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## The Baron and the Bear

David Kingsley Snell

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THE  
BARON  
& THE  
BEAR

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THE

Rupp's Runts,  
Haskins's Miners,  
and the Season  
That Changed  
Basketball Forever

BARON

DAVID KINGSLEY SNELL

& THE

Foreword by Nolan Richardson

BEAR

*University of Nebraska Press · Lincoln and London*

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For Mary Lou

In memory of the point guards:

Bobby Joe Hill

Tommy Kron



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## FOREWORD

I can never think about the 1966 NCAA Championship without remembering that Kentucky star Pat Riley later called the game “the Emancipation Proclamation of college basketball.” That victory shook the game to its very foundation. And that’s what I think *The Baron and the Bear* does, too. Author David Kingsley Snell challenges conventional wisdom about Coaches Don Haskins and Adolph Rupp. And the book puts the reader back into the climate of a racially divided 1960s America. This story is a timely reminder of past prejudices and captures the feel and flavor of two historically significant teams and their Hall of Fame coaches.

In the fifty years since mighty Kentucky, with its all-white team, was beaten by upstart Texas Western’s all-African American lineup, both coaches have undergone radical makeovers in the media. First, in the immediate aftermath of the game, Haskins received bundles of crude hate mail from racists who believed his all-black lineup had somehow tainted college sports.

In 1968 *Sports Illustrated* accused the University of Texas at El Paso (which by then had changed its name from Texas Western) of abusing their minority students, particularly their athletes, who were, according to the article, discarded once their eligibility was over. The accusation wasn’t true—only two of the twelve players on that year’s team failed to graduate, and both of them went on to highly successful careers.

By then Haskins was already getting mail from African American ministers and community leaders, charging him with exploitation. Rival coaches used the *Sports Illustrated* article to muck up the recruiting advantage Haskins should have reaped from his NCAA Championship.

As the anniversary of that championship season passed—twenty,

twenty-five, thirty years—what was considered true about the 1966 game and Coaches Haskins and Rupp shifted, took on other perspectives. For a while it was a straightforward story of David and Goliath. Rupp would be reviled as a racist, Haskins seen as the hero of racial progress.

In 2005 Dan Wetzel teamed up with Coach Haskins to write his autobiography, *Glory Road*, a book that captured the gruff coach's voice, giving him the important space to tell his life story. But there was a Hollywood movie of the same name that came out that year, and the film overshadowed the book. The problem was that the film got so many important points wrong, and once again history got rewritten. For one thing, Haskins won the championship in his fifth year, not his first. For another, there were already two black players on the Texas Western team before Haskins set foot on campus. One of them even averaged twenty points a game before Haskins turned him into a defensive stopper. Within two years Haskins had cut this lefty's scoring average in half. The former high-point man was me.

I hated Haskins at first. He demanded that I stop shooting so much and start playing the defense I was capable of. He had me so frustrated mentally that even my free-throw percentage dipped. Over the years, as I began my own coaching career, I came to understand Don Haskins in a deeper way. I appreciated how stubborn and demanding he had been with us. By the time I was coaching at the University of Arkansas, I found myself being just as hard on my Razorbacks as he had been on his Miners. Like Haskins, I never apologized for being so strict.

While my first coaching job at an El Paso high school gave me a ring-side seat for the Miners' championship seasons, much of what I know about Coach Rupp is second or thirdhand and until now remained a mystery. In following Rupp's undersize team through the season, *The Baron and the Bear* gives us a behind-the-scenes picture of the man who was, at that time, the winningest coach in the history of college basketball.

Over the years so many people got the story wrong. As *The Baron and the Bear* makes clear, Haskins was an accidental hero, which to me is a more interesting story. He didn't set out to make a statement; he was trying to recruit—and then play—the best players he could find. He indirectly challenged all college coaches to play the best players avail-

able, regardless of race. And slowly, that's what began to happen. Once, when I congratulated him for his role in changing the game of basketball, he responded, "I'm glad everybody feels that way, but I'm just an old country boy who wanted to coach, and it just so happened that things worked out for all of us."

