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Review of *The Rhythm Boys of Omaha Central: High School Basketball at the '68 Racial Divide* by Steve Marantz

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Rhythm Boys of Omaha Central: High School Basketball at the '68 Racial Divide. By Steve Marantz. Foreword by Susie Buffett. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011. xiii + 247 pp. Photographs, illustrations, index. \$17.95 paper.

During the school year of 1967–68, African American basketball sensations John Biddle, Willie Frazier, Dwaine Dillard, Roy Hunter, and Phil Griffin electrified the predominantly white student body, coaches, and administrators of Omaha Central High School. These five “Rhythm Boys” and the racially tense times they lived through inspired Steve Marantz, a 1966 Omaha Central graduate, to write an examination of the first-string basketball players and the surrounding discrimination and racism they faced on and off the court. It was a year in which their high-school principal, J. Arthur Nelson, privately referred to black students as “Smoky Swedes” and employed only one black teacher, Wilda Stephenson, who taught typing and business classes as part of the school’s college-prep curriculum. Marantz’s study effectively uses the ratio of the sole black instructor to the rest of the white teachers as an example of imbalance of opportunity and the rampant inequality in Omaha, a typical segregated city in 1960s America.

Marantz’s monograph provides a broad view of black residents living in Omaha’s Near North Side. He labels the community as “Omaha’s Ellis Island” because the ethnic enclave evolved from Irish and Italian immigrants in the nineteenth century, to a Jewish neighborhood, nicknamed “Bagel,” shared with

African Americans arriving in the twentieth century. The Near North Side’s black community struggled with civil rights. Residents were championed by a thirty-five-year-old activist, soon-to-be state senator, Ernie Chambers. He challenged city protocol during the minority neighborhood’s first racial riot in June 1966. The disturbance, in which one black youth was killed by an off-duty white officer, happened at 24th and Lake Streets, the heart of the black community. It was one of several racial explosions in Omaha that Marantz includes in his study.

One of the book’s best features is the chapter on George Wallace, in which Marantz expertly guides his readers through Wallace’s infamous 1968 Omaha campaign stop. Aggressively politicking at Omaha’s Civic Auditorium, the southern Democratic presidential candidate deliberately incited a public disturbance in which “chairs started flying” and black youths were methodically bludgeoned by Omaha police officers. It was a turning point in Omaha’s local civil rights movement, one that led to the black community’s self-directed 1969 riot, the worst in the city’s history.

The Rhythm Boys of Omaha Central examines the almost-championship season of 1968 while studying the black and white world of the starter basketball athletes. Marantz’s documentation of the racial slur-spewing during basketball games and the consequences of dating, despite the fact that interracial marriage was ruled legal in Nebraska in 1967, highlights the city’s mentality, which still closely followed social taboos at the time. Despite the grim prognosis of the Rhythm

Boys' community, Marantz presents a halcyon moment when these five extraordinary high-school athletes made anything seem possible at Omaha Central. His retelling of this positive year against a backdrop of a racially divided Omaha bears further investigation, simply for the knowledge of what it was like to live in an isolated black urban community in the Great Plains.

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