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NEWS RELEASE

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Fortenberry Recalls Father's Claim to Fame

McPherson - Oliver Fortenberry remembers shooting hoops in his home driveway but, despite his 6-2 height, he wasn't able to dunk the basketball due to the slanted driveway. "One day pop came home," recalled Fortenberry. "He took off his overcoat, took off his hat and placed his pipe in his pocket." His 55-year-old father dunked the basketball while remaining flat-footed.

This is just one of the many memories Oliver has about his father, Joe Fortenberry, a man who played on the first-ever USA Olympic basketball team. In 1936, in the midst of the Great Depression, Joe's team rose to the top of the Amateur Athletic Union ranks to capture the national title and then moved on to the Olympics in Berlin. Thanks to Joe 6-8 and teammate Willard Schmidt 6-9, the McPherson Globe Refiners of McPherson, Kansas, were billed the "Tallest Team in the World."

On August 13, Oliver will visit McPherson to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the Olympic championship and his father's legacy. And in his hands he will carry Joe's 1936 Olympic gold medal. "Pop was a humble man," said Oliver noting his father kept the gold medal in a shoebox in the closet.

Joe seldom discussed the Olympic win with his family, and his son attributes this to the fact that basketball "didn't really exist during the pre-war years." Additionally, the Olympics were suspended during World War II, resulting in a 12-year span from the first Olympic basketball appearance to the next. Oliver is confident, though, that his father would have qualified for the 1940 and 1944 games. Joe is attributed for being the team's high scorer. "Pop was more athletic than the others," said Oliver. "He could leap, he could jump."

In a recent article, Sports Illustrated writer Michael McKnight recounts the moment Joe was credited for the slam dunk. McKnight wrote, "When Joe Fortenberry, a farm boy from Happy, Texas, threw one down on the West Side YMCA in New York City on March 9, 1936, he may have not been the first man to dunk a basketball, but he was the first to do it in an aesthetically stirring way, and in front of the right people." McKnight was referring to New York Times writer Arthur J. Daley who covered the tournament designated to determine which Americans would represent the USA at the Olympic debut for the sport of basketball. Photos captured the momentous lay-up style performed by Joe and teammate Schmidt. Daley cited, "They left the floor, reached up and pitched the ball downward into the hoop, much like a cafeteria customer dunking a roll in coffee." Daley's description resulted in the signature term "dunk."

Team USA advanced skillfully through the Olympic tournament while playing on outdoor clay courts. The championship game against Canada was played during a rainstorm in temperatures ranging in the low 50s. Despite

the muddy court, team USA prevailed with a final score of 19-8 earning the first-ever medal in their sport. Joe was the team's top scorer with eight points.

Over the years Oliver has revisited history by pouring through his mother's scrapbook. The woman, boasting a height of 5-3, documented her husband's accomplishments. The personal moments reflected a man dedicated to his work, his sport and his country.

During WWII Joe served in the Army but never left the United States because he was "too tall." Oliver noted the Army didn't know how to utilize his father's height overseas so he was transferred throughout the country. An important placement was at the Mayo Clinic where he assisted war-wounded patients with physical therapy. With admiration in his voice, Oliver explained his father's large size allowed him to move patients with ease.

After the war Joe returned to Amarillo, Texas, where he worked for Phillips 66 as a petroleum land man. He was also a member of the company's basketball team. This is where Oliver was most aware of his father's athletic ability. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Oliver watched firsthand his father's role on the basketball court. "He was a legend among the Phillips," Oliver remembered fondly.

The public is invited to reminisce with Oliver and other Globe Refiners family members on Saturday, August 13, 6 to 8 p.m., at the McPherson Museum. The celebration will feature select artifacts including Joe's 1936 gold medal, a tour of the team's home court at the Community Building, a trivia game, jazz entertainment and hors d'oeuvres. Cost is \$10 per person. Contact meetings@visitmcpherson.com or 620.241.3340 to make reservations. Event sponsors include CHS, McPherson Rotary Club and McPherson Convention and Visitors Bureau.

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