

University of Memphis

University of Memphis Digital Commons

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

1-1-2018

Larry Finch's Memphis: Race, Basketball and the City, 1967-1997

Keith Brian Wood

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Wood, Keith Brian, "Larry Finch's Memphis: Race, Basketball and the City, 1967-1997" (2018). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 2980.

<https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd/2980>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by University of Memphis Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of Memphis Digital Commons. For more information, please contact khhgerty@memphis.edu.

LARRY FINCH'S MEMPHIS: RACE, BASKETBALL AND THE CITY, 1967-1997

by Keith Brian Wood

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Major: History

The University of Memphis

December 2018

Copyright © 2018 Keith Brian Wood

All rights reserved.

Dedication

In loving memory of my mother Priscilla Austin Wood. Diabetes took her too soon, but her spirit lives on as she continues to inspire me daily.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation has been a collaborative effort from its inception. What began as a study of the intersection of race and sport in Memphis around negro leagues baseball shifted to a study of Larry Finch and how his basketball career impacted race relations in the city. At the University of Memphis, my advisor and directing professor Aram Goudsouzian's encouragement and patience have allowed me to grow as a historian and a scholar. Beverly Bond inspired me to stay the course during my residency year where I taught full-time and was a full-time graduate student. She also guided me towards a much more nuanced understanding of Memphis history. Sarah Potter fostered my analytical thinking and challenged me to think in more profound ways about race and sport. I would also like to thank my colleagues and peers that I coached with for seventeen years throughout the Memphis community. They accepted this young kid from Upstate New York and allowed me to become part of their community. Then, they allowed me to interview them to seek a deeper understanding of the racial dynamics in this city through the lens of basketball, issues that still challenge Memphis. It is through the generous support of Christian Brothers High School here in Memphis that I have been able to complete my doctoral studies, for that I am forever grateful. Finally, I must thank my loving wife Sheri Wood who allowed me to chase my academic dream while I worked full-time as a teacher and we were raising three young men.

Throughout my personal and professional career, basketball has offered me many opportunities. I hope through this work to give back to the game something worthy of what the game has given me.

Abstract

At the center of the 1973 Memphis State Tigers' run to the national championship game lies Larry Finch, whose basketball career spanned a period of profound change in the city of Memphis. This study seeks to examine how the community, both black and white, used basketball to construct an identity for Memphis. By examining Memphis basketball at the high school, collegiate, and professional level in the 1970s and 1980s, a more nuanced understanding of race relations in the city can be achieved. This study also examines how basketball forged black pride, black manhood, and black community during these years in the city. Finch was proclaimed as a symbol of the racial healing power of basketball for Memphis, but basketball also provides a vehicle to examine the racial inequalities and issues that pervaded the city in these same years. Basketball, as a social function, allowed black identity to be recast in a positive light following the turbulent times that preceded this era. Basketball also served as a forum for symbolic political assertion and an arena for real political struggle for blacks in Memphis. Political battles in Memphis involving school busing, public housing, crime, and white flight tell a story that runs counter to the myth of racial unity surrounding the 1973 Tiger team and the city. Finch's role varies in each of these basketball stories, but it is his image as a vehicle of racial healing in the city through basketball that drives this inquiry.

Table of Contents

Chapter	Pages
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: “Memphis is my home...”	17
Chapter 2: “To Bring this town together...”	56
Chapter 3: “Champions Behind the Wall: The 1974 - 1975 LeMoyne-Owen Magicians”	93
Chapter 4: “Memphis goes Pro...”	136
Chapter 5: “Memphis’ Black Basketball Coaching Moses: Verties Sails”	175
Chapter 6: “A Shakespearean Tragedy in Memphis”	208
Chapter 7: “Favorite Son”	243
Epilogue	281

Introduction

The 1973 Tigers' run to the national championship game remains atop the pantheon of narratives surrounding the history of the Memphis State men's basketball program. At the center of this story lies Larry Finch, whose basketball career spanned a period of profound change in the city of Memphis. The story of Finch's rise as a local schoolboy hero from Orange Mound's Melrose High School to his tenure as the first African-American head coach at Memphis State University provides insight into the social and racial history of the city during this period. Finch was proclaimed as a symbol of the racial healing power of basketball for Memphis, but basketball also provides a vehicle to examine the racial inequalities and issues that pervaded the city in these same years. At this specific moment in Memphis's history, basketball allowed for an assertion of racial equality on the court and the opportunity to unite the city socially and politically off the court. The Mid-South Coliseum provided an arena that sat on one of the physical borders of segregation in the city. Basketball, as a social function, allowed black identity to be recast in a positive light following the turbulent times that preceded this era. It provided a cultural counterpoint for blacks from the grim experiences of working and living in a culturally divided city. Players such as Finch provided a positive black male model of identity to both black and white communities. Basketball also served as a forum for symbolic political assertion and an arena for real political struggle for blacks in Memphis. Through competition with whites, basketball provided the black community, in Memphis and nationwide, with a heightened sense of black consciousness and self-esteem.

From 1968 to 1997, the period that spans the basketball career of Larry Finch, basketball reflected and reinforced the inequalities found in Memphis. Basketball provides a lens through which to examine the treatment of black male athletes in the city. In an era when colleges in the Deep South began to integrate their college basketball programs, the city of Memphis embraced its flagship university's shift in that direction. For Memphis State University, Larry Finch became a symbol of what could be in integrated athletics. Just as Jackie Robinson's stellar play catapulted the Brooklyn Dodgers to the World Series, Larry Finch carried the Tigers to the NCAA finals. Outside of the Mid-South Coliseum, the city of Memphis was as divided as it had ever been racially. The 1968 Sanitation Workers Strike, that brought Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to the city, was evidence of problems the city faced. King's assassination became a nadir in the racial history of the city. The period that parallels Finch's basketball career provided hope, but it also revealed racial discord and tension in the city. Finch was exalted by the white political establishment as a racial unifier. Finch welcomed the characterization which mirrored his own personal belief that: "If the world was like an athletic program – a winning team – it would be a lot better."¹ Nevertheless, the inequities faced by black male basketball players and coaches in the city during this era mirrors the plantation mentality prevalent in Jim Crow Memphis.

