

Chapter 6 - Greg Vanek



[Greg Vanek](#)

Personal

Gregory Steven Vanek was born on October 12, 1962, in Cincinnati, Ohio to Marvin Lou Vanek and Sally Elizabeth Dancy.

Okemos High School

1977-78

During his freshman year at Okemos High School, Vanek made the freshman team.



Freshman Basketball Team: Eric Old, Mitch Miller, Brian Lewis, Scott Thompson, Mark Papsidero, Tim Wright, Jim Helmbrecht, Tim Vollmer, Greg Vanek, Tim Hatton, Dave Haga, Tim Held, Jeff LeFave, Joe Valko, Coach Jon Wiseman.

1977-78 Okemos High Freshman Basketball Team (Greg Vanek #20)




The 1977-78 Freshman Basketball Team, led by first year coach Jon Wiseman, achieved a superior season. The basketball team won two-thirds of their games with the help of the new freshman from Marquette, Tim Wright. Tim Vollmer sparked the team

with crucial baskets that led to victory. Unexpected broken bones caused a slow start in the season for Dave Valkanoff and Chuck Moya, but later they became a definite asset to the team. Credit can also go to Tim Hatton, Jeff LeFave, Eric Old, Mark Papsidero and the rest of the squad for contributing to the playing time of the successful freshman year.

All of the players are looking forward to next year with a great deal of determination to improve this year's 12 and 6 record.

Greg Vanek



Okemos	70	38	DeWitt
Okemos	80	49	Holt
Okemos	59	81	LCC
Okemos	80	46	Mason
Okemos	72	35	Haslett
Okemos	39	41	Howell

1978-79

During his sophomore year, Vanek made the junior varsity team that ended the season as co-champion of the Capital Circuit league.



JV: Co-Champions

The 1978-1979 Okemos JV cagers sported an excellent League record, winning 12 out of 14 games and sharing a spot at the top of the Capital Circuit with LCC. Overall, the forces directed by **Coach Ron Mott** performed admirably, boasting 14 victories with only three defeats. The cagers will provide more than ample reinforcement and assistance to the returning Varsity ranks, once again displaying the evidence of Okemos basketball excellence and domination in the Capital Circuit.



L to r: Hatton, Vollmer, Papsidero, Lewis, Valkanoff, Helmbrecht, Vanek, Thompson, Wright, Moya, LaFave, Old
Center Front: Coach Ron Mott

1978-79 JV Team (Greg Vanek #51) (1979 *Tomahawk*)

When asked what he most remembers about those two seasons, Greg replied: "Not much to talk about. I was a 100-pound, skinny, tall weakling, with size 14 shoes. Looked like a giant zipper, I was told!" (Greg Vanek, personal communication via email). During those two JV seasons, the game against **Lansing Catholic Central** on January 19, 1979, was a sign of things to come for Vanek. While the JVs lost the game, sophomore Vanek led the Chieftains with 15 points.



1979 *Tomahawk*

1979-80

During his junior year, Vanek made the varsity squad. Near the season's start, as reported by the *Lansing State Journal* on December 13, Coach Stan Stolz noted Greg Vanek as among the players who would "make excellent contributions and...will play a lot" ([Source](#)). By season's end the Chieftains had won the Capitol Circuit Championship for the third year in a row and the Regional Championship for the second year in a row.

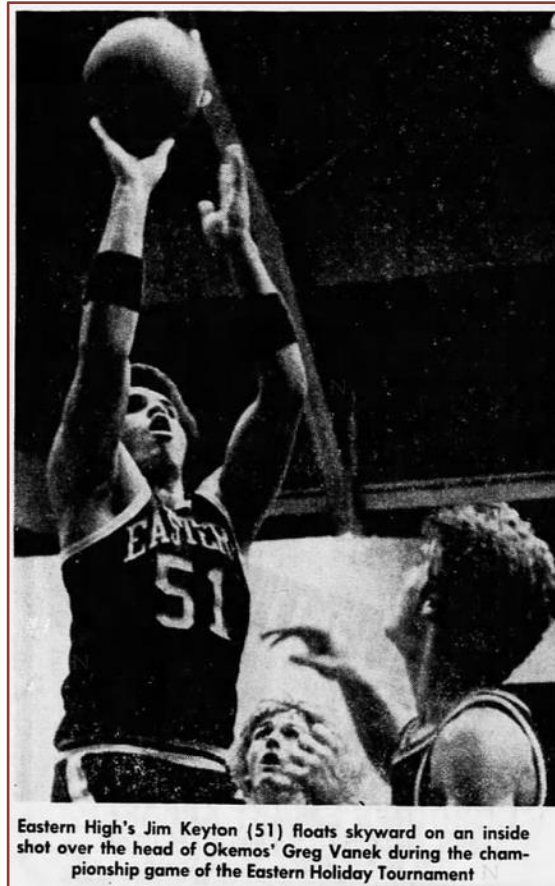


Regular Season

On December 29, Vanek made one of his biggest contributions in a game against Class A #1-ranked **Eastern**, scoring four points on a field goal and 2-2 from the free throw line.

With only one second left in double overtime Friday, sixth man Greg Vanek knocked home a rebound to give the Chieftains a tremendously thrilling 51-49 triumph over previously unbeaten Eastern and the championship of the Eastern Holiday Classic.

It was pure poetic justice that Vanek's only field goal of record should supply the winning points. Just a few minutes before, he had seemingly made Okemos a winner with two seconds to go in the first overtime, only to be judged guilty of traveling before the shot ([Source](#)).



Eastern High's Jim Keyton (51) floats skyward on an inside shot over the head of Okemos' Greg Vanek during the championship game of the Eastern Holiday Tournament

On January 26, the *Lansing State Journal* headline was "Bench paces Chieftain win" ([Source](#)), following Okemos' 61-49 defeat of **Lansing Catholic Central**. "Okemos, getting excellent support from the bench in stocky Dave Keller, lanky Greg Vanek and two mighty big baskets by forward Dave Valkanoff, never trailed in the game" ([Source](#)). Vanek contributed his fair share of the scoring with eight points on three baskets and 2-2 from the stripe.

