

# Kentucky

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*Spring 2017*

*Kentucky Humanities Council, Inc.*

*humanities*



**INSIDE:** 2016 Annual Report

LINDSEY WILSON COLLEGE

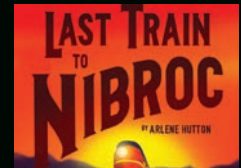
# TheatreFest!

**2017  
SUMMER  
SERIES**

## **LAST TRAIN TO NIBROC**

June 22, 23, 29 & 30 • 7 p.m. CT

A funny, touching portrait of two people searching for happiness, this simply staged romance played to critical acclaim at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and Off-Broadway.



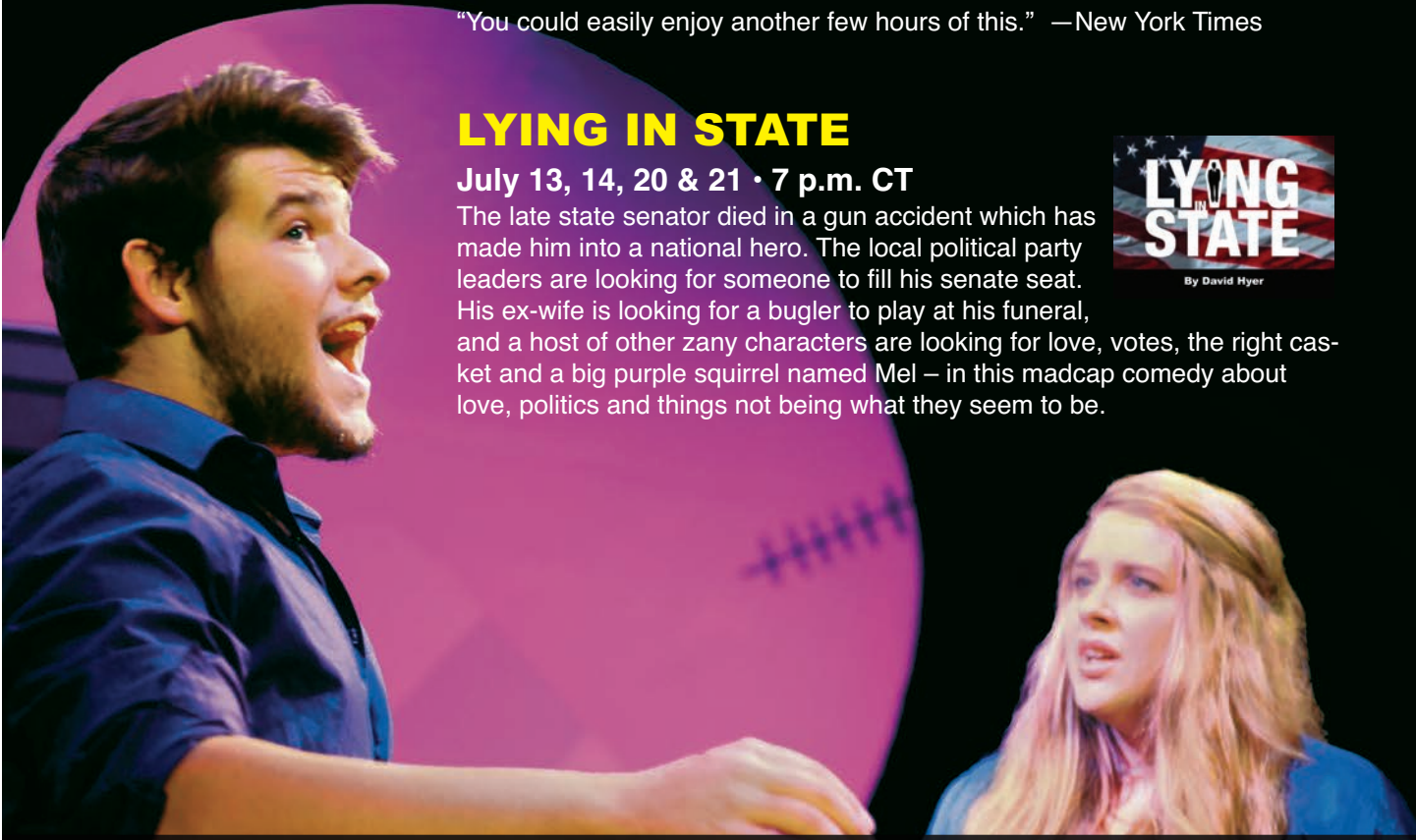
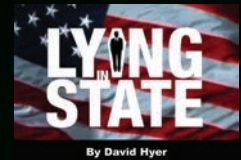
"...a gently charming little play, reminiscent of Thornton Wilder in its look at rustic Americans who are to be treasured for their simplicity and directness..." —Associated Press

"You could easily enjoy another few hours of this." —New York Times

## **LYING IN STATE**

July 13, 14, 20 & 21 • 7 p.m. CT

The late state senator died in a gun accident which has made him into a national hero. The local political party leaders are looking for someone to fill his senate seat. His ex-wife is looking for a bugler to play at his funeral, and a host of other zany characters are looking for love, votes, the right casket and a big purple squirrel named Mel — in this madcap comedy about love, politics and things not being what they seem to be.

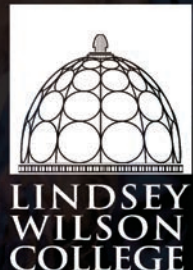


**TheatreFest!** at Lindsey Wilson College strives to challenge and entertain its audience through the production of the best dramatic literature old and new, and engage the communities of South-central Kentucky as audience members and participants in quality productions and educational programming.

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# Kentucky

Spring 2017

## humanities



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### Baseball's "Happy" Years

A.B. "Happy" Chandler made his mark in politics and sports

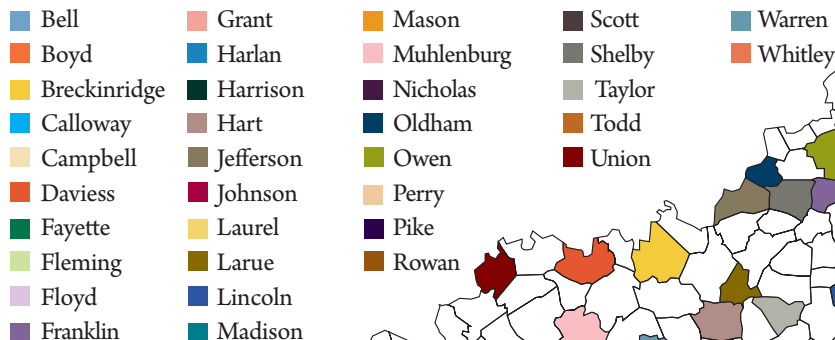
By Richard Crowe

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### Coach Smith

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Kentucky Humanities is published in the spring and fall by the Kentucky Humanities Council, Inc., 206 E. Maxwell St., Lexington, KY 40508-2613 (859.257.5932). The Kentucky Humanities Council is an independent, non-profit affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities in Washington, D.C., and provides more than 500 public humanities programs for Kentuckians every year. Supporters of the council's programs receive Kentucky Humanities by mail. Views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the NEH or the Kentucky Humanities board and staff. For information on story content or advertising rates, contact Marianne Stoess at marianne.stoess@uky.edu or 859.257.5932.

# Celebrating Sports in Kentucky

Since joining Kentucky Humanities at the start of the new year, it has certainly been an exciting journey. One of the highlights of my short tenure has been the opening of the Smithsonian traveling exhibit, *Hometown Teams*, in Wayland, Kentucky, this April. With a population just shy of 500, Wayland is now the smallest city in America to host a Smithsonian exhibit, and they are doing fantastic work bringing people in to tour the exhibit and building an impressive exhibit of local sports memorabilia to accompany the national exhibit. It has truly been a community event.

Perhaps no state loves its sports quite as much as Kentucky, and that's why we are bringing *Hometown Teams* to the Commonwealth for a two-year tour, visiting 15 Kentucky sites. A complete list of dates and sites is on page 8.

In celebration of the arrival of *Hometown Teams* in Kentucky, we have dedicated this issue of *Kentucky Humanities* to sports in the Commonwealth. And while this magazine can barely scratch the surface of the history of sports in this state, we hope you enjoy a look at some memorable moments in Kentucky sports.

James Gifford kicks things off, telling us about the link between education and athletics in eastern Kentucky and how school-time recess developed into organized high school athletics that unified communities throughout the region. Read about it on page 10.

Everyone has a sports story — a moment that sports influenced their life either as a participant or a spectator. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is no exception. On page 14, McConnell shares the story of purchasing his first baseball glove, and the joy of experiencing Major League Baseball with his father in an excerpt from his memoir, *The Long Game*.

Are you familiar with the street sport of Dainty? I wasn't either, but I have learned that we have a Dainty world champion among us! Third District Representative John Yarmuth tells of his feat on the streets of Louisville on page 15. You don't want to miss it.

While Kentucky is known throughout the nation for being college basketball crazy, basketball in the city of Louisville is not limited to the college courts. In the turbulent times of the 1960s two college students unwittingly started a summer-long basketball tournament in Louisville's Algonquin Park that would become known as the Dirt Bowl. Over the years, the Dirt Bowl has hosted players known throughout the country — Wes Unseld, Artis Gilmore, and Darrell Griffith to name a few. Darcy Thompson shares Louisville's Dirt Bowl history on page 18.

As with most things, with the good usually comes the not-so-good, and sports certainly has its darker side. Coach Adolph Rupp and his young Wildcats made history and became the talk of the college basketball, but the collegiate athletics world was rocked when evidence of a point-shaving scandal surfaced in 1951. Ron Elliott tells the story of those dark days on page 21.

Former Kentucky Governor A.B. "Happy" Chandler was not only a force in the world of politics, but also in the world of sports. Richard Crowe tells about the colorful Kentucky native who was elected a two-time governor and was appointed the commissioner of Major League Baseball. That story begins on page 27.

Lastly, Georgia Green Stamper fondly remembers her high school gym teacher, Coach Smith, on page 31. Many years after being his student, Stamper would discover that Coach Smith was a member of Adolph Rupp's 1958 national championship squad.

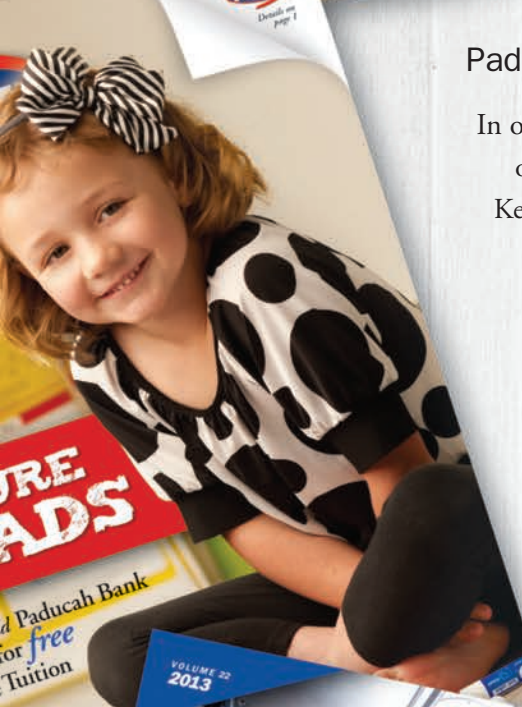
We hope you enjoy this issue of *Kentucky Humanities* and the small sampling of Kentucky sports stories included. We want to hear your Kentucky sports stories as well. If you have one to tell, please contact our editor, Marianne Stoess, [Marianne.Stoess@uky.edu](mailto:Marianne.Stoess@uky.edu), and we will share some of them on our website, [kyhumanities.org](http://kyhumanities.org).