Finch's basketball career at Memphis State marks the inception of a myth propagated by local politicians that claimed basketball unified the city. As local politicians quickly embraced this narrative, the city remained torn by racial strife. Even as the Tigers marched towards the 1973 NCAA basketball championship game, the city

¹ "Finch Strives for the Ultimate," *Commercial Appeal*, March 15, 1973.

was torn over the issue of forced busing. White flight to the suburbs and the exponential growth of private schools in the city under the direction of these same politicians, points to a different reality in the city. Mayor Wyeth Chandler proclaimed that the Tigers “unified the city like it’s never been unified before. Black and white, rich and poor, old and young are all caught up in their success. Memphis is a better city now, thanks to the Memphis State basketball team.”² That same year, Chandler, in the midst of a political struggle over the forced desegregation of Memphis City Schools through busing, said, “I cannot and will not urge any parent to send his child into a ghetto school.”³ Had the 1973 Tigers truly healed the racial wounds of 1968 and brought the city together? These contradictory quotes by Mayor Chandler had parallels in the role that basketball has played in the American narrative, one that simultaneously asserts racial equality while at the same time exploits its black athletes.⁴

This inquiry seeks to examine the discrimination that black basketball players and coaches in Memphis faced during this period marked by the changing racial culture in the city. By examining Memphis basketball at multiple levels in the 1970s and 1980s, a more nuanced understanding of race relations in the city can be understood. This study

² Aram Goudsouzian, "Back to One City, The 1973 Memphis State Tigers and Myths of Race and Sport," March 21, 2016, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/back-to-one-city/>.

³ Beverly Bond and Janann Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 140.

⁴ Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969). Edwards’ foundational work challenged the theory that athletics brought together men of all races and nationalities on equal footing. Arguing that although whites may begrudgingly admit a black man’s prowess as an athlete, he will not acknowledge his equality as a human being. Jack Olsen’s *The Black Athlete: A Shameful Story*, examines further the dehumanization, exploitation and abandoned state of the black collegiate athlete. Finch’s career as a basketball player spans this same period of black athletic resistance taking place nationally.

also seeks to examine how basketball forged black pride, black manhood, and black community during these same years. Finch's role varies at each level of basketball, but his presence and symbolic status as racial unifier provide a key point of reference throughout. Finch's abilities and talent allowed for him to navigate through the murky racial waters as a player and assistant coach at Memphis State. However, as a black head coach he faced racial contempt and intolerance when the same community that supported him as a player could no longer control him as a man. In 1968, Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb's gendered view of black male sanitation workers in the city as "boys" pointed to a cultural paradigm in Memphis that placed black males in a subservient position."⁵ Many of the Memphis State faithful expected Finch to accept as head coach the same subservient role he accepted as a player. The black men that Finch played under and who became the roots of his coaching pedagogy, laid a foundation that allowed him to navigate these struggles successfully as a player. They also guided him when he became MSU's first black head basketball coach to assert his manhood in ways that further exposed the city's divided racial perceptions. His dismissal as head coach further unveils the racial constructions Finch was expected to accept.

As opposed to a biography of Larry Finch, this study intends to use Finch as a lens into the discrimination faced by black male basketball players in Memphis.⁶ Finch's rise as an iconic figure in the city mirrors the peaks and valleys of this period in the city,

⁵ Steve Estes, *I am a Man: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2005), 132. See also Laurie Green's *Battling the Plantation Mentality* to understand the racial norm in Memphis during Finch's childhood.

⁶ Rob Ruck, *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). Ruck uses a case study to examine the role and relationship of sports with race in the city of Pittsburgh.

socially and politically. As a prep star at Melrose High School, he was part of the first series of desegregated prep basketball games and city championships. At Memphis State, he was the central figure in the Tigers' 1973 run to the NCAA Final Four. As a professional, he was a member of the ABA's Memphis Tams and Sounds. His coaching career began as an assistant to Dana Kirk at MSU, when the Tigers again reached the NCAA Final Four. Then in 1986, Finch became the first African-American head coach at MSU. For the next eleven years, he was again the central figure at the city's flagship university. During these same years, the city of Memphis struggled with the wounds incurred from racial strife in the city. Basketball became an avenue for whites and blacks to meet on common ground, a space for blacks in the community to seek equality based upon athletic merit. Lifelong Memphian and Memphis State alum Richard Coleman echoed this sentiment following a basketball game at the FedEx Forum, when he wrote "there's a lot of things wrong with the city of Memphis that I won't get into. But, there's always been one common denominator that brings us together, basketball! Whether it's the Tigers or the Grizzlies, when they win on the national stage we become one. There's no better feeling than to walk out of the arena and people are high fiving and hugging each other. For a brief moment we're one, there's no racial barriers, no political or religious differences, we're one!"⁷ Coleman's sentiment resembles the way that many Memphians have felt about basketball since the heroics of Larry Finch and his Tiger teammates carried the team to the NCAA championship game in 1973. Over the course of the twentieth century whether it was Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Jim Brown, or Memphis's Larry Finch, Americans learned to fantasize that a single

⁷ Richard Coleman, interview by author, April 23, 2017.

person would save them from the racial problems that were endemic, built into the structure.⁸ But not all Memphians are avid basketball fans. There is no one monolithic Memphian, black or white. Therefore, although the 1973 Tigers held a degree of unifying influence in the city, basketball was also leveraged as a tool to veil the political and social issues facing blacks across the city.

There are two basic themes that run concurrently throughout this inquiry. The first is that the myth embraced and propagated by local media and politicians surrounding Larry Finch is just that, a myth. Basketball fans throughout the city have embraced Finch's legend and celebrated his status as an iconic figure. There lies merit within the lore. For brief moments the city came together as one at the Mid-South Coliseum to cheer on their Tigers. Nevertheless, when whites and blacks left the Coliseum they returned to homes in a city that remained segregated and a world that constantly contested the shifting racial climate. The second is an examination of the inequities, discrimination and injustices faced by black players and coaches from high school basketball through the at all levels of basketball in the city during this era.