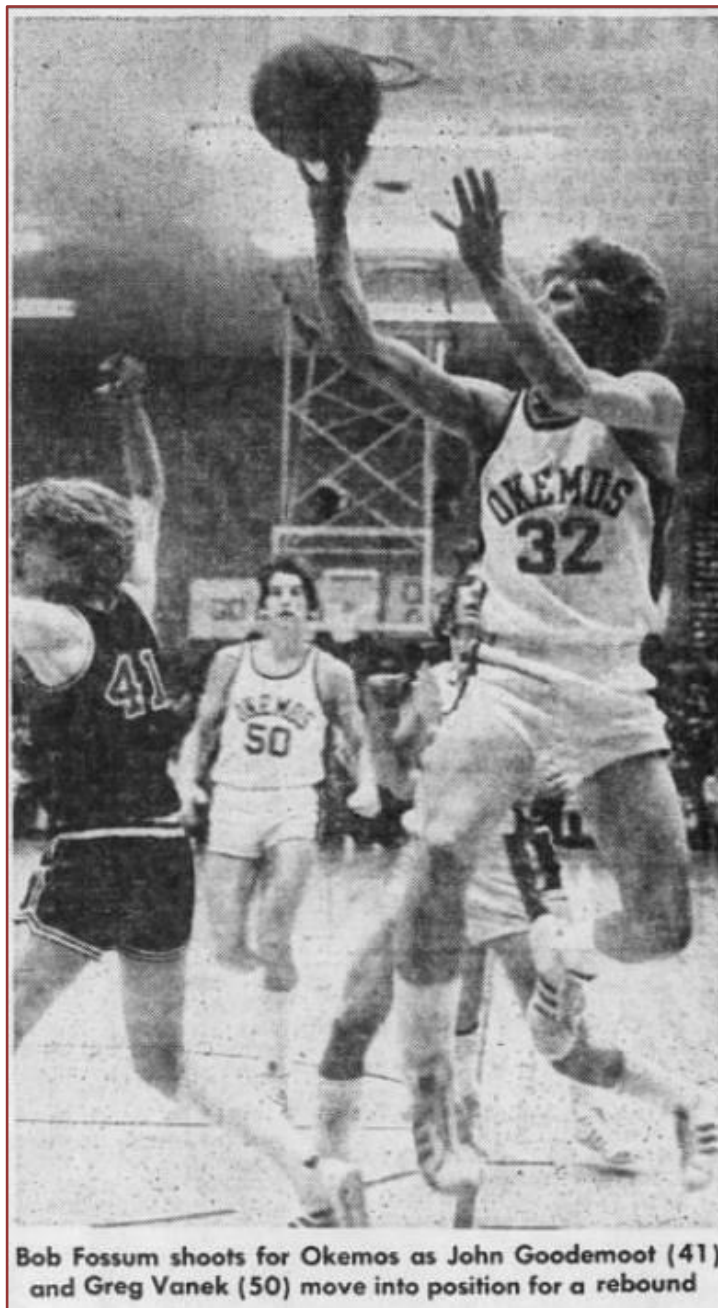
On January 29, Okemos slithered past **Waverly**, 60-59, after Waverly had taken a 39-38 lead in the third quarter. But the "Chieftains proceeded to tally eight of the next nine points, Greg Vanek, [Mike] Witherill, Dave Keller and [Bob] Fossum all scoring, to restore their lead to six" ([Source](#)). Vanek contributed six points on three baskets.

On February 1, Okemos won its eleventh game in a row, defeating **Haslett**, 66-47. Vanek "aided the cause by adding a dozen points" ([Source](#)) on four baskets and shooting 4-5 from the free throw line.

On February 12, **Grand Ledge** upset Okemos, 63-57, a loss partly explained by three Chieftains – forward Tim Hall, center Greg Vanek, and guard Dave Valkanoff – being sent to the bench with five fouls each. For the game Vanek scored six on two baskets and 2-3 on free throws ([Source](#)).

Regionals

On March 11, Okemos outgunned **Grand Rapids Catholic Central**, 71-59, in the first round of the Class B regional. The Chieftains were down, 21-9, during the second quarter; however, the “shooting of [Bob] Fossum and [Mike] Witherill, along with the inside play of substitute center Greg Vanek, rallied the Chieftains somewhat by halftime, but they still trailed by five points at 31-26” ([Source](#)). The Chieftains played the entire game with only six players, including “Sixth Man” Vanek who scored 13 points on six baskets and 1-2 on free throws.



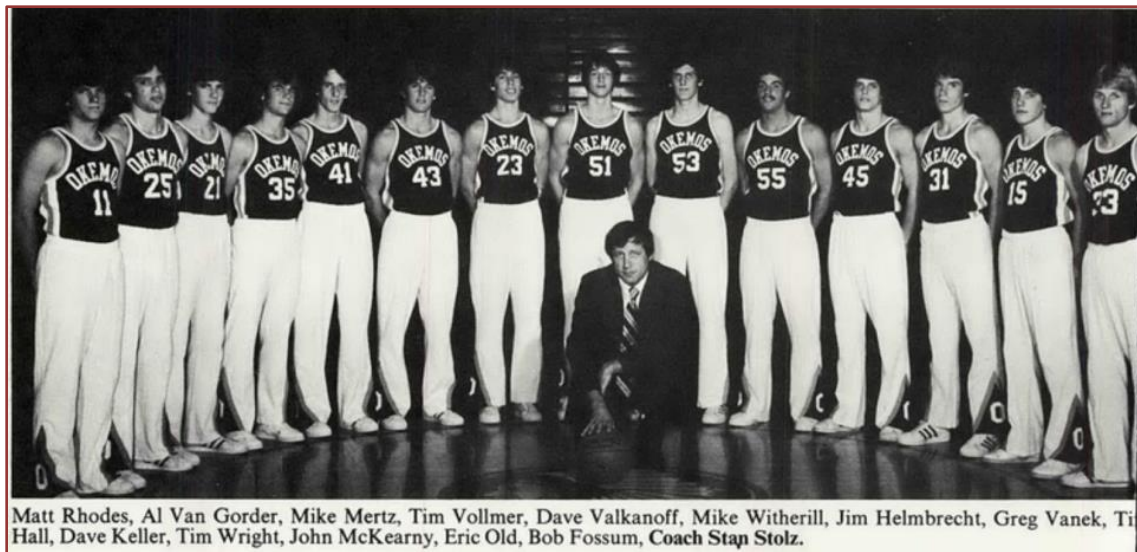
On March 15, in the Class B regional championship, Okemos beat **Lake Odessa-Lakewood**, 64-50. The Chieftains played only their five starters plus Vanek who “came off the bench for the second game in a row and pumped in 15 points” ([Source](#)) on six baskets and 3-5 at the stripe.

Quarterfinals

On March 19, the Chieftains’ season came to a bitter end with a 61-57 loss to **Flint Beecher**. In his first game as a starter, Vanek scored 10 points on three baskets and shot a perfect 4-4 from the free throw line.

During the regular season, the Chieftains lost only once (to **Grand Ledge**), and then went undefeated until the Class B state quarterfinals loss to **Flint Beecher** ended the Chieftains season with a 21-2 record. In the Christmas Tournament, Okemos beat **Lansing Eastern**, the Class “A” Champs, in double overtime, 59-58 (Eastern’s only loss of the season). This win was clinched when Vanek made the winning basket as time expired. Greg recalls: “It was that game that boosted my confidence to really see how far I could take this game” (Greg Vanek, personal communication via email).

Among Greg’s teammates was senior Bob Fossum (see prior vignette and photo below) who, the next season, became a member of the Michigan State Spartan basketball squad.



1979-80 Okemos Varsity Team – Greg Vanek (#51) Behind Coach Stan Stolz

Chiefs	Opponent	
69	Holt	50
88	Howell	56
67	Haslett	33
70	A. A. Huron	47
51	Eastern	49
87	De Witt	46
89	E. Rapids	41
95	Mason	72
93	Charlotte	47
61	L.C.C.	49
60	Waverly	59
66	Haslett	47
60	De Witt	47
57	Grand Ledge	63
93	E. Rapids	54
123	Mason	74
91	Charlotte	46
80	L.C.C.	59
Districts		
74	Mason	46
73	Holt	59
Regionals		
71	Grand Rapids	
	Catholic Ctl.	59
64	Lakewood	50
Quarter Finals		
57	Flint Beecher	61

What more can be said? Again, this year the Okemos Varsity Basketball squad reigns as Capitol Circuit Champs for the third year in a row, and are possessors of their second straight Regional title. The Chiefs had but one major setback through the course of the season, that being a disappointing loss to Grand Ledge. The Chiefs, however, seemed to take strength from the loss and went on undefeated until a loss in the quarter-finals to a strong Flint Beecher team.

The Chiefs were a surprisingly strong team. Team leaders, **Bob Fossum** and **Mike Witherill**, standouts since their freshman and sophomore years, worked virtual magic as two of the steadiest, yet explosive, players that have ever passed through the portals of Okemos High. **Dave Valkanoff** and **Greg Vanek**, in their debut season, made a great contribution to the team as a whole, as did the rest of the first year men. As for the old veterans of the team, what more can be said? The play of Seniors **Tim Hall**, **Al Van Gorder**, **Matt Rhodes**, and **John McKearny** made the extreme success of the team possible.