**Bill Goodman**

Executive Director  
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A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bill Goodman".



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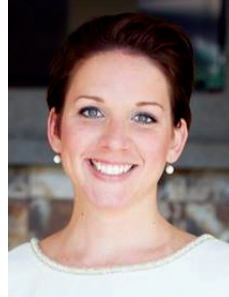
## Eight new members join Board of Directors



**Thomas Appleton**



**Charles Boteler**



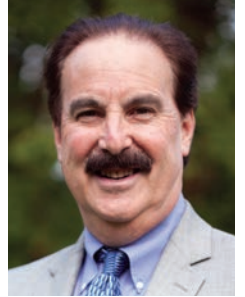
**Ashley Bruggeman**



**Martha Clark**



**John Ernst**



**Mark Kornbluh**

Thomas Appleton, Charles Boteler, Ashley Bruggeman, Martha Clark, John Ernst, Mark Kornbluh, John David Preston, and Dave Shuffett have joined the Kentucky Humanities Council Board of Directors.

Appleton, Bruggeman, and Shuffett were appointed to the board by Governor Matt Bevin for four-year terms. Boteler, Clark, Ernst, Kornbluh, and Preston will serve for six years as elected members.

Thomas H. Appleton, Jr. is a professor of history at Eastern Kentucky University and one of Kentucky's foremost historians. He is the editor or co-editor of six books on Kentucky and southern history. Appleton and Dr. Melissa McEuen are co-editors of the first extended treatment of Kentucky women published, *Kentucky Women: Their Lives and Times*.

Charles W. Boteler has worked as a lawyer and judge in the Commonwealth since 1977, including stints with Logan, Morton, Whitlege & Springer law firms, and has served as a district judge, circuit judge, and senior status judge. During his career, Boteler has acted as a judge or mediator in 33 of Kentucky's counties. He also served as a lecturer on the introduction to the legal system and American constitutional law at Brescia University in 2015-2016.

Ashley Boggs Bruggeman is an account executive for Scranton, Pennsylvania's CPG International, managing the business development and distribution networks in Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C. She previously worked with Patterson Pope in North Carolina, and Bentley Prince Street, Inc. in California.

Martha F. Clark currently works as an administrator for the John B. & Brownie Young Memorial Scholarship Fund. She has previously worked as an associate with BKD, LLP, a principal York Neel and Company, owner at Martha F. Clark & Associates, staff accountant at Riney Hancock & Company, and as a math teacher for both the Daviess County and Owensboro Independent School systems.

John P. Ernst is the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Student Success at Morehead State University. Ernst has been a member of the Morehead faculty since 1994 serving in roles including Director of the Appalachian Studies Program, Chair of the Department of History, Philosophy and Legal Studies, Executive Assistant to the President, and Professor of History.

Mark Lawrence Kornbluh is the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Kentucky as well as a Professor in the Department of History. Prior to his work at UK, Dean Kornbluh worked on the faculty at Michigan State University, Washington University, Rice University, and Oklahoma State University.

John David Preston has served as a Circuit Judge in the 24th Judicial Circuit since 2007. He previously worked as an attorney, Mayor of Paintsville, Commonwealth's Attorney, Paintsville City Councilman, state Senator, Chairman of the Kentucky Mine Safety Review Commission, and family court judge.

Dave Shuffett is an independent writer, producer, and television host. In 2014, Shuffett retired from Kentucky Educational Television (KET) after a 15-year career in television. A veteran host and producer of the network's award-winning series, "Kentucky Life," Shuffett served as host, writer/producer of multiple award-winning KET specials. Shuffett was awarded the 2015 Governor's Arts Award, was named a Distinguished Rural Kentuckian, and was a nine-time regional EMMY nominee for on-camera performance and producing.



**John David Preston**



**Dave Shuffett**



## 2016 Kentucky Book Fair • Frankfort Convention Center

More than 2,500 readers flocked to the Frankfort Convention Center on November 5, 2016 for the 35th Annual Kentucky Book Fair, presented by the Kentucky Humanities Council. Attendees from Kentucky and beyond connected with 180 local and national authors, including headliners J.D. Vance, Mary Alice Monroe, Barney Frank, J.R. Ward, Craig Johnson, and Wendell Berry. Many patrons attended panel discussions in the River Rooms, including a special reading celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Affrilachian Poets, a discussion of food and southern identity, and a panel on one of Kentucky's most scandalous crimes, the death of Verna Garr Taylor. Hundreds watched presentations from authors from the Main Stage, a new feature for the event. Pulitzer Prize winners Maria Henson and Joel Pett also addressed the crowd as part of the Pulitzer Prizes Centennial celebration.

The Sixth Annual KBF Kids Day was held on November 4, 2016, also at the Frankfort Convention Center. More than 800 elementary, middle, and high school students from 19 Kentucky counties participated in author presentations and a Master Class with Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Maria Henson. Other presenters included Mary Knight, A.Y. Hodge, Debbie Dadey, biology professor Edmund Zimmerer, and Alecia Whitaker.



### Top 10 Titles

1. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, J.D. Vance
2. *Roots to the Earth: Poems and a Story*, Wendell Berry
3. 2017 James Archambeault's Kentucky Calendar, James Archambeault
4. *An Obvious Fact*, Craig Johnson
5. *Beaumont Inn Special Recipes*, Helen Dedman/Beaumont Inn
6. *Victuals: An Appalachian Journey with Recipes*, Ronni Lundy
7. *Frank: A Life in Politics*, Barney Frank
8. *Concerning the Matter of the King of Craw*, Ron Rhody
9. *Dark Highway: Love, Murder, and Revenge in 1930s Kentucky*, Ann D'Angelo
10. *A Small Porch: Sabbath Poems 2014 and 2015*, Wendell Berry

## Thank You!

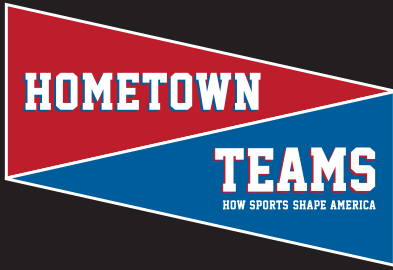
We wish to thank our sponsors and more than 100 volunteers who helped make the 2016 Kentucky Book Fair a success:



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Franklin County Democratic Party  
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# Grand Opening Mountain Sports Hall of Fame Wayland, Kentucky March 25, 2017



## Exhibit Schedule

DATES	HOST
04/29/17-06/03/17	Campbell County Public Library <i>Newport</i>
06/10/17-07/08/17	Laurel County Public Library <i>London</i>
07/15/17-08/19/17	Nicholas County Historical Society <i>Carlisle</i>
08/26/17-09/30/17	Appalachian Arts Alliance <i>Hazard</i>
10/07/17-11/11/17	Todd Welcome Center <i>Elkton</i>
11/18/17-12/30/17	Corbin Tourism & Convention Comm. <i>Corbin</i>
01/13/18-02/24/18	The Lincoln Museum <i>Hodgenville</i>

DATES	HOST
03/03/18-04/07/18	Fleming County Public Library <i>Flemingsburg</i>
04/14/18-05/19/18	Highlands Museum & Discovery Center <i>Ashland</i>
05/26/18-07/07/18	Lincoln County Public Library <i>Stanford</i>
07/14/18-08/18/18	American Cave Museum <i>Horse Cave</i>
08/25/18-09/29/18	Muhlenburg County Public Library <i>Greenville</i>
10/06/18-11/10/18	Wrather West Kentucky Museum <i>Murray</i>
11/17/18-12/29/18	Georgetown and Scott County Museum <i>Georgetown</i>

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Through her parents' examples and encouragement, Elsa developed lifelong passions for theater, education and the arts. She loved to tell a good story and developed her own radio program, called "Elsa's Street."

The **Kentucky Humanities Council** embodies many of the passions that motivated Elsa. Her Foundation continues her legacy and is proud to support the outreach programs of the Humanities Council, by offering grants for the Chautauqua program for school children, in six of Kentucky's northern counties.

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# ATHLETICS & EDUCATION IN EASTERN KENTUCKY 1880-1980

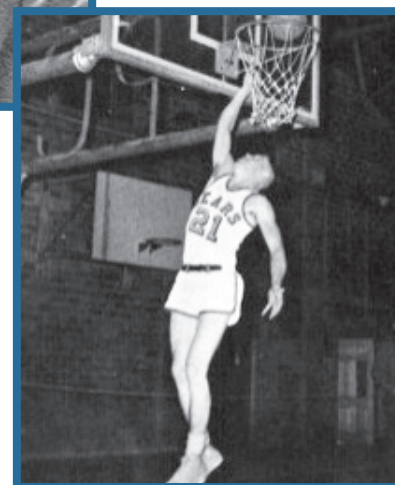
By James M. Gifford

**T**hroughout the 19th century and well into the 20th century, sports and education in eastern Kentucky schools centered around informal games, usually played in the school yard with little or no adult supervision. Sometimes neighbors and family members would come and play with these children at “recess periods.”

Some schools had three recess periods: about 15 minutes in the middle of the morning; about 45 minutes after lunch; and another 15 minutes in mid-afternoon. A former one-room teacher from Fleming County remembered supervising and playing with children on the playground. Another early 20th century one-room school teacher from Mason County remembered the boys and the older girls playing softball together. She also purchased a book of schoolyard games which the children enjoyed.

By the 20th century, many of the small schools had a dirt-floor basketball court on a playground that included enough room for a few “teeter-totters” for younger children and a softball field. Races were popular: relay, sack, one-legged, and sprints. “Mumblety-peg,” a game played with knives by older boys, and marbles were also popular school yard games. Younger children played drop the handkerchief, farmer in the dell, London Bridge, cat and mouse, and tag.

When the weather was too cold or rainy for recess outdoors, the students played in the schoolhouse. Sometimes they used the chalkboard for games like “tic-tac-toe.” They also played “hide the thimble” and other guessing games. There were no “store bought” games, but some schools had a few puzzles. For the most part, the children created their own games and entertainment.



Photos courtesy of the Jesse Stuart Foundation

*Johnson County's Donnis Butcher played baseball and basketball at Meade Memorial High School before going on to join the basketball team at Pikeville College (now University of Pikeville). He led the team to the NAIA postseason tournament and earned Little all-America honors.*

Meanwhile mainstream America was developing a system of “modern athletics” between 1880 and 1920. Beginning with a concern for nurturing “the strenuous life” in an urban, industrial society, Americans created a highly organized spectator and participant system of athletic activities for their young. These developments began in the Northeast, spread to the Midwest, and came late to Southern Appalachia and eastern Kentucky, where athletics played an important role in education and helped to define a distinctive Appalachian culture.

At the turn of the 20th century, urban Americans articulated a sports ideology that spoke of a “muscular Christianity,” which stressed the religious significance of manliness and the importance of play for proper physical, spiritual, and mental development. The Young Men’s Christian Association, city playground associations, church leagues, business-sponsored community leagues, and the public school athletic leagues all reflected an urban-centered ideology that had come, in modified form, to Appalachian Kentucky by the 1920s. Eastern Kentucky’s distinct lack of urban areas in the early 20th century limited the development of organized athletics until after 1920. The area’s predominantly rural schools, oriented to a seasonal farm cycle, had little interest in, or ability to nurture, extracurricular activities such as athletics. Sports had long been important in the Big Sandy Valley, but they existed in the form of outdoor activities like hunting and fishing. Eventually, eastern Kentuckians became convinced of the need for adult management of youthful activities as a way to nurture values. The emergence of “comprehensive” high schools in the 1940s and 1950s further encouraged adult management of youth sports. Athletics were said to help channel adolescent sexual energy into constructive social and moral habits and to help potentially rebellious students.

