



THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

It has been 30 years since CCHS basketball legend Percy Eberhart's death, yet coaches and community members in Athens are keeping his legacy alive.

STORY AND LAYOUT
BY WYATT MEYER
Lead Copy Editor

Nestled in the front corner of the Clarke Central High School boys varsity basketball locker room is a painting.

In fine brushstrokes, this painting shows a larger-than-life CCHS basketball player rising above awed Cedar Shoals High School defenders to dunk in the University of Georgia's Stegeman Coliseum.

Though this painting hangs proudly next to the whiteboard the team plans around at every home game, few passers-by know what the image of the Gladiators' legend – who died over 30 years ago – truly means.

This painting represents *a legacy.*

This painting represents *a dream, lost.*

This painting represents *Percy Eberhart.*

Above: A LIVING LEGEND: Geneva Johnson Eberhart, Athens community member and mother to Clarke Central High School Class of 1992 alumnus and former varsity basketball player Percy Eberhart, points at a painting of her son's likeness displayed in the CCHS boys varsity basketball locker room. According to Geneva, Percy had starry-eyed dreams that became intertwined with the history of the CCHS basketball program. "(Percy) wanted to play against Shaquille O'Neal. He said, 'Mom, I want to play against him.' I said, 'That big ole' boy? Are you crazy?' He said, 'No, I just want to play against him, and I think I can,'" Geneva said. "Right before he died, he was scheduled to go to Texas and try out with (Charles) Barkley, Shaquille (O'Neal), Scottie Pippen, but he never did make it there." Photo by Aza Khan

According to Percy's mother, Geneva Johnson Eberhart, Percy grew up like any other Athens youngster. He attended Alps Road Elementary School and Burney-Harris-Lyons Middle School, playing pickup basketball games with his friends behind the now-closed West Broad School minutes from his house on Paris Street.

Playing in backyards and playgrounds, Geneva remembers Percy's hoop dreams starting before he was anything to his city.

"He said to me, 'Mom, when I make it famous, I'm taking all the guys from Rocksprings and Broadacres right here in the neighborhood with me. All of us are gonna be together,'" Geneva said.

Standing well over 6 feet tall in his freshman year — though he would eventually make it to a startling 6 feet 9 inches — Percy played varsity basketball for CCHS throughout his high school career, improving all the time. Geneva swears that in the very same matchup against CSHS shown in the locker room painting, Percy put up 51 points.

On another occasion, Percy's former teammate Jason Johnson, a CCHS Class of 1991 alumnus and current CCHS assistant boys varsity basketball coach, recalls Percy ending a game against Hancock Central High School in the first quarter by shattering the backboard.

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-- BILLY WADE,

Former CCHS head boys varsity basketball coach

"I just heard everybody stand up and (start cheering) and I turned around, and when I turned around, he caught the ball, took two long steps and slammed it home. When he got through, he had the rim in his hand. He had shattered the backboard," Johnson said. "He walked over to the bench with the rim in his hand and (was) like, 'What are we gonna do now?'"

Former CCHS boys varsity basketball coach Billy Wade, who coached at CCHS for 24 years between 1986 and 2010, including all of Percy's high school career, marveled at Percy's capabilities.

"He's one of the best players to come through Clarke Central from the time it was conceived up until now, without a shadow of a doubt," Wade said. "You compare him to Kevin Durant, one of the best players in the (NBA). That skillset that (Percy) had, it was ahead of his time."

With Percy's growing fame, those outside of Athens began to take notice.

"When (television host) Dick Vitale mentioned (Percy's) name live on ESPN, he put Clarke Central on the map," former teammate Dr.

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Right: A POINT OF PRIDE: Former Clarke Central High School boys varsity basketball player and Class of 1992 alumnus Percy Eberhart dunks on a defender during the 1991 season. Billy Wade, who coached hundreds of high school basketball players during his 24-year tenure as CCHS head boys varsity basketball coach, believes Percy is one of the best players to come through the school. "People came out to watch him play, people came out to watch Clarke Central," Wade said. "If you look at attendance while (Percy played for CCHS), we didn't have any problems." Photo courtesy of the Gladius Yearbook



Stefan Smith, CCHS Class of 1991 alumnus and current CCHS head boys varsity basketball coach, said. “When he said that on ESPN, we went crazy. (Percy) was that type of guy.”

After being named a “Parade Third-Team All-American” for high school basketball in 1991 and then again in 1992, Percy looked destined for greatness, attending Anderson Junior College in 1992 after graduating from summer school.

This decision didn’t come without some controversy, as a nationally-reported recruiting violation with the University of South Carolina denied Percy a move to the Gamecocks. However, that didn’t stop Percy from “burning up the nets at Anderson College” — as a 1992 Spartanburg Herald-Journal article put it — leading the Trojans to an 11-1 record while averaging 22 points, seven rebounds, and four assists per game.

“We didn’t communicate a lot after he went off, (but) when he came home, we connected and we talked. He was excited that he was about to transfer (to a Division I school),” Johnson said.

Percy would never get the chance.

On March 22, 1993, during a pick-up basketball game in Anderson, Percy collapsed on the court and was rushed to the hospital. 20 minutes later, the baby boy of the Eberhart family, the CCHS basketball hero, the big man with bigger dreams, was pronounced dead at 20 years old.

“(At the hospital), they opened this room that was filled with reporters and people, too many people,” Geneva said.

“I said, ‘I don’t want to come to this room, I want to see Percy. Where is he?’ (Anderson Junior College Coach Steve Lytton) looked at me and dropped his head. I said, ‘Where’s my baby? Don’t tell me my baby’s dead.’ I got on my knees and started praying. I didn’t know nothing else to do.”