Basketball fans will find the similarities between the Rupp and Haskins coaching styles detailed in this book fascinating. Yet their differences are equally striking: Whereas Haskins's emphasis was on defense taught through mind-numbing repetition, Rupp concentrated on offense, going over and over the same play. Haskins, just thirty-six, still liked recruiting; Rupp did not.

While many of us assumed that Adolph Rupp staunchly defended the segregationist policies of the Southeastern Conference, Snell paints a very different picture of a coach who was aloof from the recruiting process and tried ineptly to recruit a player of transcendent ability to be his Jackie Robinson, to break the SEC color barrier.

You might not agree with all of David Snell's conclusions in this captivating book. To be perfectly frank, when my own biography, *Forty Minutes of Hell*, came out in 2010, hell, I didn't like everything in that book, either. But we need to disrupt the status quo and challenge all of our assumptions. Like our full-court press at Arkansas, this book will rattle you, make you sweat, and always keep your attention.

I've come to understand that the world is a complicated place, and I'm suspicious anytime all of the media agree on some hot-button issue. I've felt that way when our country has gone to war, and I felt that way when I got fired from the University of Arkansas in 2002. Now? More than a decade has passed, and I've come to think of even that incident differently. For one thing, I think that history is on my side, and I hope that my legacy as a pioneering African American coach will stand the test of time. Yet like many people, I continue to think about the debt that I owe to that 1966 game.

Of course, there wasn't a single black coach at a major American college at the time my career began in the 1960s. Haskins was my only role model, one of the few college coaches I knew personally, although I had heard about stymied legends such as Clarence "Big House" Gaines

and John McClendon. The fact that there are now a number of African American coaches in college basketball is another Don Haskins legacy. The openings he helped create for the black players slowly impacted the coaching profession. History demanded that John Thompson, John Chaney, and I become groundbreaking pioneers of racial progress, to open the door for the next generation of coaches of color.

I've heard people say that history is written by the winners, and that is often true. But the losers often have an interesting tale to tell. And the fact that one of the nation's best basketball programs of all time might be best known for a loss some fifty years ago? That's a fascinating start right there. What really unfolded in Lexington in the mid-1960s? Was Adolph Rupp as complex as Don Haskins? How were they different? How were they alike? How has history changed the way we should view Rupp and his Wildcats? That's got to be a great story.

I was raised by my grandmother, whom everyone called "Ol' Mama." She used to say if you wanted to change the world, you had to wait for a door to open a crack—and then kick that door down. That's the way I think about *The Baron and the Bear*. It's a good, strong kick to a door that needed kicking.

NOLAN RICHARDSON

THE  
BARON  
& THE  
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## Prologue

It happens every year. Two college basketball teams catch lightning in a bottle. Sometimes they seem to have perfect chemistry from the beginning. Sometimes there is a slow build as a team gradually comes together at just the right moment. Either way, there are always two teams that end up winning game after game down the stretch to reach the Big Dance, the Final Four, and the game for the NCAA Championship.

This is the story of two very different basketball teams. Each entered the season with low expectations and caught the lightning from opening tip-off. It is the story of Adolph Rupp (the Baron of the Bluegrass) and Don Haskins (the Bear), two intensely passionate coaches who used remarkably similar techniques to lead their teams through the ups and downs of a college basketball season. And, finally, it is the story of a history-bending game that has come to be recognized as a milestone in America's civil rights movement.

In the 1966 NCAA Championship game, an all-white University of Kentucky team was beaten by a team from Texas Western College (now UTEP) that played only African Americans. It had never happened before. It would never happen again. By beating mighty Kentucky, tiny Texas Western helped to destroy invidious stereotypes about black athletes and open the door to their greater participation in colleges and universities across the country. It also sounded the death knell for whites-only athletics, long considered essential to maintaining the southern way of life.