High school sports in eastern Kentucky helped to give an identity and sense of common purpose to the region’s small towns. Kentucky’s late Historian Laureate Thomas D. Clark noted that the enthusiasm for school athletics placed schools “in a curious kind of public domain.” “Even hardened old rednecks,” Clark noted, “caught the fever. Fifty years ago they would have regarded these sports as either effeminate or juvenile.” However, by the middle of the 20th century an interest in school athletics teams had brought Eastern Kentuckians closer to “the forms if not the substance of [mainstream] education.”



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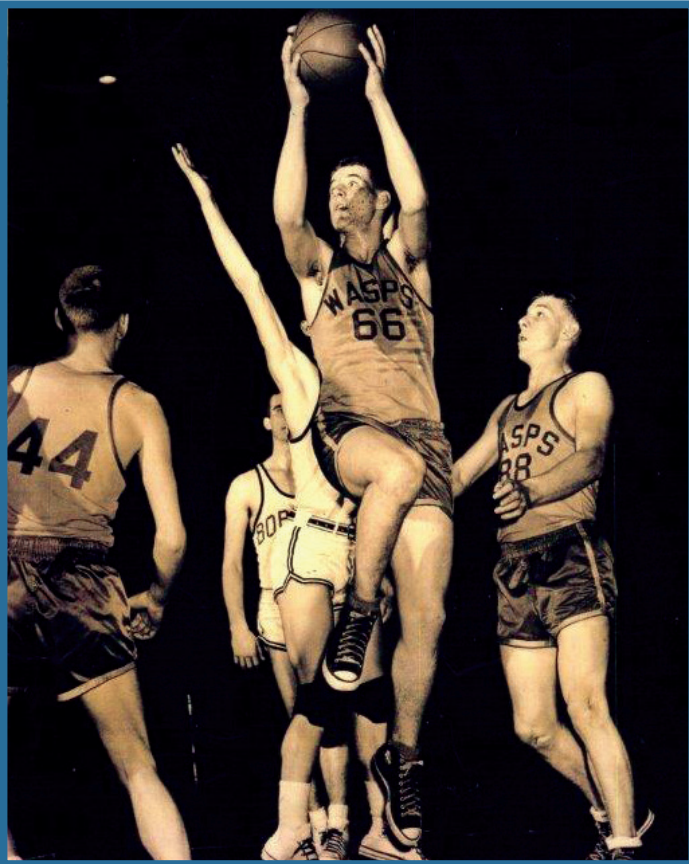
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Each fall, beginning in the 1930s, football became the prime focus for large school athletics. It was a major ritual and a complex cultural event involving more than players on the field. Cheerleaders, baton twirlers, and marching bands were actively involved, while the stands filled with students, and parents, friends of parents, and many people from the community who had no direct ties to the school. One scholar observed that schoolboy football “was an instrument of psychic survival and, as such, a centerpiece of the regional culture.” When the local high school team was having a bad season, an “uneasiness” settled over the entire community. Journalist James J. Kilpatrick noted that while high school athletics are also taken seriously in the Midwest, in



*Among the greatest Kentucky high school players of all time, “King” Kelly Coleman finished his high school career with 4,263 points, averaging 33.6 per game during his four-year career at Wayland High School in the hills of Floyd County.*

the South, “they’re a religion.” Eastern Kentuckians read in their Saturday papers or their weeklies of the feats of Panthers, Rebels, Bison, Rockets, Trojans, Bulldogs, Tomcats, Warriors, Musketees, Raiders, Tigers, and Bank Mules.

Basketball was a rallying point for communities whose schools were too poor and/or too small to field football teams. In eastern Kentucky, basketball so dominates the culture that many small towns have enjoyed lasting distinction on the basis of their high school team’s accomplishments in the state tournament. For example, “King” Kelly Coleman led the Wayland Wasps to a third-place finish in the 1956 state tournament. Playing against much bigger schools, he established tournament records of 1,985 total points and 68 points scored in a game against Bell County.

Sadly, there were several decades in the 20th century when team sports were not available to girls in eastern Kentucky schools. In one of the great educational hypocrisies of the 20th century, young women who came home from school, changed into jeans and boots, and worked beside their fathers and brothers on hillside farms or in large tobacco barns were deemed too frail for athletics. Or perhaps the educational system told them that sports compromised their femininity or their health, but it was not until Title IX in the 1970s that young women in eastern

Kentucky schools were guaranteed an opportunity to play basketball, and later volleyball, tennis, and other school-sponsored sports such as swimming, track, and cross country. By the 1980s, women’s sports were a vital and flourishing part of the educational system, and many young women, like their male classmates, received athletics scholarships at colleges and universities.

The importance of athletics teams in eastern Kentucky’s small towns contributed to a community reluctance to accept large, consolidated county high schools. In many counties, a local community maintained its identity through a small school, and the boys and girls who comprised the varsity basketball teams were genuine community heroes and heroines. In this setting, basketball games became the major social activity of the school year for both the adults and children of the community. These get-togethers provided inexpensive, family-oriented socialization for the rural populace and were carefully scheduled so as not to conflict with church activities, the other focal point of small-town social life. Edwina Pendarvis, a retired Marshall University professor and one of Appalachia’s finest poets, was born in Weeksbury, and spent her early school days in Floyd County and Pike County. She remembers the extreme importance of basketball at her school. “I wasn’t all that much of a fan of basketball,” she reflected. “My girlfriends and I went to the basketball games to flirt with the boys who were in the bleachers.”

Oftentimes, support for the local team continued after high school. Many eastern Kentucky college students came home on the weekends to enjoy some home cooking, help with the chores, and watch their younger siblings or former classmates in action on the gridiron or the hardwood. Before retiring in 2007, Hal Blythe, a keen observer of high school and college sports, taught for more than 35 years at Eastern Kentucky University. Blythe, an award-winning teacher and author, noted that his rural students still identified with their home counties and “guys — especially through the ’70s and ’80s — wore their school letter jackets with fierce pride and girls did the same with their cheerleader sweaters.” Others were even more creative in their support. Donald Johnson, for example, had attended high school in Elkhorn City. After high school, he became a supply clerk in the Army, and he convinced his unit’s basketball team to change its colors from red and white to blue and gold — Elkhorn City’s school colors. When the Army’s blue and gold uniforms were “ready to be replaced,” Johnson ordered new uniforms for the army team and sent the old ones, still in good condition, to the Elkhorn City high school team.

By the 1960s, many Eastern Kentucky counties contained a “big school” — a county-seat high school with 500 to 2,000 students. However, the county was also still dotted with “country schools,” which contained 300-600 students in grades 1 through 12. By the late 1960s and early 1970s consolidation and “progress” closed most of these small, country high schools. The “farmers” rode the big yellow school buses, often for several

hours each day, to attend bigger and, ostensibly, better schools. Many of these rural youngsters, who had played at their small schools, were either too timid or too untalented to participate in extracurricular activities and sports at a bigger school. Others wanted to be involved, but they had to ride the bus home in order to assist with the daily chores of farm life. In exchange for a broader curriculum and other big-school amenities, many rural youngsters lost an opportunity to build confidence and leadership abilities through participation in sports, clubs, and other extracurricular activities. On the positive side, big-school education unquestionably led more rural youngsters to attend college.

The development of consolidated schools in eastern Kentucky ushered in a “unique curriculum.” For many students, the “3 Rs” were “reading, writing, and Route 23,” the route to northern cities and good jobs in their factories and educational systems. During the boom and bust of the coal business in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, tens of thousands traveled north to Columbus, Dayton, and “Dee-troit” in search of steady and gainful employment. Appalachian literature and Appalachian music are filled with the plaintive refrain of out migrants. Donnis Butcher’s story is a case in point.

Born in Johnson County in 1936, Donnis was the 15th of Ollie and Beecher Butcher’s 16 children. He was an outstanding baseball and basketball player at Meade Memorial High School. In 1955, following his graduation, he thrilled his family and hundreds of local supporters by accepting a basketball scholarship to play for the Kentucky Wildcats under legendary coach Adolph Rupp. However, like many mountain boys who went away to the big city after high school, Butcher became overwhelmed and homesick and left school and returned home in a few days. Soon, he headed north to a good factory job at National Cash Register in Dayton, Ohio, where he played for the NCR Industrial League basketball team. In 1958, he returned home and enrolled at Pikeville College (now University of Pikeville). In his first season, 1958-59, Pikeville College won their league championship and went to the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) postseason tournament in Kansas City. Three days of train travel exhausted the Pikeville team, and they lost their first game. However, Butcher, a 6-foot-3-inch forward with a great vertical leap, was selected to the Little All-America basketball team.

After his basketball career at Pikeville College ended, Butcher was drafted by the New York Knicks. He played professionally for the Knicks and Detroit Pistons for five years and later coached the Pistons, the only eastern Kentuckian to ever coach in the NBA. Like Butcher and Kelly Coleman, Morehead State’s Steve Hamilton played professional basketball after college.

Hamilton’s professional accomplishments were even more remarkable than Butcher’s. In 1958, he graduated from Morehead State University, where he had lettered all four years in baseball, basketball, and track. An all-American in basketball, Hamilton was the second draft pick of the Minneapolis (later the Los An-

geles) Lakers and played for two years as the great Elgin Baylor’s back-up at power forward.

At the same time, Hamilton was developing a career as a professional baseball player. After several years in the minor leagues, he arrived in the major leagues with the Cleveland Indians in 1961, beginning a 12-year career with five major league teams. Hamilton pitched in 421 major league games — winning 40, losing 31, and saving 42. Highly respected by players and management, Hamilton was an early leader of the major league players’ union. After retirement, he coached in the minor leagues before returning to his alma mater, Morehead State, as head baseball coach and, later, athletics director. During his long athletics career, he held the rare distinction of playing in the NCAA basketball tournament, the NBA championship, and the World Series.

Thousands of eastern Kentucky athletes used a college education as a springboard to success, but they still loved to reflect on the “good old days” of high school sports. For many, if not most, a general theme emerged: “the older I get, the better I used to be.” Jesse Stuart, a strong 200-pounder, had been a guard on his high school football team between 1922 and 1926. Seven years later, after a year of graduate work at Vanderbilt University, he reported that he was considering returning to Vanderbilt to finish his M.A. and to play on the football team. This observation may have been more a reflection of Stuart’s creative mind-set than a comment on Vanderbilt’s depression-era football program. Stuart’s second cousin, Billy C. Clark, the great chronicler of the Big Sandy Valley, elevated his athletics reflections to an art form. Clark, a tough but undersized part-time quarterback at Catlettsburg’s Thomas R. Brown High School, once reported with real indignation that he had attended the University of Kentucky, rather than the University of Louisville because, at U of L he would have been forced to play behind Johnny Unitas!

By the 1980s, some of the little high schools that once pumped lifeblood into local communities had become grade schools. Many others stood as empty and crumbling monuments to a part of regional life that had been lost forever. The dissolution of the small country high school led to a concomitant disappearance of community spirit and identity, leaving a rural populace frustrated, disoriented, and nostalgic for the good old days when a last-minute victory over an archrival lit fires of community pride that were rekindled by generations of storytellers. Regarding school spirit, University of Alabama football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant once observed, “It’s hard to rally ’round a math class.” For eastern Kentuckians, it was hard to rally around an empty building.

## About the Author

James M. Gifford is the CEO & Senior Editor of the Jesse Stuart Foundation, a regional press headquartered in Ashland for the past 31 years.

**Author’s Note:** *Many of the generalizations in this essay vary from county to county.*

# THE LONG GAME

## A MEMOIR

By Senator Mitch McConnell

I got my first baseball glove the summer of 1954, when I was twelve years old. My father and I split the cost of it, with my share coming from money I'd earned cutting my neighbors' lawns in Augusta, Georgia, where, four years earlier, my family had moved. My father had continued to work with the army after his discharge from the military, and in 1950, just after I turned eight, he was transferred to Camp Gordon, now Fort Gordon, in Augusta. It was not easy to leave Athens, Alabama, having to say good-bye to Big Dad and Mamie, but as we settled into life in Georgia, we all tried to make the best of it. For me, this meant finding baseball.

