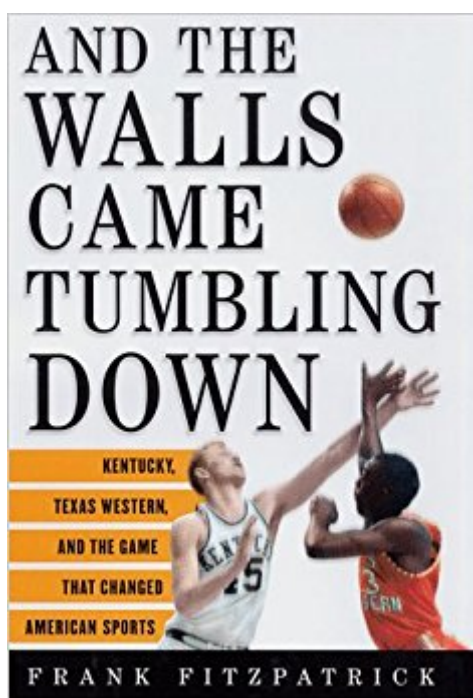


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And The Walls Came Tumbling Down: Kentucky, Texas Western, And The Game That Changed American Sports



Synopsis

I remember sitting in Mr. Grillo's high school English class one Friday afternoon in 1966 when the subject of that weekend's NCAA basketball tournament arose. As basketball fanatics, my friends and I argued the merits of the Final Four participants. No one mentioned Texas Western except to disparage the stunning racial makeup of their starting five. Five blacks! It was one thing for an inner-city high school to start five blacks, but for a college team at the Final Four, it was unprecedented. "All you have to do is get ahead," said one of my friends. "They give up when they're behind." "Kentucky is too smart," said another. "I'll bet all Texas Western can do is run-and-gun." The sad part was I believed it too. So when Kentucky was upset by Texas Western, with their tenacious defense, disciplined play, and marvelously named players like Big Daddy Lattin and Willie Gager, we were all stunned. My beliefs were shaken as severely as they would be in religion class that same junior year. Maybe I was wrong about the capabilities of black basketball players. About Catholicism. About a lot of things. So begins Frank Fitzpatrick's stunning account of the 1966 NCAA championship game. Late on the night of March 19, 1966, in the University of Maryland's Cole Field House, five unassuming black men from Texas Western stepped onto the court to face five white men from the University of Kentucky. On the surface, this was just another basketball game. But there were hidden forces at work. Kentucky's legendary coach, Adolph Rupp, had resisted the pleadings of his president to recruit his first black player in thirty-six years. Meanwhile, Texas Western administrators were concerned that coach Don Haskins was playing too many blacks. Almost everyone believed the game's result was a foregone conclusion: There was no way Texas Western's unheralded blacks could beat Rupp's mighty Kentucky Wildcats, featuring All-America Pat Riley. Yet Texas Western did win and American sports embarked on a new era. That 1966 NCAA title game -- played at a turbulent moment in civil rights history -- marked the first major sporting championship in which an all-black starting team had played, let alone defeated, a white one. Not since Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color barrier in 1947 had such a cultural watershed occurred in American sports. Sociologically and historically it was the most significant game ever in college athletics. In *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, veteran sportswriter Frank Fitzpatrick examines the game, the history that preceded it, and the sweeping changes that followed in its wake. In profiling the coaches, the players, and the administrators, he details the impact of that championship game and paints a nuanced portrait of the events that belied the easy black-and-white characterization. Through his close look at this rare moment when sports led rather than followed the forces for social change, Fitzpatrick takes readers on an unparalleled journey that brings the riveting story of this landmark season to life.

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Customer Reviews

Fitzpatrick wastes no time making his point in this fertile and compelling story of perhaps the most important college basketball game ever played: "What a piece of history," Arkansas basketball coach Nolan Richardson exclaims in an opening quote. "If basketball ever took a turn, that was it." Richardson may be underestimating. The 1966 NCAA championship final between the heavily favored, all-white University of Kentucky, and the "No Names from Nowhere" all-black starting five of upstart Texas Western (now the University of Texas-El Paso) was a sporting insurrection in a time of social chaos and upheaval. Played out in black and white, everything about this David-and-Goliath confrontation was washed in complex and layered shades of gray. Through strong interviews and contemporary accounts, Fitzpatrick builds toward the ineffable climax, recreated in spirited detail, on a Saturday night in Maryland. He lays his foundation with a contextual chronicle of the turbulent times, emphasizing the importance of white basketball to Kentucky's image of itself. He lays up strong profiles of the universities, their hoop traditions, the players, and the two extraordinary coaches who led them--the Miners' rumpled tactician, Don Haskins, and the Kentucky squire, Adolph Rupp, whose legend is sadly choked by his racist roots. "No one has ever studied the effect Texas Western's victory had on integration, nor would such a thing be entirely measurable," Fitzpatrick observes, but it was nevertheless unmistakable. "The number of black athletes at major colleges surged immediately afterward ... and basketball, which had always been linked with sweet-shooting country boys from places like Indiana and Kentucky, became the 'City Game.'" And for young blacks in America, the accomplishment provided something beyond a

national title; it held out a hint of hope. Walls' ultimate achievement--by no means a small one--is not letting us forget that. --Jeff Silverman

