

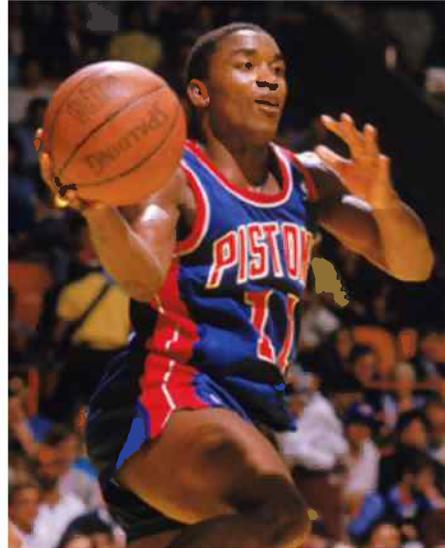
The Magnificent 400 Miles

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Written By James A. Johnson

Illinois, the "Tall State," is strategically situated between Lake Michigan and the Mississippi River. It is at least 400 miles in length, lying in the heart of the Midwest, bound on the north by Wisconsin, Indiana on the east and Kentucky on the south. The Prairie State, Land of Lincoln is the home of Presidents Ulysses S. Grant and the birthplace of Ronald Reagan. Also, it is the domicile of John Deere, designer and manufacturer of steel plows, and a plethora of others, too numerous to mention.

This article is not about Illinois' indigenous people, the Blackhawk, Sac and other Native Americans. Nor is it about the early settlers of Italian, Polish, Swedish and German descent. This story is about all of the above who played Illinois high school basketball – one of the toughest basketball states in the country. Keep in mind that great college players and NBA/WNBA standouts do not come out of the woodwork. With few exceptions, basketball skill begins in high school.



Isiah Thomas - Knicks head coach
H.S. - St. Joe's

We start in Chicago, metropolis of the Midwest and the third-largest city in the United States, with a population of three million people.

The first Chicago high school team to reach the State Finals at Champaign/Urbana – University of Illinois, was all-black DuSable in 1954. This team consisted of super guards Paxton Lumpkin, Charlie Brown and the great forward Shellie McMillon, who played four years in the NBA with the Detroit Pistons. It has been alleged that DuSable lost the championship game because of late, questionable referee calls.

Chicago was founded by a Black fur trapper, Jean Baptiste Point DuSable, who built a cabin and trading post at the site of modern Chicago. Since a Black man founded Chicago and has a high school and museum named after him, the black experience must be mentioned. Historically, the most racially segregated city in America above the Mason-Dixon Line. Some of the famous DuSable graduates include Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton (Harlem Globetrotter and NBA), Shellie McMillon (NBA), Harold Washington (former Mayor of Chicago), Nat "King" Cole, and Maurice Cheeks (NBA Player with 7,392 assists and Coach).

Today, Chicago is a crucible of ethnic diversity and opportunity exemplified by Congressman Luis Gutierrez of District Four and U.S. Senator Barack Obama. One of the best kept secrets outside the Midwest is the University of Chicago. Its undergraduate and professional schools are second to none, including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley. Earl B. Dickerson in 1920 is the first Black graduate of its law school. Carol Moseley Braun, a former U.S. Senator is also a graduate of the University of Chicago Law School.

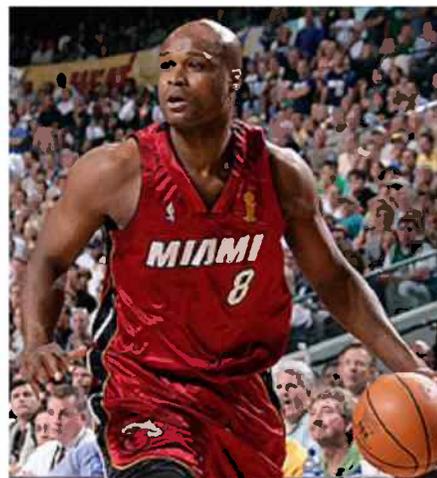
In my considered opinion, the following high school players are the Chicago area all-time best:

Player	High School	Grad. Year
Nolden Gentry	W. Rockford	1956
Art Hicks	St. Elizabeth	1957
George Wilson	Marshall	1960 (NBA)
Cazzie Russell	Carver	1962 (NBA)
Kris Berymon	Harper	1970
Ricky Green	Hirsch	1973 (NBA)
Eddie Johnson	Westinghouse	1977 (NBA)
Mark Aguirre	Westinghouse	1978 (NBA)
Isiah Thomas	St. Joe's	1978 (NBA)
Voise Winters	Gage Park	1981
Janet Harris	Marshall	1981
Carl Golson	Phillips	1981
Bernard Jackson	Phillips	1982
Juwan Howard	Vocational	1991 (NBA)
Antonine Walker	Mt. Carmel	1995 (NBA)
Kevin Garnett	Farragut	1995 (NBA)
Ronnie Fields	Farragut	1995 (NBA)
Quentin Richardson	Whitney Young	1998 (NBA)
Eddy Curry	Thronwood	2001 (NBA)
Andre Iguodala	Lanphier	2002 (NBA)
Shannon Brown	Proviso E.	2003 (NBA)

Shaun Livingston	Central	2004 (NBA)
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In 2002, the NCAA adopted the Wilson Solution composite as its official basketball. Wilson Sporting Goods is based in Chicago.