Looking back through the hazy gauze of history, it is easy to think of the story in stereotypic terms. There is the villain, Kentucky coach Adolph Rupp, standing astride college basketball, determined to protect the integrity of the White Man's Game, yelling *Stop!* There is the

hero, Coach Don Haskins, marching through the pages of history arm in arm with Rosa Parks, Thurgood Marshall, and Martin Luther King Jr., determined to right the wrongs visited upon African Americans since the first slave ships arrived in the New World. The reality of the season is very different, the truth about Rupp and Haskins more nuanced than has ever been told. With race in the news more than at anytime since the 1960s, the story is a timely reminder of past prejudices and what some have called “the Emancipation Proclamation of college basketball.”

To fully appreciate the importance of the 1965–66 college season and the championship game that followed, it is important to understand the context. The game was played in the middle of a decade when long-dormant seeds of racial unrest were finally coming to the surface. There were the lunch-counter sit-in at a Woolworth’s store in Greensboro, North Carolina (1960); the vicious attacks on the Freedom Riders in Anniston, Alabama (1961); the bombing that killed four young girls at Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church (1963); the murder of three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi (1964); and Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama (1965).

The 1966 NCAA Championship game was played in Cole Field House on the campus of the University of Maryland, barely seventeen miles from the Lincoln Memorial, where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech just three years earlier. But despite passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of ’65, there was a psychic distance yet to be traveled before college athletics would be ready to sit down at Dr. King’s “table of brotherhood.”

The laws had changed, but college basketball teams in the North still limited their recruitment of black players and adhered to an unwritten rule limiting their participation: *two at home, three on the road, and four when you’re behind*. The laws had changed, but on southern campuses (including the University of Kentucky) athletics continued to be a whites-only activity. The laws had changed, but there was still a gentlemen’s agreement that northern schools were expected to leave black players behind when they journeyed into the Deep South. The laws had changed, but many still believed that permitting African Americans to participate as equals in athletic competition would lead inexorably to a

sense of equality in their daily lives and irrevocably destroy a *precious southern heritage*.

Dr. King's "fierce urgency of now" was still being met with determined resistance. The Ku Klux Klan was morphing into White Citizens' Councils, but states from Louisiana to Mississippi to Alabama and Georgia, the backbone of Kentucky's Southeastern Conference, were still electing segregationist governors. There was "Stand Tall for Paul" Johnson, who admonished his supporters to vote against those who would change Mississippi's "way of life." There was Lester Maddox, whose refusal to serve black customers in his Atlanta restaurant acted as a springboard to the Georgia governor's mansion. There was George Wallace, elected governor of Alabama on the slogan "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever."

While Kentucky's governor Edward "Ned" Breathitt Jr. had managed to pass the first civil rights law in any state south of Ohio, the basketball team of the state's flagship university remained all white. Adolph Rupp had tried, ineptly at times, to recruit his Jackie Robinson. He was seeking a player of transcendent ability to break the SEC color barrier, as Robinson had in Major League Baseball. To that end Rupp sought the advice of Branch Rickey, the general manager who brought Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.

Although Rupp was widely recognized as the number-one coach in the history of college basketball, the last of his four national championships was eight years earlier, and even his most ardent supporters were starting to wonder if the game had passed him by. Over the years the preeminence of the Kentucky basketball program allowed Rupp to choose from the top high school players in the country rather than actively recruit. Now he had four returning starters but no dominant big man. In a game trending to behemoths, his tallest starter was only six feet five, earning his team the nickname Rupp's Runts.

Texas Western College already had African Americans on its basketball team when Coach Don Haskins took over the program in 1961. With a minuscule budget compared to Kentucky's, he didn't set out to make a statement or take a stand. He recruited the best players he could find, black or white, who could help him win basketball games. By the cham-

pionship season seven of the twelve players on the team were African Americans. Most of them had been ignored by other schools.

Although their approach to the game was remarkably similar, the life experiences of the two coaches had been totally different. While Rupp was racking up the last of his national championships in 1958, Haskins was coaching both boys' and girls' teams in a small Texas high school and driving a school bus to make ends meet.

