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Karen Lammon Moden, here in the gym in Wauseon High School, was a member of the seven-woman professional basketball team called Hazel Walker's Arkansas Travelers.

Wauseon High School to honor an athlete far ahead of her time

BY MIKE TRESSLER
BLADE STAFF WRITER

WAUSEON — She could dribble a basketball and she could shoot it. That was enough to make the team.

And what a team it was, the barnstorming women's professional basketball team that Karen Lammon — now Karen Moden of Wauseon — joined in 1961.

Hazel Walker's Arkansas Travelers was one of the very few women's teams of that era. They traveled the country, playing games in villages, cities, and country gyms.

The Travelers women were good enough to win 85 percent of their games — all against men.

"We never played other women. Never," Mrs. Moden said.

The 59-year-old Wauseon mother of three recalled her single season of 220 games, all on the road, as "a dream, just a dream to me."

Mrs. Moden was the youngest on a seven-woman team that barnstormed the country, from Wyoming to West Virginia and Ohio to Florida. People paid to watch them play against teams of local athletes and

coaches.

The women seldom lost.

"Oh, yes, we were good," Mrs. Moden said. "In those days men didn't expect women to be able to outplay them. But we did."

When a game was over, the Travelers piled into a station wagon and drove through the night to the next game, typically 300 to 500 miles away.

Many of Mrs. Moden's northwest Ohio friends don't know of her year as a paid hoopster, but they will when her picture and plaque are attached to the

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Wauseon High School Wall of Fame alongside those of star athletes who have been named All-Ohio.

Members of her Wauseon High class of '60 urged the school to honor her — an athlete born too soon to play basketball as girls play it today, with the same rules as men.

It wasn't that way when Karen Lammon was in school. Girls played half-court, with ladylike rules.

In her junior year someone took her to Lyons, Ohio, to see a women's team play. She saw them play just like men, and against men, for the first time.

After graduation she trained at an airline-office school, but when a

job was not quickly offered, she and friends decided to join the Air Force. Her parents wouldn't sign for her, she said.

She wrote a letter to the women's basketball team she had watched, Hazel Walker's Arkansas Travelers.

"One day I got notice about an airline job in Chicago. That same night Hazel Walker called and invited me down to Little Rock," Mrs. Moden recalled. "There was no doubt where I wanted to go."

An admittedly naive and sheltered small-town girl, Mrs. Moden said she had \$25 to her name, "enough for a bus to Little Rock, but not enough to get home." She reported to a YMCA gym.

"I dribbled the ball and shot one layup shot," she said. "That was all."

She then was quizzed about her morals, family life, and school, she said, then was taken to the bus station. "You made the team. Here's money to get home," Hazel Walker told her.

"I said, 'You don't know my ability. You didn't see me play,' and Hazel said: 'You can dribble and you can shoot. I can teach you the rest.'

"So I learned basketball very quickly," Mrs. Moden said.

"I was told I made the team because of my moral character. My folks didn't much approve. They had doubts, but they became big fans once they saw us play."

Few men's teams were prepared for the opposition the women brought to the game. Usually the girls outpassed, outshot, out-hustled, and sometimes out-muscled them.

"I was not as rough a player as some of the others, but one time this man guarding me, a big man, was real aggressive and I made a move and flipped him right into the air, head over heels."

Most of her teammates were southerners, from Arkansas and Mississippi. "The others said I was the only Yankee they ever liked," Mrs. Moden remembered.

Mrs. Moden said her northwest Ohio Christian upbringing stayed with her as the team barnstormed the country. She drank soda pop when the others drank and smoked at roadhouses along the way.

"I read my Bible every day," she said. "And when I got homesick and went behind the bleachers to cry, Hazel would understand."

Her plaque will go onto the Wauseon High School wall without much fanfare, although something might be planned later, athletic director Bill Gase said.

"Like most folks here I had never heard about her playing pro basketball but I've learned that she was way ahead of her time," Mr. Gase said. "It's amazing what she did."

"She must have been quite an athlete," Mr. Gase said. "At a foot-

ball game last year she won a chance to kick a field goal and didn't send a man on the field to do it. She kicked the ball and barely missed."

Mr. Gase said the school's coaches want Mrs. Moden to talk to students and become an active role model.

After the 220 games of that 1961-62 season, she had an offer to play again, she said. But back home, she also had another offer: marriage to Jim Moden.

"I told him that either I go away and play basketball, or we get married," Mrs. Moden said.

She and Jim Moden have been married since 1963. Their three children, Kelly, Jill, and Kody, are grown and on their own. Mrs. Moden works for the Fulton County Health Department.

She was a longtime fan and refereed for a while, but she said she has not seen many games for some time.

"I watch how good girls basketball is today, and I feel like a pioneer," Mrs. Moden said.

"The only disappointing thing about my experience is that today they score three points for those long shots that we made all the time."