I'm not sure what, exactly, drew me so strongly to the sport. Maybe it was my way of trying to find someplace to feel at home at a time I otherwise felt so uprooted. Or that even by the age of twelve, I had come to realize that I'd never truly gain the respect of my peers if I didn't excel in something athletic. Or that the polio, which left me unable to run for long distances, narrowed my choices.

It was probably a mix of all those things, but either way, I loved the game. So did my father. The summer of 1955, he took me to see the Augusta Tigers, a Detroit Tigers farm team, no less than thirty-five times. We'd sit in the bleachers, filling up on hot dogs and popcorn, and then race home. Before the screen door even slammed shut behind us, we'd be in front of the radio, turning the dial to the Brooklyn Dodgers game. The Dodgers were my team, and 1955 was their year. It was the fifth time in nine years they'd gone up against the



Photo courtesy of US Senator Mitch McConnell archives

*At the age of 12, Senator Mitch McConnell purchased his first baseball glove. Splitting the cost of the new glove with his father, the young McConnell earned money mowing lawns in his Georgia neighborhood.*

Yankees in the World Series. They'd lost every time, but I believed their day had come. The Yankees won the first two games but the Dodgers came back. The series was tied at 3-3. Just before the seventh and final game, my family and I traveled back to Athens, Alabama, to attend the funeral of my great-uncle Ad. While everyone gathered somberly in the kitchen, I was in the living room, trying to pick up the game on the radio. I had to press my ear against the speaker and constantly jiggle the dial to try to hear the game over the static, wishing the whole time I were at home watching on TV, listening to the commentary offered by Vin Scully, the famous voice of the Dodgers. In one of the final plays, Yogi Berra hit a line drive to Sandy Amoros in left field. Amoros threw it to Pee Wee Reese on second for an out, and then Reese to Gil Hodges at first, for a double play. This would be the play that decided the game, which ended 2-0 Dodgers, handing them the series for the first time in the franchise's history. Trying to respect the mourning adults in the next room, I jumped up and down as quietly as I could.

This was all well and good, but when it came to my own attempt at the sport, I had a serious problem. I was terrible at baseball. I picked up a bat to find I couldn't hit; nor could I throw particu-

larly well. It was a dampening realization, to say the least, but I also knew I had a choice: I could accept my limitations and move on, or I could work hard to overcome them. I chose the latter, and the summer I turned twelve — a summer that saw Hank Aaron hit his first home run, the polio vaccine get introduced in the United States, and the Supreme Court pass down the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision — I approached my goal of getting good at baseball as if it were the most important task in the world.

Our house at the time — 2311 Neal Street — was the first home my parents owned, after almost ten years of marriage, and I bet they didn't pay any more than \$8,000 for it. It was a modest house, made more modest by the telephone pole that, for some reason, had been erected right smack in the middle of our front lawn. It was a little embarrassing. My parents looked into having it removed, but were told it would cost more than they'd paid for the house. (The telephone pole would remain.) One of the best things about this house is that we were just two doors down from the home of Bernie Ward, the principal at my elementary school. Before he became our principal, Bernie played professional baseball in the minor leagues, and he certainly knew a lot about the game. Often, when he saw me prac-

## JOHN YARMUTH

### CONGRESSMAN & WORLD CHAMPION

**B**efore I was a member of Congress, I was a world champion. It happened just three months before my first election, the beginning of the campaign season and, though I am unaware of any SportsCenter highlights of my feat, I've got the trophy to prove it.

The street sport of Dainty may not be America's favorite pastime, or even known to the vast majority of the country. But for almost half a century, for one day a year in the Schnitzelburg neighborhood of Louisville, Kentucky, traffic stops, businesses close, and hundreds converge on the street in front of Hauck's Handy Store for the World Championship Dainty Contest.

The store owner, George Hauck, grew up playing the game, which comprises two wooden sticks the thickness of broom handles — one about 5 ½ inches with tapered ends, the other three feet. The smaller stick (the "dainty") starts on the ground, and each player has three chances to whack it with the larger stick, pop the dainty into the air, and take a second swing to send it as far down the street as possible. Today, Hauck's World Championship draws hundreds to watch competitors (all over age 45) including community leaders, first responders, and local celebrities.

I'd never competed before and, as I waited for my turn, I watched some contestants whiff on their swings or fail to get the dainty off the ground at all. It was comforting to know that I couldn't do much worse. But others began knocking the dainty 30, 40, even 50 feet. It was my turn.

I stepped to the stick, took my first whack and got a very lucky break. The dainty popped up, entered my line of sight, and I made perfect contact. It sailed halfway down the street, striking the hanging branch of a tree before coming to a stop some 145 feet away. Six inches shy of the world record on my first swing, I had won the 36th Annual World Championship Dainty Contest.

That world record was eventually broken in 2013 (the same year I happened to not make any contact with the dainty). But in that moment, and for the year that followed, I was a world champion. I'll leave it to the pundits to decide how much impact it had on the 2006 campaign. I'm not going to say that it won me the election, but I'm also not going to say that it didn't.



Photo courtesy of Representative John Yarmuth

ting with my friends in our backyard, he'd stop by to offer some instruction — showing me how to grip the ball to get a more accurate pitch; how to throw a curveball. We worked on my batting and fielding, and after he'd gone home, I'd convince the other kids to stick around, to practice with me a little longer.

To my amazement, the effort paid off. I started hitting the ball well. My pitches were good. It seemed to happen suddenly, as if something had clicked. By the end of the summer, I'd found that with nothing other than persistence and hard work, I had turned myself from a crummy ballplayer into a pretty darn good one.

It was extremely gratifying, and by the time I was thirteen, playing in the local Little League, I was feeling very confident in my baseball abilities. I was no longer just a student of the sport; I was now a serious competitor. In fact, I'd say I was even feeling a little full of myself. Maybe I had a future in the sport, I thought. Maybe I was going to even play in the big leagues. And then the all-star game came along and with it another important life lesson.

At the end of the summer, I was chosen as a county all-star, which meant I got to play in the exhibition game against the city all-stars. All season I'd hoped for the chance to play in this game, and had been looking forward to it for weeks. But that excitement gave way to fear the moment we arrived at their field.

They were bigger than we were. They had better uniforms. Their field was nothing like the dusty, pebbled patch behind Wheelless Road Elementary where we played, but an actual baseball field with freshly a cut grass, a pitcher's mound, and a home-run fence.

The game was seven innings, and the other pitcher on my team was slated to pitch the first three and a half innings, and I'd pitch the last. This gave me plenty of time to sit on that hard wooden bench, gripping my glove and realizing how overmatched we were. Come the fourth inning, I made my way to the mound on shaky legs, praying my nerves wouldn't show themselves in my pitches. I wasn't so lucky. I walked the first guy. And then the second. And then the third and the fourth. That was one run in. As the next batter approached the plate, I reminded myself of how hard I'd worked, how good I was, how I had every reason to be confident. I was going to get that ball in the strike zone, the way I had hundreds of other times.

Well, I did, only to watch the batter knock it over the fence and out of the park. Needless to say, we lost the game. Afterward, my dad knew enough to allow me the car ride home in silence. I kept my head pressed against the glass so my dad couldn't see my disappointment, and knew I'd just learned another important lesson. As soon as you start to believe there's nobody smarter or stronger or better than you, you will undoubtedly come up against the kid who's going to clear the bases with a home run, knocking the ball far over the fence, and taking your overconfidence right along with it.

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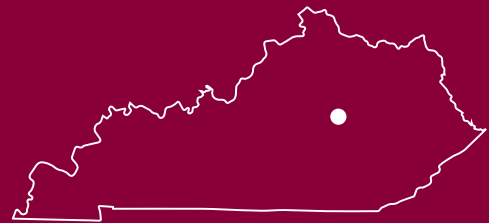


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# SETTING THE BAR SINCE 1870



# BROWN-FORMAN

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A photograph showing the silhouettes of several basketball players on an outdoor court during sunset. One player is in mid-air, jumping to shoot or pass the ball. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright glow and long shadows. A basketball hoop and backboard are visible in the upper left. The background shows utility poles and trees.

# I SAID BANG!

## Louisville's Playground Basketball Community Tells its Own History

By Darcy Thompson

Every year, analyses of television ratings find that Louisville residents watch college basketball games more than any other media market in the nation, and it's not even close: Louisville watches more than twice as much college basketball on ESPN as any other city. The city is teeming with passionate fans of two of the nation's premier college basketball programs. Great-grandmothers and young children alike know the intricacies of the game, reminisce and debate past players and games, yell at their television sets during moments of triumph and frustration. In a city so obsessed with bas-

ketball, it's fitting that one of the most extraordinary grassroots community-building initiatives has centered around the sport.

In 1969, times were tough. A month after Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, there was a racially-charged uprising in Louisville's Parkland neighborhood that shook the city to its core. Louisville's Board of Aldermen had passed an open housing ordinance in 1967 to ban discrimination in housing, and there were still fresh tensions in the community around that. In the midst of these turbulent times, two college students unwittingly started the Dirt Bowl, a summer-long basketball tournament in Louisville's



Algonquin Park. Ben Watkins had been an all-state player for Central High School, and, like many talented African American players in that era of limited opportunity (the University of Kentucky had not yet signed its first black player), he was playing basketball for an historically black college, Jackson State. In 1969, he was home for the summer and working as a park supervisor at Algonquin Park, which was small but popular because of its swimming pool. The other park supervisor was the energetic former track athlete and cheerleader Janis Carter, who had just completed her freshman year at Kentucky

State University. Their job was to provide activities for children in the park all summer: arts and crafts projects, games like box hockey and four square, and, of course, sports.

During his breaks, Ben began working out and doing basketball drills in the park. Other athletes caught wind of this and began showing up to work out with him. Soon they were playing five-on-five games, and before they knew it there were 12 teams of players wanting to compete, and more showing up. Ben and Janis decided to organize a tournament. The court in Algonquin Park was surrounded by dirt, so they called it the Dirt Bowl. They drew chalk lines on the court, got together a crude scorekeeping system (Janis would write the score in marker on a sheet of paper, then write on a new sheet when someone scored), developed a schedule, recruited referees, the whole nine. It was improvised, but it was pure. And it ended up lasting the whole summer.

Many of the city's very best players participated: stars from the ABA's Kentucky Colonels, college players from Kentucky schools,



## “Bang! I said BANG!”

If you drive into Shawnee Park on a summer weekend, you will hear the animated voice of Cornell Bradley shouting one of his well-known catchphrases before you see the basketball courts or the crowd surrounding them and before you smell the smoke rolling off the vendors' grills. If you hear him say, “Bang! I said BANG!” that means that someone has just hit a three-pointer. He has been the official announcer of the Dirt Bowl since 1979. If he gives you a nickname, you might not like it, but his taking notice of you is a badge of honor. For most of his career, his day job was as a pest control worker in a Winn-Dixie warehouse, far from the public eye. But down in the park he has always been a legend, larger than life. His head is full of history and his mouth is full of some of the craziest and most endearing stuff you've ever heard.

high school standouts, and streetball legends who had never played organized ball. It was an intense, physical, highly competitive brand of basketball, with a vocal crowd surrounding the court — it was not for the faint of heart. In every game, pride was at stake (and often, money was too). The battles were legendary.

