

Landmark Game: 1963 Mideast semifinal was a game with no losers

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EAST LANSING, Mich. (AP) -Jerry Harkness called the game "the beginning of the end of segregation" and insisted both teams won that 1963 Mideast Region semifinal.

Loyola defeated Mississippi State 61-51, though the full impact of that matchup played at the Michigan State campus may never be known.

Third-ranked Loyola went on to upset two-time defending national champion Cincinnati the next week and win the NCAA men's title. But it was Mississippi State and coach Babe McCarthy that earned respect that transcended the basketball court.

"Game of Change," a new documentary film by Harkness's son, Gerald, will be screened Saturday evening in Detroit and will center on Mississippi State's decision to defy authority and sneak out of the state to play a predominantly black team.

"They were more of a winner than we were," Harkness, a two-time All-American, said Friday. "It took a long time for me to realize all that they went through. Today, I think that game was bigger than winning the national championship."

Loyola had won its first-round game against Tennessee Tech by a record 69 points but didn't know if its second-round game would be played. McCarthy, Mississippi State president Dean Colvard and athletic director Wade Walker made sure that it was.

In three of the previous four seasons, their all-white teams had been forced to decline NCAA invitations because an unwritten Mississippi law forbid play against integrated programs.

In 1963, the sixth-ranked Southeastern Conference champs changed history, thanks to a perfectly run play to get out of the state.

"Babe McCarthy was one wonderful person," Bulldogs player Bobby Shows said Friday. "And when he told us to jump, we said, 'How high?' We were just kids. We obeyed our coaches. So when Babe said, 'Boys, if we win it again, we're going to play in that tournament, come hell or high water!' we believed him."

Mississippi Gov. Ross Barnett wasn't about to let that happen. Nor was state Sen. Billy Mitts, a former Mississippi State student body president and cheerleader. Mitts even got an injunction prohibiting the team from leaving the state.

But before the papers could be served, Colvard left the state for a speaking engagement in Alabama, while Walker and McCarthy drove north, across the state line to Tennessee.

Early the next morning, trainer Dutch Luchsinger and several reserves drove to a private airport in Starkville, Miss. When they saw the path was safe, a call was made for assistant Jerry Simmons and the starters to hurry and join them.

The plane took off without incident, stopped in Nashville to pick up Walker and McCarthy and headed to Lansing and a warm reception. Back in Mississippi, the Ku Klux Klan and segregationists stewed while many others cheered their team's stance.

"When Babe said we were going, it was like God speaking," Shows said. "We didn't understand the politics. But we were all on pins and needles. Just as our plane took off, the sheriff drove through the gate. He'd driven to the wrong airport. It turns out he wanted us to go."

Loyola guard John Egan, the only white starter on his team, said he didn't understand the implications when Harkness and Mississippi State's Red Stroud shook hands at the center jump in Jenison Field House, as hundreds of flashbulbs popped all around them.

"Jerry is very emotional about this and was crushed when Red just died," Egan said. "None of us saw it as 'us' against 'them.' The Mississippi State players were true gentlemen. I guess we showed people the way it could be."

Mississippi State wound up with a split for the trip, beating Bowling Green and star Nate Thurmond in a consolation game.

"I think Nate had 30 rebounds in that game," Shows said with a laugh. "But when we got back to Starkville, the cars were lined up for 20 miles with thousands and thousands of kids there to see us. The KKK boys were a nasty, ugly minority. Most people weren't like that. And even though we lost, we came home as winners. All of us did."

Wood recalls 'Game of Change'
BY GERY WOELFEL
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RACINE — Chuck Wood was taken aback.

He and his Loyola University Chicago teammates were caught off-guard when they took to the basketball court against Mississippi State for an NCAA regional tournament game in 1963.

Wood, a 1960 graduate of St. Catherine's High School, saw an opponent with a distinct physical advantage.