At season's end it was a classic David and Goliath story with a biblical outcome. Nolan Richardson, who played for Haskins two years before the championship season and went on to a Hall of Fame coaching career, said, "If ever there was a turning point in basketball, this was it." Conventional wisdom that black players lacked the discipline to win without a white player to lead them fell away. Northern schools began to abandon unwritten quotas limiting the number of African Americans on the floor at one time. And southern schools, where athletics had always been a whites-only activity, began a gradual move toward integration.

Before all that there were two improbable teams and two driven coaches determined to beat the odds and their opponents. Rupp was sixty-four, in the twilight of his Hall of Fame career. Haskins was thirty-six, with little reason to believe that he, too, would one day share that honor. Despite their difference in age and pedigree, the two men were similar in many ways. Both coached with almost fanatical intensity. Both insisted on absolute silence in their practices. And, because of the way the season ended, both coaches and their teams are forever linked in popular memory. This, then, is their story.

# 1

## A Drop of Water

Adolph Rupp looked down at the handsome watch he'd just been given and shook his head. He didn't need another watch. What he needed almost more than life itself was a fifth national championship. An hour ago that still seemed possible. That was before the Texas Western Miners pulled off what came to be known as the biggest upset in the history of college basketball. Now, as the team bus made its way through the flickering lights of late-night traffic from Cole Field House on the campus of the University of Maryland to their hotel in Silver Spring, Rupp and his team were in a daze.

Later, Adolph would say in an interview, "They beat us fair and square." What he said now, in the quiet of the bus, was "Harry, this looks like a nice watch, but I'm not going to wear the damn thing because every time I'd wear it, I'd be thinking about this fucking game."

Everyone on the bus that night—players, coaches, and one student manager—had been given identical watches as mementos of their Final Four experience. Gold, waterproof, shock-resistant Bulova watches, each with the inscription *NCAA Basketball Finalist 1966*. While the watch represented failure to Rupp, for his team it was a reminder of the Rupp's Runts season and that day in late November when the prospects of a successful season seemed bleak.

"MANAGER!"

Coach Rupp was standing in a low crouch, staring at the center circle.

"GET ME A GODDAMN TOWEL," he growled, in a voice that was part southern and part Kansas twang.

"THERE'S A GODDAMN DROP OF WATER ON THE FLOOR."

A student manager dropped to his knees and toweled up the offending drop.

“Must be a leak in the goddamn ceiling,” Rupp said, looking skyward. “Cause none of these sonsabitches are playing hard enough to work up any kind of a sweat.”

Practice had been lethargic. The White Shirt Team, supposedly Rupp’s best five, was moving up and down the floor in a funk, like zombies in a slow-motion movie. It was as if they were already drowsy from tomorrow’s turkey dinner. The Blue Team—substitutes in Rupp’s limited rotation—wasn’t much better. Everybody was looking forward to the traditional Thanksgiving break. It didn’t happen.

On the sideline Coach Rupp was fuming the way he always did when practices were sluggish. With his freshly starched khaki shirt and pants and black high-top Converse All-Star basketball shoes, balding with a hook nose and a potbelly spread that strained his belt and blood pressure, he could have passed for one of the janitors anywhere else. This wasn’t anywhere else. This was Memorial Coliseum, on the campus of the University of Kentucky. *Here* he was the Man, the indefatigable, infallible pope of the state’s true religion. Idealized in Kentucky, Adolph Frederick Rupp was known wherever the game was played as the winningest coach since James Naismith hung a peach basket in that Massachusetts YMCA.

“All right, hold it!” he called out, bringing things to a halt.

That started a routine his players knew very well. Coach walked across the floor—his belly bouncing along, a scowl on his face—to check the stats, the way he always did. The players lined up to shoot free throws, the way they always did. The student managers scrambled to make sure everyone had a ball, the way they always did. That was when the normal routine of the closely choreographed Rupp practice veered into a different dimension. Digging deep into his formidable arsenal of scatological invective, Coach Rupp called that single drop of water every name in the book. “A goddamn drop of water. Shit, damn sonofabitchin’ water. Where the hell did it come from? Jesus H. Christ, a fucking drop of water right here in the middle of the coliseum. Goddamn it all to hell.”

