

Kelly: Dillard is main figure in 'Rhythm Boys'

Continued from Page 1

sives in the car.

"What was Dwaine doing?" Marantz said. "Why did he go out that night?"

Was it a conscious protest?

Was there something in his makeup or life experience that caused him to be out there when he should have just been thinking about basketball?"

The 6-foot-7 Dillard, regarded as the best Omaha player since the All-American, Olympian and professional Bob Boozer, is the central figure in the book. Dillard played briefly in college and for the Harlem Globetrotters, but his career never lived up to his dreams.

"He had a hard life and a disappointing life," said Marantz, who interviewed Dillard weeks before his 2008 death. "At Central, after he was arrested, there was a lot of feeling that he was just a goof-off. No one gave him credit for being able to think in political, social or cultural terms. I think that was unfair."

The '68 tournament was shifted to Lincoln, and Central's coach suspended Dillard for the first game. He played the next two, including the championship game, which Central lost on his 19th birthday. Shortly after that, he was expelled from school for behavior issues.

Marantz, 59, paints an entirely credible picture of the times, placing that infamous Omaha week in the historical context of an infamous year: American involvement in Vietnam increased in January, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in April and Robert F. Kennedy in June. Race riots raged nationally, but Omaha's was the first that year.

Though Dillard was the main figure, "Rhythm Boys" contains many others, including a white student at Central, Vikki Dollis, who befriended the black players, dated one of them and kept a diary.

Dollis, now a counselor in Colorado, was Marantz's date to homecoming that year. While preparing the book, he found her on Facebook — and she mentioned the diary.

"I don't know what the book would be without that diary," said Marantz. "It was crucial. Vikki gives a real-time voice to that year, a beautiful voice."

The diary became a thread throughout the book. In the language of the day, she wrote about Central in the aftermath of Wallace's speech:

All day in school, the colored kids were yelling "black power" and Dwaine got in two fights. There were threats of riots so all the white kids were dismissed to go home. But I'm not afraid so I stayed all day. . . . Some colored kids ignore me now because I'm white.

The "Rhythm Boys" nickname, coined by a World-Herald sportswriter, made a few people uncomfortable because of possible unintended race connotations — Central's yearbook adviser tried to dissuade the student editor from using it, though it appears above photos of the five starters. Marantz said the players embraced the nickname because it was distinctive. Even in defeat at state, the term applied, with one of the players saying, "We never found our rhythm."

The author provides readers with satisfying postscripts of the characters in the book, including Wallace, who later renounced his racist views. Marantz, who will sign the book at noon on March 27 at the Bookworm, 8702 Pacific St., loves his alma mater and is pleased that its team is back in this year's state tournament.

The book, published by the University of Nebraska Press, is dedicated in memory of the author's brother, Dennis, a 1966 Central graduate. He fell into a gorge in upstate New York when, Steve Marantz said, he was high on hallucinogens. "He was one of the lost hippies," the author said. "I don't romanticize the '60s."

The book includes a foreword by philanthropist Susie Buffett, a 1971 Central grad. Marantz, a former newspaper writer in Kansas City and Boston who covered sports and politics, now is a researcher at ESPN. He and his wife of 31 years have two grown children.

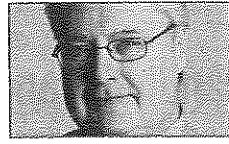
His well-researched book provides texture and detail to the tumultuous '60s, including this nugget: Out of 345,000 votes cast in the 1968 Nebraska presidential primary, George Wallace received 2,500.

Book rebounds to timely topic: hoops, race

More than four decades ago, a George Wallace speech at the Civic Auditorium ignited race riots and the sudden switch of the state boys basketball tournament from Omaha to Lincoln. This week, the news again was about race.

On the eve of the 2011 tournament, black referees objected Wednesday to the Nebraska School Activities Association board that only two of 22 eligible African-American refs were assigned to tournament games.

Journalist and author Steve Marantz, a 1969 graduate of Omaha



Michael Kelly

Central High, delves into the question of race with a new book, "The Rhythm Boys of Omaha Central: High School Basketball at the '68 Racial Divide."

"It was a story I carried for 40 years," said Marantz, who now lives in the Boston area. "It wasn't

until '08 that it became clear to me that it was a story worth doing, possibly because of the politics of that year."

On Feb. 7, 2008, on his way to election as America's first black president, Barack Obama spoke to a cheering crowd at the Civic, in the very arena where segregationist Wallace stood on March 4, 1968. Wallace's speech resulted in a chair-throwing melee and three days of rioting.

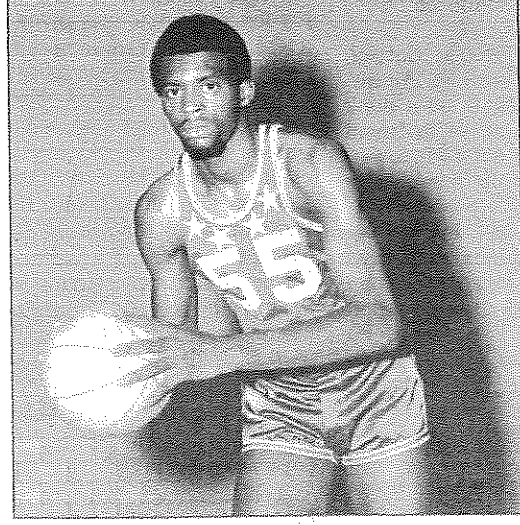
It so happened that the '68 state tournament was scheduled to be played at the Civic that week, fea-

turing the favored Class A team, Omaha Central — whose all-black starting lineup had become known as the Rhythm Boys.

Dwaine Dillard, the star player, stood outside the Civic the night of Wallace's speech. Two nights later, Dillard was with five others when he was arrested in a car with Molotov cocktails.

The car's driver eventually went to prison, but charges were dropped against Dillard, who said he hadn't known about the explo-

See Kelly: Page 2



Dwaine Dillard, Omaha Central's star basketball player in 1968, was arrested during state tournament week. The city had three tense days of race riots that week.

THE WORLD-HERALD