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# Culture and the Sweet 16 Boys Basketball Tournament

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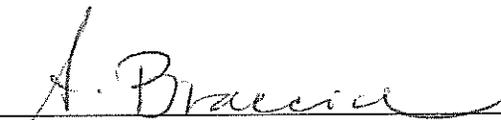
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BENTHIC MACROINVERTEBRATE COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO A HEADWATER  
VALLEY RESTORATION AT SLABCAMP CREEK, ROWAN CO., KENTUCKY

By

Nicholas P. Revetta

Thesis Approved:

  
Chair, Advisory Committee

  
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CULTURE AND THE SWEET 16 BOYS BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Mike Sayre, my dad.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my wife, Kelly, my daughter, Kennedy, and my son, Reid, for putting up with me during this project. Additionally, I would like thank my mom, dad, grandmother, and grandfather, Dwight Peavler. Helping with inspiration, I would like to thank everyone in my Sweet 16 family, including Jacob Koch, Scott Robertson, Dave and Duncan Cavanah. Lastly, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to Dr. Thomas Appleton, my thesis advisor, for guiding me through this process and being so helpful and fun to talk with, Dr. Chris Taylor, the ECU department chair, personal advisor to me during my entire graduate school tenure, and Dr. Brad Wood, committee member and the professor who taught me to think about culture and sports as a viable research option.

## ABSTRACT

This research meant to investigate the cultural importance of the annual Kentucky Boy's High School Basketball Championship Tournament, known simply as the Sweet 16. For over ninety years, sixteen teams from around the state have competed for a single basketball championship, and throughout these many decades interesting cultural changes have occurred. The Sweet 16, scheduled in the middle of each March, acts as a meeting place for the whole state, as various cultural regions from around the Commonwealth gather to worship at the alter of basketball. Though the basketball played in the tournament is not part of the research, it colors the background of the sources and is used as the organizing purpose of the paper.

Within the chapters of this thesis, the issues of community, the over-emphasis of basketball, race, urban versus rural cultural clashes, and the sub-culture of the Sweet 16 attendees are considered in some length. Culturally significant for over seventy-five years, the Sweet 16 acts as a mirror into the soul of Kentucky and illuminates the best and worst of its citizens. Racial progress and tolerance is met with community over-indulgence and fear. Little research has been attempted in this field. Though many authors have looked at individual basketball teams, and plenty has been written on the tournament's glorious basketball history, this work means to consider what the tournament says about Kentuckians, its people.

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## Introduction

*“Every year you have a regularly scheduled meeting of the State of Kentucky and it all centers around basketball.” – Scotty Davenport, Coach of the ’88 Ballard Bruins<sup>1</sup>*

Slowly leaning back into his chair, the years of wear and tear apparent on his eighty- year- old body, he deposits a liberal portion of dip behind his lip and pours himself another helping of bourbon. Scanning the room, mentally taking note that several generations of basketball lovers have generously lent him their fleeting attention, he spouts off, “I don’t care what y’all say. I’ve never seen anybody score, rebound, and dominate a tournament like Kelly Coleman.” The older men nod in general agreement as his son, himself influenced by his own experiences and bourbon, adds that boys have played in this tournament over the decades, but only one *man* has played and his name is Wes Unseld. At this point, the room breaks down into a gloriously chaotic argument filled with stories (many have become exaggerated) of teams, players, statistics, and regional bias, and inevitably all in the room will reach for their Sweet 16 program to settle disputes. The youngest generation sits listening, again, as these arguments tend to repeat themselves every mid-March. With each passing year, another layer is added to the legacy and more history is made to tell, re-tell, and eventually fabricate. So goes the conversations of countless hotel rooms, dens, bars, and really any place that fans of the Kentucky Boys Basketball Tournament, known as the Sweet 16, have gathered over the years.

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<sup>1</sup> Scotty Davenport Interview, July 25, 2013, Louisville, KY.

This tournament has stood as a vital cultural component in the fabric of the commonwealth of Kentucky. Beginning in 1918, in Danville, Kentucky, and after one year there moving to Lexington, the Sweet 16 has increased in popularity over the decades. Eventually, the tournament transferred to Louisville for many years, but recently has been moved back to Lexington, to be played at the famed Rupp Arena. The Sweet 16 itself has historically maintained a similar format, as sixteen teams from regions all around the commonwealth meet in a tournament to pronounce the one and only state champion. The state is divided into sixteen regions, themselves divided into four districts. Moving from west to east, with the far western portions of the state representing the first region and the farthest east falling into the sixteenth, each region can only have one winner. Louisville is home to both the sixth and seventh regions, while Lexington and the surrounding counties make up the eleventh. Because of this relatively consistent geographical format of the Sweet 16, cultural and historical attributes have become associated with the regions themselves. This spills over into issues of race, religion, political affiliation, and other cultural phenomena. Therefore, for a historian the Sweet 16 presents a unique opportunity to study the cultural DNA of a geographically diverse state.

For decades fewer and fewer states have celebrated a single state champion in basketball. Increasingly, states have moved to a class system, dividing participants into categories, or classes, depending upon the size of the school. Some have even added divisions between public and private schools. While this class system has allowed for more schools to become competitive among their peers, it has also yielded an unintended consequence. Cultural diversity gets lost because small, rural schools stop playing larger,

urban teams. Moreover, private schools cease playing public schools; young athletes are stripped of the opportunity to compete against a variety of students from an assortment of cultural regions. Fortunately, the Kentucky High School Basketball Tournament has held onto its roots, and it now stands as the only state with a single champion.

Geographically, Kentucky rests between the North and South, and during the early years of the republic even represented the West from a cultural perspective. As a crossroads of America, Kentucky has experienced a unique and assorted range of cultural events and movements that few other states can claim. Welcoming migrants moving west after the Revolutionary War, the commonwealth was founded by tough, independent minds. Home to the first university west of the Allegheny Mountains, Kentucky's early cultural roots were of western stock. However, over the decades as the nation's population stretched farther and farther west, Kentucky lay in the middle of another cultural battle. A slave state loyal to the Union, Kentucky's role as a border state during the Civil War planted seeds of racial tension that would continue to play out for decades to come.<sup>2</sup> Jim Crow segregation dominated the cultural and social structure of the state from the 1890s until the Civil Rights Movement began to dismantle this fading institution. The state itself hosts a mixed group of people, often loyal to localities and the cultural traditions associated with those regions. Outsiders often mistake Kentucky as a single entity, culturally homogeneous throughout its political borders. This perspective fails to capture the cultural diversity of the state.

As a river town, Louisville experienced a flowering culture much different from other parts of the state. The most diverse city in Kentucky, Louisville boasts large

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<sup>2</sup> Luther Adams, *Way Up North In Louisville: African American Migration in the Urban South, 1930-70* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1-15.

populations of different races and religions. Though today Louisville/Jefferson County makes up only 17.1 percent of Kentucky's population, it is home to over 45 percent of Kentucky's African Americans.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, along with northern Kentucky near Cincinnati, a large majority of the state's non-Protestant religions reside in Louisville. Each part of the state clings to regional and cultural roots that manifest themselves in varying ways. Eastern Kentucky and the Appalachian Mountains have developed a unique culture. Often isolated geographically, Eastern Kentuckians have forged proud traditions that often share little in common with Louisvillians. Likewise, counties from the far western end of the state have cultures that differ considerably from Louisville and Appalachian counties.

However disparate Kentucky's local cultures might seem, once per year the state comes together to celebrate a common heritage. The Sweet 16 has served as a unique cultural experience since 1918. What it means to the communities and schools, the players, and the fans may differ; however, it functions as a cultural event that unifies communities and creates opportunities for participants and fans.

Historians have failed to consider the cultural importance of the tournament in the macro sense. Several have written works concerning themselves with specific locations, players, teams, or even coaches. Unfortunately, the great majority of these works have focused on the basketball itself. While this makes for compelling reading, we learn little about the state as a whole and its cultural evolution in general. These works, though highly readable and important to micro specific locations, generally ignore issues of race,

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<sup>3</sup> State & County Quick-facts. Income, Race, Education Statistics. US Department of Commerce: US Census Bureau. Last modified December 17, 2013. Accessed January 1, 2014. [www.quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states](http://www.quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states)

community organization (in the macro), anti-urban manifestations, dangerous hero worship, and the lasting impact of the Sweet 16 on those who participate.

Marianne Walker's book *The Graves County Boys* looks at the 1952 Cuba Cubs team from far western Kentucky and does a fine job weaving the narrative of those participants and fans. She allows the reader to get into the daily lives of those living and breathing Cuba Cubs basketball. However, Walker's analysis stays at the story-telling level. She chooses to focus on the lives of the individual players and coach.<sup>4</sup> This is similar to Gary West's look at King Kelly Coleman, perhaps the most fabled participant of the Sweet 16. In his work *King Kelly Coleman*, West takes a glimpse at one person's movement through life and basketball.<sup>5</sup> Both West and Walker focus on players and teams that participated before integration of the Sweet 16 and thus do not have the opportunity to examine deeper cultural issues relative to a macro perspective. Moreover, Keith O'Brien's recent *Outside Shot* tracks the Scott County Cardinals as they attempt to reach the Sweet 16. Though it considers the life of Scott County coach Billy Hicks, and the struggles of his childhood in rural Kentucky, the main thrust of the book is more about the day-to-day grind of a Kentucky high school power, rather than an analysis of the cultural impact of the Sweet 16.<sup>6</sup>

This work uses the Sweet 16 as a mirror or barometer for the state's cultural evolution through the issues of race, community cohesion, urban versus rural diversity, and hero worship. Basketball remains a backdrop of the research, the galvanizing

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<sup>4</sup> Marianne Walker, *The Graves County Boys: A Tale of Kentucky Basketball, Perseverance, and the Unlikely Championship of the Cuba Cubs* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 1-10.

<sup>5</sup> Gary West, *King Kelly Coleman: Kentucky's Greatest Basketball Legend* (Sikeston, MO: Acclaim Press, 2005), 1-15.

<sup>6</sup> Keith O'Brien. *Outside Shot: Big Dreams, Hard Times, and One County's Quest for Basketball Greatness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 1-12.

principle that drives the state's cultural obsession with young men shooting a leather ball through an iron hoop. Investigating the cultural importance of the Sweet 16 tells us more about the state as a people than about the basketball that is played over a five-day tournament. Therefore, the works that come before this, such as West's and Walker's, constitute a valuable foundation that speaks to the cultural importance of the game and tournament itself; however, the research presented here offers a fresh lens through which to analyze a few of the state's cultural and social issues. From the perspective of the historian, the Sweet 16's consistency permits a more nuanced analysis. Holding the tournament as a constant provides for a cleaner examination, as changing cultural forces involved in the tournament can be viewed against a relatively stable event. Clearly, the tournament format and venues have changed in small ways, but not compared to other states. Therefore, the historian's conclusions relative to cultural phenomena should prove more reliable, particularly among the cultural regions of the state. Observers can witness cultural changes against the backdrop of a single, annual, five-day event that draws together multiple cultural regions for a unique analysis.

Focusing almost exclusively on primary evidence from the early 1950s through the mid-1990s, this research is informed by interviews with seventeen individuals who share a love of and long history with the Sweet 16. They include former players, both stars and role players. Former and current coaches were interviewed; some have reached the Sweet 16 only a few times, while others guided one or more teams to state championships. The current commissioner of the Kentucky High School Athletic Association (KHSAA) was interviewed, as were several regular attendees, each of whom possessed more than five decades of Sweet 16 fan experience. Finally, the Hall of Fame

journalist Billy Reed lent his personal insights. Multiple articles from seven different news outlets were used, including the Lexington *Herald-Leader* and the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, the paper of record in Kentucky for more than six decades.

Additionally, five regional or local weekly papers were chosen as a means to examine how smaller localities recorded the tide of their local team and the community support around which it was galvanized. Moreover, government and research data were mined as a way to connect community issues with such larger themes as race, income, and education.

