944. Promoter Verner Newman was one of three black athletes to break the color barrier for the high school football team in 1947. The high school basketball team integrated at the end of the 1949 season and the Promoters disbanded. While integration was a sign of progress, it also meant limited opportunities for organized sports.

"It's been nearly 60 years, but that [integration of the high school team] still represents one of the most disappointing moments in my life," says Chuck Newman, 73, who saw his dream of playing on the Promoters varsity team vanish when the team disbanded.

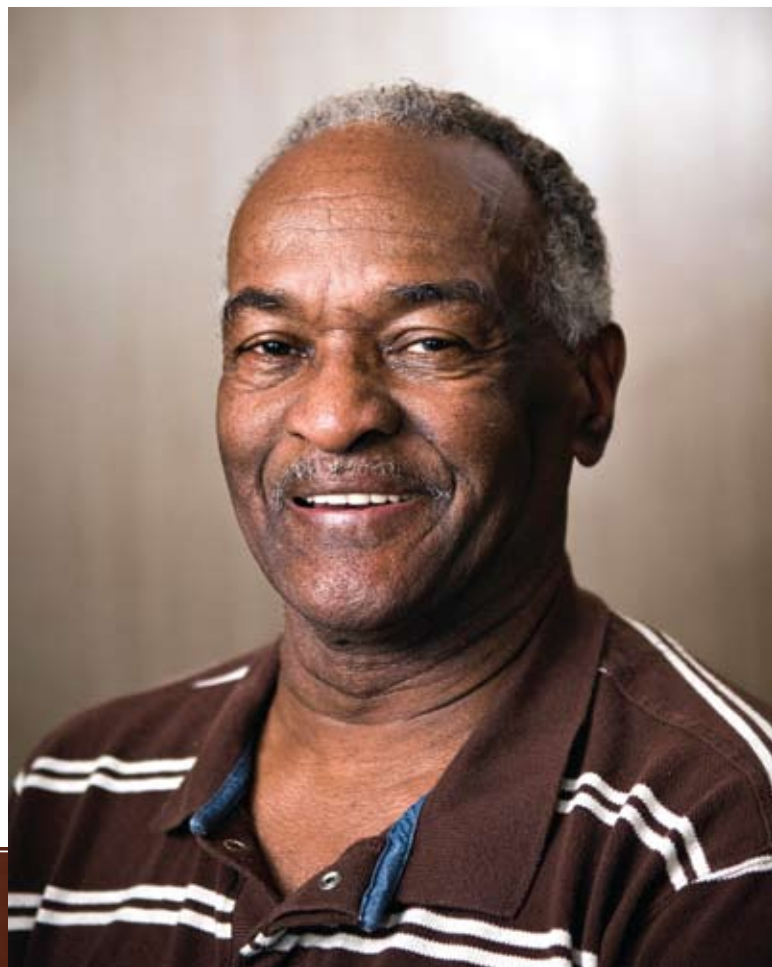
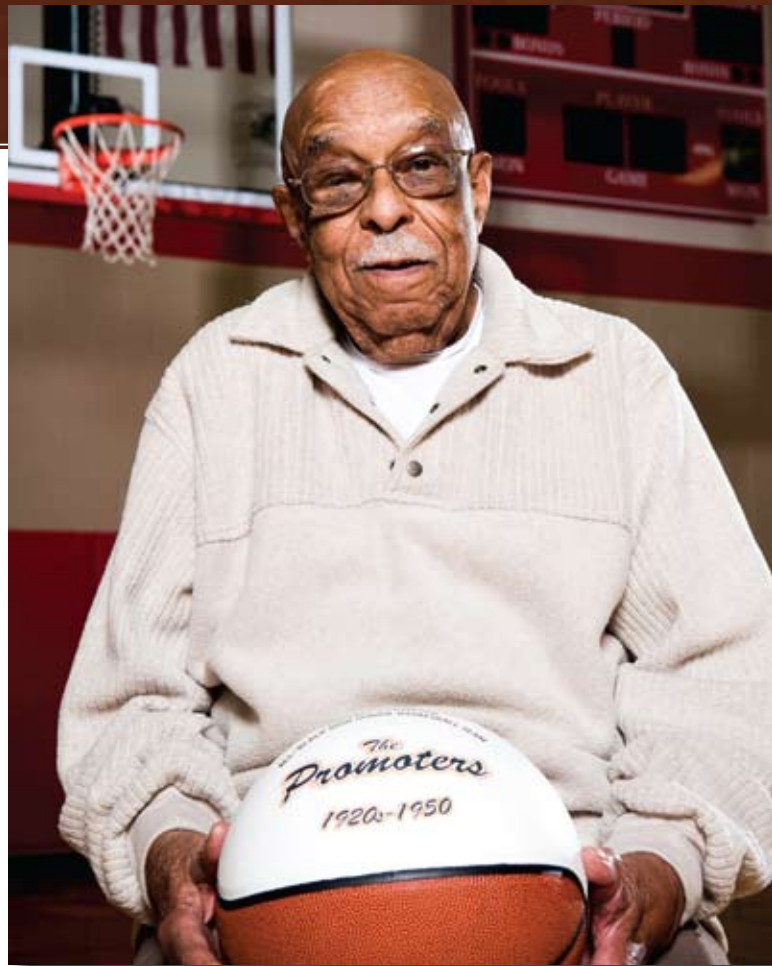
"I was in the ninth grade in 1949, which meant I played on the 'B' team," recalls Newman. "I was looking forward to being on the varsity, getting that uniform and traveling as a part of the team. When the team went away, that really hurt."

