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Tops Beat Cats, Race Barriers 30 Years Ago

It was a Cinderella story. A story that takes us back to a time when race barriers were first being broken, and Western had an all-black starting five.

It was a time when UK refused to play Western in the regular season.

After being dodged by Adolph Rupp for his entire career as a coach, the Hilltoppers finally got their chance at the Big Dance.

Following a 74-72 win against Jacksonville in the first round of the NCAA Tournament, Western met the Wildcats in Athens, GA.

And the Toppers sent them back to Lexington licking their wounds.

It was 1971. Western had just elected its first black and first female to major positions in student government. Controversial speakers in campus were called communists. And there were complaints about the \$3 admission fee to see Neil Diamond.

Students crammed in Diddle Arena to watch the Toppers play. They'd stand if the building filled to capacity. In a 1971 game against Murray State, the Diddle attendance record was set at 14,277.

Big Mac

After Jim McDaniels finishes his work today at Sam Johnson Lincoln Mercury in Charlotte, NC, the 53-year-old former Western star will head over to a sports bar. He'll meet about 100 fellow alums to watch the Western, UK game. He'll bring his wife with him. She'll be wearing his Western jacket.

"I can't quite get it on," he said Wednesday from his office at the car dealership.

When he walks into the bar, greetings will be extended to "Big Mac" -- the center who averaged 29.3 points and 15.1 rebounds as a Hilltopper.

McDaniels remembers facing the Wildcats three decades ago. And he remembers his strategy well.

"Kill. Kill. Kill. Destroy. Destroy. Destroy," he said. Kinda like Terminator. That was what it was like . . . I came to play."

McDaniels scored 35 points. And after he committed his fifth foul, he looked over at Rupp and raised his hands high in the air as a sign of victory.

Rupp, recruiting, racism

It was more than a tournament game. More than the Hilltoppers' chance to beat UK in their first battle. More than a match against a team with 44 previous appearances in NCAA Tournament games and four national titles.

Western was a team of shining black stars overlooked by Rupp, a coach notorious for not recruiting African-American players.

Former Western forward Clarence Glover probably said it best.

"We knew that black people all over the country were paying attention to what was happening that night," he said. "It was a game that was played for a people all across the United States."

In author Frank Fitzpatrick's "And the Walls Came Tumbling Down," he wrote that in Rupp's 42 years at UK, Rupp never played a regular season game against Western, Louisville, or Eastern Kentucky.

"For one thing, he could always find a less-challenging patsy somewhere else," Fitzpatrick wrote, "and for another, he didn't want to help them get any publicity that might aid their recruiting."

McDaniels recalls being reluctantly recruited by Rupp. He spent two days in Lexington, mostly in a hotel room. Big Mac, who averaged 40 points in high school, said he wasn't even shown around UK's campus. He spoke to Rupp for about 15 minutes before returning to Allen County-let down.

One day during his senior year, the mailman arrived at his house with a bag filled with hundreds of letters. Each of them was from a different student on the Hill. They said things like, "You are the future of Western."

After reading about 15 letters, "I told my mother, 'That's it. I'm going to be a Hilltopper. I'm going to Western.'" he said. "She cried. I cried. All my brothers and sisters cried.

"My heart was stolen...It's still stolen 30 years later."

The game

In a meeting before the 1971 game between Western and UK, Coach John Oldham asked his assistants about defensive strategy.

Assistant Coach Buck Snyder insisted they run a zone defense. Assistant Jim Richards had a different plan-a riskier one.

"If you let us press them," he told Oldham, "we'll beat them very badly. Maybe by 20 points or more."

"Don't say that," Oldham replied. "We're talking about Kentucky."

"It's just us three here," Richards said, wondering why Oldham was so worried. But Richards knew he had stepped out of bounds by assuming Western could beat Kentucky that bad.

"I'm gonna put your coaching career on the line," the coach said. "We'll press 'em, and we'll see.

It was a disaster for Kentucky from the beginning.

"They were slow," Oldham said. "We were wicked fast. We ran the press the whole game."

By halftime, Richards remembers, about half of UK's fans were so upset they'd left the arena.

"When we came back, there were so many that weren't in their seats," he said. "I thought they'd gone to get a hot dog or something."

Glover said he didn't even notice what was happening in the stands.

"In that game, the concentration was there, and the focus remained on one thing and that was winning the game," he said.

It was a 107-83 win, Western's third largest margin of victory that season.

"I'm not sure whether or not this is my greatest moment," Glover said at the time, "but we play for our fans, and if it's their greatest moment, I guess it's mine, too."

The hereafter

Western finished the season 24-6 and reached the Final Four. Glover and McDaniels made their peace with Rupp and played for him on an all-star team. Glover went on to play professionally for the Boston Celtics. McDaniels played in the now-defunct American Basketball Association, then with the Lakers and Supersonics of the NBA. Oldham retired as coach and Richards took over.

A year later, Rupp was coerced into retiring by administrators at Kentucky who threatened to invoke the school's retire-at-70 policy. In 1977, in a private room at UK's Chandler Medical Center, Rupp died of spinal cancer.

Tonight, Glover, a principle at Kennedy Metro Middle School in Louisville, will help his 12-year-old son with a school project. Oldham will catch the game on TV. He'd planned on attending, but he works at Hartland Equipment, and he's seeing a potential customer about a lawn tractor. He jokingly said he'd been spoiled sitting on the sidelines all those years, and he couldn't stand to sit in bad seats.

In Section 33, Row P, Richards will sit with friends watching a newer version of the '71 game. During his 17 years working with Oldham in one capacity or another, he said, the two never had one ill word.

"The most harshly he ever spoke to me was when I said we could beat UK by 20 points," Richards recalls. "He said, 'Don't say that.'"