

In May of this year a new restaurant opened in Raritan named *Stapleton's*. Interestingly it was named after a former basketball coach at Bridgewater Raritan High School (West) Vaughn Stapleton. The co-owner is one of coach Stapleton's former players Eric Murdock. Coach Stapleton, who passed away in 1993, had been the most influential person in Eric's life. To ensure that his coach would be remembered Eric Murdock named his new restaurant after him. Eric Murdock played under coach Stapleton at Bridgewater-Raritan High School West from 1985-1987. In 1987, the team won the State Championship in Cinderella like fashion – beating teams that were then considered the supposive powerhouses in high school basketball. In this issue of The Breeze we take a look back at that special year when the Bridgewater-Raritan High School "Golden Falcons" (as they were known then) won their first of what would turn out to be three consecutive State Basketball Championships.

The star on the team was future NBA player Eric Murdock who averaged 23 points a game, but the supporting cast could hold their own with anyone. Lance Miller, a 6' 4" forward, averaged 12 points a game - and made the all-county team. His brother, Dave Miller, a 6' 0" guard, averaged 10 points a game – and he also made all-county team. Center Jim Shickora at 6' 4" played his roll well, supporting the scorers, and playing superb defense. The other starter was forward Bill Ettel, a player who came through in the clutch.

While offense gets most of the attention in basketball, and this team had that, it was their defense that set them apart from other teams. Coach Vaughn Stapleton taught them to play an intense man to man defense. With their excellent offense and defense they won most of their regular season games by large margins. In fact going into the playoffs the coach had voiced concern that they may not be prepared to face a tough opponent in a close game as in the regular season there were only two close games – one of which they lost.

The Golden Falcons intense play at both ends of the court frustrated their opponents so much that some of these opponents still recall in detail how tough it was to play against them. Tyrone Brewer who today lives in Bridgewater, then played for Piscataway High School, remembers how impressive the Bridgewater defense was. He said that each guy on Bridgewater knew his role – they were very impressive as a unit. Tyrone further added that Eric Murdock had the best "Basketball IQ" of any player he ever saw. Piscataway only lost six games that year, but both games against Bridgewater they lost by big margins.

### **State Tournament – Hamilton East (Steinert)**

After a 24-1 regular season, the Golden Falcons headed to the state playoffs. In the first playoff game they put on an amazing performance against Hamilton East (Steinert) . They came out smoking taking a 20-2 lead. By the third quarter it was 61-22 before the starting players would be removed from the game for good. The final would be 92-49. The win startled the basketball community as it was the kind of rout that is seen in a mismatched regular season game, not in a state tournament. The opposing coach said "They kept hitting those outside shots against our zone. Normally you expect them to cool off eventually, but it just never happened. And their defense ... well I just haven't seen anyone play that kind of man to man defense all year. They're so quick". The Golden Falcons scoring totals that game

were Murdock with 27, Dave Miller with 12, and Lance Miller with 10. Reserve forward Bob Bryant even scored 10 points coming off the bench.

### **Ewing**

The next game was against the defending state champions Ewing. The game was tied with 5 minutes left in the first half when Bridgewater went on a 12-4 surge to take an eight point lead into the locker room. The highlight reel included an nice fast break basket by Bill Ettel after a Murdock blocked shot, a Lance Miller turnaround jumper that delighted the crowd, and an impressive "end to end" run by Murdock that started with his rebound on defense and ended with a layup at the other end. In the third quarter they continued their domination outscoring Ewing 16-9 to take a commanding 15 point lead into the fourth quarter. However, at this point the Golden Falcons showed that they were indeed human. Ewing, the defending champions, were not going down without a fight. Starting the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter Ewing's Kelly Williams got hot. Bridgewater started missing shots. Then in frustration they were fouling on the rebounds giving Ewing foul shots of which they made 9. While the Golden Falcons bent, they did not break. With a minute left, Ewing pulled to within 4 points, but Eric Murdock proved he was a true superstar (as if there was any doubt) and came through hitting 4 of 5 free throws and a bank shot in the final minute to allow Bridgewater to hold on and advance to the next round .

### **Colonia**

Next up was Colonia. Here the Golden Falcons were out for revenge as last year they had been eliminated in the state tournament in double overtime by Colonia. A packed house of basketball fans came to see what they thought would be a close game between two evenly balanced teams. The score was tied 12-12 one minute into the second quarter when Dave Miller put Bridgewater up for good with a jump shot. Then in a two minute stretch they pulled away. First Eric Murdock drove through the defense to the basket on two consecutive possessions and then Lance Miller stole a pass and went in for a layup. When Colonia inbounded the ball a deflected pass was intercepted by Murdock who scored on a jump shot. They took a 32-21 lead at halftime. In the last half Colonia tried to battle back, but the Golden Falcon's aggressive man to man defense, led that night by Jim Shickora and Bill Ettel, frustrated Colonia's offense. The final was 75-50.