The field of sports history has placed significant emphasis on the role of race, in probing the role of sports in the black freedom struggle. Historians David Wiggins, David Zang, Amy Bass, and Randy Roberts have opened the doors to scholarship in this field and have begun to connect the role of black athletes to the larger American

⁸ Henry Yu, "Tiger Woods at the Center of History: Looking Back at the Twentieth century through the Lenses of Race, Sports, and Mass Consumption," found in *Sports Matters: Race, recreation and Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2002), 334. Yu further argues that black athletes at their height of popularity fit into the generic modes of understanding African American masculinity in the United States. Finch's roles in the 1973 championship run and the 1985 Final Four, mask the greater issues facing Memphis as politicians reconstructed his story to fit their own political objectives.

narrative. Noted sociologist Harry Edwards *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* challenged the theory that athletics brought men of all races together on equal footing in the late 1960s. William C. Rhoden's more recent work *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* contends that black athletes have found themselves on the periphery of true power in the sports industry and remain slaves, of their own accord, to the sports industry.⁹ One of the common modes of historical analysis of the role of the black athlete in the American narrative has been biographical. Jules Tygiel's *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* examines the quintessential black sports hero and how the "noble experiment" reflected more than a saga of sport but offered an opportunity to analyze the integration process in American life. Milton Katz and Leonard Shapiro provide in-depth analyses of two of America's preeminent black basketball coaches: John B. McLendon and John Thompson.¹⁰ Recent histories of Charlie Scott and Perry Wallace, the men who broke the color barrier respectively in ACC and SEC basketball, have furthered our understanding of how race and sport clashed in the South during the era preceding Finch's playing

⁹ William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 269. Rhoden's assertion that black sporting life reflects the main currents of black life in America allows for a more nuanced understanding of the treatment of black athletes at MSU. He questions the preparedness of black athletes as big-time college universities to deal with those racial realities. His argument that professional athletics creates a plantation mentality runs parallel to the plantation mentality that existed in the city of Memphis during the Finch years. Seeing black athletes as commodities and not as human beings creates tensions that he argues are easily masked by the celebrity and benefits black athletes received.

¹⁰ Leonard Shapiro, *Big Man on Campus: John Thompson and the Georgetown Hoyas* (New York: Holt and Company, 1991) and Milton Katz, *Breaking Through: John B. McLendon, Basketball Legend and Civil Rights Pioneer* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007). Shapiro constructs John Thompson's story through a unique set of lenses as reporter and personal confidant. Thompson, long attacked for the black aesthetic his players carried on the floor, became a symbol for the impact an African American head coach could make as basketball coach at a predominately white university. Thompson demanded respectability as a black man through "bogarding," which Shapiro ties directly to Thompson's roots on the Washington, D.C. playgrounds. Katz's *Breaking Through* further emboldens McLendon as a racial pioneer and civil rights advocate, while existing within the segregated world of HBCU basketball. Johnson's relationship with McLendon and McLendon's influence upon Johnson marks the importance of Johnson to not only black basketball, but also links Johnson directly with the game's founder James Naismith.

career at Memphis State. Sports historians Pete Axthelm, Rick Telander, and Vincent Mallozzi have examined the importance of urban basketball to the construction of black identity.¹¹ Others have also examined the desire for white America to find its “Great White” hope.¹² Adam Criblez’s intervention suggests that the black aesthetic found in inner city basketball became the major impetus for the modern professional game.¹³ Larry Finch’s *Memphis* allows for further examination of the black aesthetic on the impact of basketball in the Deep South on multiple levels of play.

Another area that has lacked in academic study has been the impact of the ABA on the modern professional game. Terry Pluto’s *Loose Balls* became the first in a limited number of studies to examine the impact of the ABA. Most of these studies have been crafted by authors who were connected to the franchise in some form or another. Gary West’s *Kentucky Colonels of the ABA* and Mark Montieth’s *Reborn: The Pacers and the Return of Pro Basketball to Indianapolis* are case studies that examine the impact of the

¹¹ Pete Axthelm, *The City Game* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), Rick Telander, *Heaven is a Playground* (New York: Sports Publishing, 2013), and Vincent Mallozzi, *Asphalt Gods: An Oral History of the Rucker* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 2003). These three works illustrate the unique black aesthetic found in inner city basketball. The culture of inner-city basketball. Although both describe basketball in New York City, the introduction of the black aesthetic to Memphis basketball began with the onset of the MIAA city basketball championship. Finch’s role as an iconic figure in Memphis State lore includes his role as one of the first black players who starred at Memphis State whose play embodied the black aesthetic.

¹² Mark Kriegel, *Pistol: The Life of Pete Maravich* (New York: Free Press, 2007) and Seth Davis, *When March Went Mad: The Game that Transformed Basketball* (New York: Holt, 2010). The basketball careers of Pete Maravich and Larry Bird both point to the country’s desire to find a “white hope” during this era that marked a noted shift away from white stars to the collegiate and professional games dominated by black players and the black aesthetic.

¹³ Adam Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts: Dr. J., Pistol Pete, and the Birth of the Modern NBA* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017). Criblez’s asserts that the modern NBA is a product not of the Bird vs. Magic rivalry of the 1980s, but instead is a product of the black aesthetic found in the ABA with Dr. J, the skyrocketing salaries that were a byproduct of the battle between the ABA and NBA for players, and the merger of the two leagues.

ABA on their host cities.¹⁴ “Larry Finch’s Memphis” provides an addition to this scholarship on the impact of the ABA on the modern professional game. Whereas both the Kentucky and Indianapolis franchises were successful in regions where basketball reigned, Memphis’s ABA franchise failed which signals the limited impact of the game on the city during this era.

Recent histories of Memphis have begun to examine the role of African Americans in the city from a grassroots approach. Laurie Green, Michael Honey, and Elizabeth Gritter have produced grassroots studies that have infused social, economic and political activism of blacks in the city into the historical narrative. Shirletta Kinchen’s and James David Conway’s recent works examine the role of Black Power politics in Memphis, which mirrors the same period of Larry Finch’s playing career at Melrose High School, at Memphis State, and with Memphis’s ABA franchise. Montgomery McBee’s Ph.D. dissertation “They Also Played the Game,” examined, in case study form, the role of Negro League baseball in the city of Memphis from the 1920s through the 1950s. The run by the 1973 Memphis State Tigers to the NCAA’s championship game transformed the city into a basketball crazed community. Thus, there is a need to examine the relationship between basketball and racial relations in the city.

