

Why It Matters

Looking back at UK's basketball tradition
Story and photos by Larry Treadway

Basketball, Kentucky, Wildcats. These three words, together, might not be the first three words uttered from a Bluegrass baby's gooey mouth but eventually they are learned then spoken, with pride and reverence once afforded heads of state and beautiful women. You see, we take basketball a might seriously in the Commonwealth. Sure, Indiana, North Carolina and Kansas might argue that basketball is just as important to their state's homespun culture and history—but I'd stand on a soapbox in the middle of Bloomington, Tobacco Road or Lawrence and proclaim that there's really no state where it matters more and where the expectations are any higher. Say what you want rest of the world but here in K-tizzle, basketball is king poop of diaper mountain.



You see, back in the earliest part of the 20th century, back before city and county schools merged to become big monolithic educational institutions, each individual little burg had its own individual little high school. Most of those small high schools might not have had the student population or cash in the coffers to field a football team or even a ragtag baseball team, but they could usually find 8 or 9 skinny kids to fill out a basketball team. High school gymnasiums held P.E. classes during the school day, basketball practice in the evening and aside from churches and barbershops they also held the community role as the best meeting place in town. Local basketball games became the place where folks met up, socialized and as a hub for all

this activity, these games were more than just "games." Deep knowledge of the game as well as pride in one's team was fostered and grew. Basketball mattered in places where there just wasn't much going on. If you grew up in a small town in Kentucky—and I think we all share the same thought on this—there just was never much going on. But on basketball night it was nothing to see the gym packed to the gills with hundreds of people. See and be seen, all under yellowing Stonco light of the gym with the sound of hollow rubber on

hardwood. Not just basketball but life and its connections that took place because of and in spite of the game.

But I think any state can historically say high school sports played this kind of role in community building, but what makes Kentucky a little different is that, and I'm gonna brutally be honest here ... we just didn't have a whole helluva lot to be proud of. Statistically, the state is at or near the bottom of most educational barometers and most socio-economic indicators. This isn't just recent news, it's been that way. We have a long history of being hard working, undereducated, a bit piss poor and easily overlooked, beyond good photo-op fodder for the noblest of politicians and goodniks.

Hey, we just ain't good at much. Well, we might be good at something but we sure ain't the best at much, how about that? But these scrappy players, from these small communities, got better, and downright good at basketball and in time, some S.O.B. of a ball coach in a cheap brown suit named Adolph Rupp began to snatch these ballplayers out of the

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hills and bring them to the University of Kentucky to play basketball and the team succeeded—and well, something pretty big happened.

These kids with names like Spicer, Beard, Tingle and Jones hauled their community followers with them in mind and, many times, body to cheer them on. Ol' Rupp got a whopping 80 percent of his players out of Kentucky. And his Kentucky teams kicked, scratched and pummeled all comers, winning championships, setting records and dominating discussions. By god, basketball was something 'we' were good at. State heroes in Chuck Taylors were being made and chests were being pumped by both fans and foes alike. UK, love 'em or hate 'em—you had to deal with 'em. And after you've tasted a little success, well you don't wanna go back to the taste of the hind tit, as they say. Chew on this for just a second ... Under the Baron, UK teams won four NCAA championships and one National Invitation Tournament title back when the NIT was a tournament equal in prestige to the NCAA tournament. They appeared in 20 NCAA tournaments, had a whopping six NCAA Final Four appearances, won five Sugar Bowl tournament championships, captured 27 Southeastern Conference regular season titles, and won 13 SEC tournaments. Rupp's Kentucky teams also finished ranked #1 on six occasions in the final Associated Press college basketball poll and four times in the United Press International (Coaches) poll. Kentucky squads were also awarded the Helms National Championship a couple times. Rupp, love him or hate him brought Kentucky basketball to the mountaintop and we still love the view he left us with.



So a tradition was created, a real tradition of success, of winning at this particular game. On radios and grainy televisions throughout the state, folks huddled, listened, learned about the game. Armchair coaches of both sexes knew more about basketball than some actual coaches. Or so they thought, and I'd bargain some are right. Without sounding like some cranky Luddite who longs for how it used to be, I'll just say sports coverage was a tad different before cable TV and talk radio. That lack of access probably helped the mystique of the mighty basketball Wildcats. There's a ton of us still around who were so accustomed to the phrase "Hello everybody, this is Caywood Ledford" being a part of our lives that just typing it made me think of a bowl of brown beans and cornbread which was a regular

meal on game night at my mamaw's house.

Hey, when a polyester-haired talking suit on the sports broadcast throws around the cliché in these parts that people 'bleed blue' it ain't just a catch phrase, we do. It runs in the blood and gets passed from generation to generation. Thank you Mr. Ledford for narrating my life and the lives of

many others. There was a time when sports was much more personal than it is in this age of ESPN and shoe endorsements. Our media heroes hawked new Ford trucks while giving us local weather and the best place to buy work boots. We

steamroller this tradition can be. Either ride it or get crushed by it ... but don't drink then try to drive it.

So now Coach John Calipari is here and on paper, the most talented team that has stepped on the floor for many a moon. This year the team will top 2,000 wins—more than any other team in the country. That's a lot of pressure on a

new coach, on a new team and on an old, loyal fan base steeped in the lore of holding championship trophies and cutting nets down.

And how big is UK basketball when the state is suffering double-digit unemployment rates and two of the state's resources are coal and tobacco (a couple of the most chastised commodities going)?

Well, let's just say, we are looking for something to rally behind and take some sort of pride in. It's no fun being at the bottom of the lists on education, jobs and wealth while being at the top on lists like diabetes rates, obesity and infant mortality.

This damned basketball matters.

It matters being part of a positive national dialogue, and I hate to say it, but let's call a spade a spade, it matters to be thought of as winners. There are many who think it's trivial or we take it too seriously or the money and effort might be better spent on academics or digging out of the state's long and lengthy recession—I feel ya, I really do and I know there are things we want and things we need as a state. UK basketball's success, I think it's a need, not just a want. It matters, again, this damned basketball matters.

We are good, no wait, we are GREAT at basketball. We might have hit some speed bumps in the last few years, and it has sucked. Not being good, not being part of the chatter, always embroiled in talk of firings and hirings and hypotheticals. Not good for the faithful. You, outside of Kentucky, are going feel a little of that greatness over the next few months ... well, don't be surprised to see us dominating basketball championship discussions again, rolling with a swagger that wasn't lost, only tucked back in the closet waiting to be brought out Sunday-best style. See you, come March, I'll be the bald guy, dressed in something blue. ■

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listened, we bought and we knew Caywood would tell us the truth about the team, the truth we wanted and needed — a homer that never sounded like a homer and helped serve us that blue Kool-Aid that we still buy today. Winning was a tradition, yes, definitely but hearing about the winning was just as important, I didn't see a UK game until I made it to UK as a student, but I don't recall missing many on the radio. How many of us turned the TV down and listened to Caywood even though the radio delay and TV didn't sync up? Put your hands down, I see you.

I'm not gonna give some history class of all of UK hoops. Joe B. Hall won a championship. Pitino nearly a couple, Tubby got his. Billy G. Well, Billy G. found out what a