The voices and evidence were selected with diversity of opinion in mind, though it must be admitted that limitations are present. While African American voices and opinions are heard, more work needs to be done with this important minority group that has played a critical role in the state and tournament alike. Furthermore, the geographic representation could be more complete. Voices, data, articles, and opinions from varying parts of the state create a stronger thesis. Evidence from Eastern Kentucky, Louisville, Lexington, Central Kentucky, and one from Western Kentucky have made its way into the analysis. Few Northern Kentucky voices appear, and Western Kentucky residents are not vigorously represented. Yet, the consistency among the interviewees and community voices from rural areas of the state found here lend credence to the likelihood that those areas of the state experienced similar cultural phenomena.

Though the huge bulk of the evidence used in this analysis concentrated on the forty-five-year period from about 1950 until 1994, the conclusions relative to culture and community did not stop after the 1994 season. Yet, to effectively analyze the historical reliability of the evidence, prudence dictated that enough time pass to form dependable

conclusions. However, the following analysis cannot ignore the ongoing cultural importance of the Sweet 16, and one would be a mistaken to conclude that the twenty-year time period represents a decline in the cultural relevance of the tournament.

After examining the evidence, analyzing the data, reading the opinions of the community, hearing the voices of past participants, and exploring the relevant secondary sources, one must conclude that the Sweet 16 basketball tournament represents the possibilities and limitations of Kentucky's people, highlights its racial progress *and* its fear of diversity, joyfully glues local communities together even in the face of economic depression, breaks down crushing stereotypes, both racial and cultural, and creates an environment conducive to unhealthy hero worship. The following chapters rely on the stories and experiences of those who have lived the history of a unique Kentucky institution, the Sweet 16.

## Chapter 1

### Community

*“It’s a rallying point.”* - Julian Tackett<sup>7</sup>

The cultural regions that comprise the commonwealth of Kentucky characterize a diversity of political perspectives, racial outlooks, religious affiliations, and social stratifications. However, a defining characteristic threading them together is cultural pride manifested in love of community. Though many regions of the state have suffered and continue to suffer from economic stagnation, over the years it has been basketball success that has given brief, though vital, periods of respite. Many basketball fans have sought solace from their troubles in their reverence for the University of Kentucky or the University of Louisville. Yet for others, those universities and the students who attend do not embody their way of life or cultural values. Hometown pride and glory manifests itself more fervently with geographic proximity. Not everyone goes to college, but most have shared in high school experiences, times of their lives that symbolize promise and hope. Thus, fans around the state, regardless of locality or race, have found that the success of local basketball teams represents something larger. Earning a spot at the Sweet 16 galvanizes local communities, and for those few regions lucky enough to attain high school basketball victory, the community outpouring has proven to be dramatic, endearing, and at times overblown.

Interestingly, community outpouring and galvanizing spreads across multiple cultural variables and eras. Whether private or public, rural or urban, wealthy or poor,

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<sup>7</sup> Julian Tackett, Interview, September 19, 2013, Lexington, KY.

communities celebrate the success of their boys at the Sweet 16. Additionally, there is consistency over the decades. For over sixty years localities have embraced Sweet 16 glory as a defining aspect of community pride. Moreover, these cultural regions also share a common history of overemphasizing the importance of the success. Here, the evidence illustrates that economically depressed regions are more likely to overindulge in the importance of Sweet 16 glory. However, regardless of economic status, rural and urban communities alike have used high school basketball as an inspiration for community organization.

In 1971, the Anderson County Bearcats reached the finals of the Sweet 16, carried along the way by their All-American guard, and University of Kentucky star recruit, Jimmy Dan Connor. Leading up to the tournament, the people of Lawrenceburg cared deeply for their team and its success. For example, the *Anderson News*, the weekly paper published in Lawrenceburg, had *twenty* advertisements congratulating the team in the March 18<sup>th</sup> edition alone.<sup>8</sup> Even before the team's tournament success, the paper boasted that "they were plenty good to have made the 'Sweet 16.'"<sup>9</sup> According to Dave Ruggles, a starter on the team and the leading scorer in the finals against Louisville Male, "we sold out everywhere we went," and added, "fire marshals were called." "We would have more people come to watch us on the road games than (there were) home town fans," he continued.<sup>10</sup> Some even professed a higher power intervening, praying for team success. Discussing the team statistician's love for the team, the *Anderson News* explained, "It isn't that she doesn't have confidence in the team or coaches, heaven forbid, she just about worships them all, it's just that she has great faith in Him and believes that if things

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<sup>8</sup> *Anderson News*, March 18, 1971.

<sup>9</sup> Ezra Sparrow, "This and That...Here and There," *Anderson News*, March 18, 1971.

<sup>10</sup> Dave Ruggles, Interview, October 16, 2013, Lawrenceburg, KY.

get close and He is watching the game, He may nudge a tip-in for Anderson County occasionally.”<sup>11</sup>

During the season, the intensity grew and manifested itself both individually and collectively. Ruggles claimed that “people wanted autographs everywhere you went.” The adulation even went further: “Fathers tried to set me up on dates with their daughters.” Extraordinarily, “fathers would stop (me) on the street and promise to pay for the entire date.” He continued, “Everybody wanted to know about Jimmy Dan. What’s he like?”<sup>12</sup> After the tournament, the town reacted with collective pride, as if the team had won, rather than finishing as the runner-up. Coming home to Anderson County, it was “estimated at between 2,500 and 3,000 fans . . . gathered at ACHS to welcome home the Anderson Bearcats.”<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the paper noted that “more than 300 cars were in the motorcade (that met the team at the county line) including the fire truck, local police cruisers, the Rescue Squad, and the ACHS bank,” which probably “extended more than five miles.”<sup>14</sup>

The experiences of this Central Kentucky rural community were not unique. Without question, the most fascinating cultural phenomenon to grace the Sweet 16 courts in the past thirty years hailed from Clay County. Richie Farmer embodied an interestingly vital cultural icon for the eastern portion of the state specifically and the rural areas generally. Short, not overly fast, and lacking outstanding leaping ability, Farmer could simply play, and his Clay County Tigers, coached by the legendary Bobby

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<sup>11</sup> “Mary Frances Monroe Is A Self-Confessed Basketball Nut,” *Anderson News*, March 25, 1971.

<sup>12</sup> Ruggles Interview.

<sup>13</sup> *Anderson News*, March 25, 1971.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

Keith, excited the Sweet 16 fans, but his and the team's impact on his community proved more significant.

Clay County ranks as one of the poorest counties in a poor state. In fact, according to the US Census Bureau, the county's median household income is among the lowest in the country.<sup>15</sup> In 2012, Clay County's per capita income was only \$12,825, while the median household income was just under \$22,300. Moreover, more than 34 percent of the county, as of 2012, lived under the poverty line, with only 7.4 percent of the adult population holding at least a bachelor's degree.<sup>16</sup> The community has embraced the high school basketball team as a respite from its economically depressed reality. Keith took eighteen teams to the Sweet 16 as a head coach. "As far as the economy of Eastern Kentucky, it's very poor," Keith recalled. "It was primarily based on coal. Most of the coal in Clay County has been mined out and there's not really much going on here. A lot of Eastern Kentucky counties are in the same situation." Achieving positive notoriety built communal pride for a town that had suffered over the years. "We might be low on the economic pole; we might be low status on a lot of other things, but in basketball we were the best." Put simply, "The county as a whole absorbed that with a great deal of pride."<sup>17</sup>

Community support for those Tiger squads reached a fever pitch when Farmer's teams were competing. In fact, according to Keith, in 1988 Clay County was ranked as high as fourth in the nation. This popularity was manifested most intensely through their success in the Sweet 16. Winning the State Championship in 1987, Farmer's junior year,

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<sup>15</sup> "State & County Quickfacts." Income, Race, Education Statistics. Last modified December 17, 2013. United States Department of Commerce: US Census Bureau. Accessed January 1, 2014. [www.quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states](http://www.quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Bobby Keith Interview, June 26, 2013, Manchester, KY.

the Clay County Tigers uplifted the spirits of the community and inspired an amazing following. The *Manchester Enterprise* warned before the tournament that tickets were running scarce for the Sweet 16. Some “got in line as early as 5:30 in the morning to purchase tickets” that went on sale hours later. Others camped out all night. The ticket salesperson claimed that when she “arrived some of the people were holding their sleeping bags in their arms.” In fact, Sherry Whitehead, a fan of the Tigers, asserted that it was more than worth it to stay up all night for tickets. “For the Greatest show on earth,” she said, “you better believe it was.” Amazingly, the March 26 edition of the *Enterprise* recounted every single game of the season, with full reporting, box scores, and comments from the players.<sup>18</sup>

When Clay County finally won the Sweet 16, the community celebrated the victory for the team but also for the county’s people. “This has to be the proudest moment in the history of Clay County,” gushed Coach Keith.<sup>19</sup> The local paper claimed that over ten miles of cars drove together down the highway toward home, and the team was met with a two-hour-long welcoming at their home gym (now named after Coach Keith). Farmer could not believe the reaction, saying that he “didn’t know there were this many people in Clay County.”<sup>20</sup> Looking back on the experience twenty-five years later, Coach Keith still believed that it meant “more to them (the people of Clay County) and the community, especially from Eastern Kentucky, than anywhere else.”<sup>21</sup>

Rural communities in Kentucky often have just one school to rally around, one institution to represent their local culture and pride. With Louisville, an unfortunate

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<sup>18</sup> *Manchester Enterprise*, March 26, 1987.

<sup>19</sup> “State Champions!!,” *Manchester Enterprise*, April 2, 1987.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Keith Interview.

stereotype has lingered for years, that because of busing, the schools themselves do not represent a community. Instead, the stereotype reckons, Louisville schools lack the local cultural cohesion readily present in rural, county schools. Several of those interviewed from rural areas expressed this sentiment. However, evidence illustrated that Louisville did rally around Sweet 16 success, and though the celebrations appeared somewhat muted relative to Clay County's, for example, local communities certainly embraced the pride of their culture.

Fairdale High School sits comfortably in the middle of the Fairdale community in the southern portion of Jefferson County. "They call us the poverty area of Jefferson County," observed former head coach Stan Hardin, but "I don't understand it."<sup>22</sup> Jermaine Brown, captain of the Fairdale team that won back-to-back state championships and the 1991 Mr. Basketball title, said, "Fairdale is a good community, but it's not a wealthy community."<sup>23</sup> Because of busing, many Louisville schools have lost neighborhood students to schools farther away, but interestingly that has not diminished support in many instances. Brown, who was bused from the Southwick projects, noted that on "the West End we were definitely not wealthy," but with the Fairdale community he found "common people with common goals."<sup>24</sup> However, both Brown and Hardin claimed that the Fairdale community worked hard to embrace all of their students as part of the larger community. "The families in this community took these kids in, fed them, kept them overnight, took care of them," Hardin recalled.<sup>25</sup> "Louisville gets a bad rap because they (outsiders) think that doesn't happen here," said former Ballard head coach

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<sup>22</sup> Stan Hardin Interview, July 31, 2013, Louisville, KY.

<sup>23</sup> Jermaine Brown Interview, October 17, 2013, Louisville, KY.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Hardin Interview.

Scotty Davenport.<sup>26</sup> Like most stereotypes, the notion that Louisville schools lack community derives from ignorance. Louisville as a town is comprised of many separate, minute communities and cultural pockets. “Louisville has walls,” claims Hall of Fame writer Billy Reed.<sup>27</sup> He notes that south Louisville varies culturally from the west end or the eastern portion of the city.

Fairdale’s consecutive state championships and Sweet 16 appearances were celebrated in ways very similar to rural schools. “In 1983 we took 17 bus loads,” Coach Hardin explained, “and when we won the state tourney in ’90, we had a big shindig down here.”<sup>28</sup> Brown added that “we had a parade that started at Fairdale and finished at the Southwick community center,” which was “at least a thirty minute ride.”<sup>29</sup> Even though Fairdale lacked extravagant furnishings, “the community rented limousines” for the players, according to both Brown and Hardin. Just as at the rural schools, “Freedom Hall must have had a line of cars a mile long coming home from the (championship) game.” Hardin continued, “To win the state tournament in this community, it will never be forgotten.”<sup>30</sup> Scotty Davenport echoed the community aspect of Louisville relative to the Sweet 16: “When we won the regional tournament in ’87, we got floral arrangements; we got food arrangements from rival schools in Jefferson County to say ‘bring it home for us.’” Davenport made the argument that in “smaller communities they have no one else to rally around but one school,” and for Louisville schools to come together was noteworthy.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Scotty Davenport Interview, July 25, 2013, Louisville, KY.