Other scholars, outside of the discipline of history, have further examined the roles of blacks within Memphis’s historical narrative. Charles Williams’s *African-American Life and Culture in Orange Mound* provides an anthropological look at the

¹⁴ Mark Montieth, *Reborn: The Pacers and the Return of Pro Basketball to Indianapolis* (Indianapolis: Halfcourt Press, 2017) and Gary West, *Kentucky Colonels of the ABA: The Real Story of a Team Left Behind* (Morley: Acclaim Press, 2011). In a league doomed to fail, these two franchises encompass the possibilities of creating successful professional franchises, but they also expose the limitations and obstacles faced by the upstart ABA.

black community of Orange Mound. Zandria Robinson's *This Ain't Chicago* provides a sociological examination of race, class, and gender through the prism of a country-cosmopolitan identity found in post-civil rights Memphis. She situates Memphis's regional identity as a strategically negotiated accomplishment based on shared, though contested, understandings of what it means to be a black southerner. Marcus Pohlman's *Opportunity Lost: Race and Poverty in the Memphis City Schools* provides another sociological view of the challenges faced by black students in the city following the postindustrial economic changes coupled with racial exclusion that made it extremely difficult for black children to rise from rags to riches in the city.¹⁵ Former *Commercial Appeal* beat writer Otis Sanford's *From Boss Crump to King Willie* another lens through which to analyze the era of Finch's playing career, through political discourse.¹⁶ Williams's, Robinson's, Pohlman's, and Sanford's explorations allow for an interdisciplinary approach to understanding black identity, but they have paid little attention to sport. This inquiry's examination of the construction of both black identity and racial barriers through sport to add to the existing literature.

"Larry Finch's Memphis" opens with an examination of the role of high school basketball in bringing white and black Memphians together. Chapter one, "Memphis is

¹⁵ Marcus Pohlman, *Opportunity Lost: Race & Poverty in the Memphis City Schools* (Knoxville: UTK Press, 2008). The city's 1973 bussing issues were symbolic of the social conflict within the city that politicians masked with Finch and MSU's run to the NCAA finals.

¹⁶ Otis Sanford, *From Boss Crump to King Willie: How Race Changed Memphis Politics* (Knoxville, UTK Press, 2017). Sanford's first-hand knowledge of the racial and political struggles that have faced Memphis during the twentieth century captures the struggle by African Americans in the city for social acceptance and political inclusion through the lenses of the editors of the city's newspapers. He examines not only the political shift from Crump to Herenton, but he also explores the obstacles faced by the city's black citizens as a rare group in the Deep South that retained the right of suffrage.

my Home,” introduces basketball as a vehicle for unifying the city racially. Examining the first two MIAA basketball city championship games in 1968 and 1969 provides an analytical framework to begin understanding the relationship between basketball and the city. Both games were played at a time when the city was searching for common ground to unite following the racial discord in the city after Dr. King’s assassination. The 1969 MIAA City Championship game was considered by many to be the most important high school basketball game in the city’s history. The game also provided insight into the racial relations in the city as Finch’s Melrose High, one of the oldest black high schools in the city, competed against Johnny Neumann’s Overton High, one of the city’s newest white high schools in East Memphis. This chapter also studies the Mid-South Coliseum as an affective piece of geography, and its impact upon the city racially. The 1969 game was played in front of a sold-out crowd at the Mid-South Coliseum, as Finch’s Melrose defeated Neumann’s Overton. Finch’s subsequent decision to sign with Memphis State signaled the birth of his role as the central figure in the narrative that placed basketball as the healing trope for the city.

The next chapter, “To Bring This Town Together,” provides an analysis of the 1973 NCAA Final Four run of the Memphis State basketball team. Propelled by the play of black Memphians Larry Finch and Ronnie Robinson, the Tigers advanced to the NCAA championship game before being defeated by the UCLA Bruins. Finch’s senior year provided the culminating moment in Finch’s basketball playing career and it allowed the city to revel in its newfound avenue for unity. The moments leading up to the Final Four, and the political rhetoric that encompassed the fervor around the team, were the origins of Finch’s racial healing trope. The young Tiger star from the other side of the

tracks provided a rallying point for the city's political leadership as they struggled with the shifting racial paradigm in the city. The city turned to basketball, one of the few unifying platforms, to shift attention away from forced busing and the issue of school desegregation in the city. By unifying behind Larry Finch's play and the Tiger's success, less attention was paid to the real issues that continued to divide the city.

The third chapter, "Champions Behind the Wall," explores the issues faced by the city's historically black college, Lemoyne Owen College, as they claimed Memphis's only men's national basketball championship during the 1974-75 season. LOC's status as a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) provided hope and a space for racial pride within black Memphis. For the small HBCU, basketball provided a sense of institutional pride and engendered school spirit. During this era many of the best black basketball players were integrating larger white universities throughout the country. However, many black players chose the safety and security of an HBCU to continue their basketball careers. The Magicians' Jerry Johnson, a product of a segregated world, thrived in LOC's small segregated environment and became an iconic figure within the black community. Hidden behind the wall of segregation in Memphis, LOC provided a family-like atmosphere that strengthened the resolve of a community relegated to second class citizenship in the city. LOC's membership in the Volunteer State Athletic Conference, an otherwise all-white NAIA athletic conference, signaled a movement towards racial reconciliation. The 1975 LOC team's story sheds light on the realities that HBCUs faced as historically white colleges and universities began a brawn drain that not only depleted their talent pool, but it also exposed the financial hardships faced by HBCU athletic programs. Lemoyne-Owen's story is pivotal to understanding the racial

relationships within the city at the time. The school's anonymity signals the extent to which the city was divided racially during this era. Although LOC provided a safe haven for its athletes from the exploitation occurring at predominately white universities, nevertheless the school and its players faced the economic realities of being a small HBCU.