In the Christmas Tournament, Okemos defeated Class "A" Champs, Lansing Eastern, in double overtime, 59-58, and gave the Quakers their ONLY loss of the season.

When all things are considered, the final analysis can have but one conclusion. The 1979-1980 Okemos Varsity Basketball team was "AWESOME."

1980 Tomahawk

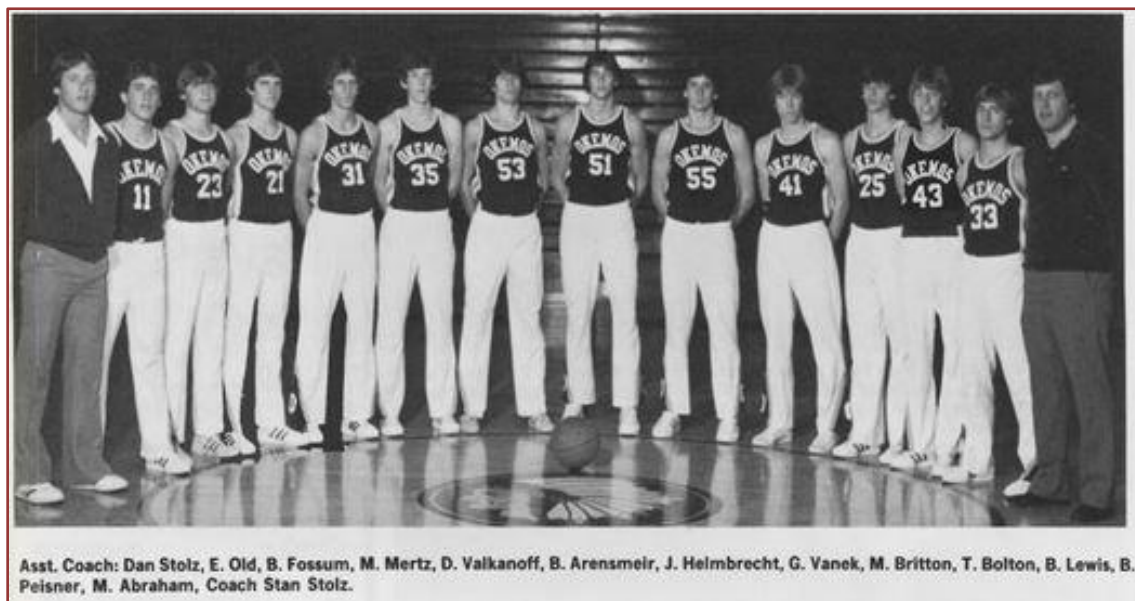
Laurels

At the end of the 1979-80 season Vanek was honored with the MIP (Most Improved Player) award.

VARSITY BASKETBALL	
MVP —	Bob Fossum, Mike Witherill
MIP —	Greg Vanek
COACHES AWARD —	Al Van Gorder Tim Hall
RECORDS	
Most pts. in a quarter —	
38 vs	Mason
Most pts. in a half —	
75 vs	Mason
Most pts. in a game —	
123 vs	Mason
Most pts. in a game by an individual	
Mike Witherill	
57 vs	Mason
Tied for most wins in a season —	
21	

1980-81

During Vanek's senior year, the Chieftains' varsity squad achieved even greater success in becoming the first Chieftains basketball team to win Michigan's Class B State Championship. The following year, the 1981-82 Chieftain squad returned to the Class B state finals and again won the state championship.



1980-81 Varsity Team (1981 *Tomahawk*)

Regular Season

On December 5, Okemos blasted **Holt**, 77-37, with Greg Vanek scoring seven points on two baskets and 3-5 on free throws ([Source](#)).

On December 9, Okemos topped **Hill High**, 64-56, with Vanek scoring 14 points on five baskets and 4-6 on free throws ([Source](#)).

On December 12, two games into the 1980-81 season, Okemos easily routed **Eaton Rapids**, 72-37, in the Capital Circuit opener for both teams. "Greg Vanek of Okemos was the game's high scorer with 19 points [on eight baskets and 3-5 from the stripe], many of those coming on baskets after offensive rebounds" ([Source](#)).

On December 16, No. 5 **Saginaw Buena Vista** beat No.2 rated Okemos, 64-59. For the game, Vanek grabbed 15 rebounds and was the third-highest Chieftain scorer with 13 points on five baskets and 3-5 from the free throw line ([Source](#)).

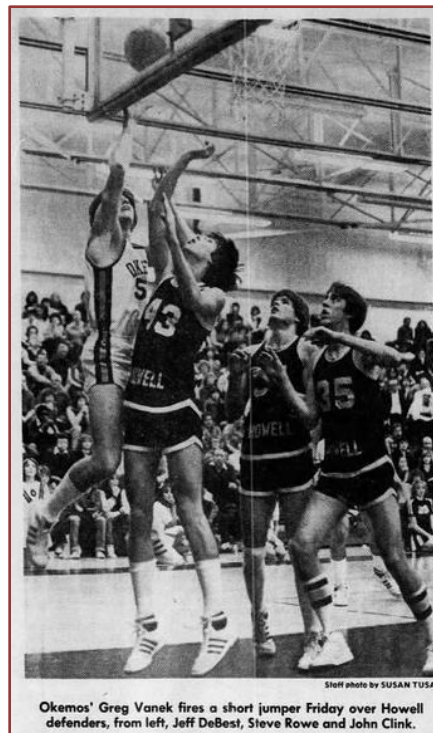
On December 19, Okemos bounced back from its loss to Buena Vista by defeating **Mason**, 86-64. Vanek scored seven points on two baskets and 3-6 on free throws ([Source](#)).

In late December, as Okemos prepared to host a Holiday Tournament, Coach Stan Stolz shared his thoughts on Vanek.

One Chieftain who hasn't suffered from serious inconsistency is Greg Vanek, a veteran of last year's push to the Class B quarterfinals.

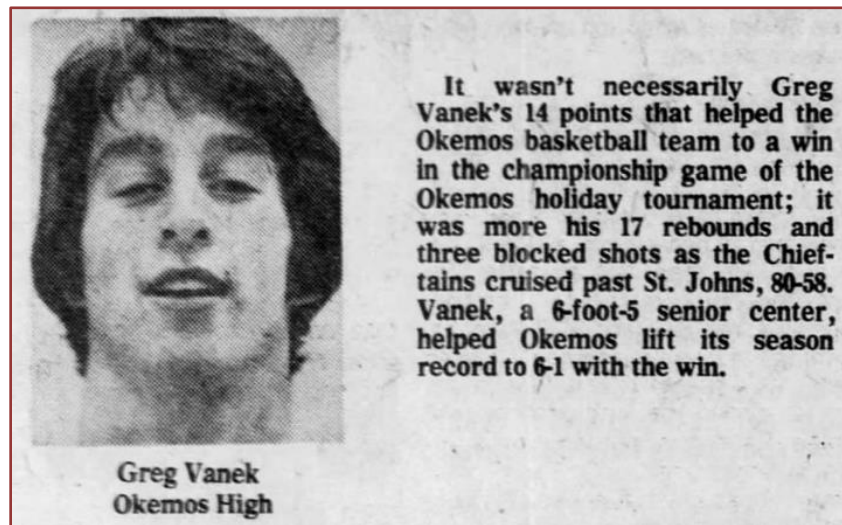
"He has been a stalwart on the boards for us," Stolz said. "He's been averaging 12 rebounds a game, and that's a lot. He hasn't been scoring like he's capable of doing, and we need that. But it'll come in time" ([Source](#)).