<sup>27</sup> Billy Reed Interview, December 30, 2013, Louisville, KY.

<sup>28</sup> Hardin Interview.

<sup>29</sup> Brown Interview.

<sup>30</sup> Hardin Interview.

<sup>31</sup> Davenport Interview.

One clear difference, admittedly, was the difference in press coverage. Certainly covered in *The Courier-Journal*, Louisville teams did not enjoy the near-total domination of coverage that local teams garnered. However, the lack of major media press coverage did not diminish the cultural cohesion experienced by Sweet 16 success. One could argue that the heightened number of schools within the school district has increased the school pride through fierce local competition. Brown said that “growing up in the project, it was literally divided. You either went to PRP (Pleasure Ridge Park), Fairdale, or Doss. When you got home, you got bragging rights.”<sup>32</sup>

Community pride and support did not begin in the last few decades. Evidence indicated that cultural regions had been celebrating Sweet 16 success for generations. The 1951-52 Cuba Cubs, a tiny school in the far western portion of the state, enjoyed a motorcade that went between several towns.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, on the opposite side of the commonwealth, as the 1955 Hazard Bulldogs traveled home they were “met by a motorcade that must have contained 2000 automobiles.” An out-of-town journalist gushed that “since the tournament began and until this afternoon, Hazard could have rivaled the deserted village for lack of a population.”<sup>34</sup>

By 1961, Kentucky community support ventured toward the laughable. Judged by some to be the greatest team in Kentucky history, the Paul Blazer Tomcats of Ashland experienced community support that moved toward hyperbole. “All traffic lights turned green Sunday afternoon for Ashland’s Tomcats,” noted the sports columnist John McGill, “as they were paraded through the city and accorded a thunderous tribute as Kentucky’s

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<sup>32</sup> Brown Interview.

<sup>33</sup> Marianne Walker, *The Graves County Boys: A Tale of Kentucky Basketball, Perseverance, and the Unlikely Championship of the Cuba Cubs* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 209.

<sup>34</sup> Gerald Griffin, “Celebrating in Hazard,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 20, 1955.

new champions of high school basketball.”<sup>35</sup> The party kept going for the Tomcats and McGill. He claimed that “behind us as far as the eye could see, and extending for perhaps as much as three miles, was a line of automobiles.” But “no one was prepared for the scene at the city limits, where sirens wailed, guns roared, and thousands of fans waved, cheered, and threw confetti.” Eventually the mayor of Ashland declared that “the Tomcats have brought honor to our city and credit to the school.” He continued, “I would like to give each player a key to the city.”<sup>36</sup>

By the 1980s, many communities in Kentucky were in need of something to claim as their own, a victory for their region. In the final game of the 1982 Sweet 16, with the score tied and only precious few seconds remaining, Paul Andrews of Laurel County launched a desperation shot from over forty feet away. As the ball violently fell through the hoop, the people of Laurel County exploded into celebration. Without a hint of irony or exaggeration, Charles House, writing for the *London Sentinel-Echo*, spoke of the Andrews shot and what it meant: “His next move could mean the difference between unbounded glory that will last a lifetime or unimaginable despair that will take a lifetime to forget.” House counted over twenty-five-hundred fans coming to celebrate the victory, with several hundred cars lined up awaiting the bus of Laurel County Cardinals.<sup>37</sup> The mayor of London said, “It’s the greatest thing that ever happened,” and called it “a great achievement for Laurel County.”<sup>38</sup> One local resident opined that “the championship will put London on the map again,” while another boldly stated that “it was the greatest thing we ever heard.” Local resident Mike Cook, an auto parts dealer, believed that “it’s great

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<sup>35</sup> John McGill, “Champs Given Roaring Reception,” *Ashland Independent*, March 20, 1961.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Charles House, “A Fantasy Ending Overshadowed Brilliant Team Effort,” *London Sentinel-Echo*, April 1, 1982.

<sup>38</sup> Carl Keith Greene, “Local Residents Ecstatic Over the Boy’s,” *London Sentinel-Echo*, April 1, 1982.

for the kids and great for the community. It builds pride in the community and the school.”<sup>39</sup>

Clearly, Kentucky communities have used the Sweet 16 championship as a rallying point for local pride. Yet, the unifying nature of the Sweet 16 applied to tournament champions as well as those who simply made it to the event. Especially for teams or counties that rarely earned a bid in the Sweet 16, the chance to honor town and culture for just one or two games magnified the importance of the tournament and its people.

By the mid-1980s, the Somerset Briar Jumpers, annually matched up against larger schools in the 12<sup>th</sup> region, had failed to reach the Sweet 16 for years. However, in the 1984-85 campaign, head coach Kirt Chiles led the small school to a berth in the competition. “A lot of coaches and a lot of teams go to the state tournament to participate. There’s only a few that go to win it,” Chiles explained. Somerset was so happy to get there even though winning the tournament was improbable. The town celebrated simply making the tournament, with a fire truck parade through town.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, the 1985-86 Woodford County Yellow-Jackets, which miraculously won the 11<sup>th</sup> region tournament through a series of upsets, experienced a huge upsurge of community support for making the tournament. The 1986 team was the first, and incidentally the last, Woodford County High School team to reach the Sweet 16. “As a one high school town, the whole community got behind the team,” recalled Bob Gibson, a sophomore reserve on the team. “There was this mass spirit for the community and love for the school” along with “signs and poster-boards all over the community,”

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Kirt Chiles Interview, December 22, 2013, Lexington, KY.

remembered Gibson. On the way to Rupp Arena, “when the team left for the tournament, the students lined the streets on the way out to the highway.”<sup>41</sup>

Not all teams leaving for the Sweet 16 have enjoyed such fanfare. So important was participation for Breathitt County in 1963 that the coach arranged for bulldozers “to clear the road so the Bobcats could leave town” after a flood in the area. Journalist Billy Reed wrote that the “coach had to send an army of amphibious troop carriers to round up his players, some of whom live 35 miles from Jackson.”<sup>42</sup> That the town and coach essentially organized a flotilla in the mountains to merely attend the tournament speaks volumes. Simply to participate, to represent your school and community, was valued to such an extent that a small, poor community employed scarce resources to be present at the Sweet 16.

Sometimes earning a bid in the Sweet 16 garnered important community respect within the confines of the region itself. For generations the 16<sup>th</sup> region was dominated by Ashland Paul Blazer High School. By 1973, Blazer had already captured four state championships, including the famous 1961 team ranked among the greatest Kentucky teams ever. Moreover, the Tomcats had won the region more than twenty-five times by the early seventies while their county rivals, the Boyd County Lions, had failed to win even once.<sup>43</sup> Through the 1950s and 1960s, the city of Ashland was booming financially. Ashland Oil and other industrial giants helped fuel an impressive economic engine. According to Kyle Fannin, a senior on the ’73 Boyd County team, kids from “the city

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<sup>41</sup> Bob Gibson Interview, June 19, 2013, Versailles, KY.

<sup>42</sup> Billy Reed, “Voice in the Crowd,” *Lexington Leader*, March 15, 1963.

<sup>43</sup> “2011 PNC/KHSAA Sweet 16 State Tournament.” Kentucky High School Athletic Association Media Notes, 2011. March 16-19. Accessed January 5, 2014. [www.khsaa.org/basketball/boys/sweet16/2011/medianotes.pdf](http://www.khsaa.org/basketball/boys/sweet16/2011/medianotes.pdf)

(Ashland)” were “the rich kids.”<sup>44</sup> Narrowly defeating the Paul Blazer team in the regional finals represented a victory for county kids, beating their more affluent neighbors. “It made them (the Boyd County community outside of Ashland) feel like they were just as good as anybody else. There was a lot of pride in the school,” remembered Fannin.<sup>45</sup> Recording the community spirit for the Lions, the *Ashland Independent* noted that “Boyd County drew one of the largest crowds of the tournament. They had thirteen busses, two for the band and eleven for the students.”<sup>46</sup> Though Boyd County lost in the first round to the eventual state champion team from Louisville Shawnee, the community pride experienced by the rural Boyd County fans illustrated the critical organizing principle of the Sweet 16.

By the early 1990s, no private school had claimed the boys’ state title since the 1962 St. Xavier team from Louisville. That was to change in 1992, however, as both finalists hailed from small private institutions. Lexington Catholic in the late 1980s and early 1990s was very small, class A in fact. Nevertheless, upon winning the 1992 11<sup>th</sup> region championship, this small community was invigorated to participate in the Sweet 16. “Making it was a championship alone,” according to Davon Davis, the junior star of the Knights.<sup>47</sup> Brandon Salsman, a reserve player, though captain of the team, remembered, “A booster had rented out the Phoenix Room at Freedom Hall.”<sup>48</sup> Their pep rally had “people who weren’t even from the school” attend, as the wave of enthusiasm

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<sup>44</sup> Kyle Fannin Interview, June 3, 2013, Versailles, KY.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Mike Reliford, “Phil Pratt Boyd County’s Biggest Lion,” *Ashland Independent*, March 15, 1973.

<sup>47</sup> Davon Davis Interview, October 20, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>48</sup> Brandon Salsman Interview, August 9, 2013, Lexington, KY.

overtook the small institution. After the finals loss, like so many other schools, the team “rode fire trucks around the entire neighborhood.”<sup>49</sup>

The consistency of the evidence depicted the cultural value placed upon earning a berth in the Sweet 16 and the importance that communities accorded that achievement. Interestingly, some evidence suggested that the cultural pride derived from tournament success had manifested itself in unsuspected and dramatic fashion. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Boyd County, 1973. As in Lexington and Louisville, politicians in Ashland were trying to merge the city and county governments. According to Kyle Fannin, the residents of Boyd County had for years been scared to stand up politically to their more affluent neighbors. However, the people of rural Boyd County gained confidence from the success of the Lion team and refused to allow the city of Ashland to annex increasingly larger parts of the community. “I think Ashland would have been successful had it not been that year and that basketball team,” recalled Fannin.<sup>50</sup> Since that tournament, Boyd County has won the 16<sup>th</sup> region nine more times, outpacing even Ashland Paul Blazer.<sup>51</sup>

Along similar sports lines, both Davon Davis and Brandon Salsman noted that Lexington Catholic has grown substantially since its tournament run, now competing in 4A football. Moreover, the school has gone on to capture state championships in boys’ and girls’ soccer, boys’ and girls’ basketball (four for the girls), two football championships, and baseball, and has been ultra competitive in most other sports, all since 1992. Likewise, Bob Gibson credited his 1986 team with kick-starting the Woodford County sports program. Though dominant in wrestling for years, the entire

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Fannin Interview.

<sup>51</sup> KHSAA 2011 media guide.

sports program has become competitive statewide in multiple sports, including winning the 2012 state baseball championship.<sup>52</sup> Though one might argue that Gibson's declaration was biased, as athletic director of Woodford County he has been in a unique position to witness the ascent of the sports program.

For some, the greatest community benefit from Sweet 16 success over the years has been escape. This journey from reality has come in many forms, some healthy, others not so much. By the early 1970s, many Americans began to struggle economically as never before. With the Vietnam War still raging, basketball offered a brief reprieve. As Ezra Sparrow wrote during the Anderson County run to the finals in 1971, "Perhaps it is good that we get our minds away from the turmoil of world affairs and enjoy the thrills of our annual school boy classic; we hope that all will gain lessons that will help meet some of life's stern realities."<sup>53</sup>

Sometimes communities were desperate to have a win, any win, to salve the harsh reality of life. For generations, rural Kentucky has suffered economically, educationally, with health issues, crime, poverty, cyclical dependence on government aid, and has felt the ridicule of outsiders. By 1992, 39 percent of Clay County residents "lacked basic prose literacy skills" (though the figure decreased to 21 percent by 2003).<sup>54</sup> By 2009, over 37 percent of the county received government benefits in the form of food stamps.<sup>55</sup> The community benefitted emotionally from the success of their local team, a team that

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<sup>52</sup> Gibson Interview.

<sup>53</sup> Ezra Sparrow, "This 'n That...Here and There," *Anderson News*, March 18, 1971.