Words used on the water were reused with added venom on this team

of miscreants who'd been weighed in Adolph's inestimable balance and found wanting, worthy of condemnation by God, country, and, most especially, the Big Blue Nation, Kentucky's fan base that was the biggest and most loyal in the country.

For the past several years there had been talk that Adolph Rupp was losing his touch. The headline in one Kentucky paper put it bluntly: "One SEC Title in Past Seven Years! A Clue to Cage Decline at Kentucky." Rupp, they wrote, was a "basketball anachronism" and suggested that he confine his animal interest to livestock (he bred prize Hereford cattle) rather than Wildcats. Since this was essentially the same team that struggled through the previous season with a mediocre 15-10 record, there was cause for concern.

All across the SEC, teams like Georgia, Tennessee, and Vanderbilt had twin-tower forwards and sky-scraping centers. Rupp had Thad Jaracz (rhymes with "Harris"), a six-foot-five sophomore about to get his first varsity playing time as the team's center. Larry Conley and Pat Riley were six feet three, Tommy Kron six feet five, Louie Dampier six feet even. It was beginning to seem possible this could be the first losing team since Rupp arrived at the University of Kentucky from Illinois's Freeport High School in 1930. Coach Rupp didn't think so. "You're going to read a lot of stories about how you're not going to be very good," he told the team in an uncharacteristic courtside homily on the first day of practice. "Don't believe that. You're going to be very good. I'm going to get things out of you that you don't know you have in you."

From the start Rupp upped the ante with first-ever double practices on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They were practicing seven days a week, but, somehow, it just wasn't working. Since October 15 good practices following bad ones must have had Rupp feeling like Sisyphus, condemned to spend eternity pushing a boulder up the mountain only to have it fall back of its own weight.

Now he looked at the stat sheet. "You sonsabitches ever play this game before? Dampier: turnover. Kron: turnover. Goddamn it, Jaracz, think you could go get a rebound? Just one? Hell, my grandma can block out better than that." Ripping the damning evidence into tiny pieces, he threw it over his shoulder and stomped back across the floor, giving

the now dry spot in the center circle another glare and a few more expletives. “All right, let’s go.”

Over his thirty-six years as Kentucky’s coach there had been countless times when a Rupp Rant worked its magic. Not this time. This time the scrimmage was getting uglier by the minute. Rupp’s face was flushed, and his hands were balled up into tight fists, red on the outside, white in his blood-starved palms.

On the floor the White Team was stuck in the mud, while the Blue Team, rising to the occasion, looked like All-Americans on a romp. Their defense was stifling, their offense whirring along like a finely tuned instrument. It went on that way for five, ten, fifteen minutes, with the coach becoming increasingly agitated. Suddenly, there was a loud crash, and everybody turned toward the sound. Coach Rupp had picked up the front row of seats—three folding chairs with padded seats and backs—and hurled them into the stands.

“None of you sonsabitches are getting any goddamn turkey tomorrow.” He paused for the reaction he knew wouldn’t come. In a Rupp practice players didn’t talk. Ever. “Thanksgiving be damned, you’re staying right here on campus, running your asses off until you learn to play this fucking game.”

While Rupp was being hyperbolic, on some level everybody in the gym that day understood that he was dramatizing an essential truth: his players weren’t fully committed to the level of effort required for them to become the team he envisioned. Rupp had his virtuosos. He had Louis Dampier and Pat Riley, who were big scorers. He had Tommy Kron, whose height made him a matchup nightmare for opposing guards. He had Thad Jaracz, who was proving himself capable of running the court and pounding the boards. And he had Larry Conley, one of the best passers of his era. There was the potential for beautiful music, but heading into that Thanksgiving weekend it was, to quote the biblical definition of *faith*, “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.”