

# Clark will honor past basketball champions

## Five title-winning teams share spotlight on Saturday

By PAUL DANZER  
*Columbian staff writer*

Joe Johnson didn't miss much the last time he suited up for the Clark College basketball team.

He remembers making 8 of 9 shots from the floor and all five of his free throws the 1956 day Clark won its second consecutive Washington Junior College championship.

"We didn't miss that day," Johnson said, recalling the title-clinching win over Grays Harbor.

Johnson, who lives in Woodland, isn't going to miss Saturday, either.

He will join former teammates at the O'Connell Center as Clark College celebrates its basketball champions during Saturday's games against Lower Columbia College. The former champions — five men's teams and two women's teams — will be recognized during halftime of the men's game against Lower Columbia.

The women's game starts at 6 p.m. and the men's game at 8 p.m. A hospitality room for returning champions will be open throughout the evening. The event is being organized by the Penguin Athletic Club, The Clark College Alumni Association, and the athletic department.

Claude "Skeets" O'Connell, who coached four of Clark's men's basketball championship teams, will not attend Saturday's event. The 95-year-old coach lives in a Vancouver retirement community. Clark athletic director Denny Huston said O'Connell joked that the 8 p.m. men's game is past his bed time.

Members of the men's basketball championship teams from 1947, 1953, 1955, 1956 and 1995 are expected to attend. Pat Sutherland, one of five surviving members of the 1947 teams, has told event organizers he will attend Saturday's event.

Members of the 1989 and 1993 women's basketball championship teams will also be recognized.

Johnson played forward for the 1955 and 1956 teams. He moved to Clark County after four years in the Navy, and walked into

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### If you go

■ **What:** Clark College basketball night of champions.

■ **When:** 6-10 p.m. Saturday. Women's game at 6 p.m., men's game at 8 p.m. Ceremony halftime of men's game..

■ **Where:** O'Connell Sports Center at Clark College.

■ **Who:** All members of Clark College basketball championship teams are invited to participate.

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O'Connell's office and asked for a tryout. He earned a starting forward spot. Johnson and Larry Smedley were the two players on both of the 1955 and 1956 champions.

"It was team basketball. No one player tried to dominate," Johnson said, explaining the formula for success on those teams. "And we played very, very good defense."

The 1947 team defeated Everett to win the first basketball championship of the Washington State Junior College Athletic Conference, which formed in 1946. The nine charter members were Centralia, Clark, Everett, Grays Harbor, Lower Columbia, Olympic, Skagit Valley,

Wenatchee Valley and Yakima Valley.

In 1953, Clark beat Lower Columbia for the title. In both 1955 and 1956, Grays Harbor was the runner-up.

"I think we enjoyed good chemistry, particularly on the '54-'55 team," said Ken Boydston, who played point guard on the 1953-54 and 1954-55 teams. "A lot of us were locals who knew each other. We just got along."

Boydston said he and center Fletcher Frazier worked well together, making the 1955 team difficult to defend.

His favorite memory? "Winning games. It was a well-contested league."

It took 39 years for Clark to win another men's basketball title. The 1995 team coached by Dave Waldow won the Northwest Athletic Association of Community Colleges title, beat-

ing Everett.

The NWAACC, which officially combined the Oregon and Washington junior colleges for men's sports in 1980, crowned a women's basketball champion for the first time in 1979. The Clark women were champions in 1989 and 1993, and were runners-up in the three seasons between those titles under coach Ken Trapp.

The 1989 team had several players from the Prairie High team that finished 25-1 in 1988, losing only in the first game at the state tournament by a single point. That made winning the NWAACC title extra sweet, according to Julie (Cotton) Renk.

"For us it was pretty big," said Renk, now an assistant coach for Prairie girls basketball. "It was not a national title or anything, but it was as far as we could go, which was nice."