The fourth chapter, "Memphis' Black Basketball Coaching Moses," positions Verties Sails experiences as the first African American assistant basketball coach at Memphis State within the struggle for racial equality in the city during this period. Sails's leadership on and off the court should place him among the iconic figures in the black coaching fraternity, yet his role has been minimalized in Memphis's basketball narrative. A pioneer in the city for racial equity through sports, his quiet activism helped to bring racial progress at the high school and collegiate levels. Sails's voice remained a consistent one for Larry Finch, from his decision to sign with Memphis State through Finch's years as the school's first African American head coach. The various racial slights and struggles Sails faced on campus and in the city as the first African American assistant at MSU expose the limited scope of basketball as a unifying trope in the city. These racial slights make it apparent that a lack of racial healing in MSU's basketball and athletic program were commonplace following Finch's graduation in 1973. Finally, this chapter aims to establish the importance of Sails's groundbreaking role as the first assistant African American basketball coach to the ascension of Finch as the school's first African American head coach.

The fifth chapter, "Memphis Goes Pro," moves away from the healing myth of Finch towards an understanding of how race and sport intersected in the city during the

ABA's short-lived stay in the city. Constructed as a case study of Memphis's ABA organization, this chapter reveals parallels in the instability of the league with the shifting racial paradigm in professional basketball. The ABA's reputation as a "blacker" league with its style of play, physicality, and athleticism serves as a point of reference to examine racial tensions in Memphis's ABA organization. Memphis seemed a logical location for an ABA organization during this period that was marked by the city's love affair with Larry Finch. As the city's love affair with basketball purportedly unified the city, then the success of an ABA team that eventually featured Finch, should have brought similar success. Yet, the ultimate failure of the ABA in Memphis highlights the difficulties that the city had with accepting a league where black men wore afros, gold chains, collected large salaries, and were not committed to the city in a way that the black players were who played for good ole State U at Memphis State.

Chapter six, "A Shakespearean Tragedy in Memphis," examines the Dana Kirk era at Memphis State as a prime example of the racial exploitation that black players faced on college campuses during this era. Kirk's tenure marked the return of Memphis State to the upper echelons of college basketball and with the recruitment of local black basketball players. Scarred by NCAA violations and claims that the treatment of black players in the program were exploited Kirk was dismissed by the university. This chapter explores the racial implications of a white head basketball coach, Kirk, who exploited the talents of black players from the city to bring Memphis back to the apex of college basketball. The local NAACP accused Kirk of failing to be concerned about his black players when only four basketball players graduated during his tenure, and they were all

white. The unscrupulous ploys by Kirk and the school's boosters furthered negative racial stereotypes in both the white and black communities.

In "Favorite Son," Finch's years as the head coach for the Tigers and the first African-American head coach in the Deep South are analyzed as part of the larger narrative that employed his basketball career as the essential element in the healing narrative of Tiger basketball for the city. Finch's character and integrity straightened out the program following Kirk's troubled reign as the school's head coach. Yet, even as Finch returned respectability to the program as head coach he was held to a standard he could not duplicate. As his tenure progressed, the Tiger faithful began to question his coaching competence. When the team moved into a new downtown arena, the Great American Pyramid, and attendance began to wane, his position became perilous. This chapter also explores Finch's fall from favor as part of the discriminatory treatment he faced as the school's first black head basketball coach. When Finch was forced to resign his position as head coach by the university in the middle of the season, with no plausible explanation by the school's president or athletic director, it pointed towards the inequities he faced. If Finch was truly the unifying force and the most iconic figure in the school's basketball history, why would the school dismiss him in this fashion? In a uniquely Memphis fashion, the city and the university continued to praise Finch while removing him from the university's top basketball coaching position. The local media, the university, the alumni, and the fan base embraced Finch as a heroic figure who symbolized racial healing as they overlooked this professional act of betrayal to a man who had given over 25 years of his life to the university and city. The final chapter in

Finch's basketball career sheds further light on the relationship between basketball and race in Memphis.

Basketball historian Stanley Cohen noted that, "what once burned bright in memory recedes into the more remote pockets of recollection. We treat the past as if it were a vault in which events can be stored and preserved against the incursions of time. But time stakes its claim. Memory is an untrustworthy guide. The tale, cast anew each time, becomes transformed in the telling. The facts, of course, are always the same; it is the way we see them and feel about them that changes."¹⁷ Larry Finch's Memphis was a very complicated place. The simplicity of a game played with a round ball shot towards a cylindrical basket belies the complexity of the racial implications associated with the game. Basketball brought the city together, albeit for brief periods of time. Following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the Lorraine Motel, the city was in search of a healing trope that could bring the city together. Finch's courage to create his own path, against the better judgement of many in Orange Mound, began a relationship with Memphis State that changed the trajectory of Tiger basketball. Politicians, both black and white, propagated a myth that basketball was the unifying force that propelled the city forward. Further analysis exposes the inherent weaknesses in this myth. Finch's name is synonymous with Tigers' basketball and he deservedly earned his place among the pantheon of Tiger greats, yet he also paid a heavy price for his commitment to both the city and the university. Behind the veil of this myth promulgated by Wyeth Chandler was a city torn by racial discord, political upheaval, and white flight.

¹⁷ Stanley Cohen, *The Game They Played* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1977), ix.

Chapter 1

“Memphis is my home...”

Under the guise of high school athletics a few progressive minded athletic directors and coaches attempted to use sports as a conduit to improve race relations in the city in the 1960s. The first integrated high school football game in the city took place on September 15, 1965, between all-white Catholic High and all-black Father Bertrand High at Crump Stadium in front of close to 7,000 fans.¹⁸ Later that same school year, the Tennessee Secondary Schools Athletic Association held its first integrated state basketball championship when all-black Pearl High of Nashville defeated all-white Treadwell High of Memphis on the campus of Vanderbilt University. On that same March night, Texas Western started five black players as they defeated the University of Kentucky’s all-white team for the 1966 NCAA men’s basketball championship.¹⁹ The following school year, schools across the city began to schedule integrated athletic events. Historian Jules Tygiel coined the phrase “baseball’s great experiment” to describe Jackie Robinson’s integration of major league baseball and thus set the precedent for other institutions to provide social justice long denied the black community. Sport ultimately played into the civil rights movement in richly symbolic terms. Black athletes on the baseball diamond, football gridiron, and in the basketball arena reinforced

¹⁸ Bill McAfee, “Catholic Defeats Bertrand,” *Press-Scimitar*, September 16, 1965.