### **Camden - Woodrow Wilson – The semi-final**

The semifinal game was against Woodrow Wilson of Camden. It would be a thriller that went down to the last second. In this game the usual stars did not have their best night, but as a great team does, the lesser players stepped up to ensure the win. Camden had a considerable size advantage over the Falcons. As the game progressed it appeared that this advantage might be too much for Bridgewater as they fell behind by 13 points midway through the second quarter. They gained some ground after that but were still losing by 7 at halftime. The outside shots by Eric Murdock and Dave Miller that usually connected were not falling. Jim Shickora made up some of the slack as he would have his best scoring game of the playoffs. The third quarter was evenly played and they entered the fourth quarter down by 5.

As the clock ticked away they closed the gap. With 2:30 to play Murdock hit a jumper to pull them within 2. Then Coach Stapleton decided to have the Golden Falcons change from their man-to-man defense to a 1-3-1 defense in the hope of confusing Camden. It would prove a brilliant move. The new defense seemed to rattle Camden as they turned the ball over. Then Bill Ettel, who had not scored in the first three quarters, came alive and hit a 17 foot jumper that tied the score. Camden again turned the ball over and Bill Ettel converted an offensive rebound in a score – he was fouled on the play and made his foul shot to give the Golden Falcons a 3 point lead with 1:34 to play. Camden scored quickly on their next possession to close to within a point. Then they fouled Dave Miller as soon as Bridgewater inbounded the ball. Dave would make one foul shot. Camden then scored on a jumper and the game was tied with 43 seconds left. Bill Ettel again came through making a ten foot jump shot - where he was again fouled on the play. His foul shot gave Bridgewater a 3 point lead with 31 seconds left. But Camden was not done. They managed one foul shot on their next possession to close it to 60-58. They fouled Lance Miller on the inbound pass. Lance converted both free throws putting Bridgewater up 62-58 with 21 seconds left. It looked like Bridgewater had it sewn up. But Camden scored quickly reducing Bridgewater's lead to 2 points. On Bridgewater's possession Camden fouled Murdock in order to stop the clock. Murdock would go to the foul line with 8 seconds left to shoot a "one on one". If the shot went in, the game was essentially over. (There was no "three point shot" in High School Basketball in 1987.) The star player tossed the free throw as the crowd of thousands watched intensely, but the shot missed. On the rebound Bill Ettel, who was in the midst of the best three minutes of his career, managed to grab a part of the ball along with a Camden player. The whistle blew on the "tie up" - and fortunately the "possession arrow" was in favor of the Falcons. On the inbounds pass Lance Miller was fouled. The clock now showed just 5 seconds left with Bridgewater clinging to a 2 point lead. Like moments before they were at the foul line where a successful shot would ice the game. But again the free throw was missed. This time Camden grabbed the rebound and raced up court. They got a shot off just before the horn sounded ... everyone held their breath as the hurried shot appeared to have a good chance of landing, but it bounced off the rim and the game was over. The Golden Falcons and their fans went wild.

### **Shabazz - The Championship Game**

The final game for the State Championship was held at The Rutgers Athletic Center. They would be playing Shabazz High School of Newark who were led by 6' 9" future NBA player Anthony Avent. Up till half time the game was even with Shabazz holding a slim 2 point lead. It remained tight – then with 3 minutes left in the third quarter Bill Ettel gave Bridgewater the lead for good. At the start of the fourth quarter the Golden Falcons, with the championship in their site, went into high gear. Led by Eric Murdock they outscored Shabazz 25-9 in the fourth quarter for a final score of 76-57.

Eric Murdock was the star of the game and tournament MVP with 28 points. Dave Miller would add an impressive 18, Bill Ettel again rose to the occasion with 14 points, and Lance Miller had 6. Jim Shickora also had 6 points, but it was his defense against Shabazz star Anthony Avent that was his best contribution to the team.

It was a glorious championship. To see photos, articles, and box scores for this team logon to [www.raritan-online.com](http://www.raritan-online.com). (Bridgewater-Raritan Basketball Team, led by Coach Vaughn Stapleton, would again win the state championship the next two years, but that's another story for another article.)