<sup>54</sup> "National Assessment of Adult Literacy: State & County Estimates of Low Literacy – 1992 & 2003." Literacy Rates by County. National Center for Educational Statistics. Accessed January 1 & 3, 2014. – [www.nces.ed.gov/naal/estimates/stateestimates.aspx](http://www.nces.ed.gov/naal/estimates/stateestimates.aspx)

<sup>55</sup> "County by County Review of SNAP/Food Stamp Participation." Food Research and Action Center. Released January 5, 2010. Accessed January 1, 2014. [www.frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/ny\\_times\\_snap\\_poverty\\_formatted.pdf](http://www.frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/ny_times_snap_poverty_formatted.pdf)

represented their culture. From 1985 to 1988, the Sweet 16, according to Coach Keith, gave “people the right to hold their heads up. It says that we’re just as good as anyone else.”<sup>56</sup>

The mountain teams have not been the only areas of Kentucky to suffer. Literacy and poverty issues have touched almost all of Kentucky. Graves County in the far western portion of the state, Jefferson County/Louisville, and many other parts of the state have long suffered. These social and economic problems have festered for generations, and to find solace in a mere basketball tournament at first blush seems outrageous. Exhausting valuable and scarce community resources towards a trivial sport does not solve the literacy issues, nor does it address increasing adult and childhood obesity. As the next chapter demonstrates, overemphasis plagued many communities.

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<sup>56</sup> Keith Interview.

## Chapter 2

### Overemphasis

*“It’s like a fix of drugs.” - Kirt Chiles<sup>57</sup>*

Throughout the last one hundred years, Kentucky has never ranked among the economic powers of the country. Primarily rural, the commonwealth has faced hardships similar to other southern states. Racial segregation and dramatic white pushback during the Civil Rights Movement defined Kentucky specifically and the South generally. Moreover, the stereotypes about Appalachian families did no justice to the truth, ignoring rich and valuable cultural contributions to the state and beyond. Basketball has been a means by which to advertise the richness and vitality of local cultures.

Discussed previously, local communities have long valued success at the Sweet 16 as cultural and community capital, currency accepted throughout the state. Additionally, heroic performances at the State Tournament provided commercial opportunities for local cultures and regions to radiate with pride, if for a transitory moment. Using basketball as an escape mechanism should be seen, many have argued, no more differently than film or theater, a brief and harmless pause from life. However, evidence indicated that community and cultural glory achieved through the Sweet 16 has led to overemphasis at times and resulted in a blurred mixture of cultural pride and community desperation. Unhealthy behavior and unrealistic community expectations often resulted, skewing the line between a cathartic escape and excess.

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<sup>57</sup> Kirt Chiles Interview, December 22, 2013, Lexington, KY.

Individuals and families have used the Sweet 16 as a salve, dulling the sharp pains of tough childhoods or community troubles. “The tournament was an escape from the bad parts of life,” commented Brandon Salsman, captain of the 1992 Lexington Catholic team, whose family had struggled. The Sweet 16 was fun and exciting, a “gift from God” according to his mother, who put three boys through Lexington Catholic on a secretary’s wage. Getting to travel to Louisville or Lexington reminded fans and players that participating in something larger than self connected one to the community. The exciting journey that teams, players, and fans experienced acted as a cohesive bond. Salsman noted that in his experience “the emotional aspects of the tourney help people deal with emotional issues later in life.”<sup>58</sup>

This outlook was not exclusive to Salsman. Marshall County, in the far western reaches of the state, has for decades been riddled with negative stereotypes. Long criticized for its racial intolerance, Marshall County’s present racial make-up includes an African American population of less than .5 percent, with over 98 percent white.<sup>59</sup> These numbers were even more lopsided in prior decades. By 1992, 15 percent of the population was functionally illiterate. However, high school basketball in the county remained culturally significant. After years of futility, Marshall County finally broke through and won a pair of Region One championships in the early 1990s. So personally critical was this to some that former Marshall County coach Kirt Chiles tearfully recalled a young man named Rory Brewer, who hailed from Hardin, Kentucky, a tiny hamlet in a rural pocket of the state. From a struggling family, Brewer recounted to Chiles, “From

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<sup>58</sup> Brandon Salsman Interview, August 9, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>59</sup> “State & County Quickfacts,” United States Department of Commerce: US Census Bureau. Income, Race, Education Statistics. Last modified December 17, 2013. Accessed January 1, 2014. [www.quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states](http://www.quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states)

the time I was a little boy, my family wanted to see me play in the state tournament.”<sup>60</sup>

The cultural importance and life-changing experience was valued by Brewer, Salsman, and thousands of other Kentuckians. Participation was a thrill, and representing your community and cultural roots was a privilege. Regrettably, others have become addicted to local and state glory. Summarizing the problem, Commissioner Julian Tackett said, “What we have to guard against is overemphasis, and unfortunately there is so much pressure to get to the state tournament that that’s where sometimes people cross lines.”<sup>61</sup>

Overemphasis of the Sweet 16 has reared its ugly head in multiple ways. First, coaches searching for an edge have long looked beyond their district for talented players. Tackett noted, “Sometimes people go after kids that don’t belong to them.”<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, several of the coaches, a few of the players, and more than one of the long-time attendees discussed recruiting as a problem. Many used Louisville as an example because busing and districting has for years been so complicated that Louisville’s power basketball programs have skirted the lines of propriety. Others have pointed to private schools, particularly Catholic schools, as rule breakers. Still more claimed that mountain teams with powerful coaches have used their influence to bring talent into the community.

A second example of community overemphasis manifested itself in an overindulgence in escapism. Various communities and cultural sub-sections have commonly embraced the pride of local basketball success and claimed “glory” as evidence of cultural dominance. Clearly, pride and community spirit has been shown to galvanize a community and lift the spirits of local cultural sub-sections; however, after

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<sup>60</sup> Chiles Interview.

<sup>61</sup> Julian Tackett Interview, September 19, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

having tasted success, some communities began to fall in love with the winning, replacing the community aspect. In Marshall County, the excessive thirst for high school basketball success proved laughable, even for the head coach. During his successful tenure there, Kirt Chiles came to believe that the community placed “too much emphasis” on basketball. While there, Chiles had *two* weekly radio shows and even a TV program. We “practiced every day but Saturday, and on Saturday morning we had two radio shows,” remembered Chiles. On Sundays, “we practiced right after church.” “Meals were provided for days before and during” the district and regional tournaments, he continued. The players “were treated like rock stars.”<sup>63</sup>

In the 1980s, Clay County’s run took on a life of its own. Beyond escapism, the community began to put more and more emphasis on high school basketball. According to Anderson County Coach Glen Drury, Clay County High School offered his team \$1000 plus expenses to come play in Manchester (thus splitting the gate receipts).<sup>64</sup> Even with dwindling resources, the importance of the basketball culture maintained its dominance. Beyond high school finances, the people of Clay County invested much of their small income into following the Tigers. Wherever the team went, the fans in the 1980s followed. “When we left (on road trips) it was like a caravan of cars leaving town,” recalled Coach Bobby Keith. “When we played a regional tournament, they would open the door at 4:00, and by 4:30 it would be full of Clay Countians.” They would sit there for three hours waiting for the game to begin.<sup>65</sup> This happened also with the 1971 Anderson County team. Dave Ruggles explained that traveling Bearcat fans “got there

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<sup>63</sup> Chiles Interview.

<sup>64</sup> Glen Drury Interview, October 8, 2012, Lawrenceburg, KY.

<sup>65</sup> Bobby Keith Interview, June 26, 2013, Manchester, KY.

early” before the home team’s fans, outnumbering the locals.<sup>66</sup> Yet, once those great teams passed, graduated, and moved on, the fans’ exuberance faded as well. Billy Reed reasoned, “The tradition of overemphasis (in relation to basketball) started with Adolph Rupp.” The legendary UK coach’s tenure began during the Depression, and Kentuckians began to associate cultural pride with basketball. “It gave you an identity for the next couple of decades,” said Reed.<sup>67</sup>

Unfortunately, this identity spilled over into social and political identity. “They (local communities) will hold you in an exalted position forever. It leads to political office,” Commissioner Tackett declared. Moreover, he maintained that “it leads to a fame and fortune that can be localized or it can be statewide.” This local fame filters into lifelong leadership in the community: “There are people who have community positions (he mentioned teachers and similar community wide jobs) because they represented the community at the Sweet 16.”<sup>68</sup>

There was a social price to pay for this overemphasis. For a person’s greatest achievements and memories in life to have been completed before receiving a high school diploma sent a dangerous message to the following generations. Scotty Davenport said, “If you live to be seventy years old, that’s twenty-eight-thousand days. When they’re seventy, and recollect those twenty-eight-thousand days, they’re going to recollect every minute of every play and every possession of every one of those games.” Davenport’s comment was not critical of the overemphasis; he was simply trying to communicate the cultural importance of the event. In fact, when speaking of his famous games against Clay County, he said, “We played three games, three overtimes, in front of

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<sup>66</sup> Dave Ruggles Interview, October 16, 2013, Lawrenceburg, KY.

<sup>67</sup> Billy Reed Interview, December 30, 2013, Louisville, KY.

<sup>68</sup> Tackett Interview.

forty-five-thousand people.”<sup>69</sup> How could a high school student, still developing his mind and curiosity, not be moved to conclude that basketball was the most important thing he would ever do? Perhaps, as Billy Reed pointed out, all sports enthusiasts are responsible for the overemphasis.<sup>70</sup>

If overemphasis became a nasty community side-effect from the cultural dominance of the Sweet 16, there have certainly been more positive by-products. The most prescient and encouraging cultural consequence of the tournament is that race relations improved. Before integration, segregated African American schools were prohibited from participating in the Sweet 16. However, as that ruled evaporated, the tearing down of racial barriers between communities began. Though the issue of race and racism has reared its ugly head at the Sweet 16, the barriers to segregation were more quickly torn down thanks to the tournament.

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<sup>69</sup> Scotty Davenport Interview, July 25, 2013, Louisville, KY.

<sup>70</sup> Reed Interview.

## Chapter 3

### Race

*“If it wasn’t for Basketball, there are people you might not have spoken to.”*

Jermaine Brown<sup>71</sup>

Kentucky’s experience with race has proven complicated and erratic. Unlike many other states, Kentucky lies at a cultural crossroads. Home to overlapping and diverse cultural groups, the unique geographic layout of the state offers the historian an excellent opportunity to explore the struggle of African Americans to find equality. Moreover, the evolution of tolerance among the state’s white population has likewise moved in fits and spurts. Originally a slave state, Kentucky remained politically loyal to the Union during the Civil War; however, a sizable number of Kentuckians fought for the Confederacy. As a border state, Kentucky’s geographic location was of crucial importance from a strategic, military perspective. However, that the state bordered both the Union and Confederacy illustrates its conflicting racial conundrum. For example, the state was home to both D.W. Griffith, the director of “Birth of a Nation,” but also to John Marshall Harlan, the lone dissenting voice in the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson* that legally codified Jim Crow segregation. Additionally, the same state that brutally upheld segregation also counted Muhammad Ali, formerly Cassius Clay, as a native son. He would eventually become one of the most recognizable figures in the world. At one time, Kentucky boasted one of the most respected and liberal newspapers in the country, and the power and influence of the Louisville *Courier-Journal* could be felt statewide and

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<sup>71</sup> Jermaine Brown Interview, October 17, 2013, Louisville, KY.

beyond. During the 1950s, in fact, the paper employed Anne and Carl Braden, white stalwarts of the early Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky.<sup>72</sup> Accused of communist sympathy and dangerous race mingling, the Bradens represented a small but vibrant liberal minority in the South. Known for intolerance as well as progress, Kentuckians, white and black, have perennially struggled with race.

Like other significant cultural questions, race has been an issue with respect to the Sweet 16. As Kentucky has labored to accept tolerance and reject prejudice, the Sweet 16 played a vital and surprising role. Since the integration of the Kentucky High School League and the Kentucky High School Athletic Association during the 1956-57 basketball season, the Sweet 16 has, with obvious and clear exceptions, acted as a critical instrument that brought varying cultural and racial groups closer together, and positively contributed to the state's race relations.