"You didn't know a lot about your opponents when we played back then," said Wood, an assistant boys' basketball coach at St. Catherine's. "You didn't see tape of your opponent back then and you didn't see them on TV.

"We just knew they played in the Southeast Conference and that Kentucky was in that conference and that Kentucky was good. So we knew they had to be something.

"But when we saw them, we saw how big they were. They were definitely bigger than us. And they jumped well."

Mississippi State's height advantage was seemingly the only concern of Wood and his teammates, who otherwise treated the game like any other in their quest to win a national title.

Many other people had a drastically different perception. To them, this basketball game between basketball powers from the North — Loyola was ranked third in the nation — and the South — Mississippi State was ranked sixth — carried significant social implications.

For those people, it was a big game between an all-white team — Mississippi State — and an integrated Loyola team. For those people, including then Mississippi governor Ross Barnett and Mississippi state Senator Billy Mitts, that superseded any athletic event. And it was why Mitts obtained an injunction to prevent the Mississippi State team from traveling to East Lansing, Mich., for the game.

Bulldogs coach Babe McCarthy, whose teams weren't allowed to participate in the NCAA Tournament in 1959, 1961 and 1962 because of the racial policy, was determined to let his players have a chance at a national title.

To avoid being served the injunction, McCarthy secretly drove to Nashville, Tenn., while Mississippi State president Dean Colvard traveled to Alabama.

The next morning, some members of the basketball team went to a private airport in

Starkville, Miss., and, once realizing the coast was clear, summoned the rest of the team.

Yet, even then, there was concern whether the Bulldogs would make their trip.

“The word was that the police chief called over to the school and said he had an injunction to serve, but that he was on his coffee break and that he wouldn’t be able to get over there right away,” Wood said. ‘So he knew, too, that it was a good thing to get these kids out of town.’”

The Bulldogs didn’t stay in East Lansing long, either. They had received several threats, some coming from the Ku Klux Klan, an organization that advocates white supremacy.

But the game went off without a hitch, and it didn’t take long for Wood to realize the importance of it.

“At the introductions, they just had the captains shake hands,” Wood said of Mississippi State’s Red Stroud and Loyola’s Jerry Harkness. “It was amazing how many flashbulbs went off. It sort of illuminated the room.”

Wood, a 6-foot-3 reserve swingman who played in the game, said the teams had a mutual respect. No words were exchanged. No elbows were thrown. It was just a clean, hard-fought encounter.

“There wasn’t a peep either way,” Wood said. “If someone got knocked down, the other team put out a hand to help them up. Those guys couldn’t have been nicer.”

Loyola won 61-51 and went on to win the NCAA championship.

Mississippi State may have been an even bigger winner. The Bulldogs helped change the course of history. Their courage and resolve to play Loyola and its four black starters — Les Hunter, Ron Miller, Vic Rouse and Harkness — opened the doors to Mississippi State University becoming receptive to accepting students regardless of color.

“They say athletics can break down barriers and that game did,” Wood said. “That game had a social implication on the south and the state of Mississippi.

“That tournament game was in March and, in August, blacks registered at the school without an incident. They didn’t need the National Guard. They didn’t have any problems like they did before.”

The historical significance of the game wasn’t lost on the NCAA. It chose the Loyola-Mississippi State game as one of the 25 “defining moments” in the first 100 years of the NCAA.

Two weeks ago, the NCAA reunited several members of the 1963 Mississippi State and Loyola teams, including Wood, in Detroit. They attended a reception and were guests at

the NCAA Tournament game between Kansas and Davidson.

Wood and his friends also witnessed the premier showing of “Game of Change,” a documentary about their memorable game. The documentary was produced by Jerald Harkness, the son of the Loyola star guard.

“It was quite moving,” Wood said. “You sat there and you’d say to yourself, ‘Did that really exist? The way the governor is talking about blacks. ... You couldn’t believe it.

“All of those guys from Mississippi State didn’t know the impact they made. We all thought it was just a game then, but it was more than that.”