That year, the title was taken by the team from Newburg, an historically rural African-American community southeast of downtown that punched above its weight when it came to basketball talent, yielding legendary players like NBA Hall of Famer Wes Unseld and Kentucky's first African American Mr. Basketball, Mike Redd. The city players derisively called folks from Newburg the "Farmers," but the Newburg players embraced the term, officially calling their Dirt Bowl team The Farmers and riding to the Dirt Bowl in the backs of pickup trucks. Even without Unseld and Redd, the Farmers became the first Dirt Bowl champions.

By the end of that summer, thousands of people packed the park every weekend to connect with one another and to watch high-level basketball featuring the best players in the region. But much more was happening in the crowd: people were having reunions, showing off the latest fashions, discussing serious societal issues, falling in love. It was the biggest event of that year for a great many people in the nation's most basketball-obsessed city.

The rest is history.

Generations of people have bonded, reunited, competed, laughed, shown off, and celebrated one another at the Dirt Bowl, which has run from late June to August almost every year since 1969. It's where many people saw their first Rolls Royce live and in-person, when 7-foot Kentucky Colonels star Artis Gilmore pulled up beside the court and peeled himself out of the driver's seat. It's where future NCAA Player of the Year and NBA Rookie of the Year Darrell Griffith first made a name for himself as a 14-year-old phenom with a 48-inch vertical leap playing against pros and college stars. It's where some of the most athletic young women staked their claim to the attention and respect of the community by doing things on the court that many people didn't think they were capable of doing. Kids were mentored. Community leaders — both the official and unofficial varieties — politicked and made deals and sometimes job offers. Cooks like Paul Paul, also known as "The Smoke Doctor," conjured sizzling feasts on their grills. Brilliant comedians graced the microphone, cracking the crowd up with their antics. For 48 years, it has been a showcase and a celebration of the tremendous talent, beauty, resourcefulness and creativity of Louisville's African American community.

## I Said Bang!: A History of the Dirt Bowl, the Crown Jewel of the Most Basketball-Obsessed City in America



Louisville is full of people who will light up and begin reeling off memories the moment you ask them about the Dirt Bowl. But until recently, no one had made a formal effort to delve into the Dirt Bowl's history; the individual stories of people who have been a part of the tradition; the community that created, nurtured, and sustains it; and the reasons why it means so much to so many people.

Between September 2014 and February 2016, the nonprofit Louisville Story Program and 37 people who have contributed to and been shaped by the Dirt Bowl tradition — organizers, players, coaches, announcers, spectators, vendors, and referees — worked together to develop the book *I Said Bang!: A History of the Dirt Bowl, the Crown Jewel of the Most Basketball-Obsessed City in America*, which was published in 2016 and has since been recognized with a Kentucky History Award by the Kentucky Historical Society.

The result is a truly one-of-a-kind book, the richest account ever of any community's playground basketball heritage, written from the inside out. This book weaves together the authors' stories and experiences to paint an impressionistic portrait of the Dirt Bowl

and the community that nurtures and sustains it. It begins by describing the local playground basketball ecosystem and day-to-day life in several Louisville neighborhoods in the years leading up to the Dirt Bowl, and the subsequent sections describe Dirt Bowl experiences in roughly chronological order up to the present day. The book captures the spirit of the Dirt Bowl and conveys why it is such a treasured part of our cultural heritage.

The book is available at [louisvillestoryprogram.org](http://louisvillestoryprogram.org), at Louisville bookstores, and on Amazon. *I Said Bang!* author Ravon Churchill also co-produced a 50-minute radio documentary with WFPL News and the Louisville Story Program, which can be streamed online at [wfpl.org](http://wfpl.org) and is available on iTunes.

# SINISTER INFLUENCES

*“If the pressure of college athletics is such that a boy of Ralph (Beard’s) caliber can be reached by sinister influences, there is something wrong with the system and no young man playing college athletics is safe.”*

— M.R. Holtzman, Male High School, 1951

**By Ron Elliott**

College basketball was among the many American institutions disrupted by World War II. Travel restrictions and the difficulty in obtaining shoes occasioned by the shortage of rubber were but minor irritations compared with the lack of available talent. By the time the fall semester of 1945 arrived, the only accessible players were those who failed to qualify for military service and those who were below the draft age.

Fortunately for the University of Kentucky, where Coach Adolph Rupp was well on his way to becoming a legend, two athletically talented Kentucky boys fell into the latter category. Ralph Beard, a 5-foot-10-inch, 170-pound dynamo, was born in Hardinsburg, but moved with his mother to Louisville. Gifted with quickness, speed, and great determination, Beard starred in football, track, and baseball at Male High School. Exceptional in all sports, he was most outstanding in basketball as he led the Bulldogs to the state title in the spring of 1945.

The other young man was Harlan native Wallace Jones, nicknamed “Wah Wah” when his baby sister could not manage “Wallace.” Also an all-around athlete, the 6-foot-4-inch, 200-pound Jones starred in all four high school sports and led the Green Dragons to the state basketball title in 1944. Jones was also an

outstanding tight end in football and would gain all-America honors in football as well as basketball at UK.

Both young men were lured to UK by the success Coach Rupp’s Wildcats had been enjoying. By the time Beard and Jones arrived in Lexington, Rupp had compiled a 256-63 record, a remarkable 80.25 winning percentage. His legend was aided by the fact that fans turned out in droves, packing Alumni Gym to see their beloved Wildcats.

The shortage of players had prompted the National Collegiate Athletic Association to declare freshmen eligible for varsity sports. This allowed Coach Rupp to blend his talented newcomers with seasoned veteran players. Rupp’s 1945-46 Wildcats, featuring Jones and Beard, finished the regular season with a 30-2 record (losses were at Temple and to Notre Dame in Louisville) and breezed to their third consecutive SEC Tournament title. Teammates Jack Parkinson and Jack Tingle joined Beard and Jones on the all-SEC team that season.

Although the NCAA had held a postseason tournament since 1939, the National Invitation Tournament, held annually in New York City’s Madison Square Garden, was considered more prestigious and the NIT winner was generally accepted as the national champion. Thus, Rupp’s charges journeyed to the Big Apple in



*Kentucky natives Ralph Beard (shooting) and Wallace Jones (#27) were the talk of college basketball. Alumni Gym, on the University of Kentucky campus, was packed night after night as people came out to get a glimpse of Coach Rupp and his young Wildcats.*

March 1946. They sailed through the opening rounds to set up a meeting with the pre-tournament favorite Rhode Island Rams for the championship.

A crowd of 18,000, many of them cheering for the underdog Rams, showed up on a chilly evening in New York. With Kentucky heavily favored, the battle turned out to be much closer than expected with Rhode Island's stars Ernie Calverly and Dick Hale matching Beard, Jones, and Tingle basket for basket.

Despite two UK starters — Jones and Tingle — disqualified on fouls, the game stayed close. With the score knotted for the 12th time at 45 and only seconds left on the clock, Beard took the ball to the left of the circle, paused momentarily before darting past his defender. As Beard sped for the basket, the Rams' off-guard, Calverly, moved in to block his path. Deftly, Beard veered to his left past the defender. Calverly reached, but Beard was already by him and all the Rhode Islander could do was try to disrupt the sure score with a hard foul. The whistle sent Calverly to the bench with his fifth foul while Beard picked himself up and stepped to the free throw stripe for the single free throw.

His jaws chomping his mouthful of gum was the only sign that the 18-year-old felt any pressure despite the national title opportunity resting on his shoulders. "I was scared to death," Beard would say 50 years later. "That was my way of calming myself." Ignoring a trickle of blood from the knee injured by the foul, "Calmly the little Louisville athlete stepped to the stripe — the screams of 18,000 persons were hushed momentarily — and dropped in the free throw that won the ball game for Coach Adolph Rupp and his brilliant Kentuckians." The Rams were unable to score as the remaining 40 seconds clicked off. The free throw gave Beard 13 points in Kentucky's first NIT championship.

These Cats became the first UK squad to win 28 games in a season. Even though the term "rock stars" did not yet exist, his freshman exploits awarded that status to Beard. Despite his small stature, he was, indeed, a big man on campus.

Fans' expectations were high when the next season began. Returning starters Jones, Beard, and Tingle and reserve Joe Holland were joined by Alex Groza, Kenny Rollins, Dale Barnstable, Cliff Barker, and Bob Brannum, all of whom were returning from military duty. Groza, Rollins, Barker, and Brannum had played at UK before entering the service.

With such a wealth of talent, competition for starting spots was hot. Beard was a lock at shooting guard while rock-steady Rollins won the point. With Jones not yet at practice, (the football season overlapped) proven performers Holland and Tingle emerged at the forward positions. Competition was stiffest between Brannum and Groza for the center spot, but the agile and crafty Groza eventually won out. When Jones showed up in December, he out-fought Tingle for a forward position.

The Cats lived up to expectations: they breezed through the regular season winning 27 games while losing only to eventual NCAA champion Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State) and at DePaul. Following another SEC Tournament title they traveled to New York for the NIT in Madison Square Garden.

Rupp's charges handily dispatched Long Island University and North Carolina State to set up the championship game against a surprising Utah squad. The Utes upset highly-favored Kentucky, 49-45. Sixty years after the fact, Beard was still angry enough to point out that he had to get out of a hospital bed to play that night. The loss put the Cats record at 34-3 as they closed out the season as NIT runner-up. Groza and Beard were named consensus all-Americans while Jones and Tingle were named to some honor squads. Rupp looked forward to the team (minus Tingle) returning for the 1947-48 season.

The air was abuzz in Lexington when school began in the fall of 1947. Beard, Groza, Jones, Barker, and Holland were all juniors, Barnstable was a sophomore, and Rollins was back for his senior campaign. Once again, competition was stiff in practice. As the opening game approached, with Jones again absent due to football commitments, Beard, Rollins, Barnstable, Barker, and Groza won the starting assignments. With such proven talent, the fans and coaches anticipated an undefeated season.

The Cats roared through the first six games, winning handily before facing Temple on their home court in Philadelphia on December 20. Beard was subpar with an injury and, while Jones was now available, he was not yet in basketball shape and did not play. The Owls won 60-59. As each team had 20 field goals, the difference was a Rollins missed free throw at the end of the game.

Rupp did not relish losing at any time to any team. He felt that this squad had no reason to lose to anybody and he intended to get their inherent greatness from them. "Coach was a terror, a tiger in practice the following week," Holland remembered. "We'd had plenty of rough practices before, but we'd never seen him like that."

On January 3, 1948, in Alumni Gym on Euclid Avenue on the campus of the University of Kentucky, as Jones, Beard, Groza, Barker, and Rollins walked out for the tip-off, the Fabulous Five was born.

This line-up had everything for which a basketball team could hope. The squad had plenty of collegiate playing experience. Beard was cat-quick, a deadly outside shooter and perhaps the fastest ever to play for UK. Groza, while a bit short by major college standards at 6-foot-7-inches, was quick and crafty around the basket and a capable scorer. Rollins was a steady ball-handler and always took the toughest defensive assignment. Barker, who had spent three years in a German POW camp, was a wizard with the ball. Jones was a tough defender and a tenacious rebounder who could score when necessary. These players routinely took the ball off the defensive board and, with speed and deft passing, moved it into the opposite goal without the ball having touched the floor.

The Fabulous Five reeled off nine consecutive victories before suffering a loss at Notre Dame in early February. Nine more wins followed, producing a regular season 26-2 record. Four more wins locked down the SEC Tournament title. This time, for reasons best known to him, Rupp decided to go for the NCAA Tournament rather than the NIT. In late March, the Cats traveled to Madison Square Garden where they defeated Columbia and Holy Cross to bring them to the championship game against Baylor. That game was no contest as Kentucky won 77-59 bringing home the school's first NCAA championship.