On December 26, Okemos downed **Howell**, 85-53, with Center Greg Vanek finishing with 10 rebounds and 12 points on six field goals ([Source](#)).



On December 27, Okemos won the championship of its first-ever hosted Holiday Tournament, defeating **St. Johns**, 80-58. The headline in the *State Journal* read:

“Chieftain Vanek takes charge: Okemo blasts St. Johns” in the wake of Vanek scoring 14 points [on six baskets and 2-5 free throws], grabbing 17 rebounds and blocking three shots. “Vanek was definitely the difference,” said Okemos Coach Stan Stolz. “He goes to the boards strong, real strong. He just came up with the big play tonight” ([Source](#)).



On January 2, Okemos downed **Grand Ledge**, 93-70, with Mike Mertz leading the Chieftain's scoring 43 points. Vanek scored 12 points on three baskets and 6-10 from the stripe ([Source](#)).

On January 6, Okemos scraped by **Holt**, 60-58, with Vanek grabbing 10 rebounds and scoring 13 points on four baskets and 5-9 on free throws ([Source](#)).

On January 9, Okemos defeated **Charlotte**, 82-40, with Vanek contributing 14 points on four baskets and 6-7 from the charity line ([Source](#)).

On January 16, Okemos chalked up a 96-61 triumph over **DeWitt**, the Chieftains getting “excellent scoring balance” from four of the starters, including Vanek who chipped in 13 points on four baskets and making 5-6 on free throws.

“Vanek has been super on the boards” said [Chieftains Coach Stan] Stolz, “and his big strength lately has been getting the ball and releasing it quickly to the guards to get the break going. When he and Valkanoff and Arensmeier come up with that kind of rebounding we can play with anybody and I’m serious about that” ([Source](#)).

On January 23, the Chieftains downed **Lansing Catholic Central**, 67-61, in double overtime, with Vanek scoring 18 points on seven baskets and 4-8 from the stripe ([Source](#)).

On January 27, Okemos whisked away **Waverly**, 66-58, in a non-conference game, upping Okemos' record to 12-1 overall with no defeats in the Capital Circuit. Vanek was the Chieftain's second highest score with 15 points on five baskets and 5-7 from the free throw line ([Source](#)).

On January 30, the Chieftains defeated **Eaton Rapids**, 80-57. Vanek led Okemos with 14 rebounds and 20 points on four baskets and 12-13 from the stripe. The win upped the Class B No. 7-ranked Chieftains to 6-0 in the Capital Circuit league and 13-1 overall ([Source](#)).

On February 6, Okemos downed **Mason**, 51-39, to remain atop the Capital Circuit standings, upping the won-loss tally to 7-0 in the league and 14-1 overall. Vanek blocked six Mason shots and poured in 14 points on seven field goals ([Source](#)).

On February 13, the Okemos juggernaut recorded a 73-42 win over **Charlotte**, with Vanek scoring 12 points on six baskets ([Source](#)).

On February 14, Okemos handed **Haslett** a 76-59 loss. "Greg Vanek paced all scorers with 18 points, as No. 6 Class B Okemos upped its season mark to 16-1" ([Source](#)). Vanek scored 18 points on seven baskets and 4-6 from the charity stripe.

On February 20, Okemos edged **DeWitt**, 57-55, with Vanek netting ten points on four baskets and 2-4 from the charity stripe. The win clinched Okemos' fourth straight league title in the Capital Circuit ([Source](#)).

On February 27, in the final regular season game, Okemos beat **Lansing Catholic Central**, 50-44, upping the Chieftains to a perfect 10-0 record in the Capital Circuit and an 18-1 record overall. Vanek scored six points on three baskets ([Source](#)).

Districts

After beating **Lansing Catholic Central** the previous weekend to notch Okemos' fourth Capital Circuit championship, the Chieftains, 18-1 on the season, were poised to host the Class B district basketball tournament. Looking ahead to the tournament, Coach Stolz said:

"I feel good about this team and how far it could go but the one thing that could hold us back is the lack of consistency from the guards," Stolz added. "We're tough up front behind Dave Valkanoff, Greg Vanek and Bruce Arensmeier but so far I haven't had a guard who wants to take charge like we had a year ago in Bobby Fossum" ([Source](#)).

Coach Stolz's remarks about "the lack of consistency from the guards" caught the attention of Chieftains guard Mark Abraham. In the March 4th game against **Eaton Rapids**, Abraham "pumped home 11 of his 13 points in the final quarter to lift the once-

beat and fifth ranked Chieftains to a 62-53 triumph” ([Source](#)). Vanek led the Chieftain scoring with 17 points (on seven baskets and 3-4 from the stripe) plus “muscle down a dozen rebounds...in one of his better games of the year” ([Source](#)).

If ever there was a time when Okemos was ripe for a quick trip to the tournament sideline, it was Tuesday. The Chieftains went through the motions much of the game, and had it not been for center Greg Vanek and [guard Mark] Abraham, Okemos would have been embarrassed. . . .

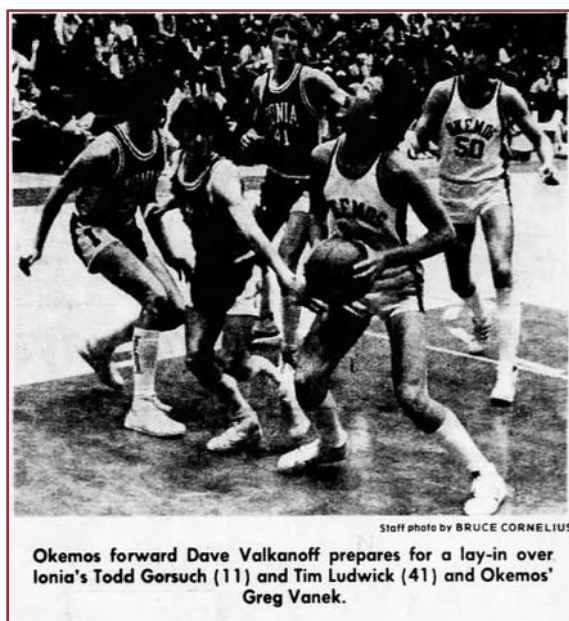
“[Greg] really showed me a lot tonight,” said Coach Stan Stolz. “It’s a good thing Greg and Mark were out there tonight, because we were not a good basketball team otherwise. We could very well have lost this game” ([Source](#)).

On March 5, Okemos crushed **Fowlerville**, 78-32, with Vanek scoring seven points on three baskets and 1-2 from the charity stripe ([Source](#)).

On March 7, Okemos was “at its best” routing **Mason**, 82-33, winning a third straight Class B district basketball tournament—and this time on its home court! Vanek was the Chieftains fourth highest scorer, chipping in nine points on four baskets and 1-1 at the charity line ([Source](#)).

Regionals

On March 11, Okemos crushed **Ionia**, 78-35, in the opening game of the state Class B regional tournament, thus qualifying the Chieftains to take their 22-1 record into Friday night’s title game against East Grand Rapids. With Vanek having scored only five points (on one basket and 3-3 from the stripe), Coach Stolz said: “We didn’t get a great game out of Greg Vanek, but when we need him, he’ll be there” ([Source](#)).



