

Texas Western's 1966 title left lasting legacy

Watch the 1966 NCAA Championship game now and you'll probably wonder what all the fuss is about.

This is the most important college game ever played? It looks more like Princeton-Dartmouth on a Friday night in January.

Ten players in laughably short pants move slowly through 40 minutes of ordinary basketball. There's not much drama, very little passion, and, in 2001, you'll see more athletic talent at many high school games.

The NCAA title game had yet to morph into March Madness when Kentucky and Texas Western met that Saturday night, March 19, 1966, in the University of Maryland's Cole Field House. There was so little madness surrounding the contest, in fact, that its starting time was 10 p.m., it wasn't carried by a major network, and it was televised only on a tape-delayed basis in several American cities.

But examine the grainy film more closely. The crowd is white. So are the NCAA officials, the referees, the coaches, the cheerleaders and almost all the sportswriters on press row. High in the bleachers, Kentucky fans wave a Confederate flag as the Wildcats' five white players line up for the opening tap.

Then history steps into the picture.

Walking toward the red "M" at center court, in their orange uniforms and white Converse All-Stars, are the five starters for Texas Western. They are all black.

Until that moment, at the height of the civil-rights era, no major-college team had ever started five blacks in an NCAA championship game. In fact, until Texas Western coach Don Haskins did it earlier that season, no major-college team had ever started five blacks in ANY game.

For the first time that night, on the edge of the Mason-Dixon Line, a major American sports championship would be contested by one team that was all-white and another whose starters were entirely black.

"What a piece of history. If basketball ever took a turn, that was it," said Nolan Richardson, the Arkansas coach who played for Haskins at Texas Western.

Texas Western, an independent from remote El Paso, was little known outside the Southwest despite its 27-1 record and its No.3 ranking. Their 72-65 victory that night over No.1 Kentucky, coached by the legendary Adolph Rupp, stunned college basketball and upset conventional wisdom.

In 1966, American cultural and sporting mythology insisted at least one white starter was necessary for success. Black athletes, prevailing wisdom implied, needed the steadying hand of a white teammate. Otherwise, games would dissolve into chaos.

"There was a certain style of play whites expected from blacks," said Perry Wallace, who a year later at Vanderbilt became the first black basketball player in the Southeastern Conference. "'N***** ball' they used to call it. Whites then thought that if you put five blacks on the court at the same time, they would somehow revert to their native impulses."

Sportswriters who had never seen Texas Western play until that weekend and knew nothing about the team but its curious racial makeup helped sustain those racist myths.

"Rod Hundley, the former West Virginia and Lakers star, had the funny quote of the tournament when he was talking about Texas Western," wrote John W. Stewart in the Baltimore Sun that weekend. "'They can do everything with the basketball but sign it.'"

"The Miners, who don't worry much about defense but try to pour the ball through the hoop as much as possible, will present quite a challenge to Kentucky," wrote the Sun's James H. Jackson. "The running, gunning Texas quintet can do more things with a basketball than a monkey on a 50-foot jungle wire."

In fact, the opposite was true. Texas Western walked the ball up court, ran a rigidly patterned offense, and emphasized defense - - allowing just 62 points a game.

"We were more white-oriented than any of the other teams in the Final Four (Duke and Utah were the others)," said Texas Western guard Willie Worsley. "We played the most intelligent, the most boring, the most disciplined game of them all."

No.1-ranked Kentucky, meanwhile, was the run-and-gun team. Rupp's Runts, featuring future NBA coach Pat Riley, future ESPN broadcaster Larry Conley and Louie Dampier, were small, quick and athletic. And, like all of coach Adolph Rupp's teams, they ran at every opportunity.

That night, to the surprise of almost everyone, Texas Western's defense and superior rebounding stifled Kentucky. The Wildcats, whose only previous loss had come to Tennessee (on the same day Seattle beat Texas Western), shot just 38 percent.

But even as the jubilant Miners celebrated a new set of myths was emerging. Rupp's lingering bitterness helped paint the Miners as urban street thugs, quasi-professionals imported from Northern cities to win Haskins a championship.

Writing a decade later in his book, "Sports in America", James Michener characterized the game as "one of the most wretched (stories) in the history of American sports. He called the

Texas Western players "loose-jointed ragamuffins. Hopelessly outclassed (by Rupp's pristine Kentucky program)." That, again, was nearly opposite the reality.

Of Texas Western's seven black players -- the Miners also had four whites and an Hispanic, none of whom played that night -- four graduated. The other three came within a semester of their degrees and have not suffered because of it: David Lattin is an executive with a Houston liquor distributor. Orsten Artis became a detective sergeant in Gary, Ind., and Bobby Joe Hill was a senior buyer with El Paso Natural Gas Co.