The first African American players competed in the 1957 Sweet 16 for the Hazard Bulldogs.<sup>73</sup> By 1959, two all-black schools, Lexington Dunbar and Covington Grant, made an appearance in the tournament, and in 1961 Lexington Dunbar made the finals, losing to Larry Conley's Ashland Paul Blazer team.<sup>74</sup> These early teams fought hard on the court but were forced to overcome nagging and unfair stereotypes. According to journalist Billy Reed, many whites felt that black players were showy and became easily unnerved.<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, he noted that one of the most beloved all-white teams in tournament history, the Cuba Cubs, played a style of basketball that attempted to emulate

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<sup>72</sup> Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), Intro & Chapter 1.

<sup>73</sup> John Kleber (Editor in Chief), *The Kentucky Encyclopedia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 58.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Billy Reed Interview, December, 30, 2013, Louisville, KY.

the Harlem Globetrotters. In fact, the entire first chapter of Marianne Walker's work dedicated to that Cuba team, *The Graves County Boys*, depicted with vivid imagery the fascination of the flashy play from the all-white Cuba club. The book consistently emphasized the fans' adoration of their jazzy and flamboyant style.<sup>76</sup> Yet, Reed recalled, the 1961 Dunbar team, led by "Sweet" Austin Dumas and Coach S.T. Roach, were perhaps the most disciplined team in the tournament.<sup>77</sup>

Dwight Peavler, an attendee since 1945, believed that Roach was "the classiest coach that ever coached." Roach's tasteful demeanor was famously put to the test in the 1961 semi-finals versus Breathitt County. This game served as an interesting turning point in Sweet 16 race relations in general. From the tip, the majority of fans in Lexington's Memorial Coliseum rooted for the all-white, rural Breathitt County team against the local all-black Dunbar team. However, as the game progressed, referee bias became glaringly obvious. Peavler remembered that "Dunbar got the short end of the stick with the referees."<sup>78</sup> Scott Robertson, an attendee since the early 1950s and a friend of Austin Dumas's father, was even more blunt: "They got robbed."<sup>79</sup> Eventually the crowd became so annoyed by the bias that they began to fervently root for Dunbar. After a questionable foul call and the subsequent free throws, Breathitt County found itself a single point ahead. As the final buzzer neared, Dumas hit a last-second shot from well beyond the modern-day three-point line to claim victory. Robertson remembered jumping and hugging Dumas's father, and the crowd erupted with a sense of justice.

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<sup>76</sup> Marianne Walker, *The Graves County Boys: A Tale of Kentucky Basketball - Perseverance, and the Unlikely Championship of the Cuba Cubs*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 1-5.

<sup>77</sup> Reed Interview.

<sup>78</sup> Dwight Peavler Interview, January 5, 2014, Lexington, KY.

<sup>79</sup> Scott Robertson Interview, November 26, 2013, Lexington, KY.

“Most high school basketball fans that go regular, we love to see a good scrappy ball club that can play,” and the Dunbar team filled that role, regardless of race.<sup>80</sup> Peavler noted that Roach “never got rowdy because they got screwed.”<sup>81</sup> As Dunbar entered the 1961 finals, the issue of race and the Sweet 16 would forever change, though rocky times were ahead.

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, 1960s, and into the 1970s, race as an issue spilled into all aspects of life, including basketball and the Sweet 16. Indeed, Mike Sayre, having attended the Sweet 16 since 1961, declared: “Race was a big issue (in the 1960s); it was everywhere you went.”<sup>82</sup> Though Sayre did not remember hearing many racial slurs, others recalled the use of vulgar language. Kyle Fannin, remembering his Boyd County’s 1973 match-up with an all-black Shawnee team, said, “I recall the n-word used or shouted” from the crowd “when calls didn’t go our way.”<sup>83</sup> Interestingly, he found that the slurs seemed to have come from the general crowd, not from the school’s cheering section. Commissioner Tackett, when asked about racial comments and the like, admitted that he “heard stories from the early 1960s, particularly when the tournament was at the (Memorial) Coliseum. The seating was so much smaller.”<sup>84</sup> Fannin claimed that “when you’re playing you don’t hear that stuff,” and added that on the bench, “I heard vile stuff” coming from other white schools.<sup>85</sup>

The success of African Americans in the Sweet 16 took little time to manifest itself on the court, but struggles to gain general acceptance as a result proved much

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<sup>80</sup> Peavler Interview.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Mike Sayre Interview, January 5, 2014, Versailles, KY.

<sup>83</sup> Kyle Fannin Interview, June 3, 2013, Versailles, KY.

<sup>84</sup> Julian Tackett Interview, September 19, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>85</sup> Fannin Interview.

slower. By the mid-1960s, African Americans began to participate on teams that dominated the tournament. Louisville Seneca, a mixed-race team, won back-to-back state championships in 1963 and 1964. The next year Butch Beard's Breckinridge County club, another mixed-race team, claimed the title. As the decade faded into the 1970s, teams with almost exclusively black players ruled the Sweet 16. From 1969 to 1975, only predominantly black teams won the tournament, and often the runner-up boasted a similar demographic. However, the role of African Americans in the schools was mainly limited to playing basketball, while access to administrative positions proved more elusive. Louisville Male, Louisville Central, and Lexington Dunbar did extend coaching opportunities to African American candidates; unfortunately, African Americans struggled beyond the court at the Sweet 16 in the first two decades after integration.

Like the refereeing problems in the 1961 semi-finals between Dunbar and Breathitt County, after the 1971 semi-finals between an all-black Central High School and an all-white Anderson County team led by UK recruit Jimmy Dan Connor, Central's coach Robert Fuller directed a letter of protest to the KHSAA. He alleged "poor and possible prejudiced officiating," and asked for support from the NAACP and the Urban League.<sup>86</sup> Spilling into the sports pages and the Sweet 16, calls for racial justice began to increase. By 1971 the *Courier-Journal* was printing articles demanding more inclusion for blacks beyond simple basketball participation, noting that there was a lack of black cheerleaders, referees, and administrators. Calls for progress also started to come from the state government.<sup>87</sup> Galen Martin, the Kentucky Commissioner of Human Rights,

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<sup>86</sup> *Anderson News*, March 25, 1971.

<sup>87</sup> "Bigger Negro Role in Athletics Urged," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 20, 1971.

said, “Black athletes are stars at schools that are predominately white as well as predominately black. Yet there are few black cheerleaders, fewer officials, and no blacks at all on the policy making board of the KHSAA.”<sup>88</sup> Though this would eventually change, progress was slow to arrive.

Mirroring the rest of society, small victories were quickly overshadowed by frustrating set-backs. The first African American to referee in a Sweet 16 game, John Will “Scoop” Brown had played for Dunbar under the segregated Kentucky High School Athletic League. By 1963 he envisioned “the day a Negro will play on a University of Kentucky team.”<sup>89</sup> Sadly, only one year later and during a fierce recruiting battle for highly sought after Wes Unseld, the Memorial Coliseum crowd openly booed the Louisville Seneca senior. While the University of Kentucky had yet to admit a black undergraduate, Adolph Rupp did try to recruit Unseld. Yet, Unseld’s coach at Seneca, Bob Mulcahy, concluded, “If the boos were any indication of the feelings of Kentucky fans, I doubt if he will want to stay in state.”<sup>90</sup> According to Billy Reed, when Unseld questioned Coach Rupp about his possible safety while on road trips to other SEC schools farther south, Rupp conceded that it would be difficult to protect the black superstar.<sup>91</sup> In the end, Unseld decided to attend the University of Louisville and eventually became an NBA Hall of Famer.

While the Unseld saga illustrated the glacial pace of racial tolerance, some Sweet 16 stars remained concerned about the issue. As the tournament became dominated by all-black teams, Ron King, Mr. Basketball and an African American student from the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Russell Rice, “Sporting Trails: Sweet Success,” *Lexington Leader*, March 13, 1963.

<sup>90</sup> Dave Bennett, “Mulcahy Says 2<sup>nd</sup> Title Pleasing, but Criticizes Booming of Unseld,” *Lexington Leader*, March 22, 1964.

<sup>91</sup> Reed Interview.

historically black Central High School, urged others to look at skill over color. He said, “We’ve tried to get some white boys at Central to show people that it’s performance and not color that counts.”<sup>92</sup> “There’s a good one at Jackson Jr. High we think might make the team,” he added.<sup>93</sup> Reed noted that racial acceptance went beyond traditional ignorance of whites towards African Americans, adding that the Sweet 16 games allowed many African American students and young men to integrate with Appalachian whites on the court, breaking down decades of geographic seclusion.<sup>94</sup>

By the 1980s and early 1990s, race issues no longer dominated news coverage; the Civil Rights Movement had faded. However, busing had come to Louisville through court order in 1975, and for twenty years to come racism occasionally showed itself at the Sweet 16. Not as overt as racism twenty years earlier, lingering racial intolerance could still be seen. Racism “was there,” recalled Jermaine Brown, the Louisville Fairdale star who would go on to play for the University of Tennessee. He said, “We weren’t in the huddle talking about it, but you knew.” Though Brown largely felt that the Sweet 16 was good for race relations, he commented that he saw prejudice in small things. For example, Fairdale’s basketball team was almost entirely comprised of African Americans, and when they travelled to small county or mountain schools, they occasionally received technical fouls for dunking.<sup>95</sup> Davon Davis, the Lexington Catholic star from the 1992 finalists, mostly agreed with Brown’s assessment. Arguing that the Sweet 16 and basketball smoothed race relations, he likewise experienced occasional racial intolerance; however, his Lexington Catholic team only had a few black

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<sup>92</sup> Dean Eagle, “Press Box: Ron King has 80 Offers, Might Stay Close to Home,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 28, 1969.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Reed Interview.

<sup>95</sup> Brown Interview.

players. “In some cases I could tell there was racism,” recalled Davis, “mostly from county schools.” Though it happened “very few times,” some players “would be guarding me and drop the n-word.”<sup>96</sup> Kirt Chiles, who led three teams to the Sweet 16, including Marshall County, remembered coaching at Lyon County in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He observed that fear of whites in Marshall County was a real problem for some of his African American players at Lyon County. He said, “I did have a couple of black kids who played for me at Lyon County who were scared to death to go to Marshall County and play.”<sup>97</sup>

Clearly, the racial past of the state has spilled into the Sweet 16 experience and perhaps at times accelerated racial stereotypes. However, the Sweet 16 played a significant role in breaking down racial barriers and accelerate the state’s movement towards racial tolerance. One can argue that many in the state continued to cling to decades-old prejudice, but the Sweet 16 has historically aided the state in the direction of tolerance and understanding. Commissioner Tackett found that with “integration in the mid-50s of the Kentucky High School League with the Kentucky High School Athletic Association, the progress was accelerated by the Sweet 16 more than anything else.”<sup>98</sup> Sam Arnold, a long-time attendee, agreed with Tackett, and went further, noting that true basketball fans missed out on witnessing the best possible basketball competition before integration.<sup>99</sup> A Harrison County native, Arnold grew up near the home of Louis Stout, who in 1994 became not only the first African American commissioner of the KHSAA

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<sup>96</sup> Davon Davis Interview, October, 20, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>97</sup> Kirt Chiles Interview, December 22, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>98</sup> Tackett Interview.

<sup>99</sup> Sam Arnold Interview, December 17, 2013, Cynthiana, KY.

but the first black athletic commissioner of any state.<sup>100</sup> In fact, Arnold insisted that Stout's influence in Kentucky went even farther. Stout played for fellow Harrison County native Joe B. Hall in Colorado. The success that Hall enjoyed was largely due to the basketball dominance of Stout. Arnold argued that Stout himself significantly contributed to Hall's move to be Rupp's top assistant coach.<sup>101</sup>

The geographic oddity of the regional format that defines the Sweet 16 aided progress in race relations more than any policy or human rights commission. Each geographic region of Kentucky had representation at the Sweet 16, and though many of the most competitive regional tournaments eliminated top teams from participating in the Sweet 16, it ensured that two teams from northern Kentucky were represented, as were four from Appalachia, two from Louisville, and so on throughout the state. This regional format hastened the movement towards tolerance because it provided an opportunity for players to meet. Reed found that all-white teams were exposed to teams that were heavily minority.<sup>102</sup> Jermaine Brown offered a similar perspective. "You got to interact," he said, adding, "If it wasn't for basketball there are people you might not have spoken to."<sup>103</sup> Dave Ruggles, the leading scorer in the 1971 finals for Anderson County, an all-white team, concurred. "You get to know people you'd never know. It's no question that sports" have helped race relations in Kentucky.<sup>104</sup> Another long-time attendee, Dwight Peavler, believed that the Sweet 16 was "good for race issues. He noted that many small

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<sup>100</sup> "Notable Kentucky African American Database: Louis Stout," University of Kentucky Libraries, Notable Kentucky African American Database, Accessed January 12, 2014, [http://nkaa.uky.edu/record.php?note\\_id=104](http://nkaa.uky.edu/record.php?note_id=104)

<sup>101</sup> Arnold Interview.