On Saturday, March 14, a *Lansing State Journal* headline read “Regional crown to Okemos” – “Not even Friday the 13th or the loss of starting center Greg Vanek could deny Okemos High School one of its biggest basketball victories in years Friday night” ([Source](#)). Against **East Grand Rapids**, the Chieftains held a lead (34-27) seconds into the third quarter. Up to this point Vanek had scored four points on two baskets, when Greg

crumbled to the floor in pain, holding his right ankle. He was carried to the locker room with the aid of team physician Dr. John Pudliner. Nobody knew how serious the injury was. A hushed Chieftain crowd didn’t know if the 6-foot-5 senior would return. . . . Vanek, his ankle heavily taped, returned to a standing ovation from the Okemos section with 6:47 left in the fourth quarter but did not play ([Source](#)).

Yet the determined Chieftains outscored the Pioneers, 33-22, in the final half, and closed out the game with a 65-49 win, capturing the school’s third straight Class B regional championship, with the expectation that Vanek would “be at full strength in the quarter-final game Wednesday night” ([Source](#)).

The win was the Chieftains 20th in a row following the early season loss to Saginaw Buena Vista. Next up, the Chieftains would take their 23-1 record to Michigan State’s Jenison Field House on Wednesday to face their next opponent – **Marysville** (18-6).

Quarterfinals

The thought of playing a basketball game right in its own back yard and not on the road is enough of an incentive for Okemos High School which faces Marysville in a Class B state tournament quarterfinal game Wednesday night,

Michigan State’s Jenison Field House, a hop, skip and jump from Okemos, is the setting for the 8:30 p.m. clash pitting the Capital Circuit champion Chieftains who are riding a 20-game winning streak against St. Clair area league runnerup Marysville.

“We were just hoping we could get past the district and regional and make it to Jenison and that was talked about a lot,” Stolz said. “The kids have all been out there many times but playing on the big floor is a thrill for anybody. Everybody’s pretty excited and I know we’ll have a lot of Lansing followers besides our own people pulling for us and that’s always nice. It’s just good not to be going to Corunna, Lakewood, Grand Rapids or some other place and it’s a break for our fans, too.”

The big uncertainty for the Chieftains (23-1), going into the quarterfinal game against Marysville, was whether Greg Vanek would be able to play.

Okemos could be playing without its own big man — 6-5 Greg Vanek who has been hobbling with a severely sprained right ankle. He was on crutches when the Chieftains held a brief practice Sunday night and his ankle has been placed in a plastic cast.

“I doubt very much if Greg will be ready to play by Wednesday,” Stolz said. “The ankle was the size of a softball the other day so we’ll just have to wait and see.”

On game day (March 18), the prospects for Vanek to play were not good.

The loss of a starter at this point in the tournament — Greg Vanek is unlikely to play tonight — is not the best thing that could have happened to Okemos. But Stolz seems highly optimistic the Chieftains can play over that handicap for at least one more game. I’ll take his word for it.

That evening, after Okemos had a slow start and were trailing **Marysville**, 14-6, the Chieftains came to life and “blew the Vikings all the way back to the Thumb area with a 24-8 second quarter spree en route to their 66-52 triumph” ([Source](#)). Tim Bolton, a 6-3 junior, stepped into the starting lineup in place of Greg Vanek who was still “nursing a sprained ankle but could have played had the Chieftains needed him” ([Source](#)).

“I really didn’t want to have to use Greg but we got permission from Michigan State University trainer Clint Thompson and our team physician. He should be ready Friday but he won’t be 100 percent. I thought the kids played very well with him out but still we need him because he’s such a strong rebounder. I wasn’t able to rotate much with the front line,” said Stolz.

Vanek, 6-5, injured his ankle in the regional championship game against East Grand Rapids and had been on crutches until Wednesday.

On March 20, Coach Stolz reported to the press on the status of Vanek's recovery, saying that the possibility of Vanek playing in the next game were good:

"He's chomping at the bit to get in there. We put him through a light scrimmage Thursday to test his sore ankle and it's about 90 percent for sure he'll play. He's the key as far as we're concerned although the other kids have done a great job with Greg on the bench."

Semifinals

On March 20, Okemos went up against the Class B defending champion **Ypsilanti Willow Run** in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan's Crisler Arena. By 6:05 left in the game, the Chieftains had managed to blow a 15-point (47-32). With 1:59 on the clock, the Chieftains were holding on to a one-point lead (51-50). With 1:10 left, Willow Run called time out; six seconds later Willow Run scored a basket, putting the Flyers ahead for the first time in the game at 54-53.

With 23 ticks remaining on the clock, Vanek, playing for the first time since spraining his ankle in the regional championship game, returned Okemos to the lead with a layup. Then the Flyers scored, putting them back ahead by one point, 55-54.

"**THE PLAN WAS** to get the ball in the high post to Vanek and if he was covered he was to dish the ball off to either Arensmeier or Bolton," Stolz said. "Thank God it worked but there was still 10 seconds to play."

Vanek got the ball but was double-teamed and spotted Bolton, who had moved into position from the left side.

"The minute I touched the ball they were all over me and I looked quickly and saw Tim open and he made the shot," said Vanek, cutting a heavy layer of tape from his right ankle. "I used my head on that one," he grinned.

BOLTON, WHO SCORED six of his seven points in the fourth quarter, said the pass from Vanek was partially deflected.

"Everybody was trying to get into position and when I saw the ball coming it hit the leg of one of their players and came right to me. I don't remember hearing all the noise but I just put the ball up off the glass and it went in,"

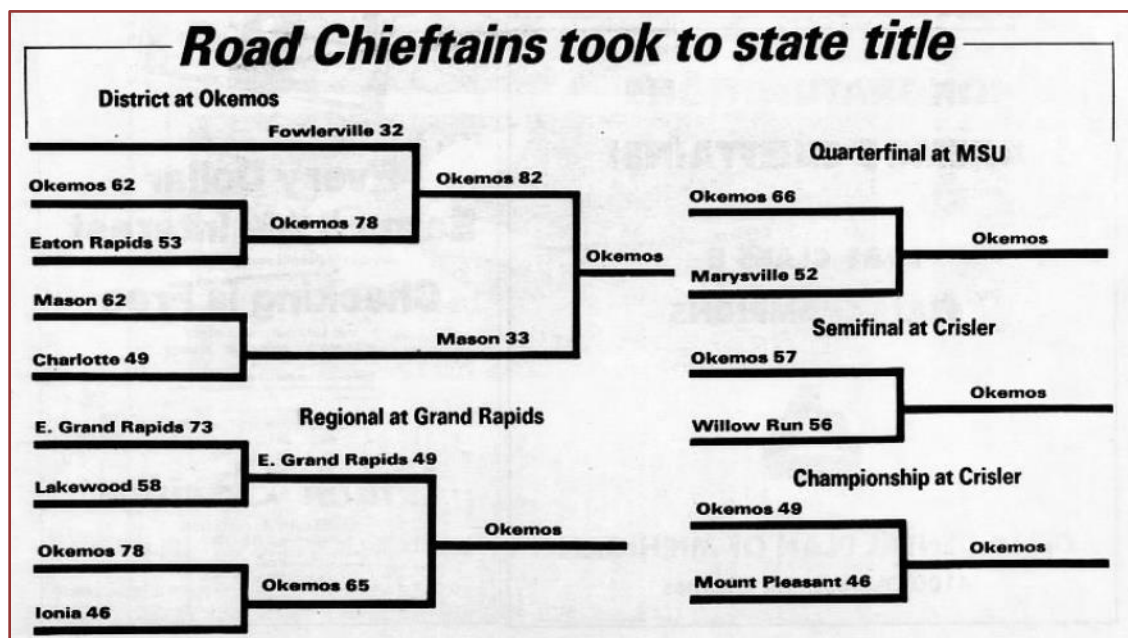
Bolton said. "I guess you'd have to say it was one of my bigger plays of the season," he said, half smiling.

