

When bloomers and hay were the rule

MARCH 12, 1987

Newspaper headlines announcing that another of Chelmsford High School's athletic teams has established a new record or won a tourney is not uncommon; it's almost routine. This was not the case years ago, within the memory of our older residents.

It is true that, according to history, the high school boys, at the turn of the century, played baseball and football on the Center Common, which was then the school playground, but this could hardly be called organized sport as we know it today. In the early 1920's, the baseball team, coached by Ralph P. Coates, the science teacher, played other high schools.

Not until 1927 (just 60 years ago) did regularly organized sports become a part of the High School program. In the Annual Town Report for the year ending December 31, 1926, the school superintendent pointed out that the proposed school department budget included an item for a physical director for all grades and the High School. "Besides supervising the physical exercises taught the pupils by our teachers, he would have complete control of the development of all athletic teams for all the grade schools, as well as for the High School."

That fall Mr. Elsworth R. Thwing was hired to inaugurate the physical education and athletic program. It was then that C.H.S. football made its debut along with

The way it was

By George A. Parkhurst



both boys' and girls' basketball teams. There had been no suitable place for a basketball court until the McFarlin School building opened in the fall of 1926. (The Town Hall had been used many years previously.)

Today's athletes would not recognize the gym on the ground floor of the McFarlin building as acceptable for interscholastic basketball games. The court itself was somewhat less than "official" size and had a couple of major obstructions. There were two iron columns about 10 inches in diameter in the middle of the floor. Wrestling mats were wrapped around them to make them feel just a little softer when a player collided with them.

The game of basketball took on an entirely new dimension when a player standing behind one of the posts could shoot to either side while it took two opponents to block the

shot. Members of the visiting teams often found it difficult to accustom themselves to dribbling around posts.

Football was played, for the first three years, on a hayfield at North Chelmsford, near where the new Little League Field is by the river. After the hay had been cut and harvested, the team managers (including this writer) and a few volunteers marked the lines by pouring powdered lime from a coffee can along a string stretched across the field. The quality of the playing surface was somewhat less than that of today's Astroturf!

Beginning in 1930, football games were played on the field behind the High School (now the Town Office Building on Billerica Road.)

Girls' soccer became recognized as a C.H.S. sport in the fall of 1931 and field hockey was added a few years later. Boys' track was introduced in the late 1920's on a limited scale.

It is interesting to note that, while the uniforms of the boys' basketball teams were not too different from today's, the girls' uniforms have undergone several changes. You don't see white middle blouses and blue serge gym bloomers on the court in 1987.

But that's the way it was.

George A. Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.