Meanwhile, though it was never mentioned until decades later, by the mid-1970s, four of Kentucky's five starters, including Dampier and Riley, had not earned degrees.

The game began with a message. Informed by Haskins that Rupp had vowed five blacks would never beat his team, Texas Western center David Lattin had a point to prove.

On the Miners' second possession, he took a pass from Bobby Joe Hill and, as Haskins had suggested, slammed a forceful dunk over Kentucky's Riley. "(Lattin) said, 'Take that you white honky,'" recalled Riley. "It was a violent game. I don't mean there were any fights -- but they were desperate and they were committed and they were more motivated than we were."

The Miners nursed the lead, pulling ahead to stay when Hill converted consecutive steals from Kentucky's guards. Those two layups gave the Miners a 16-11 advantage. They never trailed again.

"(Rupp) jumped up and called timeout, (and) as they were coming off the court, he confronted his two guards about the steals," recalled Eddie Mullens, then Texas Western's sports-information director. "(He said) 'You stupid sons of b*****!' He just couldn't take it."

His only defeat in an NCAA title game haunted Rupp. "(He) carried the memory of that game to his grave," wrote his biographer, Russell Rice. Friends noted that even as he was dying with cancer in a Lexington hospital in 1977, the old coach lamented to visitors about the loss.

He always blamed the loss on a flu bug, on inept shooting, on the referees, sometimes embellishing his excuses with hints that Texas Western somehow had cheated by using ineligible players.

Haskins fumed at his counterpart's reaction. Later that year, when he and Rupp crossed paths at a sports banquet in Ohio, the younger coach nearly snapped. "I had been listening to all this damn crap out of him," said Haskins. "and it's a wonder I didn't say something to him about it. But I didn't."

It was the presence of Rupp, with his four national championships, his then-record 749 victories, and his history of foot-dragging on integration that lent the 1966 championship game much of its significance.

He and his all-white Kentucky program were not only the epitome of college basketball at the time, but the ideal foils for Haskins and Texas Western. It was as if history demanded that for change finally to occur, a great hero and a great villain must meet. Rupp and Haskins fit those roles perfectly.

In 1966, two years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, SEC athletics remained segregated. For several years Kentucky president John W. Oswald, realizing changing times and the school's border-state geography gave it a unique opportunity, had been pushing Rupp to recruit a black. According to longtime Kentucky assistant Harry Lancaster's autobiography, Rupp, after his first meeting with Oswald, told Lancaster, "Harry, that son of a b**** is ordering me to get some n***** in here. What am I going to do?"

Still, Rupp held out. His reputation was such that even those black players he did recruit -- like Kentuckians Butch Beard and Wes Unseld -- were reluctant to play for him.

It wasn't until December of 1970 that a Rupp team first dressed a black player, Tom Payne. Two years later, Payne had left, and Kentucky was all-white again. By then, even deep-South SEC schools like Auburn and Mississippi had several blacks on their teams.

Curiously, while Oswald had been prodding Rupp, Texas Western president Joseph Ray tried to move Haskins in the opposite direction. Ray suggested Haskins start at least one white player.

Haskins contends he doesn't recall the incident, but Ray spoke of their meeting in an interview for the oral-history project at Texas Western, now renamed the University of Texas at El Paso. Whether it happened or not, five blacks continued to start for the Miners.

A pool-shooting hustler from Enid, Okla., Haskins was a pragmatist on racial matters. While blacks couldn't play at most Southern and Southwestern schools in the mid-1960s, Haskins welcomed them at Texas Western, recruiting them from New York City, Detroit and Gary, Ind.

"The fact that he was doing something historic by playing five blacks, that probably never crossed Don's mind," said his assistant, Moe Iba. "Hell, he'd have played five kids from Mars if they were his best five players."

In the years immediately after Texas Western's title, the integration of college sports took a great leap forward. Between 1966 and 1985, the average number of blacks on college teams jumped from 2.9 to 5.7.

At Northern colleges, where the unwritten rule for coaches had been, "Two blacks at home. Three on the road. And four when behind", things changed quickly.

Blacks now were recruited as reserves as well as starters. Athletes who had been directed to small black schools now were being lured to major state universities.

The bigger change, of course, came in the South. In the 1966-67 season, every Southern conference, even the SEC, had integrated basketball teams. "It was quite clear after March 1966 that Southern basketball teams would have to change or become increasingly noncompetitive nationally," wrote historian Charles Martin.

Haskins coached until 1999, never reaching another Final Four. In the last of Rupp's 1,066 games at Kentucky, in March of 1972, his team lost to Florida State. Kentucky was all-white again. Florida State started five blacks.

"No one will remember him without remembering us," said Texas Western's Harry Flournoy. "And I guess there is a certain justice to that."