Notwithstanding, Chicago and its environs, West Rockford (Ernie Kent 1973 and University of Oregon Coach), Elgin (Flynn Robinson 1960), Aurora (Bill Small 1959, Bob Kivisto 1968, Tom Kivisto 1970, Melvin Harden 1980, and NFL Walter Payton's Museum), Batavia (Dan Issel 1969), Downers Grove (Rick Howat 1967, Jeff Dawson 1969), we must go immediately to Southern Illinois.



Antoine Walker - Miami Heat Forward
H.S. - Mt. Carmel

First, we visit Mt. Vernon with at least three state championships, and, in 1954, beat DuSable. This region produces some of the best teams and players beginning in the 1940s. Witness: Centralia 1941 Dike Eddleman, 1955 Bobby Joe Mason - Bradley University; Mt. Carmel 1954 Archie Dees - Indiana University; Benton 1967 Rich Yunkus and Doug Collins; Marion 1967 Greg Starrick - Southern Illinois University. For the hip-hop generation readers who may question the skills of the above players, rest assured, they would be stars today. These players were off the chain and you should recognize Doug Collins and Dan Issel, former NBA players and coaches.

If you are still not convinced, come with me to McLeansboro, where, in 1960, Jerry Sloan played high school basketball. Later, he became an NBA Chicago Bulls star and Utah Jazz Coach. There's also Jim Burns in 1963 and later U.S. Attorney in Chicago. They were outstanding players who used the discipline and other values gleaned from participation in high school and college basketball into productive adults.

Deep in Southern Illinois is 6'2" Charlie "Chico" Vaughn from Alexander County High School, Tamms in 1958 with a career total of 3,358 points. This record withstood the onslaught from paragons of the hardwood for more than 40 years. Charlie took his skills to Southern Illinois University and the old ABA.

Now, let us go back upstate to the southwest corner to Collinsville. From 1956 to the late 1960s, it was the number one basketball city in the state with a bevy of outstanding players. Vergil Fletcher has coached 34 state tournament games, 21 victories and 2 State Championships. He ranks in the top 50 in national schoolboy coaching wins to this very day. Visit the Vergil Fletcher Gymnasium at Collinsville High School. In 1983, Vergil Fletcher was inducted into the National High School Sports Hall of Fame. The winningest boys coach in Illinois history is Dick Van Scyoc of Peoria Manual with 826 victories. On the college level, Theresa Grentz, University of Illinois Coach, was inducted into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame in 2001, and, in 2002, exceeded 600 career wins.

Since the past illuminates the present and provides a window to the future, take Interstate 74 North from Champaign to Normal, the home of the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame. You will see pictures and memorabilia honoring coaches, players and much more. The Illinois High School Association, the governing body regulating high school athletics,

began using the phrase "March Madness" in 1939 to describe its annual high school basketball tournament. This tournament, a caldron for thrills per minute, has been held since 1994 at the Peoria Civic Center.

Illinois High School Players & NBA Coaches (Past & Present)

NBA Coach / Past & Present	High School
Maurice Cheeks	DuSable
Jerry Sloan	McLeansboro
Dan Issel	Batavia
Quinn Buckner	Thornridge
Glenn "Doc" Rivers	Proviso East
Isiah Thomas	St. Joe's Westchester
Doug Collins	Benton

Future College Stars & NBA Prospects

Future Star	High School	Grad. Year
Derrick Rose	Simeon Academy	2007
Jon Scheyer	Glenbrook North	2006
Jeremy Pargo	Robeson	2005
Julian Wright	Flossmoor	2005
Jamarcus Ellis	Westinghouse	2004

It is interesting to note that 2007 is the centennial celebration of boy's basketball. The IHSA has planned a gala event for the boys tournament, including inviting and honoring the team of 100 Legends selected by the fans and a blue-ribbon committee.

Special mention must be given to Chicago legend Ronnie Fields, a 1996 Farragut Academy super leaper. In today's basketball lexicon, the "King of Hops" has a 48-inch vertical leap and a 32.4 ppg average. He was sidetracked by a serious car accident in 1996, but continues to work on his game with hopes of getting to the NBA. Ronnie Fields exemplifies persistence and one big mile in Illinois' Magnificent Four Hundred Miles.

For the young student-athlete, your primary focus should be on grades and a college education, not professional sports. If you have NBA skills, the scouts will find you no matter what college you attend. Consider the following:

There are about one million high school football players and about 500,000 basketball players. Approximately 150 will make it to the NFL and about 50 will make an NBA team.

Less than three percent of college seniors will play one year in professional basketball.

The odds of a high school football player making it to the pros are 6,000 to 1 and the odds for a high school basketball player are 10,000 to 1.



Eddie Johnson - Suns Legend
H.S. - Westinghouse

***James A. Johnson** is a basketball cognoscente and a Certified NBA Players Agent.

"Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education alone will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."

--Calvin Coolidge