

Nothing golden can stay
By RIAL CUMMINGS of the Missoulian

They were golden, and now they're gone.

Ed Buzzetti [Sigma Chi, 1931], the last living member of Montana State's "Golden Bobcats," died last week in Missoula, at age 96. His passing was the bittersweet coda to a remarkable achievement - the rise of Montana State basketball in the 1920s, led by Hall of Famer John "Cat" Thompson [Sigma Chi, 1929].

MSU rolled up consecutive seasons of 30-7, 36-2 and 36-2, capped by the 1928-29 "Wonder Team" that was declared national champions by the Helms Athletic Foundation.

Ed Buzzetti, a reserve on that squad, was always modest about his own contributions, according to his son, Tony Buzzetti.

"But he loved being part of it," Tony Buzzetti said. "He always said it took 10 players to make a team, and he was extremely proud of their exploits."

Ed Buzzetti worked for a year after graduating high school in Hardin, earning money to attend MSU (then known as Montana State College). In addition to playing basketball in Bozeman, he was a track standout, which came in handy with the go-go Bobcats. He was also a fine baseball pitcher and senior class president.

Molded by coaches G. Ott Romney [Sigma Chi, 1912] and Schubert Dyche, the Bobcats were pioneers of "racehorse" basketball, what we term the fastbreak.

The 1929 team was perfectly suited to the Jazz Age: stylish and frenetic.

At a time when the national scoring average was roughly 40 points a game - and every basket was followed by a jump ball at center court - the Bobcats averaged 60.5 points, winning by such preposterous scores as 97-23 and 110-10. They swatted the Griz 38-14 and 62-18; Buzzetti scored six points in one of their closest wins, a 39-34 decision over Washington State.

The 5-foot-9, 160-pound Thompson, barely recruited out of Dixie, Utah, earned All-America honors three straight years and scored 1,539 points in 100 college games, setting an MSU record that wasn't broken until 1960. Thompson's school-record 629 points in 1928 stood for 60 years before finally being surpassed by Tom Domako, who scored 667 points in 1988.

"Dad wasn't what you'd call a hero worshiper, but he admired Cat Thompson," Tony Buzzetti said.

There was no NCAA tournament back then. The Bobcats confirmed their stature, however, by winning two of three contests from Cook Painters of Kansas City, the reigning AAU national champion.

"The Bobcats took a trip back East, and beat some of the better teams there," Tony Buzzetti said. "In Chicago, dad attended his first real vaudeville show. He still talked about that 50 years later."

Ed Buzzetti spent most of his adult life as a teacher and coach in Missoula, guiding Missoula County High to state basketball titles in 1947 and 1949. He also coached a depleted Montana Grizzly squad to a 2-10 record in 1943-44, during the heart of World War II. The story goes that UM scraped together a team under the impression that the Bobcats were going to field one. They didn't.

"He liked to brag about having the worst record in school history," Tony Buzzetti said with a laugh.

Ed Buzzetti stayed active in later years, enjoying his reputation as a sharp poker player. An avid bowler, he was a familiar fixture around the lanes well into his 90s. He maintained lifelong

friendships with former colleagues and students, visiting what he liked to call "the old people" - who, invariably, were younger than he was.

There are no courts or arenas named for Ed Buzzetti, unlike his former Bobcat teammates, Brick Breeden [Sigma Chi, 1929] and Max Worthington. Nor did he make the Hall of Fame, like Cat Thompson.

His monuments are the family he raised with his wife, Kathryn; the friends who were attracted to his winning personality; the lives he touched through years of service.

It was, by all accounts, a rich, rewarding ride. You might even say it was golden.