<sup>102</sup> Reed Interview.

<sup>103</sup> Brown Interview.

<sup>104</sup> Dave Ruggles Interview, October 16, 2013, Lawrenceburg, KY.

county schools have no black players. “Put them on the floor (of the Sweet 16) and they become more accessible.”<sup>105</sup>

The desire to win the coveted Sweet 16 state championship had the effect of focusing the players on results, not racial stereotyping. “He’s a basketball player,” Davon Davis said of an opponent. “I never stepped on the court and said ‘I’m not going to get dominated by a white player.’”<sup>106</sup> Ultra-competitive, Brown did not care about race. “We simply wanted to destroy everybody.”<sup>107</sup> For those who played in the Sweet 16, the issue of race became much less important. Brandon Salsman, a role player on the 1992 Lexington Catholic team, maintained that basketball “has been good” for race relations. “I think they (race problems) were definitely out there,” but “I don’t remember race being that much of an issue.”<sup>108</sup> One might accept with caution the racial insights of white players. However, the evidence presented by black and white players proved consistent, at least by the late 1980s and early 1990s. Reflecting on the tournament through the decades, Billy Reed held that the 1963 tournament was the racial turning point.<sup>109</sup> In that year, more African Americans found a place on the coveted all-tournament team than whites. No longer were African Americans token members of the team or an oddity. Reed felt that this signaled a critical step for Kentucky and the Sweet 16.

Regardless of when the tide turned in favor of tolerance, the evidence unquestionably suggests that the Sweet 16 has acted as social lubricant between the races.

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<sup>105</sup> Peavler Interview.

<sup>106</sup> Davis Interview.

<sup>107</sup> Brown Interview.

<sup>108</sup> Brandon Salsman Interview, August 9, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>109</sup> Billy Reed, “‘63 Tourney Changed the Event Forever’,” *Lexington Herald-Leader*, March 16, 1988.

These positive gains were seen throughout multiple perspectives; players, coaches, fans, and official observers universally declared that the Sweet 16 was an essential meeting place for all Kentuckians. With that said, the Sweet 16 witnessed another cultural collision, often with racial overtones. The next chapter explores the Sweet 16's struggle with the urban versus rural cultural divergence.

## Chapter 4

### Louisville

*“There were people in that community at the time, maybe still, who didn’t consider Louisville part of Kentucky.”* Kyle Fannin<sup>110</sup>

Louisville’s relationship with the rest of Kentucky has not always been a comfortable one. Proudly rural, the regional cultures that comprise the state have historically cast a suspicious eye in the direction of the River City. The stimuli for this distaste vary from person to person; however, many of the negative sociological constructions have manifested into persistent and often unfair stereotypes. Clearly more diverse than the whole of the commonwealth, Louisville boasts a population far greater than any other Kentucky community. Louisville’s percentage of African Americans, 21.3 percent, is more than two and a half times larger than the rest of the state’s average, 8.1 percent. Likewise, whites make up almost 86 percent of Kentucky’s population, though only 70 percent of Louisville’s.<sup>111</sup> Home to more religious diversity, Louisville’s cultural identity fails to demonstrate a “consistent” pattern distinguishable in many rural Kentucky communities, often dominated by large percentages of Protestants. In fact, Louisville is home to twenty-eight Catholic elementary and middle schools and eight Catholic high schools.<sup>112</sup> This is to say nothing of the much larger percentages of non-Christians living in the city relative to the rest of the state. Put simply, in the words of

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<sup>110</sup> Kyle Fannin Interview, June 3, 2013, Versailles, KY.

<sup>111</sup> “State & County Quickfacts.” Income, Race, Education Statistics. United States Department of Commerce: US Census Bureau. Last modified December 17, 2013. Accessed January 1, 2014. [www.quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states](http://www.quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states)

<sup>112</sup> “Find a School,” Archdiocese of Louisville. Accessed January 17, 2014. [www.archlou.org/schools](http://www.archlou.org/schools)

James C. Klotter, “Very different in many ways from the rest of the state, Louisville was Kentucky, but it also was not Kentucky.”<sup>113</sup>

The social skepticism from the county areas towards Louisville has historically spilled over into the Sweet 16. Rural teams from both ends of the state have long considered themselves great and noble underdogs to the vaunted basketball machines that hailed from the big city. Almost universally, both primary and secondary schools from Louisville, historically the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> regions, have played Goliath to the rural schools’ David. Perhaps the small community school pitted against a school of formidable size was the reason, as a substantial amount of primary evidence implied. Others rejected the school size argument and postulated that a general fear of Louisville as a city motivated the distaste. Many, however, felt that race was a constant issue for fans who disliked schools from Louisville. Whether the aversion to Louisville teams originated from race issues, the relative size of the schools, or an embodiment of basic differences in urban versus rural culture, the city of Louisville, specifically from the early 1950s through the early 1990s, acted as a lightning rod for fans from outside the city, as annual attendees, players, coaches, and journalists universally attested.

From the early 1950s, the negative perception of Louisville itself was a unifying cause of Sweet 16 ire. Julian Tackett agreed, admitting that many fans outside of the city acted upon stereotypes and false information. “Louisville is the place you go to get mugged or beat up,” according to rural fans.<sup>114</sup> Scott Robertson, a long-time attendee, concurred, saying that fans held onto the notion that Louisville was dangerous and people

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<sup>113</sup> James C. Klotter, *Kentucky: Portrait in Paradox, 1900-1950* (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 1996), Chapter 1, 15 (quotation).

<sup>114</sup> Julian Tackett Interview, September 19, 2013, Lexington, KY.

feared “getting mugged” outside the arena.<sup>115</sup> In fact, many from Eastern Kentucky would not make the journey to Louisville when the event was held there for so many years. Tackett added, “Eastern Kentucky fans didn’t want to go past Lexington.”<sup>116</sup> Growing up in Boyd County, Kyle Fannin went further. “There were people in that community at the time (1973), maybe still, who didn’t consider Louisville part of Kentucky.” He continued: “For some on the team and for some in the community, it was the first time they had been to Louisville.”<sup>117</sup> Ironically, crime rates in much of Eastern Kentucky did not differ, in terms of per capita offenses, from that of Louisville. Murder, for example, occurred more frequently per capita in many more Eastern Kentucky counties than in Louisville.<sup>118</sup> Regardless, the negative perception of Louisville as a dangerous metropolis persisted over the decades. At the Sweet 16, it translated into a fierce fan loyalty among county schools and a legacy of anti-Louisville sentiment.

Beloved teams from rural areas like Carr Creek, Cuba, and even Ashland received unsolicited support from fans around the state. Louis Snowden recalled the famous Cuba Cubs squad from Graves County. “I never saw anything like that game before or since,” he commented. “I remember looking around the Coliseum, and I saw across the court only one little patch of red sitting in the section for the Manual fans. Everybody else in the whole place was waving green and gold and screaming for Cuba to win.”<sup>119</sup> Similarly, long-time fans often considered the 1961 Ashland Paul Blazer team as the best in tournament history, rather than any of the teams from Louisville that dominated the

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<sup>115</sup> Scott Robertson Interview, November 26, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>116</sup> Tackett Interview.

<sup>117</sup> Fannin Interview.

<sup>118</sup> “Crime in Kentucky,” Kentucky State Police report to the Governor. Accessed January 18, 2014. [www.kentuckystatepolice.org/pdf/cik\\_2009.pdf](http://www.kentuckystatepolice.org/pdf/cik_2009.pdf)

<sup>119</sup> Marianne Walker, *The Graves County Boys: A Tale of Kentucky Basketball, Perseverance, and the Unlikely Championship of the Cuba Cubs* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 206-07.

1970s. Interestingly, only three schools have repeated as champions since 1950, and all three have been from Louisville. No consistent evidence of their adoration across the state can be found among the general population of fans or players. The last team to achieve that feat, Fairdale in the 1990-91 seasons, experienced similar anti-Louisville sentiment throughout their reign of dominance, even though the community of Fairdale shared much in common with poor, rural areas. Jermaine Brown acknowledged that his team was cognizant of the Louisville disdain: “We felt like nobody liked us.” Fairdale won one tournament at Freedom Hall and one in Lexington, at Rupp Arena. Brown remembered the non-Fairdale fans rooting against his team. “When we played Tates Creek in Lexington, it was like playing Kentucky. I can attest to that because I played against Kentucky in Rupp Arena.”<sup>120</sup> The juxtaposition between Cuba’s and Fairdale’s crowd experience was not isolated, and anti-Louisville bias presented itself consistently. “The other 14 regions, their fans just didn’t like Louisville,” said Tackett.<sup>121</sup> Billy Reed observed that “small towns ban together” against Louisville.<sup>122</sup>

Observers have noted that the anti-Louisville sentiment from rural fans contrasted sharply with their love of Eastern Kentucky schools. “The lower arena that comes every year gravitates to the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 16<sup>th</sup> region by Friday,” said Tackett.<sup>123</sup> According to some, fans associate “community” with Eastern Kentucky schools, not those from Louisville. Mike Sayre admitted that fans like to see communities rally, like “somebody out of the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> region.” He added: “Louisville is segmented with so

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<sup>120</sup> Jermaine Brown Interview, October 17, 2013, Louisville, KY.

<sup>121</sup> Tackett Interview.

<sup>122</sup> Billy Reed Interview, December 30, 2013, Louisville, KY.

<sup>123</sup> Tackett Interview.

many schools.”<sup>124</sup> The cultural comparisons between rural and urban schools have long played at the tournament. In 1969, one *Courier-Journal* headline announced “Country Boys Pitted Against City Dwellers.” A fan, who was a farmer, said, “We’re for the country boys.” Other students from Cuba went further: “We don’t like to see a Louisville team win the state tournament.”<sup>125</sup> Louisville stars understood this reality. Ron King, Mr. Basketball in 1969 for the state champion Louisville Central High School, observed the distaste for Louisville schools. Columnist Dean Eagle wrote in March 1969, “Ron King was slightly disturbed that more fans packed in Freedom Hall were rooting for Richmond Madison than for Central, but he shrugged it off with the conclusion that Central represents a big city.”<sup>126</sup>

That the anti-Louisville bias existed cannot be questioned. Several long-time spectators, who have seen the historically anti-Louisville bias evolve, postulated that the size, or at least perceived size, of the schools had been a motivating factor for fans. Before school consolidation began in earnest, rural, isolated communities often had high schools that served a very small population. Thus, the cultural similarities between the town and the school were tightly intertwined. Particularly in Eastern Kentucky, with small communities being separated by a mountain or other geographic barrier, with nearly impassable roads during wintertime and flood season, some counties had more high schools than Lexington. According to Kirt Chiles, Harlan County itself was at one time home to more than ten high schools.<sup>127</sup> Having attended over sixty-five Sweet 16s,

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<sup>124</sup> Mike Sayre Interview, January 4, 2014, Versailles, KY.

<sup>125</sup> Don Walker, “Country Boys Pitted Against City Dwellers,” Louisville *Courier-Journal*, March 29, 1969.

<sup>126</sup> Dean Eagle, “Press Box: Ron King has 80 Offers, Might Stay Close to Home,” Louisville *Courier-Journal*, March 28, 1969.

<sup>127</sup> Kirt Chiles Interview, December 22, 2013, Lexington, KY.