Despite the ankle sprain and his ankle taped, Vanek scored 14 points on seven baskets – but, more importantly, threw the pass to Bolton who scored the game’s winning basket, making that pass the biggest assist of Greg’s career!

“Vanek was outstanding,” said Stolz. “There aren’t too many Class B centers in the state any better than he is. He has been an unsung hero all season and he mixed it up underneath against some awfully strong opposition. Late in the game I swear some of those Willow Run players had their elbows up above the rim. Our man-to-man coverage was excellent but we were forced into a zone to protect Valkanoff when he picked up his third foul.”

Final (Championship Game)

On March 2, at Crisler Arena, Okemos went up against **Mount Pleasant** for the Class B champion title – and the Chieftains came out the victor, 49-46, Okemos’ first state title in basketball, ending “two years of frustration which saw the Chieftains lose in the semifinals in 1979 and the quarterfinals a year ago” ([Source](#)).



Okemos edges Oilers

By JOHN KERR

The Okemos Chiefs combined a balanced scoring attack with a quick scrambling defense to capture their first Class B high school basketball title yesterday with a 49-46 victory over the Mount Pleasant Oilers.

Okemos' Dave Valkanoff led the Chiefs with 12 points, while Greg Vanek and Mark Abraham each added 10.

THE CHIEFS BROKE the ballgame open midway through the final period when, with the score tied at 36-36, they outscored Mt. Pleasant 10-2. Okemos' Mike Mertz started the onslaught when he hit a lay-up to give his club a 38-36 advantage with 5:51 remaining in the

game. After an Oiler turnover and a foul, Abraham hit both ends of a one-and-one to increase the lead to four.

Mt. Pleasant's Charles Pisoni then temporarily slowed the Chiefs down when he netted two of his game-high 18 points, but Okemos came back with six straight points on a lay-up by Eric Old and jumpers by Abraham and Valkanoff to move out to a 46-38 lead with only 2:42 remaining. Mt. Pleasant managed to cut the lead to four points with only a minute left, but Okemos' Brice Arensmeier, much to the chagrin of the loud and loyal Oiler fans, iced the contest when he hit a foul shot to give the Chiefs a 49-44 lead just 13 seconds from the final buzzer.

In his last game as a Chieftain, Vanek was coming off a sprained ankle and taped but he yet notched seven rebounds and scored ten points on four baskets and 2-4 on free throws. He perhaps summed up the win best for all his teammates:

"I think we put it in everybody's face. Nobody followed us much this year and they didn't think we were good enough to get this far but you have to believe and we did. We were a tired team today but we had trouble finding our hotel after Friday's game and finally ended up staying at Plymouth at the Hilton and had to wait for our meal and didn't get to bed until almost 10:30 p.m. Then we had to get up at 7:30 a.m. and play at 11. But it was all worth it."



Greg Vanek

One of the best Class B centers in the state who led team in rebounding and was second in scoring with 12.1 per-game-average. The 6-foot-5 senior co-captain overcame a serious ankle injury suffered in the regional championship game against East Grand Rapids, did not play in the quarterfinals against Marysville but turned in sparkling performance against defending champion Willow Run the semifinals. Was picked on All-Capital Circuit first team and named to The State Journal's All-Area Class B team.

The 1980-81 basketball season was a big surprise to many people, except the players themselves. Through hard work and dedication, the team was able to compile a regular season record of 18-1. The only loss came from Saginaw Buena Vista, in the fourth game of the season. After this loss, the Chiefs went on to win the rest of their regular season contests, and capture their fourth consecutive Capital Circuit Crown. Tough opponents for Okemos were DeWitt, and Lansing Catholic Central. During the first match-up at DeWitt, Okemos trounced on them by 30 points. The following week, the team beat Lansing Catholic Central in a double overtime thriller, 67-61. The Chiefs were led by Seniors Dave Valkanoff, Greg Vanek, Eric Old, Brian Lewis, and Jim Helmbrecht. The Chieftains have a strong nucleus of four Juniors and one Sophomore coming back next year to continue the pride and tradition of Okemos basketball.

Dave Valkanoff

1981 Tomahawk

VARSITY BOY'S BASKETBALL		
Chiefs		Opponents
77	Holt	37
64	Hill	56
72	Eaton Rapids	37
59	Sag. Buena Vista	64
86	Mason	64
85	Howell	53
80	St. Johns	58
86	Grand Ledge	70
60	Holt	58
82	Charlotte	40
96	DeWitt	61
67	Lan. Catholic (2 ots)	61
66	Waverly	58
80	Eaton Rapids	57
51	Mason	39
76	Haslett	59
71	Charlotte	52
57	DeWitt	55
50	Lan. Catholic (18-1)	44
District Tournament		
62	Eaton Rapids	53
78	Fowlerville	32
82	Mason	33
Regional Tournament		
78	Ionia	46
65	E. Grand Rapids	49
Quarterfinal		
66	Marysville	52
Semi-Final		
57	Willow Run	56
Championship		
49	Mt. Pleasant	46

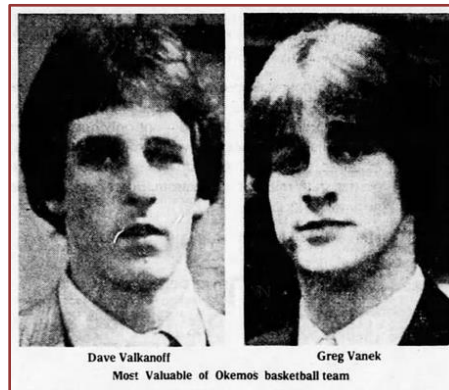
1981 Tomahawk

Laurels

Vanek along with guard Mike Mertz were named by the Lansing *State Journal* to the Class B All-Area Team, while forward Dave Valkanoff was named to the *Journal's* Dream Team ([Source](#)). Co-captains Greg Vanek (center) and Dave Valkanoff (forward) were selected unanimously to the Capital Circuit First Team, while guard Mike Mertz and Bruce Arensmeier won spots on the Second Team, with Eric Old receiving special mention recognition ([Source](#)). Okemos Coach Stan Stolz credited Vanek for how hard Vanek worked to make himself a basketball player:

Vanek made himself a basketball player. Not only is he the best center I've coached at Okemos but when he wants to play there is none better in the state. He worked with weights religiously and that made him into a top-notch man in the pivot who probably had his best game against Willow Run. He was the difference in that one."

Vanek also received an All-State honorable mention. Okemos High feted Vanek and Dave Valkanoff as co-most valuable players (co-MVPs) ([Source](#)). Coach Stolz spoke highly of both players but, in particular, had this to say about Vanek:



On June 20, two Chieftains, Greg Vanek and Dave Valkanoff played as members of the East Squad (coached by Okemos' Stan Stolz) in the Class B-C-D game at the 2nd All-Star Basketball Festival held at Central Michigan University's Rose Arena. The East Squad won the game, 106-98 ([Source](#)), with Vanek scoring 11 points ([Source](#)).

Ferris State College

As graduation from Okemos High neared, **Ferris State College**, an NCAA Division II school in Big Rapids, Michigan, offered Vanek a full-ride scholarship to play basketball for FSC. On May 12, the *Lansing State Journal* reported that FSC had landed Greg Vanek as one of "Mid-Michigan's premier male basketball players" and that Vanek, who had averaged 12.8 points and 11 rebounds per game for the Chieftains, had signed a national letter of intent with **Ferris** ([Source](#)).



After two seasons (1982-84) playing basketball for FSC, Vanek decided to transfer to Michigan State for his junior year and explore if he could make the Spartan varsity basketball squad.