An admirably researched account of the barrier-shattering championship game that slam-dunked segregated college basketball. Outside of Jackie Robinson's baseball debut, perhaps no single sporting event had so profound a social effect as the 1966 NCAA basketball championship. The competitors were the upstart Texas Western (now University of Texas, El Paso) Miners and an established power, the University of Kentucky Wildcats. More than a battle between teams, however, the game pitted two ways of life. The Miners fielded their five best players, who also happened to be African-American; it was basketball's first all-black starting roster. The Wildcats, coached by Adolph Rupp (whom the author compares to the infamous Birmingham, Ala., police chief Bull Connor), were defiantly all-white. Philadelphia Inquirer sportswriter Fitzpatrick balances present-day interviews with the former players and surviving coaches with contemporaneous accounts to expose the sporting fraternity's subtle and not-so-subtle biases. Texas Western fielded a roster of formidable athletes whose brand of basketball was predicated on fundamentals: smarts, stifling defense, superior conditioning, and intimidation, not on the undisciplined, high-flying "playground" game then associated with black athletes (a misperception Fitzpatrick addresses throughout the book). Nevertheless, sportswriters and coaches across the nation dismissed the team's chances, assuming that they would fold under pressure (another persistent cliché about black athletes). Defying stereotypes and shrugging off tremendous stress, the Miners controlled the game and won; it was the Wildcats who were flummoxed. The game's "message" was lost on Rupp, who, despite a loss that would haunt him to his grave, remained steadfast in his defense of racial segregation and held out against recruiting black players until the 1970s. Although Rupp has his apologists, some of his former players try to soft-pedal his interdict on nonwhite players; she comes across as a small-minded bigot who set race relations in Kentucky back several years, if not decades. Fair but devastating in its portrait of persistent prejudice, this is a landmark account of a landmark event. -- Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Delivery ahead of schedule. The book wasn't that great. The author was very biased so I don't feel like the whole story was accurately portrayed..also I did not read it for pleasure. It was for an assignment in grad school and I had to write a 10 page book review on it. So my opinion is a bit tainted :)

I love how the author went in-depth on various aspects of this topic: Texas Western coach and players, UK coach and history, to give a full picture of the people, their attitudes as well as the basketball season and game. Very highly recommended read.

I'm glad this book was written (done in late 1990s) at a time when most of the principals were still alive and were available to speak about the experience. The author goes into a deep dive into the sociology of the era, both at Kentucky under Adolph Rupp and at Texas Western under Don Haskins. As he points out, the differences couldn't have been more stark, except that both ran brutally long practices and controlled their players' lives in ways that are unimaginable today. Oh, and they were both basically drunks, especially as they aged. The book does a minimal job about the game itself, and in fact it says the game was kind of dull. Texas Western held a lead almost from the beginning, and though Kentucky cut it to a point or two a few times in the 2nd half, Texas Western had a 5-10 point lead down the stretch. It was a fairly mundane victory. And when the style of play is compared to today, the author notes that it seems as if the players are in slow motion and that the court is much bigger because they simply don't take up a lot of space. It took another 15 years or so before the college game got really exciting -- thank you Magic Johnson and Larry Bird. Anyway, the author explodes a lot of myths in this book, and he deserves credit for being the first to nail down those facts so prominently. More recent books about the game have followed his lead. Among the things he explains, perhaps the biggest two are that Texas Western was an undisciplined team of outlaws that used superior athleticism to swarm around the stoic Wildcats, and overwhelmed them. Wrong on all counts. Texas Western probably did have better athletes, but it won with defense. Kentucky was a run-and-gun team at the time, the highest scoring in the nation. Texas Western won by outrebounding opponents by 13-14 boards per game and stifling them with a man-to-man that never gave up. On offense, Texas Western was always deliberate, and they were even more so in the championship game because they were afraid of getting into a speed showdown with the smaller, faster Kentucky team. Oh, and here's another myth disposed of early in the book. Rupp complained after the game and for another decade that Texas Western won with kids who didn't deserve to be in college, who were criminals, etc. Actually, more Texas Western kids graduated on time and graduated eventually than Kentucky players, and every single Texas Western player had a significant professional career. Every single one. Against all the odds, they did everything right. Perhaps the most interesting parts are the discussions of the two coaches. The author rips Rupp over and over again for his racism, his sadism towards his players and his arrogance. He quotes numerous people who call Rupp the worst egoist they ever met (I'm guessing