¹⁹ Andrew Maraniss, *Strong Inside: Perry Wallace and the Collision of Race and Sports in the South* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Press, 2014), 81 & 86. Although Finch was not the first black to play at MSU, the era in which he played collegiate basketball was dominated black men who became the first to play at southern universities. Charles Martin’s *Benching Jim Crow* and Barry Jacobs’ *Across the Line* chronicle the narratives of the black men who broke the color barrier in the SEC and ACC. Finch’s role as an iconic hero in Memphis places him alongside these same pioneering black athletes.

race pride and established role models for African Americans who believed that the time had come to assert their claims to full participation in the life of the nation.²⁰ Memphis joined the “great experiment” in the fall of 1967 when a group of coaches and athletic directors mapped out a plan to integrate athletics in high school sports under the umbrella of the Memphis Interscholastic Athletic Association.

The MIAA provided the foundation for the integration of high school basketball in Memphis, as well as a platform that introduced the city to Larry Finch. Following the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision by the United States Supreme Court, Memphis began the process and political struggle over the desegregation of public schools. Memphis City Schools began the process in 1960 when thirteen first graders were enrolled in all white Bruce, Gordon, Rozelle and Springdale elementary schools.²¹ By the fall of 1967, the schools in the city remained segregated as the coaches and athletic directors attempted to use the athletic arena to show Memphians that the black and white communities could share common ground. From these initial steps emerged the MIAA city basketball championship games at the Mid-South Coliseum. These games became the showcase for high school basketball in the city, as black and white teams competed for a championship that placed them atop of the city’s basketball hierarchy.

The inaugural MIAA basketball championship was hampered by inclement weather and was missing the city’s two best basketball players, Larry Finch and Johnny Neumann. The next year in 1969, the MIAA basketball championship game featured

²⁰ David K. Wiggins and Patrick B. Miller, *The Unlevel Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 205.

²¹ Michael Kelley, "Memphis City Schools: A District Born amid Segregation, Yellow Fever Fades into History," *Commercial Appeal*, June 28, 2013.

Finch's all black Melrose High School and Neumann's all-white Overton High School. One year removed from the assassination of Dr. King, school integration was a politically and socially explosive issue. Local media coverage openly avoided any racial undertones, but underneath the façade of racial indifference was a community torn apart by race. The sellout crowd at the Mid-South Coliseum pointed to its importance in both the black and white communities. Players, fans, and coaches who participated in this game have all looked back with a sense of civic pride because of the lack of any violence surrounding the game. The 1969 MIAA City Championship basketball game both transcended and exposed the racial tension in Memphis. A peaceful, unifying narrative became a foundational stone for unifying the city behind basketball, even as the city suffered from racial division.

For the decade preceding the MIAA's decision to desegregate high school athletics, city government and the Board of Education juggled varying philosophies, strategies, and legal remedies to limit the Supreme Court's directive in *Brown v. Board* to desegregate schools. High school athletics remained segregated. Before 1967, whites played in the Prep League or Shelby County League and blacks played in the Negro League. Local coaches and athletic directors began to defy cultural norms and cross racial boundaries in 1965 with the Catholic v. Father Bertrand football game. The courage of Catholic's Ollie Keller and Father Bertrand's W.P. Porter personified the ideals of social justice that Catholic schools taught.²² These same ideals were not as

²² Keith Wood, "CBHS Football Game vs. Melrose Helped to Bring City Together," *Purple and Gold* (Spring Summer 2016), 46-47.

prevalent with the leadership governing the Memphis City Schools. Yet over the next two years, integrated high school athletics became less contentious as teams continued to cross racial lines to play. These initial contests preceded the desegregation of high school athletics in the summer of 1967 with the creation of the Memphis Interscholastic Athletic Association (MIAA).²³

The integrated MIAA gave birth to the city championship basketball game. For years, the city's best white basketball teams assumed they were the best and the black basketball teams assumed the same. Jim Crow denied the city's best players, from both sides, the opportunity to compete against each other for their respective high schools. Very few white players crossed racial boundaries into black neighborhoods, such as Orange Mound, to compete against the city's best black basketball players.²⁴ Black players who went to find games in white neighborhoods quickly found themselves halted by Jim Crow. Thus, the best basketball players in the city were kept away from each other except on the rare occasions white players sought out games in black neighborhoods. The creation of an integrated basketball city championship provided players an opportunity to openly compete against each other, even while segregation continued to divide the city. Playing in the city's prime sports arena, black and white players in town were given a platform to showcase their abilities.

²³ Keith Gentry, *2015-2016 Shelby Metro High School Basketball* (Memphis: Gentry's Statistical Service, 2015), 95. Keith Gentry has kept statistics for prep sports for many years in Shelby County. A graduate of Oakhaven Baptist Academy, he was personally affected by forced bussing in 1973. His personal connections with prep coaches in the area was immensely helpful and his statistics are the most in-depth to be found in the city. Currently he is the women's softball coach at SWTNCC, where he has worked with both Verties Sails and Herb Wright.

²⁴ Ed Odeven, "Documentary on former hoop star Neumann's life provides a cautionary tale," *The Japan Times*, July 19, 2017.