Michigan State University

In the spring of 1984, Greg reached out to Jud Heathcote, the Head Coach of Spartan Basketball. Greg recalls:

Since Jud had issued many "Prep Player of the Week" trophies to me when I was in high school, he knew who I was. So, I approached Jud in [the] Jenison [Field House] in the spring and told him of my situation and transfer, and asked for an opportunity. He acknowledged, and was supportive, and there he invited me to play during the summer against the returning Spartans or NBA players (Greg Vanek, personal communication via email).

Heathcote's offer was a motivation to Vanek who recalled:

I wanted to see or prove to myself how good of a player I was, and that opportunity took me to another level of workouts, inspiring me to work-out and develop my skills at a level I had never had. I had to do it by myself, as we didn't have trainers, or recruiters at that time to help us through off-season (Greg Vanek, personal communication via email).

1984-85

As a 6'6" guard in his junior year, Vanek averaged 0.3 points and 0.2 rebounds. However, as he notes proudly, "I shot 1000% completion from the field and the free throw line (only shot 1 from the field, and 1 as a technical foul at Crisler Arena, and made both)." Vanek's "ongoing poke," he adds, is claiming that he has "the highest shooting percentage of any player in Michigan State basketball history! ☺" (Greg Vanek, personal communication via email). Vanek's achievement was also noted by Jack Ebling in his January 29 1985 column for the *Lansing State Journal*.

■ Statistically, the solution for MSU's offensive problem is simple — they've got to get the ball to Greg Vanek more often. The 6-foot-6 walk-on from Okemos hasn't missed a shot in a ballgame since his transfer from Ferris State. "Mr. 1.000" may be the only player in America to be perfect from both the field and the line this far into the season.

HE SANK a technical-foul free throw in the final minute of the Michigan game and coaxed home a high-kicking corner jumper in the final seconds for two points.

Vanek's usual role is to play hard in practice and help the starters prepare. He's the kind of solid citizen that would make most coaches lengthen their bench — the kind of competitor who'd love to see the Spartans get 25 up so he'd have a chance to ruin his record.



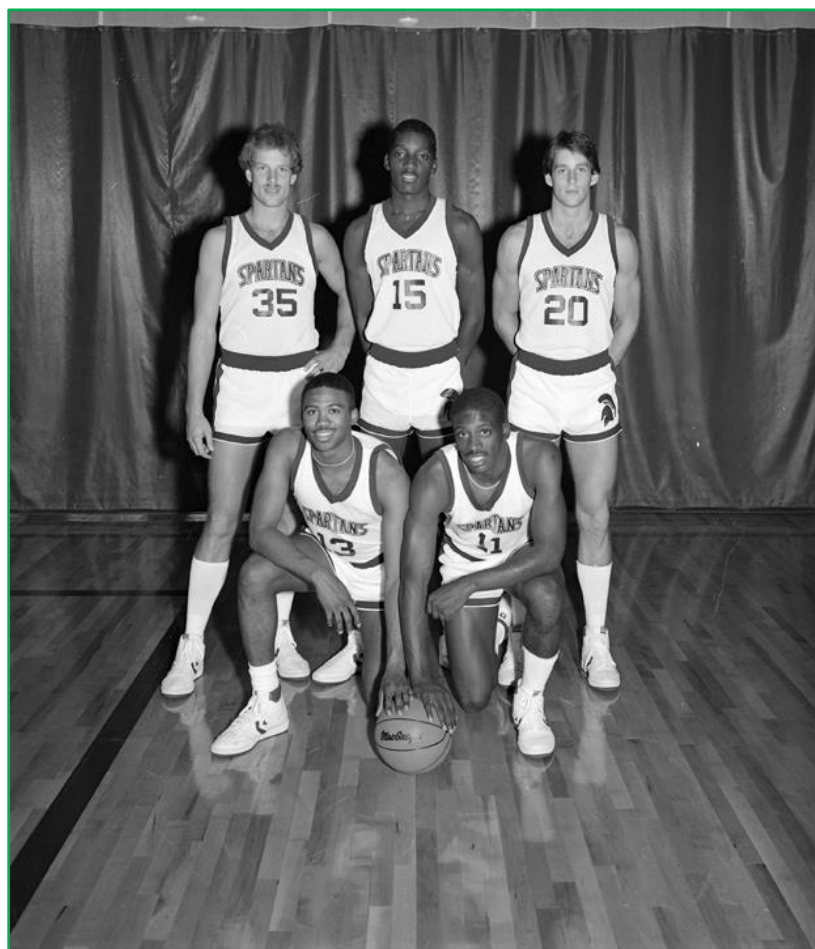
MICHIGAN STATE (75)							
	min	fg	ft	reb	ast	pf	pts
Polec	22	3-6	0-0	6	0	4	6
Valentine	24	2-5	0-1	5	0	3	4
K. Johnson	26	1-3	0-0	4	0	1	2
Skiles	40	7-17	5-6	5	5	3	19
Vincent	38	11-19	7-9	2	3	3	29
Mudd	16	0-1	0-0	2	0	1	0
Pedro	11	1-2	0-0	2	1	1	2
Walker	10	1-1	0-0	1	0	2	2
Fordham	12	4-5	0-0	2	0	0	8
Vanek	1	1-1	1-1	1	0	0	3
Totals		31-60	13-17	34	9	18	75

Vanek's three points came in the 1/24/85 game against **Michigan** when "junior walk-on Greg Vanek of Okemos...scored his first three MSU points – one on a technical foul and two with a ricochet jumper at the buzzer" ([Source](#)) in an 86-75 loss to the Wolverines.



1984-85 Michigan State Spartan Basketball Squad (Vanek #20)

1984-85 Michigan State Spartans men's basketball team							
No	Name	Pos	Year	Height	Pts	Reb	Ast
11	Sam Vincent	G	SR	6-2	23.0	3.9	4.0
4	Scott Skiles	G	JR	6-1	17.7	3.2	5.8
00	Ken Johnson	C	SR	6-8	10.8	10.2	0.6
35	Larry Polec	F	SR	6-8	8.7	4.4	1.0
13	Darryl Johnson	G	SO	6-2	5.3	1.7	1.3
24	Richard Mudd	F	SR	6-9	3.9	5.5	0.3
15	Ralph Walker	F	JR	6-8	2.3	1.4	0.4
45	Carlton Valentine	F	FR	6-6	1.6	1.2	0.0
40	Barry Fordham	F	SO	6-8	1.1	0.6	0.1
21	Greg Pedro	G	SO	6-4	1.0	0.6	0.5
20	Greg Vanek	F	JR	6-6	0.3	0.2	0.0



Four Men's Varsity Basketball Players:

Back row #35 Larry Polec, #15 Ralph Walker, #20 Greg Vanek

Front row: #13 Daryl Johnson, #11 Sam Vincent

Courtesy: MSU Archives

Notable players that season were Sam Vincent (23.0 PPG), Scott Skiles (17.7 PPG), and Darryl Johnson, each of whom later became NBA players. Another teammate, Carlton Valentine, later became the varsity basketball coach at Lansing Sexton High School and mentored his son, Denzel Valentine, who later enrolled at MSU (2012-16). Denzel became one of the greatest Spartan basketball players and, in his senior year, achieved multiple Player of the Year honors for the 2015-16 season. Denzel was then drafted by and is currently a member of the NBA's Chicago Bulls.