Dwight Peavler said, “Back in the old days” there “were so many small schools. Louisville schools were so much bigger.” The boys on the Louisville teams seemed bigger too, according to Peavler. They had “so many more boys to choose from” than smaller schools.<sup>128</sup> Attending over fifty tournaments himself, Mike Sayre agreed. “A lot of it is about numbers” for the bigger schools, he said, adding, “You get a school with 400 kids, you don’t have much to choose from.”<sup>129</sup> Because Kentucky has never adopted a class system based on school population, these long-time attendees argued that country schools have always represented the underdog. Scott Robertson, an attendee for over sixty years, consistently rooted for the underdog in each game, a decision that often pitted him against Louisville schools.<sup>130</sup> For these fans, they insisted, race had nothing to do with the historical fan bias against Louisville. Commissioner Tackett agreed: “The initial issues from Louisville had nothing to do about race. It had to do that they were from Louisville.”<sup>131</sup> Perhaps the commissioner’s perspective proved valid for some; however, long after school consolidation occurred, the anti-Louisville bias persisted. In fact, some evidence suggests that race was indeed a motivating factor for many.

That blatant anti-Louisville bias existed (and still exists) solely based on race and racism towards African Americans in Louisville cannot be substantiated by hard data. However, enough evidence suggested that race was a motivating factor, so a historian would be remiss to ignore it. Billy Reed, having attended the Sweet 16 for over half a century and analyzed the social aspects of sport for a similar duration, remarked that the anti-Louisville bias was a “relatively benign thing until integration.” He suspected that

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<sup>128</sup> Dwight Peavler Interview, January 4, 2014, Lexington, KY.

<sup>129</sup> Sayre Interview.

<sup>130</sup> Scott Robertson Interview, November 26, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>131</sup> Tackett Interview.

many outside the city equated city with black people, and black people with high crime. This built up an image of Louisville that was unfortunate and inaccurate, according to Reed.<sup>132</sup> Playing against two all-black Louisville teams in the 1971 semi-finals and finals, Dave Ruggles started for an all-white Anderson County team featuring All-American Jimmy Dan Connor. Ruggles recalled that Anderson County drew support from the Freedom Hall fans in all four games. “Small town county schools tend to make you into a Cinderella team,” he observed. Ruggles, who preferred playing more talented teams, felt that the anti-Louisville sentiment was “probably just a racist thing” from the fans.<sup>133</sup> Don Walker’s interview with fans in a 1969 article augmented this theory. While county fans rooted for non-Louisville schools, evidence indicated that Louisville Saint Xavier fans did as well, even though Saint Xavier represented Louisville. One Saint Xavier student said, “We think Central will win the tourney, but we hope somebody else does.”<sup>134</sup> Added another, “They (Louisville Central) win so much.”<sup>135</sup> Claiming that Central “wins so much” ignored the fact that Central had never won a Sweet 16 championship until that year, let alone that Saint Xavier hailed from Louisville. In fact, no black-only team had won until that year. To suggest that race was not a part of the bias seemed naïve. The race issues did not go away by the 1960s. Kyle Fannin remembered being “amazed at how racist it was” during a 1986 Sweet 16 game in which a Louisville school played a county school.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Reed Interview.

<sup>133</sup> Dave Ruggles Interview, October 16, 2013, Lawrenceburg, KY.

<sup>134</sup> Don Walker, “Country Boys Pitted Against City Dwellers,” Louisville *Courier-Journal*, March 29, 1969.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Fannin Interview.

Exacerbating the issue was the 1975 court mandate that Louisville schools be forcibly integrated through “busing.” The issue of race could not be escaped. According to Stan Hardin, born and raised in Louisville, busing took the community aspect away from many Louisville high schools.<sup>137</sup> Ironically, though race continued to be an ever-present component of anti-Louisville bias, busing proved to be an equalizer at the Sweet 16. Louisville powers won the Sweet 16 in 1969, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1974, and 1975. After forced busing, a Louisville school claimed only one more title in the next decade (Ballard in 1977). However, the bias continued to exist, regardless of Louisville success or lack thereof.

Along with race, size, and a general distrust of urban culture, the ubiquitous rivalry between the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville played into the bias. Throughout the rural areas of Kentucky, the cultural significance of the University of Kentucky men’s basketball team cannot be overstated. The university itself did not begin admitting African American undergraduates until the mid-1960s, and Adolph Rupp failed to persuade any African American players to attend UK until Tom Payne signed in 1969. The University of Louisville, however, desegregated almost fifteen years earlier and had established itself as a friendlier home to the state’s African American basketball stars, including Westley Unseld and Butch Beard. The rivalry between the schools spilled over into the Sweet 16, which brought race and geography with it. As mentioned in the last chapter, it was suggested that Unseld felt uneasy about attending the University of Kentucky for reasons of race. Billy Reed found that there was a bias in favor of the University of Louisville due to the elevated number of African

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<sup>137</sup> Stan Hardin Interview, July 29, 2013, Louisville, KY.

American players on its team.<sup>138</sup> Davon Davis did not comment on the race issue relative to the anti-Louisville bias, but he believed that much of the Sweet 16 hatred derived from the college rivalry.<sup>139</sup>

While the evidence failed to isolate a single reason for the anti-Louisville bias, it overwhelmingly suggested that it has existed for over fifty years. As the county schools, particularly in Eastern Kentucky, consolidated into much larger schools, the cultural component associated with community evolved. However, the feelings of suspicion towards Louisville teams never wavered. Whether the intolerance towards Louisville schools emanated from a fear of an urban setting, issues of race, size of the schools, a larger university rivalry, or some combination of these factors, the reality remained that the Sweet 16 tradition of “Louisville hating” proved persistent and virulent.

Fortunately, not all Sweet 16 traditions demonstrated the nasty side of the state. Uniquely Kentucky, the Sweet 16’s regional format has allowed for generations of Kentuckians to enjoy the tournament, and throughout those decades a sub-culture was created. Basketball itself has long provided the backdrop of the tournament, but annual customs began to take shape that intensified the state’s relationship with its basketball championship.

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<sup>138</sup> Reed Interview.

<sup>139</sup> Davon Davis Interview, October 20, 2013, Lexington, KY.

## Chapter 5

### Sub-Culture

*“Many of my memories of the tournament have nothing to do with basketball.”*

Mike Sayre<sup>140</sup>

The final chapter of this cultural analysis means to consider the sub-culture that has manifested over the last half-century as a result of the Sweet 16. The annual tournament has united the entire state, bringing together the various cultural regions from around the Bluegrass. From the early 1950s, before large-scale school consolidation, through integration and the Civil Rights Movement, moving past Louisville’s forced busing, and into the 1980s and 1990s, the unique nature of the Sweet 16’s regional format has created an intense following. While other states have adapted to a class system that segments schools by size and location, Kentucky has successfully fended off any attempt to change the tournament in significant ways.

Over the past decades, a small percentage of Kentuckians have earned a college degree.<sup>141</sup> Though improving, the lack of college experience could help explain the cultural significance of an event that highlights local communities. The cultural association with a local high school acted as a shared experience for most local or regional citizens, a commonality that could bind the entire area. Moreover, the relationship with local cultural values could intensify as the association with regional

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<sup>140</sup> Mike Sayre Interview, January 4, 2014, Versailles, KY.

<sup>141</sup> “State & County Quickfacts.” Income, Race, Education Statistics. United States Department of Commerce: US Census Bureau. Last modified December 17, 2013. Accessed January 1, 2014. [www.quickfacts.census.gov.qfd/states](http://www.quickfacts.census.gov.qfd/states)

success offers validation and meaning. Thus, the relative importance of the Sweet 16 could be enhanced, bolstering interest and statewide participation.

People from across the state have made attending the tournament an annual ritual, one that brought both Kentuckians and outsiders together. Fans from competing cultural districts have shaped traditions among themselves that are passed from generation to generation, from region to region. As a result, the Sweet 16 has created a five-day annual sub-culture, where Kentuckians from all cultural regions of the state have descended on either Louisville or Lexington. While basketball success served as the organizing distraction, old friends re-connected, traditions were passed down, legends were made through re-telling of stories, large amounts of gambling occurred, and parties ensued as the unspoken pull of a small state's high school basketball tournament fashioned a distinctive Kentucky experience that united, and divided, the various peoples of the commonwealth.

For many, the Sweet 16 provided a time to re-connect with old friends. Commissioner Tackett argued that often the basketball took a backseat. "The first two days (of the tournament), the fans are half heartedly paying attention to the games; they are re-uniting with the people around them," he said. "We go to great extremes to keep fans in the same area if not the same seats year after year."<sup>142</sup> "They spend the first fifteen or twenty minutes when they get there having a reunion in the hallway," he recounted.<sup>143</sup> Billy Reed, going on his sixth decade of Sweet 16 attendance, agreed, saying that the Sweet 16 was "a place to see old friends."<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Julian Tackett Interview, September 19, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Billy Reed Interview, December 30, 2013, Louisville, KY.

Innately drawing friends and family from around the state, the Sweet 16's appeal to fans binds Kentuckians around the cultural phenomena called basketball. Scott Robertson, who first went to the Sweet 16 in 1951, said that while Christmas was important, he much preferred the state tournament. "You get to go to the ball game; it's an enjoyable escape."<sup>145</sup> Mike Sayre noted, "It's not just the tradition of the tournament, but the tradition of going." Every year, Sayre was the first fan to make official arrangements for the next Sweet 16. Simply going to the Sweet 16 "is a drug for me," said Sayre.<sup>146</sup> Sam Arnold, at one time the largest single ticket purchaser at the Sweet 16, buying twenty-eight full tournament books for him and his friends, said, "It's just a dream to go. It was a vacation."<sup>147</sup> Having played in the 1992 tournament, Brandon Salsman later became a successful high school coach at Lexington Catholic. The Sweet 16 pulled him in from the beginning, Salsman said. "I can't leave this. It's like Disney World. It's where the magic happens."<sup>148</sup>

For many rural Kentuckians the chance to go to the Sweet 16 allowed the unusual opportunity to travel and demonstrate cultural pride. According to Kyle Fannin, "The city was taken over by rural Kentucky."<sup>149</sup> "Guys from Clay County were wearing overalls. That was their coming to meet clothes," added Sayre.<sup>150</sup> Tackett claimed, "There were people (in economically depressed areas) who borrowed money at a bank to go. They took out loans or promissory notes to try to get enough money to come." Going further, "That is part of the fabric of this event. It's worth that to people."<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Scott Robertson Interview, November 26, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>146</sup> Sayre Interview.

<sup>147</sup> Sam Arnold Interview, December 17, 2013, Cynthiana, KY.

<sup>148</sup> Brandon Salsman Interview, August 9, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>149</sup> Kyle Fannin Interview, June 3, 2103, Versailles, KY.

<sup>150</sup> Sayre Interview.

<sup>151</sup> Tackett Interview.

Producing legendary coaches, players, and teams, the Sweet 16 has acted as a conduit to state-wide fame. Older generations of fans passed down the stories of historical characters. Though many fans considered the 1961 Ashland team the greatest ever, perhaps the favorite team over the years was the 1965 Breckinridge County team. Racially diverse during the Civil Rights Movement, Breckinridge County's team *moved* fans. According to Dwight Peavler, who had seen almost seventy state tournaments, that team "had a hell of a defense."<sup>152</sup> "They'd whistle at you" and "slap the floor as you brought the ball up," added Mike Sayre.<sup>153</sup> Peavler concurred. "They slapped that floor when you came up," and you "could hear them whistle in the first few rows" of the arena.<sup>154</sup>

Of course, old-timers have long held that Kelly Coleman of Wayland High School, tucked inside Floyd County, was the preeminent player in tournament history. With each passing year, his legend came to assume Paul Bunyan status. Each person interviewed who witnessed Kelly Coleman, nicknamed "King," placed him at the top of his Sweet 16 list. At six feet, two inches, two-hundred-fifteen pounds, Coleman was a modern-day athlete set in 1950s rural, mountain Kentucky. Though his legend has remained unequalled, in 1956 the Lexington and Louisville papers found room to criticize. According to the *Floyd County Times*, the city newspapers "claimed he shot too much and were not appreciative of his game," and added, "The sports writers were gunning for him."<sup>155</sup> It was pointed out, however, that during his four-day stint at the 1956 Sweet 16, where he averaged over forty points per game (which was close to his season average),

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<sup>152</sup> Dwight Peavler Interview, January 4, 2014, Lexington, KY.