The Olympic Games, which had been suspended since Jesse Owens embarrassed Adolf Hitler in 1936, were scheduled to resume in 1948. In an elaborate play-off system, champions of various divisions were matched against each other to determine the United States basketball representatives. Kentucky defeated Louisville and Baylor to bring up the final game against the AAU champion Phillips Oilers. The edge was off as the selection committee had already decided that the players from these two teams would combine to form the Olympic team. The only thing at stake was coaching assignments; the winning coach would be head coach of the Olympic team while the losing coach would serve as his assistant.

The Oilers were a collection of great former college players employed by Phillips Petroleum Company. Ostensibly, they had real jobs but were, in fact, professional athletes who had won 62 of their 65 games that season.

The game, held in the Garden on March 31, was a slugger match between two heavyweights. Kentucky was up 16-10 when Barker went out with a broken nose after eight and a half minutes of play. Despite the absence of Barker and Jones, who went to the bench with three fouls, the score was knotted five times and the lead see-sawed seven times before the horn sounded with the score deadlocked at 26 at the half. Beard played magnificently in the second half, but it wasn't enough. Bob Kurland, who had been the main cog in Oklahoma A&M's back-to-back NCAA titles in 1944 and 1945, took over, leading his team to a 53-49 victory. "That Beard is the best basketball player I ever saw," said Oilers' Coach Bud Browning.

At that point, Kentucky had won 36 of their 39 games, including the NCAA championship. Was Coach Rupp pleased? Re-

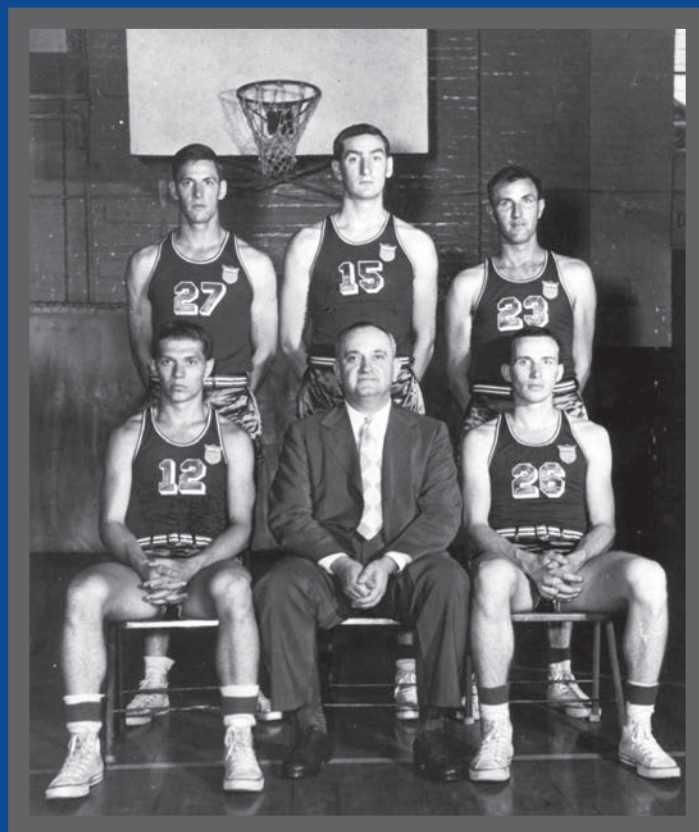


Photo courtesy of UK Libraries & Archives

*On January 3, 1948, in Alumni Gym, the Fabulous Five was born. Front Row: Ralph Beard, Coach Adolph Rupp, and Kenny Rollins. Back Row: Wallace "Wah-Wah" Jones, Alex Groza, and Cliff Barker.*

membering that he had come to UK straight from a high school head coaching position, according to Beard, all he said was, "I want to thank you bastards for making me an assistant coach for the first time in my career."

At Wembley Stadium in London, head coach Browning decided to play the Wildcats and Oilers as units, substituting five-for-five. That proved a great strategy as the Americans cruised through eight games to capture Olympic gold.

Rupp's Wildcats had gone 33-2 through the regular season, winning the SEC championship; 3-0 in winning the NCAA title; and 11-3 through the Olympic trials, exhibitions, and games. Groza and Beard were named consensus all-America and Beard was named college basketball's Player of the Year. Again, Coach Rupp licked his chops: aside from Rollins, who was a senior, his entire squad would return and some talented newcomers would join them in Lexington.

When fall 1948 rolled around, expectations were high, as Barnstable joined Groza, Beard, Jones, and Barker in the starting line-up. They would be aided by junior Jim Line, sophomores Walt Hirsh, and a kid from Cynthiana named Joe B. Hall. They played as advertised, finishing the regular season with 29 wins against a lone loss to St. Louis University, and easily won the SEC title. Coach Rupp, never one to hide his light under a bushel, had decided that

the only fitting follow-up to the previous season would be to win both the NIT and NCAA championships. So, the team boarded a train to New York where they, as the No. 1 seed, would face the No. 16 seed, Loyola of Chicago, in the evening session on March 14. All Kentuckians were delighted as Western Kentucky State College (now Western Kentucky University) would face Bradley in the afternoon. Fans of both Kentucky teams looked forward to a UK vs. WKSC match-up in the second round.

Sometimes lightning does strike twice. Bradley upset Western and then lowly regarded Loyola shocked the nation, beating UK 67-56. Only Beard played well for the Cats, leading the scoring with 15, while the remaining Wildcats played most of the game in foul trouble.

A swarm of reporters awaited Coach Rupp outside the locker room following the game. Interestingly, their questions did not focus on how Loyola accomplished the win, but rather how Kentucky managed to lose. With the rims of his eyes reddened, Rupp said, "We were flat, awfully flat." Then with a deep sigh, he added, "That's all there was to it." Pressed by the scribes, he elaborated as best he could. "We didn't hit, not even the free throws. When you can't do that, you are gonna get beat. And Loyola played well, they deserved to win." Nonetheless, rumors of NIT games being "fixed" began to surface.

A deflated UK team headed home, dreading the grueling practice sessions sure to follow the shocking defeat. There was little time to lick their wounds; Kentucky would face Villanova in the NCAA Tournament's first round six days later. The Cats, who

"were unrecognizable as the same team who floundered so dismally in the NIT," breezed through Villanova and then Illinois to set up a finals match against Hank Iba's Oklahoma A&M squad. UK won that game 46-36, behind an outstanding performance from Groza who was named the tournament's MVP. This win allowed Kentucky to join Oklahoma A&M as the only schools to garner back-to-back NCAA titles at that time. Beard and Groza were again named consensus all-Americans and Groza was named Player of the Year.

A crowd estimated at 20,000 welcomed the champs home on April 4. At a banquet that evening, UK President Herman L. Donovan, Lexington Mayor Tom Mooney, and others declared these Cats "the greatest team in the history of basketball." The jerseys of Beard, Jones, Groza, and Barker (as well as Rollins, now in the professional ranks) were retired.

The two professional leagues existent at the time coveted these players and each was drafted by a team in each league. In an incredible set of circumstances, the two leagues merged to form the National Basketball Association, a timely happenstance which allowed the Fabulous Four — Beard, Groza, Barker, and Jones — plus Holland, to become the nucleus of the NBA's Indianapolis Olympians.

While the Olympians were racking up a credible record as the only all-rookie team in the history of professional sports, the cupboard was not exactly bare at UK. Veterans Line, Hirsh, and Barnstable were joined by one of the first 7-footers in the college game, Bill Spivey. Spivey, scrimmaging against the Phillips

Oilers while they were in Lexington, had learned footwork and a devastating hook shot from Kurland and would dominate the nation throughout the 1949-50 season. Rupp's charges finished that campaign with a 22-4 record that included a 70-66 win over Vanderbilt in the last game played in Alumni Gym, bringing Kentucky's record in that facility to 262-25. The Cats then breezed through the SEC Tournament to win their seventh consecutive conference title.

At the time, the NCAA Tournament was an eight-team affair. The committee asked Kentucky to participate in a "play-in" game against North Carolina State. Rupp flatly refused, citing that UK's 25-4 record was better than the Wolfpack's 24-5 and that Kentucky had beaten Villanova, the only common opponent, who had bested North Carolina State. Not to mention the fact that Kentucky was the back-to-back defending national champion. His stubbornness had two results: the NCAA bid went to North



Photo courtesy of UK Libraries & Archives

*Kentucky natives Ralph Beard and Wallace Jones were the talk of college basketball. Alumni Gym, on the University of Kentucky campus, was packed night after night as people came out to get a glimpse of Coach Rupp and his young Wildcats.*



Carolina State and the tournament field was doubled to 16 so that no deserving team would be left out again.

As a consolation, Rupp accepted a bid to the NIT where they would play lightly regarded City College of New York in the first round. With Spivey down with the flu, and Line and Hirsh having subpar performances, CCNY handed Rupp the worst defeat of his career, winning 89-50. As a result of this game, the rumbling of “fixed” games in Madison Square Garden became a little louder. Not to worry, Rupp assured Kentucky fans, the gamblers couldn’t touch his boys “with a ten foot pole.”

As a *New York Times* sportswriter gleefully pointed out, the “fixers” must have found an eleven foot pole. Shortly after their arrests on October 20, 1951, Beard, Groza, and Barnstable admitted to having accepted money from gamblers to shave points — the practice of altering their performance to affect the point spread in a game. While that exercise might be poor ethics anywhere, it was illegal in New York. As the players admitted to having accepted cash for the game which UK lost to Loyola in the 1949 NIT, they were subject to New York law which could include a jail sentence. Beard told the grand jury that he had accepted \$700 for three games. “I took the money but I never did a thing to impact the score,” said Beard. He would repeat that assertion many times.

Legally, they received a slap on the wrist in the form of a suspended three-year prison sentence and an “indefinite probationary period.” From the NBA, the penalty for Beard and Groza was much more harsh: they were barred from play in that league for life and forced to sell, at a great loss, their interest in the Indianapolis Olympians franchise.

Although Beard, Groza, and the University of Kentucky were the big names in the point shaving scandal, a total of 31 athletes from eight schools were involved. That list would include Spivey who was implicated by teammates Hirsh and Line, both of whom also confessed to having accepted bribes. Despite the fact that Spivey persistently denied any wrong-doing and that the New York authorities had no additional evidence and no jurisdiction, Spivey was indicted for perjury and also banned from the NBA for life. Although Spivey voluntarily passed a lie detector test and his trial ended with a hung jury, he never saw an NBA court.

New York Judge Saul Streit came down hard on UK, alleging, among many other things, that the school had allowed the players to “crib” on examinations and paid them cash in excess of NCAA guidelines.