Monroe, who also excelled as a quarter-miler on the track team, was one of the first former Promoters to make the high school basketball team in 1950. He graduated from Liberty Memorial that year after setting the second-fastest high school quarter mile in Kansas and was eager to take his skills as a standout track athlete to Mount Oread. But, once again, he ran into a segregation roadblock.

"When the time for track season came around I went down there [to KU] to try out," says Monroe. "But the head coach at that time, Bill Easton, told me, 'You'll never run for me.'"

"It broke my heart. I really wanted to run for KU, because they had one of the best track teams in the country. The Korean War had broken out and some of my friends and gone to the military, so I just dropped out of KU and joined the Air Force."

Ironically, one of Monroe's six children, Darryl Monroe, later was a welcome addition to a KU athletic team. Darryl played four years for the KU baseball team and helped the Jayhawks to the school's only appearance in the College World Series in 1993. Before Darryl arrived, Bill Jeltz's son, Steve, also played with the Jayhawks and went on to start with



The Promoters, Lawrence's all-black champion basketball team, return to the court at Central Junior High School. From left (standing) Chuck Newman, James Barnes, Verner Newman and William Jeltz. From left (sitting), Leonard Monroe and Leslie Newman.



the Philadelphia Phillies and the Kansas City Royals. Steve Jeltz left the major leagues in 1990; Darryl Monroe still serves as a professional scout for the New York Yankees.

"I guess you could say that Darryl made up for the fact I couldn't be on the track team," smiles Monroe in pointing out the obvious irony.

Lawrence's single standing memorial to the Promoters is a three-panel display based on a 2005 interview conducted by Alice Fowler and Amber Reagan-Kendrick for the the Lawrence/Douglas County, Kansas, African American Oral History Project. This display rests on top of a piano in a basement meeting room at the St. Luke AME Church, 900 New York St., where the Promoters like to gather.

"We enjoy looking at the team photos and thinking back about our days playing basketball," explains Monroe. "Those were fun times." •

The high school eventually integrated its basketball team following the 1949 season and the Promoters disbanded.

Top: Bill Jeltz, guard 1943-1945 teams
Bottom: Chuck Newman, 1949 alternate team
Insert: 1934-1935 Promoters Squad