that those people had not met Donald Trump!). And that's how Rupp is remembered today, mostly due to his refusal to integrate his team, his loss vs. Texas Western, and his bitter complaints about it forever after. But at the same time, the author notes that there were some nuances in Rupp's life, such as his use of a black player when he began as a high school coach and his legitimate comments that even if he took on a black player, it would have been all-but-impossible for that player to compete in Mississippi or Alabama at the time. Meanwhile, Haskins seems charming, but nonetheless not exactly a guy you'd model your life after. He's described as drinking a case of beer a night and of running his team through practices after midnight if they lost a game. But he recruited guys who he thought could play ball, and he didn't care about their color or their back-story -- a true believer in performance. There's a lot to commend about that type of attitude. So, the book is a great review of a seminal moment in college basketball, and the real story therein. One more myth to explode: at the time, the black v. white thing wasn't quite as prominent as it became in later decades. Yes, everyone knew it was there, but because Kentucky was expected to win easily, the game had very little pre-game buildup, and even after the victory, Rupp's denunciation of his own team led many people to believe that it was a fluke. A few complaints. The writing in the book isn't particularly good, and it suffers from a ton of repetition. A ton of repetition. A ton of repetition. Kind of like that, where the same thing will be written on three consecutive pages, as if you're not smart enough to remember a prominent fact, such as that Rupp finally had a black player on his final team, or that he considered trying to recruit Wes Unseld (who went to Louisville instead), but didn't try very hard. Unseld would have been the center on that Kentucky team -- and probably would have made a difference. The book also has some weird shout-outs that make no sense. For example, it mentions that Gary Williams, future Maryland coach, was watching the NCAA final game because he was a college student at the time. But there's no quote from Williams about the game, nor any reference to what he thought about its significance. It's just dropping in his name for no apparent reason.

Ironically, "And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: Kentucky, Texas Western, and the Game That Changed American Sports," preserves a stereotypical view of the game that presumably challenged a prevailing stereotype. The controversial figure in this story has always been Adolph Rupp, coach of the Kentucky Wildcats, whose "Rupp's Runts" were the last all-white team to play for the championship in the NCAA mens basketball title game. Fitzpatrick makes Rupp the iconic figure of white racism. Indeed, before the game, Rupp told the press that a team of five black players could not beat a team of five white players. However, certainly Rupp was not alone in that holding that

stupid position. While it would not be surprising that Rupp, as a older Southern white man, would be a racist, his attempts to recruit future pros Wes Unseld and Butch Beard would seem to suggest he might have been something short of a card carrying member of the Klan. Yet Rupp is demonized throughout the book, while his players, most notably Pat Riley and Louie Dampier, are forced into the role of apologists. Unfortunately, Rupp's legacy pretty much ended with this game, while Riley and Dampier both got to prove their willingness to play not only against but with blacks in professional basketball. I had spent years booing Don Haskins and the Miners in the Pit in Albuquerque for years before I found out that UTEP had once been Texas Western and how won the NCAA title in 1966. The final score was 72-65, but as they often say, the game was never really that close. Fitzpatrick does assemble all the stories and quotes needed to give you a sense for what happened and how it was seen as important. The collision course between the two teams, the programs, the two coaches, the two ways of thinking, is crystal clear from start to finish. However, despite its importance, primarily in opening up the SEC to black basketball players and other athletes, this game certainly did not impact on the national championships for the rest of the decade. After all, the argument could be made that the only reason Texas Western won in 1966 was because freshman were not eligible to play and two-time defending national champion U.C.L.A. had the best player in the country, Lew Alcindor, playing on their freshman team. U.C.L.A. would win the next seven NCAA titles and all of John Wooden's 10 title teams were won by integrated teams. I have to believe, that even if Texas Western had lost, that the value of black players would have been lost on the rest of the country. As interesting as the story about this pivotal game happens to be, the story about the story is equally fascinating. While it was obvious to everyone who watched the game that a team of black players beat a team of white players, the sports media managed to cover the game without dealing with the racial aspects of the encounter. The aftermath of this story abounds with more irony. Kentucky did not recruit a black player until 1969, at which point Don Haskins was having trouble recruiting black players because of a Sports Illustrated story claiming he was exploiting black athletes by bringing them to Texas Western just to win the national championship (I know, think about it a bit and pretend it makes sense). When Rupp coached and lost his final game, it was again an instance of his five white players losing to a team of five black players. Ultimately, the picture of Rupp in this book makes him more of a pathetic figure than anything else. I guess when you have a larger than life figure like that it is impossible to put anything else in perspective because they overwhelm any story in which they are involved. But even though they are tearing down Cole Field House at Maryland, where this game took place, it is certainly a moment in sports history that needs to be recalled from time to time.

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