1984-85 Michigan State Spartans Basketball Squad

(Vanek seated on the ground, front row right)

The Spartans' record that season was 19-10 overall, finishing tied for 5th place (10-8) in the **Big Ten**. While ranked #20 at season's end by the UPI and qualifying for the **NCAA Tournament**, the Spartans quickly exited the tournament on losing to the **University of Alabama-Birmingham**, 70-68

1985-86

While Michigan State offered Vanek a partial scholarship for the 85-86 season (as had been the case during his Junior year), Greg turned it down based on a decision to focus his Senior year on improving his GPA as key to landing a good job after graduation. Not being a member of the Spartan basketball made it possible for Greg to redirect his time and energy to his studies.

Greg recalls: *"My senior year at MSU was a breeze without basketball, and I got 4.0 in all but one class, boosting my GPA to a 3.2. I was very proud of that"* (Greg Vanek, personal communication via email). Vanek graduated with a BS in Advertising/Business.

Career Statistics as a Spartan

The tables below summarize Vanek's statistics, per game and totals, for the one season (1984-85) he played on the Spartan.

Per Game

Season	School	Conf	G	GS	MP	FG	FGA	FG%	2P	2PA	2P%	3P	3PA	3P%	FT	FTA	FT%	TRB	AST	STL	BLK	TOV	PF	PTS	SOS
1984-85	Michigan State	Big Ten	10	0	1.3	0.1	0.1	1.000							0.1	0.1	1.000	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.3	7.70
Career	Michigan State		10	0	1.3	0.1	0.1	1.000							0.1	0.1	1.000	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.3	7.70

Totals

Season	School	Conf	G	GS	MP	FG	FGA	FG%	2P	2PA	2P%	3P	3PA	3P%	FT	FTA	FT%	TRB	AST	STL	BLK	TOV	PF	PTS
1984-85	Michigan State	Big Ten	10	0	13	1	1	1.000							1	1	1.000	2	0	1	0	2	0	3
Career	Michigan State		10	0	13	1	1	1.000							1	1	1.000	2	0	1	0	2	0	3

After Michigan State

When asked about his life after Michigan State, Greg shared the following (Greg Vanek, personal communication via email):

I've been in Sales for Consumer Packaged Goods [CPG] manufacturers since 1987, and still absolutely love what I'm doing. It's very competitive and challenging. One doesn't realize what goes into gaining just 1 inch of real estate on the shelf in a retail store. But, being on the 'front line' of a manufacturer is like playing for the company, and it's very satisfying.

As of mid-2020, Vanek was continuing to working with Perfetti Van Melle, still in CPG (Consumer Packaged Goods) as National Account Manager-Drug for accounts with national drug retailers such as CVS, Discount Drug, Drug Mart, Rite Aid, Kinney Drug, Walgreen's, and others.

I have evolved into a Big 10 fan, and expanded my appreciation for the league, not just supporting MSU. Come bowl season, or March Madness, I am rooting for all Big 10 schools!

I have a beautiful wife [Carrie]," Greg notes, "who loves dogs, and a son who's now 14 years old, and enjoying life to its fullest. She is the main reason why I'm enjoying life to its fullest. We currently live in a northern suburb of Chicago, and have plans for fruit and vegetable farming in Wisconsin. (Greg Vanek, personal communication)

[In] September 2016, Okemos' 1980-81 Basketball Team was entered into the Okemos Hall of Fame. We were invited and attended, and our coach, Stan Stolz, accepted this great award. The day after, MSU had a basketball reunion, so I brought my son and met coach Izzo at his home, saw some old teammates, and they, along with current MSU basketball players, were called down to the end zone of the MSU Football game during the 3rd quarter, and were honored in front of the fans. What a wonderful weekend and experience it was! (Greg Vanek, personal communication)



Greg Vanek with Spartan Coach Tom Izzo (September 2016)



Okemos Hall of Fame 2016 Inductee: 1980-81 Okemos Squad That Won the 1981 Michigan Class B State Championship (Vanek is third from left)



Greg Vanek Photo in Breslin Center (2016)

Looking Back

Interviewed for this vignette, Greg recalled fond memories of being a Spartan basketball player (Greg Vanek, personal communication via email):

It was an experience of a lifetime and I'll never forget it. I am still grateful because it has opened many doors for me.

Jud Heathcote gave me the opportunity, and I dearly thank him for that. Tom Izzo was one of the Assistant's at that time. Jud called me into his office, sat me down, and offered me a position and scholarship, and added, "You'll always be labeled as a 'walk-on.'" I responded, "It would be an honor to play for you, coach." I called my parents afterwards, and they didn't believe it through at least 15 minutes of conversation!

A fond memory was before the season began, Coach Izzo wanted him and me to play 2 on 2 against [Scott] Skiles and [Larry] Polec, up to 15 on a side basket in Jenison Fieldhouse. Izzo and I ended up beating Scott and Larry, who at the time were starters! I believe that was the best 2 on 2 game of my life!

During the summer, prior to the season, I enjoyed playing against Magic Johnson, Isaiah Thomas, Kevin Willis, Jay Vincent, Greg Kelser, and Phil Hubbard in summer basketball at MSU at invitation-only scrimmages, held twice weekly. Funny thing was, coach Heathcote rolled the ball to me in my first game and yelled, "Play guard!" I had never played guard my entire career from Junior High through High School, only center position! I remember dribbling the ball down the court for the first time against some of the greatest players, and thinking to myself, ok, what is a guard supposed to do now? I had to learn fast, being thrown to the wolves, and trying to learn how to dribble! 😊

I remember how humbling of an experience it was when I stepped out on the court with Big 10 and NBA caliber players. I thought I was quite talented in high school, but once I began running the court with these guys, I realized there was another level of elite talent that I wasn't. Very humbling. You don't realize it until you step on the court and actually play with or against this type of talent.

I remember Mike Dean, the other Assistant Coach at the time, called me off the practice court in Jenison, and said "do you know who those two guys are over there watching you?" He said "those are Assistant Coaches for the MSU Football team, and they want to see if you were interested." Coach Dean added, "if you are, see that brick wall (pointing to the brick wall inside Jenison), run full speed into it head first, and that's what it's like playing football!"

That conversation took just 20 seconds, and because of Dean's comments, I laughed it off and never greeted or talked with the two coaches. To this day I regret it, because I had a chance to potentially play Big 10 football. I'm not saying I would have made the team, but just having the chance. All I had to do was just walk over and say thank you, and talk with them. I blew it, and didn't even know it at the time.

To this day, one of my fingers is still swollen from getting it jammed during the run for the High School State championship. I call it my High School State Championship ring.

Through middle school, high school, and college, I had a heart issue, Atrial Fibrillation, but didn't know it, and didn't realize it until later when I was diagnosed after college. I always wondered why my body felt like shutting down when playing. It was tied to this heart issue, and I had learned to cope with it the best I could without others noticing. To this day, I wondered how much better of a player I could have been had I had a normal functioning heart (Greg Vanek, personal communication).

In 2016, Greg Vanek's 1980-81 Class B Boys Basketball Team, Michigan's 1981 Class B boys state champion, was inducted into the Okemos High School Athletic Hall of Fame (see next page).



Athletic Hall of Fame

1980-81 Boys Basketball Team



Front row: Jason Mott (manager), Gordon Robke (manager), Mark West (manager).
Back row: Dan Stolz (Assistant Coach), Mark Abraham, Bill Fossum, Greg Mitchell, Mike Mertz,
Dave Valkanoff, Bruce Arensmeier, Greg Vanek, Jim Helmbrecht, Tim Bolton, Brian Lewis,
Bill Peisner, Eric Old, Stan Stolz (Head Coach)

The team was a coach's dream made up of hard working, great attitudes with respect for each other. The final record of 26-1 brought the first basketball state championship to Okemos High School.

Inducted as a Member of the Okemos High School
Athletic Hall of Fame Class of 2016