For those who knew him, Percy’s death



“You gotta have somebody for each school that you can revere forever, and he’s just one of those guys. He’s always gonna be in the lore at Clarke Central as long as I’m here.”

-- DR. STEFAN SMITH,

Head boys varsity basketball coach and CCHS
Class of 1991 alumnus

was a “where were you when” moment.

Geneva recalls “feeling something leaving her” as she drove across the border between Georgia and South Carolina on her way to the hospital. Johnson remembers being interrupted from a pick-up game of his own to receive the news. Smith says he refused to believe it until he saw Percy’s body at the funeral.

“He was the first person that I saw in a casket and I was just like, ‘Man, get up,’” Smith said. “He was always going and always fun and joking. He was always a jovial guy and I’d never really (seen him differently).”

Percy’s funeral could have been the end of his story — the tragic end of a young man who had the world at his fingertips and a lifetime on the court ahead of him, whose dream of bringing Athens up with him would forever go unrealized.



Above: A LIVING LEGACY: Clarke Central High School assistant boys varsity basketball coach Jason Johnson coaches one of his players during the Gladiators’ game against Seckinger High School on Nov. 29, 2023. When Johnson joined the coaching staff in 2022, he made sure to emphasize the legacy of former CCHS boys varsity basketball player Percy Eberhart. “That picture means a lot. It kind of keeps his memory alive,” Johnson said. “Whenever you walk in, you’re gonna always look at that picture. That’s important because (Percy) was a key part of our basketball history here.” Photo by Aza Khan

Left: A WINNING TRADITION: Clarke Central High School head boys varsity basketball coach Dr. Stefan Smith coaches during the Gladiators’ game against Seckinger High School on Nov. 29, 2023. Smith’s former teammate, Class of 1992 alumnus Percy Eberhart, died in 1993, leaving Smith to retell Percy’s exploits. “(His numbers) give other people stuff to shoot for (and) goals to have,” Smith said. “I like (the team now) to take pride in who they’re playing for and the school and the (CCHS) tradition.” Photo by Aza Khan

Top right: SIGN OF THE TIMES: A sign in the Clarke Central High School boys varsity basketball locker room states, “We Honor Our Past”. Jason Johnson, CCHS assistant boys varsity basketball coach and Class of 1991 alumnus, has kept former teammate Percy Eberhart’s legacy alive with the current team. “His legacy is just that he was before his time,” Johnson said. “It’s hard to fill those shoes. I don’t care who you are, the stuff that he did as a high school player, I think it’s kind of unmatched.” Photo by Aza Khan

WE HONOR

OUR PAST

Not quite.

Johnson and Smith are keeping Percy's memory alive today on the same campus Percy walked over 30 years ago. Though basketball games have been moved from the James A. Crawford Memorial Arena Percy graced to the newer Competition Gym, Smith made sure to hang Percy's painting in the team's locker room.

"You gotta have somebody for each school that you can revere forever, ad he's just one of those guys," Smith said. "He's always gonna be in the lore at Clarke Central as long as I'm here."

Privately, they have no doubts about the greatest player of the bunch.

"To me, he's the GOAT (Greatest of All Time). He's the Clarke Central GOAT," Smith said. "Marcus will talk that stuff sometimes and I'm like, 'Nah, Marcus.' If we weren't here, Marcus could get away with it, but we know better."

For Wade, Percy's place in Athens history extends far beyond the paint – it stretched into the person he was off the court.

"He was a young athlete who came through

"He was a young athlete who came through Clarke Central and never tried to be any more than he was. To y'all, it's a legacy because he was a great player, but I knew his mom, dad, sisters and brothers. I knew him in the community."

-- BILLY WADE,

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According to CCHS boys varsity basketball player Marcus Gillespie – who recently reached 1000 high school points and has been touted as the next big thing in CCHS hoops – Percy is the measuring stick to which all players are compared.

"I want to get on his level. I want to accomplish what he did in high school to even be in the (same) conversation with him," Gillespie said. "I'm not on his level yet, so I have nothing to be proud (of)."

Smith and Johnson often joke with their team about who would win a game: Percy's team of the early 1990s or the current team of Gladiators.

Clarke Central and never tried to be any more than he was," Wade said. "To y'all, it's a legacy because he was a great player, but I knew his mom, dad, sisters and brothers. I knew him in the community."

The effort to recognize Percy hasn't ended at CCHS. In May 2023, Geneva attended the Athens Athletic Hall of Fame's induction ceremony, where Percy was posthumously inducted.

"He just was a young man that had dreams, wanted to take care of his mother, his father, sisters and brothers," Geneva said. "His biggest inspiration was this: he didn't put himself above anybody."

*Maybe **Percy Eberhart** never got to realize his dream. But, if Percy's locker room likeness is any indication, his legacy and his dream live on every day underneath the white CCHS jersey in **the hearts of those who walk in his footsteps.***



Above: THE HEIR APPARENT: Clarke Central High School boys varsity basketball player Marcus Gillespie, a junior, dribbles down the court during the Gladiators' game against Seckinger High School on Nov. 29, 2023. Gillespie, who recently scored his 1000th high school point and is attracting interest from universities across the country, still believes he has to do more to be considered among the Gladiators' all-time greats. "Whatever I do around here, I really don't get too cocky because I was like, I'm not on (former CCHS boys varsity basketball player Percy Eberhart's) level," Gillespie said. "I'm proud of myself for being in the same conversation. That makes me feel like I'm doing something right." Photo by Aza Khan