Reactions in Kentucky were mostly anger and disbelief. Coach Rupp was devastated. Asked if he knew about the point shaving, he angrily replied, that not only had “his boys” won three national championships, an Olympic gold medal, and 130 of 139 games, they had “perfectly performed everything” he had ever asked. The pictures of Beard and Groza, which had adorned the concourse of Memorial Coliseum, disappeared, not to be seen



Photo courtesy of UK Libraries & Archives

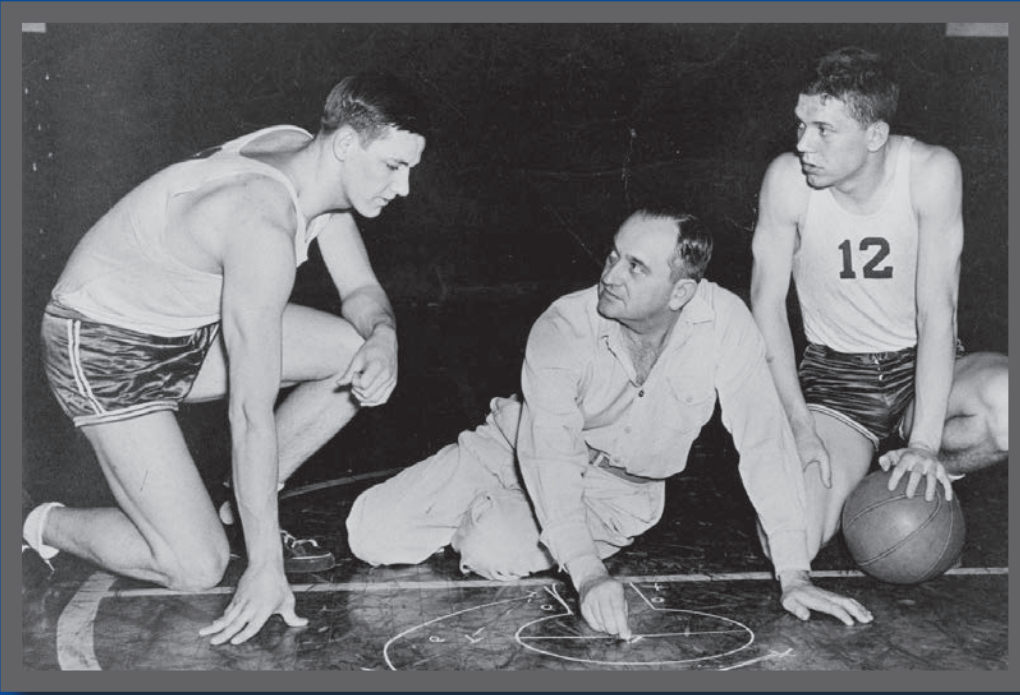
*In 1951, Alex Groza (center) and Dale Barnstable (right) admitted to having accepted money from gamblers to shave points as did Ralph Beard.*

again until UK Athletics Director C. M. Newton restored them many years later. Officially, the University of Kentucky “pledged to make such reforms” in their athletics programs as necessary to “make such scandals impossible in the future.” The announcement also vowed that school policy “will not be dictated by Judge Streit.”

Amid the national notoriety, the Southeastern Conference announced that it would conduct a “complete and thorough” examination into UK’s athletics programs. After a long, hot summer of anticipation, the SEC released its findings on August 9, 1952. The conference ruled that many UK players, Spivey, Beard, Jones, Line, Hirsh, and Groza among them, were ineligible for part or all of their college careers due to having received money in excess of conference guidelines. The University of Kentucky was, therefore, banned from playing SEC basketball games for the 1952-53 season. That edict left a 14-game hole in the already announced schedule. As UK had previously decided not to play again in the NIT and the NCAA representative was chosen by the conference tournament, the conference’s decision amounted to a ban on postseason play as well.

The hole in the schedule soon proved to present no problem. The NCAA, following its own investigation, announced that the University of Kentucky would be on probation for all sports for the 1952-53 season. As the ruling would not take effect until the winter meeting in January, Coach Bryant’s football team escaped the NCAA’s first “death penalty.”

So, UK played no basketball games that season. Taking advantage of the redshirt rule, however, no player lost any eligibility, which seems fair in that the current team was being



*Wallace Jones (left) was a standout in both basketball and football at the University of Kentucky. He played under two legendary coaches while at UK, Adolph Rupp (center) and Paul “Bear” Bryant. Ralph Beard (right) was an excellent athlete. While at Louisville’s Male High School he competed in football, basketball, track, and baseball.*

penalized for sins of the past. With skills honed during the probation year, Cliff Hagan, Frank Ramsey, and their teammates stormed to a perfect 25-0 record for the 1953-54 season, causing visions of another national championship to dance in fans’ heads. As Hagan and Ramsey had graduated during the probationary period, the NCAA ruled them ineligible for postseason play, so UK declined to participate in the 1954 tournament without its star players.

While memories of the scandal did not fade quickly, Coach Rupp weathered the storm, just as he would survive many other controversies during his long and storied career. Declaring that he would not retire until “the man that said Kentucky couldn’t play” handed him the national championship trophy, he made good on that promise when his Fiddlin’ Five won the championship in 1958. Although UK was not to win it all again under his guidance, Rupp remained at the helm until forced out in 1972, having won four national championships and being named National Coach of the Year five times while compiling an overall record of 876-190. A year after witnessing the first game played in the arena named for him, Adolph Rupp died in Lexington on December 10, 1977.

As for the players, they went on to lives in other endeavors. Groza returned to the family business in Martin’s Ferry, Ohio, before being named the basketball coach at Louisville’s Bellarmine College in 1959. After leading the Knights to a conference title in 1963, Groza left for a coaching and managerial career in the newly formed American Basketball Association, working for the Kentucky Colonels and San Diego Conquistadors. Groza was inducted into the Kentucky Athletic Hall of Fame in 1992 and his retired jersey hangs in the rafters of Rupp Arena. Groza died of cancer in 1995.

Spivey played basketball in semi-pro leagues while protesting his innocence of any wrong doing and petitioning the NBA to let him play. Finally, he filed a lawsuit against the professional league which steadfastly refused to even hear his case. The suit was settled out of court with a \$10,000 payment to Spivey — much less than he could have earned as a player. After his playing days, Spivey was part of a building materials firm before returning to Lexington for a career in real estate and insurance sales. Spivey died in 1995.

Beard, who had never had a thought of doing anything other than playing professional sports — he was good enough for major league baseball which also banned him — survived a terrible funk following his exile from sports. He eventually landed a career as a pharmaceutical salesman, a vocation in which he found personal reward as well as financial security. Although Coach Rupp would never name his favorite player in public, he did say that Beard was “a perfect player.” Beard reconciled with Rupp on the coach’s deathbed, and later died in 2007.

## ***About the Author***

Ron Elliott, a native of Lincoln County, is a graduate of ECU and UK with degrees in math and computer science. Elliott’s background includes involvement with the historic Apollo missions and a stint on the faculty of Kentucky’s Community College system. His story-telling ability, research skills, and writing style produces well-accepted books, including *Assassination at the State House*, *Hilltop to Mountaintop*, *The Silent Brigade*, *Inside the Beverly Hills Supper Club Fire* and *Through the Eyes of Lincoln* as well as numerous magazine articles. Elliott is a popular member of the Kentucky Humanities Council’s Speakers Bureau.



# Baseball's "Happy" Years

*A.B. "Happy" Chandler made his mark in politics and sports*

**By Richard Crowe**

**A**. B. "Happy" Chandler died in 1991, but to many Kentuckians it seems like only the day before yesterday. Chandler rose from an unfortunate childhood filled with farm work, sports, and church to positions of executive leadership on both the state and national levels. During childhood his mother abandoned the family when he was four, his only brother died when he fell from a tree, and his father never had steady work away from their 50-acre farm. Almost everyone who met Chandler has a story about him remembering their name, singing at an event they attended, shaking their hand, or kissing them on the forehead if they were a young child. His remarkable memory for names and faces will always be a part of his legacy.

Chandler's political career began when he won his way into the Kentucky Senate in 1929, just four years out of law school. A short two years later in 1931, he was elected lieutenant governor of the Commonwealth. Chandler found himself at odds with then Kentucky Governor Ruby Laffoon, who supported a sales tax which Chandler thought took too many dollars from the poor and middle classes. He believed there had to be a better way

for the state to pay its bills without harming Kentucky citizens as much as the proposed sales tax would. At that time, Kentucky governors could not succeed themselves, and Governor Laffoon handpicked Tom Rhea to follow him into the governor's office and carry out his tax plan. Laffoon intended to pass the torch to Rhea at the next Democratic convention.

But in 1935, Laffoon opened a door for Chandler to become governor when he made a trip to Washington, D.C. Laffoon boarded a train headed for a meeting with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. There, Laffoon asked FDR for federal funds, much needed in Kentucky. When Laffoon crossed the state line, however, Chandler became the highest ranking official in the Commonwealth and to everyone's surprise, called for a special session of the legislature. When they met, the legislators passed a bill that changed the election process. Under the new rule, candidates for office had to win at the polls in a primary election. Laffoon could no longer simply nominate his choice for governor at the convention. Rhea would have to run a state-wide campaign to win the position. Rhea garnered more votes than Chandler in the primary election, but with two others running, Rhea did

not win a majority of the votes. In a runoff election between the top two vote getters, Chandler won the majority and became the Democratic candidate for governor.

Chandler followed that up with a victory over the Republican nominee, King Swope, in the general election, making Chandler the youngest governor in the United States. He did not arrive in office at the height of prosperity. Instead, the Great Depression had slowed the economy statewide, nationally, and worldwide. Kentucky was struggling economically on all fronts. Most notably, Kentucky's bourbon industry was still recovering from Prohibition, when distilleries across the nation sat idle.

Once he was sworn in as governor, Chandler took action and led boldly. He had the sales tax repealed and replaced it with higher excise and income taxes, which he thought were more fair to the average citizen. Those new taxes raised additional revenue that allowed Kentucky to pay off much of its debt and made vast improvements in the daily lives of Kentuckians.

Once Prohibition ended nationally in 1933, bourbon could once again be produced and sold, putting Kentuckians back to work. Once in office, Chandler led the movement for a higher excise tax to be added to alcoholic beverages, creating millions of dollars of new revenue for the Commonwealth.

In addition to finding new revenue streams, he also assembled a brain trust of UK faculty and other state leaders to determine new ways to cut costs by reorganizing and streamlining state government. The cost savings and new revenue were used to

boost schools, roads, health care, welfare, and penal programs. Specifically, Chandler's programs provided free textbooks for public schools, allowed for participation in the federal electrification program, added new roads for rural areas, developed the teacher's retirement system, and created an old-age assistance program that pre-dated the federal Social Security program.

Chandler is viewed by many as one of Kentucky's most successful governors for the work he did in his first term, 1935-39. That term came amid a world-wide depression that was certainly the worst experienced in the U.S. Though Chandler was young — he became known as the "Boy Governor" — his policies and actions moved the Commonwealth ahead while many other states lost ground.

Twenty years later, Chandler was elected Kentucky's governor for a second term. While not nearly as distinguished as his first, he is best known for his continued support of education and making important improvements in the state highway system. His finest hour may have been when he called out the state National Guard and state police to enforce integration at Sturgis High School in Union County in 1956. His second term also produced the Chandler Medical School at the University of Kentucky, which gave him great pride. Most people would agree that through eight years of service in the governor's seat, Chandler helped advance Kentucky into the 20th century.

However, Chandler's impact was not limited to politics. He was also a major figure in the world of sports, serving as commissioner during the integration of Major League Baseball.

On November 1, 1945, Chandler resigned from the U.S. Senate to become Commissioner of Major League Baseball following the death of Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis.

Landis became the first commissioner after the Chicago White Sox threw the 1919 World Series to the Cincinnati Reds. As a result of what became known as "the Black Sox scandal," fans quit showing up for games. They could no longer trust what they saw on the field. They loved the game of baseball but wanted an honest outcome for the games they paid to see. Baseball owners acted at once to regain fan confidence, seeking to hire the most honest public official they could find to serve as commissioner. Landis would not accept the position, however, without having complete control.

The owners were desperate enough to save their financial investments that they accepted his terms. Landis operated as commissioner for the next 25 years, knowing that he could not be fired by the owners. During that time, fans did return to baseball — not so much because of Landis, but because the game had changed — it had become much more interesting to watch.

New excitement for the game developed when a pitcher named Babe Ruth was traded from the Boston Red Sox to the New York Yankees. The Yankees moved Ruth from the pitching mound, where he pitched every fourth day, to right field where he could bat every day. And the rest is history.



Photo courtesy of UK Libraries & Archives

*A. B. "Happy" Chandler is often viewed as one of Kentucky's most successful governors for the work he did during his first term, 1935-39.*

Ruth responded by hitting home runs as no one had ever hit them before — as many as 60 long balls a year. Fans showed their preference for this new version of baseball — over the old singles and stolen base version — by filling the stands and enriching the owners' bank accounts.