<sup>153</sup> Sayre Interview.

<sup>154</sup> Peavler Interview.

<sup>155</sup> Quentin Allen, "Hits at Coleman Critics," *Floyd County Times*, March 22, 1956.

“the Lexington and Louisville papers recorded his picture on their pages on 29 different occasions and his name appeared in these publications a total of 141 times during the four-day tournament.”<sup>156</sup> Moreover, the *Floyd County Times* fumed that the “crowd wasn’t on his side till the last game.”<sup>157</sup> Therefore, this legendary Kentucky phenomenon that towered over the Sweet 16 became a beloved marvel after years of storytelling. The same can be said of the 1963 and 1964 Louisville Seneca teams, dominated by Michael Redd and Westley Unseld. Discussed previously, Unseld’s decision to attend the University of Louisville and his rejection of the University of Kentucky made him an unpopular man in the mid-1960s, but today old-time fans remember those Seneca teams with admiration and fondness. Scott Robertson listed Seneca, along with Louisville Central (1969), Louisville Male (1970-71), and Ashland teams, as the greatest of all time.<sup>158</sup> Similarly, Peavler and Sayre named Seneca as one of their most favorite to watch, both marveling at Redd and Unseld.<sup>159</sup>

In recent decades, legendary figures have emerged as well. “Richie Farmer was a cult hero in this state,” remembered Scott Davenport. “He played in six or seven state tournaments.” Davenport, who coached the 1988 Louisville Ballard team to the state title, recalled the small schools that added color to the tournament over the years. “You have the stories of the Cubas, and the Clay Counties, and the Edmonson Counties that keep this thing going and makes it so special.”<sup>160</sup> Interestingly, the importance of the 1976 Edmonson County team proved more than just culturally critical. Though Edmonson did serve to add a small-town, cultural component, the timing of its Sweet 16

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<sup>156</sup> Gordon Moore, “Sports Chatter,” *Floyd County Times*, March 22, 1956.

<sup>157</sup> Quentin Allen, “Hits at Coleman Critics,” *Floyd County Times*, March 22, 1956.

<sup>158</sup> Robertson Interview.

<sup>159</sup> Sayre and Peavler Interviews.

<sup>160</sup> Scotty Davenport Interview, July 25, 2013, Louisville, KY.

victory might have served a greater purpose. Between 1960 and 1975, Louisville high schools won ten state championships, and six of seven from 1969 to 1975. Fans began to worry that the classless tournament format was in jeopardy. “They [Edmonson] literally saved the state tournament,” declared Commissioner Tackett. He added, “We (Louisville schools) had that run from the late 1960s and early 1970s; if we don’t have Edmonson County make that run, there is no telling what the tourney would look like.”<sup>161</sup> As the Louisville powers dominated, the attendance dwindled, particularly from county schools. Edmonson County represented a rebirth of small, culturally rural schools. Edmonson County saving the tournament in the late 1970s gave new life to this cultural affair. Calls for a class system were silenced, and the energy of the tournament was further enhanced in 1979, as the tournament venue changed to Rupp Arena.

This unspoken pull to the tournament, along with the passing down of Sweet 16 legends to younger generations, ignores one particularly critical aspect of the tournament sub-culture: the fans have lots of fun. Scott Robertson loved Freedom Hall because it allowed liquor. Robertson and his friends set up mixed drink stands next to their seats.<sup>162</sup> Mike Sayre recalled, “Restaurants used to stay open for state tournament spectators. It was a party atmosphere.” He continued, “Many of my memories of the tournament have nothing to do with basketball.”<sup>163</sup> Dwight Peavler and his family stocked the hotel room with alcohol as if in preparation for a Catholic wedding.

Along with the partying, gambling on Sweet 16 games was another vital aspect of the state tournament’s sub-culture. Very little has been written about this, though almost all annual participants know about it. Off the record, all seventeen interviewees

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<sup>161</sup> Tackett Interview.

<sup>162</sup> Robertson Interview.

<sup>163</sup> Sayre Interview.

acknowledged that gambling occurred on a regular basis. Mike Sayre remembered that bookmakers in the 1970s were often arrested for organizing gambling on the games.<sup>164</sup> Though no coaches conceded knowing the lines of their games, the great majority of them knew money was wagered. Most who acknowledged that gambling was a significant part of the Sweet 16 also felt sure that the games were never decided by illegal or dubious deals made between officials and gamblers. Although, the great majority of interviewees were loath to speak on the record concerning gambling, it has remained an important part of the Sweet 16 sub-culture. Gamblers were easy to spot; if a game between two schools with uneven talent resulted in a lopsided score, and the only people left in the arena were old men dramatically pulling for one team or another, the likelihood of their having wagered on the game was substantial. Gamblers and bookmakers filled the stands just like fans from participating schools, and these gamblers constituted an important part of the sub-culture of the Sweet 16. Kentucky's state tournament serves as a critical component of the state's culture, and those who have participated -- fans, players, coaches, referees, journalists, and administration officials-- have helped to create an annual cultural event that uniquely encapsulates the state.

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

*“Growing up, basketball was a big thing. Today there are so many other sports that kids play. Small schools didn’t have golf teams or swimming teams. The state tournament is not that big for them.” - Dwight Peavler<sup>165</sup>*

*“The tournament is much stronger today. The KHSAA recognized the importance of the fans and players.” - Sam Arnold<sup>166</sup>*

The cultural relevancy of the Sweet 16 has persisted over the years as basketball has dominated the sports landscape of the state for well over seventy-five years. Amazingly consistent, the Sweet 16’s regional format has changed very little over the past fifty years. However, what the tournament meant to communities and cultural regions has evolved. Kirt Chiles, who coached three different high schools to the Sweet 16, believed the tournament was losing support. “Basketball is less culturally important.”<sup>167</sup> Billy Reed was of the same mind, and noted that the tournament “doesn’t generate the same type of affection” now as in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>168</sup> Mike Sayre worried that “fifteen or twenty-five years from now there won’t be people who say they’ve been to thirty years in a row.”<sup>169</sup> Both Peavler and Robertson, some of the

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<sup>165</sup> Dwight Peavler Interview, January 4, 2014, Lexington, KY.

<sup>166</sup> Sam Arnold, December 17, 2013, Cynthiana, KY.

<sup>167</sup> Kirt Chiles Interview, December 22, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>168</sup> Billy Reed Interview, December 30, 2013, Louisville, KY.

<sup>169</sup> Mike Sayre Interview, January 4, 2014, Versailles, KY.

longest attendees of the tournament, felt that younger generations of people have so much more to do that a high school basketball tournament does not seem as fun.<sup>170</sup>

Many of the older fans and players suggested the product playing in the tournament was not as strong. Dave Ruggles, of the '71 Anderson County finals team, said, "The basketball isn't as good anymore. Players are more athletic, quicker and faster; the skills are much more diminished."<sup>171</sup> Hall of Fame coach Bobby Keith observed that the Sweet 16 of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s displayed impressive players who often made it to the professional ranks. He cited Clem Haskins, Wes Unseld, Butch Beard, Cliff Hagan, Johnny Cox, Jim McDaniels, and Darrell Griffith as examples of the great ball players who came through the tournament. It has been well over a decade since the last player to participate in the Sweet 16 was drafted in the first round of the NBA.<sup>172</sup>

There are others, however, who disagreed and considered the tournament to be thriving. Sam Arnold thought the tourney "much stronger today for all" the players, coaches, and fans. Giving credit to the KHSAA, particularly Louis Stout, Arnold conceded that the KHSAA finally recognized the importance of great fan support.<sup>173</sup> Even Mike Sayre admitted that the tournament's ticket sales are strong. Peavler worried about younger generations, and Commissioner Tackett did as well. Attempting to entice a younger audience, Tackett and his team have designed strategies to get Sweet 16 tickets in the hands of budding fans.<sup>174</sup> Tackett understands that attaching young fans to the event will pay dividends later, as the unspoken pull of the Sweet 16 works its magic.

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<sup>170</sup> Peavler Interview; Scott Robertson Interview, November 26, 2013, Lexington, KY.

<sup>171</sup> Dave Ruggles Interview, October 16, 2013, Lawrenceburg, KY.

<sup>172</sup> Bobby Keith Interview, June 26, 2013, Manchester, KY.

<sup>173</sup> Arnold Interview.

<sup>174</sup> Julian Tackett Interview, September 19, 2013, Lexington, KY.

Overall tournament attendance has held relatively steady over the past seven or eight years. Unsurprisingly, the attendance fluctuates based on the teams that participate.<sup>175</sup>

The Sweet 16 of the late 1960s and early 1970s, followed by the whole of the 1980s, experienced a statistically significant increase in the level of fan participation.<sup>176</sup> During the 1960s and early 1970s, the Sweet 16 was fortunate to host incredible teams with future professional prospects, and conversely, the 1980s was dominated by rural schools, which often brought huge community support. Consider that the largest attendance year in Sweet 16 history was 1987, the year Clay County and Richie Farmer won the championship. Regardless, the tournament is now what it has always been: a reflection of Kentucky. Fans of all ages continue to flock to the event.

One great misgiving among the older fans is the lack of small-school participation and success. Where are the Cubas and the Carr Creeks? Yet, the small Shelby Valley High School from Virgie, a tiny town in Pike County, made back-to-back final fours, winning in 2010. Moreover, one could easily argue that Louisville and Lexington schools actually experience bias from the tournament structure. Each of the sixteen regions is comprised of four districts, with each district containing between three and five schools (traditionally four). The size of the school does not matter; therefore, a region with a large number of tiny schools has the same chance to win a region tournament comprised of large schools. Consider the eleventh region, made up of Lexington and surrounding counties. Of the fifteen largest high school enrollments in the state, seven

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<sup>175</sup> "Sweet 16 Records," Kentucky High School Athletic Association. Accessed January 21, 2014. [www.khsaa.org/records/basketball/bbk\\_recordbook\\_sweet\\_16records.pdf](http://www.khsaa.org/records/basketball/bbk_recordbook_sweet_16records.pdf)

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

fall in this region alone, including the top three and four of the top five.<sup>177</sup> The “mountain regions,” the thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth, have no schools among the largest in the state, though schools from Louisville and Lexington have a sizable portion of them. One could easily argue that instead of the sixth and seventh regions, Louisville should be home to at least one if not two more. Likewise, the Lexington area, simply based on population, should have one more region. Each region has a similar number of schools, not people; therefore, smaller schools actually have a greater chance in the mountains of making the Sweet 16 than larger schools in the cities do. One could see that the urban versus rural cultural bias, illustrated in chapter four, has lingering effects.

These are the controversies of the current Sweet 16: alignment and attendance. Communities continue to find solace in basketball glory, and Sweet 16 success still serves as a cultural rallying point for many in economically depressed areas, white or black. Race problems persist in Kentucky, though the conversation at the Sweet 16 has moved on to other things. Louisville schools are still disliked, but for their supposed domination of the tournament rather than issues of race. The ire of Sweet 16 fans has moved away from race and toward supposed player stealing and recruiting.

The cultural importance of the Sweet 16 remains. The evidence presented here concerning community, race, urban and rural issues, overemphasis, and the tournament sub-culture has been based almost entirely on primary evidence. In-depth interviews, contemporary news articles, government data, and non-government research records are used as a way to more effectively analyze the cultural history and importance of the

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<sup>177</sup> “Enrollment,” Kentucky High School Athletic Association. Accessed January 21, 2014. [www.khsaa.org/reports/enrollments/20132014schoolenrollmenttotalsbyenroll.pdf](http://www.khsaa.org/reports/enrollments/20132014schoolenrollmenttotalsbyenroll.pdf)

Sweet 16. While secondary sources have been employed, little macro-level analysis has been published relative to the cultural identity and statewide importance of the Sweet 16. The flow and pace of this analysis was intentionally based exclusively on the voices of those who participated: fans, players, coaches, journalists, and KHSAA officials. They demonstrate that the Sweet 16 acts, and has acted over the years, as a mirror of Kentucky's cultural evolution.

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