Built in 1963, the Mid-South Coliseum became the home of the Memphis State Tiger basketball program in 1964 and the MIAA Basketball City Championships in 1968. Located on Early Maxwell Boulevard on the southern edge of the Memphis Fairgrounds, the Mid-South Coliseum became a space where Memphis's black and white communities could meet under one roof and unify in some small way behind sport. The 1969 MIAA city basketball championship game, played in front of a sold out Mid-South Coliseum, foreshadowed Larry Finch's success in bringing Memphis fans together to support Tiger basketball. The Coliseum became one of the few places where Memphians could meet, despite their racial differences, for the common cause of cheering good basketball. Yet even as they met in the Mid-South Coliseum for MIAA high school championship games, Jim Crow remained intact, as whites sat on one side to cheer their team and blacks on the other side to cheer on their team. Outside of the Mid-South Coliseum, the political paradigm was changing, and racial strife in the city led many to believe the city was on the precipice of exploding. For the short period of time that the city gathered in the Mid-South Coliseum, these issues became secondary to the excitement transpiring on the hardwood floor. The MIAA's decision to use the Mid-South Coliseum for its basketball championship elevated its importance as an affective piece of geography in Memphis. Games throughout the season were played at both black and white schools, but the city semi-finals and championship games would be played in the safety of East Memphis at the Mid-South Coliseum. Thus, larger numbers could easily be segregated within the Coliseum's oval design. The Coliseum provided an affective piece of geography that provided a ray of hope for integration by hosting fans from both black and white schools,

but it also allowed for segregation to be maintained by having white fans on one side and black fans on the other.

The coaches, athletic directors and school administrators that created the MIAA could not have anticipated the political events that surrounded the first MIAA city championships in February of 1968. Weeks before the initial city championship game in February 1968, sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker were killed on the job by the hydraulic ram of their garbage packer on Colonial Street.²⁵ Their deaths sparked black resistance in the city that culminated in the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike. For sixty-three days the workers marched, held daily rallies at United Rubber Workers union hall, and joined mass meetings at black churches. They challenged Mayor Loeb's patriarchal refusal to acknowledge their union with signs that read "I am a Man." The strike was an assertion of self-determination in the face of racism and paternalistic labor relations by Loeb.²⁶

Following a Sunday meeting at the Memphis Labor Temple on South Second Street, the sanitation workers decided to walk out on strike starting on Monday February 12.²⁷ On Thursday morning February 23, the day before the inaugural MIAA City Championship game, the AFSCME leadership and the city's sanitation workers gathered in the city council's chambers and participated in a sit-in. Numerous black preachers led the group in song and prayer. The *Commercial Appeal* reported that the NAACP's Jesse

²⁵ Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, MLK's Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 1-2.

²⁶ Michael Honey, "Labor and Civil Rights Movements at the Crossroads: Martin Luther King, the Black Workers, and the Memphis Sanitation Strike," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, vol. no. 57 (2003): 25-26.

²⁷ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 102-104.

Turner Sr. had urged the black men in Memphis to “call a friend and have him bring a bucket of garbage.”²⁸ The *Commercial Appeal* claimed that Turner’s request was an invitation to “desecrate city hall, the symbol of authority of the people of Memphis.”²⁹ The local NAACP, led by Turner, continued to push for union recognition and dues check-off as the key issues in the strike. On February 23, the same day the editorials attacking Turner appeared in the *Commercial Appeal*, the City Council voted 9-4 to reject the strikers demands.³⁰

Mayor Henry Loeb stood firm against the sanitation workers. He agreed to recognize the union, but not their right to collect dues. The sanitation workers were allowed a union amongst themselves, but not one with outside influences. Loeb told the strikers “the city does not have contracts with other unions.”³¹ The moment harkened back to “Boss” E.H. Crump, who had vehemently opposed unions in the city and clearly let that be known in 1940 in a speech. “We aren’t going to have any C.I. O. nigger unions in Memphis,” he decried, “They can do what they want in Detroit, Chicago and New York City, but we aren’t going to have it here in Memphis.”³² Historian Roger Biles argues that the white establishment in Memphis remained committed to the plantation mentality in which benevolent owners took care of their grateful laborers, and

²⁸ Richard Lentz, “Committee Gives in to Sit-In of Strikers, But Loeb Holds Firm,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 23, 1968.

²⁹ Allegra Turner, *Except by Grace: The Life of Jesse H. Turner* (Jonesboro: Four G Publishers, 2004), 92.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

³¹ Joseph Sweatt, “Action is Rebuff: 700 Workers, Friends Push into Chamber; Council to Meet Today,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 23, 1968.

³² David Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Blacks and Civic Reformers* (Knoxville, UTK Press, 1980), 55.

opposed any “radical” notions such as the closed shop and collective bargaining.³³

Loeb’s political ideology was firmly entrenched in maintaining the status quo established by Crump. Loeb viewed the sanitation workers as his “boys.”

When Memphis area high school athletic directors met to divide the teams into new leagues, they needed to avoid constructing leagues solely based upon geography. To avert segregated divisions, and to distribute the schools evenly, the MIAA created two separate divisions of schools that each had two conferences within them: a red division and a blue division.³⁴ Throughout the 1967-68 high school basketball season, teams throughout the city came together in gyms across the city in athletic competition. Although racial tensions were present, there were no major incidents reported from these games.

The 1968 MIAA City Championship game provided the type of matchup that the founding administrators hoped to create when they birthed the new integrated format. Before the integration of athletics in the city, Frayser dominated the all-white versions of the city championship, and Carver dominated Negro League play in the years immediately leading up to the desegregated MIAA city championship.³⁵ They also represented two communities: Frayser was a predominately white, blue collar, working

³³ Roger Biles, “Ed Crump Versus the Unions: The Labor Movement in Memphis during the 1930s,” *Labor History*, vol. 25, no. 4 (1984), 533.

³⁴ Larry Rea, “Bevel Gives Spark to Frayser,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 19, 1968.

³⁵ Gentry, 95.

class neighborhood in northwest Memphis and Carver was located in the Riverview section of black South Memphis where its residents worked in its industrial sector.

South Memphis is comprised of several neighborhoods. The area north of South Parkway Avenue has been part of Memphis since the 1800s and was the home to many of the city's prominent black middle class. South Memphis in the 1960s, had a large manufacturing and distribution base. Two-thirds of the South Memphis neighborhood was built between 1940 and 1970.³⁶ The Riverview neighborhood was home to Carver High and encompassed a two-mile square area south of downtown bounded by South Parkway Avenue, Florida Avenue, Mallory Avenue and McKellar Lake. Most of the homes are old shotgun style houses, but they afforded its residents an opportunity to raise their families in a home. The neighborhood was defined by strong familial ties, a strong connection with the community's churches and with Carver High.³⁷ Carver was opened in 1957, three years after *Brown v. Board*, in the Riverview section of South Memphis to ensure that white and black students in South Memphis would remain segregated. Local NAACP activist and Memphis City School Board member Maxine Smith called the opening of all-black Carver a shameful ploy to keep black students out of all-white Southside High.³⁸ By 1968, students and parents in the Riverview community charged that the school was overcrowded, understaffed and lacked the necessary equipment that

³⁶ United States, Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration, Regional Economic Development Center, *Memphis Retail Potential Study: South Memphis*, by Luchy Burrell (Memphis, Tennessee: University of Memphis, 1998), 8-11.