Between the appointment of a commissioner who brought integrity back to the game and the added thrill of the long ball, the game had once again become popular. During the last few years of Landis' reign, however, the world was immersed in World War II.

The wartime rendition of professional baseball saw many of the sport's greatest stars enlist following Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. President Roosevelt supported the continuation of baseball by allowing the sport to field teams while the star players were fighting overseas. He did so to help raise the spirit of Americans during the long years of war.

The baseball product on the field was not major league quality, however. Talent was limited and teams consisted mostly of 4-f players — men not physically able to fight in the war but who could still play baseball. The Cincinnati Reds were so desperate to field a team that they used a 15-year-old school boy named Joe Nuxhall to pitch two-thirds of an inning against the champion St. Louis Cardinals in 1944.

All told, the circumstances Chandler inherited from Landis were far different from those normally found in Major League Baseball. During spring training in 1946, there were a glut of players in training camp. Wartime players had returned home and now had to compete with returning veterans with guaranteed contracts for the limited spots on each team's 25-man roster.

A newly formed Mexican League created new competition for the game's best players. Top players were being lured to Mexico with the promise of high salaries. In order to be paid those higher salaries they would have to break the reserve clauses in their major league contracts. The reserve clause was in every player's contract and stipulated that the team owned them and could trade them at their discretion. While the owners wanted the reserve clause to stand so they could better control the players and their pay checks, the players wanted the clause outlawed to have more freedom to change teams and command higher salaries. Unfortunately for the players, they had no power to negotiate for better wages or conditions. And, finally, there was an unwritten rule that prohibited black men from playing Major League Baseball.

Chandler assumed that he could operate in the same manner that Landis had during the previous 25 years. But Landis never experienced the conditions that Chandler faced. At Landis' death, baseball was once again prospering and the owners decided they no longer needed a commissioner with total control of the game. Chandler had been a baseball fan all of his life and his new contract boosted his income from \$10,000 a year as a U.S. Senator to \$50,000 as Major League Baseball Commissioner — but it came with strings. The contract Chandler signed stipulated



Photo courtesy of UK Libraries & Archives

*In 1957, Chandler was one of 10 inaugural members of the Kentucky Sports Hall of Fame and in 1982, he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.*

that he maintain the favorable vote of three-fourths (12) of the 16 owners to keep his job.

Chandler had some great moments as commissioner, but he made enemies along the way. He started a player's pension plan with new revenue from television. The owners wanted to fund the plan with as few dollars as possible but Chandler committed 86 percent of new revenue from televising the All-Star Game and World Series to the fund. He was also very public in his support and promotion of Major League Baseball. Chandler appeared at many ballparks during the season and spring training. Chandler's refusal to compromise on his conditions for the return of players from the Mexican League resulted in some owners having to settle with their players out of court to avoid those players from challenging the reserve clause in court. He moved the Commissioner's Office from Chicago to Cincinnati, without counsel, so he could be closer to Kentucky. Most of the owners wanted the Commissioner's Office moved to New York, which supported three teams at that time and where more press coverage for the league was available. He banned Brooklyn Dodgers manager, Leo Durocher, for one year for "conduct detrimental to baseball." Chandler also hired private detectives to investigate Del Webb, one of the co-owners of the New York Yankees because Webb's construction company had received a contract to build a casino in Las Vegas. Chandler wanted to learn more about Webb's alleged connections to Las Vegas gamblers, the gambling business, and his involvement in construction of the Flamingo Hotel.



*On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first African American in the major leagues when he played his first game with the Brooklyn Dodgers.*

The greatest unease for the majority of owners came when Jackie Robinson was permitted to join the Brooklyn Dodgers. Robinson was the first player of color to sign a contract with Major League Baseball in the modern era. Contributing to the lack of integration in baseball was the fact that Landis allowed no discussion of the subject during his tenure. Chandler claims in his book, *Heroes, Plain Folks and Skunks*, that Branch Rickey came to see him at his cabin in Versailles to persuade him to approve Robinson's contract even though the owners had voted 15 to 1 against allowing a black player to play Major League Baseball. Chandler said he considered the request and decided that "when he met his maker and was asked why he did not allow black men to play professional baseball that denying this request because of the color of his skin might not be enough of a reason." This was the story told for 31 years after the owners ousted him as Commissioner. It was compelling enough to get him elected into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1982.

The facts, however, do not support Chandler's version of the story. After years of searching for a written record of these events, William Marshall, author of *Baseball's Pivotal Era*, found evidence that Rickey did, indeed, visit Chandler in Versailles, but the date of that meeting was six months after the integration decision had been made. There is still no evidence to-date that the owners voted to keep Robinson out of baseball. Dan Topping, another co-owner

of the Yankees, claimed in a 1959 *Sports Illustrated* article that the owners had formed a committee to discuss allowing black men to play Major League Baseball, but this committee was formed much later than Robinson's initial 1947 season.

Some concerns of that committee were reported to have been how to deal fairly with black players in terms of housing, travel, and pay. Also, how to be fair to the Negro League teams when players left them to join Major League Baseball. A third concern was what would happen to the value of Negro League baseball teams when their star players joined Major League Baseball. Topping recalled that both he and Rickey, the Brooklyn owner and general manager, were members of that committee and that Rickey simply took advantage of other league owners by jumping the gun in signing the best black players. This story remains unverifiable.

There is no record at the Hall of Fame, in the papers Chandler left to the University of Kentucky library, or any papers Rickey left, to verify Chandler's version of the story. The only other record that has been found was a hand-written note from Robinson that Chandler received on November 28, 1956. The note was found by William Marshall in the late 1970's at the University of Kentucky when Chandler's papers were opened. It said, "I will never forget your part in the so called Rickey experiment ..."

Baseball researchers wish that note said more because, by itself, it does not provide enough evidence to verify Chandler's version of the story. Yes, Robinson joined Major League Baseball in 1947 at age 28 and became the Rookie of the Year in the National League. And yes, two years later in 1949, he led the National League in batting average, took his team to the World Series, and was named the leagues' Most Valuable Player. And yes, Rickey did outsmart the rest of baseball's owners by signing Robinson and a slew of other Negro League players which advanced the Dodgers from the bottom of the league to the top of the league, guaranteeing financial success for a franchise that had not prospered for years. And yes, then as now, the commissioner had to approve all major league player contracts, including Robinson's. To his credit, Chandler had the power to void Robinson's contract, but he chose to approve it. He later would threaten the Philadelphia Phillies and their manager, Ben Chapman, with disciplinary action for their role in extreme, race-based taunting toward Robinson.

Chandler proudly served as the Commissioner of Major League Baseball during the sports' most challenging years. He deserved admittance into the Hall of Fame — more for establishing the players' pension plan than any other thing he may have done.

## *About the Author*

Richard Crowe spent 40 years teaching economics and management at Morehead State, University of the Cumberlands, and Hazard Community College. He has done extensive study of three eastern Kentucky notables: author James Still, the giant Martin Van Buren Bates, and his uncle Bad John Wright. He is a former member of Kentucky Humanities' board of directors.

# Coach Smith

By Georgia Green Stamper

**T**he old men wore matching brown sweaters and slacks, a nod to Coach Rupp who wore a brown suit to each game. A half-century ago, they had played for Adolph Rupp on the University of Kentucky basketball team that won the 1958 NCAA tournament. In basketball-crazed Kentucky, they had been young heroes, handing Rupp his fourth national title.

In the huge arena named for their coach, they formed a wide line that stretched across mid-court. They were there to be honored at halftime on the golden anniversary of their championship season. No one mentioned that the head coach then sitting on UK's bench had not yet been born in 1958.

When each man's name was called, he stepped forward and waved to the crowd. A television camera zoomed in for a close-up, and then a larger than life electronic image of the former player flashed on a giant screen near the ceiling of the arena.

I didn't believe it was him when I heard him introduced over the loud speaker — it's an ordinary name, after all. But when I saw him smile and wave on the huge TV screen, I recognized him. The Bill Smith of the 1958 UK squad, was the same Bill Smith who had been my high school physical education teacher in 1959. I vaguely remembered having heard he'd played for UK, but in the arrogant nonchalance of my youth, I had never before connected him with Rupp's famous "Fiddlin' Five" team. He hadn't been a marquee player, you see, and when I was 14, I only had time to pause for superstars.

Sitting in grandiose Rupp Arena, I was hit by the irony of his long-ago situation. He had been part of a national championship team one year, and the next, he was teaching the likes of klutzy me how to do jumping jacks and sit-ups in freshman gym class. My heart reached across the decades to give him a symbolic pat on the back for not buckling under the challenge.

In addition to me and a passel of other whining ninth graders, Coach Smith had other problems that year. He'd been hired to coach the varsity basketball team at Owen County High School. A lifetime later, I can better appreciate the expectations that must have been heaped on this young man fresh out of college. After all, he'd played for Adolph Rupp and on a NCAA title team. Surely, he could transform our recently consolidated farm boys into a basketball powerhouse. As if that were not pressure enough, he was handed the task of coaching the first racially integrated basketball team the Owen County Rebels ever put on the court.

Coach Smith's boys simply could not win. They were well-coached, my Daddy said, but they were small and young, mostly freshmen and sophomores. The Rebels lost every game on their schedule.

The racial integration of the Rebels, however, was a winning situation, and I have to think Coach Smith played a big role in the ease of that transition although I can't speak to how he did it. Perhaps his great height (he looked to be 6'6" to me) and confident UK-aura made others reluctant

to criticize his playing line-up. Maybe it was the even-handed way he treated all the boys in practice that made them look so comfortable and happy together on court. Whatever, several black players were assimilated into that losing team with nary a snide remark from anyone, and he started a freshman black student, Billy Whitney, every game. Billy was a flat-out good basketball player, and even though we couldn't win a game, we felt grateful he was on our side.

This may not seem remarkable to younger readers, and in a right-side-up world it would not have been. But in 1959, in places like rural Kentucky, white people did and said some awful things when their schools were first required by law to enroll black students. That is why it pleases me to remember that there was no ugliness in Owen County when our schools were finally integrated — even though a century earlier it had sent a higher percentage of its men to fight for the Confederacy than any other Kentucky county. Even though a few years earlier, someone had chosen the name "Rebels" for our newly consolidated high school's teams.

When district tournament time rolled around, God must have decided to reward Coach Smith and the Owen County Rebels for good behavior. We drew a bye in the first round, and then, in the mysterious way of miracles, we shocked Williamstown in the second round to chalk up our first win of the year. That single victory placed us in the district's title game. Win or lose (and for the record, we lost) we would be district runner-up and advance to the regional tournament.

At the regional level, we drew a Goliath in the first round (Oldham County or Shelby County, I can't remember which.) To no one's surprise, we lost. But Coach Smith and his players were not intimidated, and skillfully slowed the tempo of the game so that the score was low, and the big guys didn't humiliate us.

I couldn't get to Coach Smith through the crowd that Saturday night at Rupp Arena, but I would like for him to know that I've never forgotten his first team. I wish I could tell him how many times I've thought about those boys when one discouragement after another has slapped me down, and I've been tempted to give up. I wish he could know how often I've remembered his and his team's dignity and grace when faced with insurmountable odds. I wish I could thank him for making racial integration look so easy.

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## About the Author

Georgia Green Stamper is a seventh generation Kentuckian. A graduate of Transylvania University, Stamper is a former high school English and theater teacher and speech team coach. Her published works include *Butter in the Morning* and *You Can Go Anywhere*. She also writes a bi-weekly column, "Georgia: On My Mind," for *The Owenton News-Herald*. She has been a regular commentator for NPR member station WUKY affiliated with the University of Kentucky and a popular member of the Kentucky Humanities Council's Speakers Bureau.



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