³⁷ David Waters, "Good People Still Call Riverview Home; Once it was a Kinder Place," *Commercial Appeal*, March 20, 1994.

³⁸ Gary Waters, "Carver High Ends as it Began, in a Segregated City," *Commercial Appeal*, June 12, 2016.

was provided comparable white schools in the district.³⁹ Yet, teachers at Carver built pride in their students for the Carver community through tough lessons that went beyond the curriculum and prepared the for life.⁴⁰

Carver coach L.C. Gordon was no stranger to breaking racial barriers. A 1957 graduate of Memphis's Booker T. Washington High School, Gordon was the first black basketball player at Oklahoma State University. For years Blair T. Hunt, principal at BTW, believed in racial assimilation. Hunt worked behind the scenes as a liaison between the black community and the Crump administration. Many in the black community criticized him for trading support for favors, but he kept the voices of the black community alive.⁴¹ Gordon was a defensive stalwart at Washington who caught the eye of Memphis State coach Bob Vanatta, but instead of attempting to break Jim Crow in the city, Vanatta suggested Gordon to Hank Iba.⁴² Gordon accepted the scholarship sight unseen. Following graduation from Washington, Gordon became the first black basketball player at Oklahoma State University.⁴³ As the first black player at Oklahoma State, Gordon was not allowed to live in the same dorms as his teammates, eat in the same cafeteria, or go to the movies in any of the same places as his white teammates. Traveling to road games and playing in hostile gyms subjected Gordon to

³⁹ David Vincent, "In Spite of Attacks, Carver Rates," *Commercial Appeal*, May 30, 1968.

⁴⁰ David Waters, "Good People Still Call Riverview Home; Once it was a Kinder Place," *Commercial Appeal*, March 20, 1994.

⁴¹ Steve Pike, "Blair T. Hunt," WKNO FM, July 9, 2013, accessed November 07, 2017, <http://wknofm.org/post/blair-t-hunt>.

⁴² Jenni Carlson, "L.C. Gordon thankful to be a trailblazer at Oklahoma State," *NewsOK.com*, October 16, 2013. accessed March 16, 2017. <http://newsok.com/article/3894298>.

⁴³ Bill Burk, "L.C. Gordon Aiming for State Title," *Press Scimitar*, February 16, 1968.

racial slurs and ugly epithets.⁴⁴ Gordon persevered through these trials and graduated with a bachelor's degree. After graduation Gordon returned home to Memphis and began a career teaching and coaching basketball at Carver High School. Just as quietly as Gordon broke the color barrier at Oklahoma State in 1958, ten years later he quietly guided his all-black players from Carver into the city's first integrated championship basketball game.

John Clayton, Frayser's coach, built a perennial basketball power in the late 1960s. Frayser started as a community built around the Illinois Central Railroad in the mid-19th century. It was primarily a passenger railroad stop between Memphis and Covington, Tennessee.⁴⁵ In the mid-20th century commercial and industrial growth led to population growth and its eventual annexation in 1958 by the City of Memphis.⁴⁶ Frayser's blue-collar community allowed Clayton to build a hardnosed program that was respected throughout the city. The Rams competed for city championships the previous five seasons before the creation of the MIAA city championship. The Rams returned to the city basketball finals in 1968, after winning the all-white Prep League the year before.⁴⁷

On a blustery Friday night in February, with a dusting of snow on the ground, the Mid-South Coliseum welcomed 3,914 fans to watch the inaugural MIAA City Championship game. Carver held a decisive height advantage over the Rams, whose

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Community LIFT. Frayser Snapshot (Memphis, TN: City of Memphis, 2010) accessed March 16, 2017. <http://www.communitylift.org/sites/default/files/datafiles/Frayser%20Data%20Book.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Gentry, 95.

tallest player was only 6'2", while the Carver front line included one 6'4" wing player and two 6'6" post players.⁴⁸ From the onset the Carver defense stifled the much smaller Ram offense. Coach L.C. Gordon's demands for defensive intensity from his charges overwhelmed the smaller Rams for three quarters. Frayser fought back in the fourth quarter and cut the lead to one. The Cobras size and defensive presence ensured the victory and their first MIAA city championship.⁴⁹ The game was a success for those who created the MIAA. There were no overt political issues surrounding the game. For a fleeting moment both the black and white communities came together under one roof to watch basketball. Although each community sat on their own side of the Mid-South Coliseum, they did gather in one place peacefully. Snow dampened the numbers in attendance, but the success of this game set the stage for the matchups that followed in the coming years. None would be bigger, nor have greater significance, than the 1969 MIAA championship game between Larry Finch's Melrose High and Johnny Neumann's Overton High.

In the months that followed the inaugural MIAA city championship, the city witnessed the final civil rights battle of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life. James Lawson's invitation to join the AFSCME's struggle against Mayor Loeb brought King to Memphis. On March 18, King called for a general strike of black workers and students in the city during a speech at the Mason Temple Church of God in Christ. He claimed that to deprive people of jobs and income is "murder, psychologically." He went on to tell the audience that men like Loeb were depriving millions of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of

⁴⁸ Bill Burk, "L.C. Gordon Aiming for State Title," *Press Scimitar*, February 16, 1968.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

happiness.”⁵⁰ King reminded the nation that “it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages.”⁵¹ When King returned on March 28, the march disintegrated into window breaking and looting. A police riot followed that injured many of the protesters. Loeb then requested the governor send in the National Guard to squelch the violence.⁵²

Troubled by the violence associated with the march, King vowed to return to Memphis to restore the peaceful nature of the movement in Memphis. When King returned on April 3, Judge Bailey Brown issued an injunction against King participating in any marches in Memphis. King declared, “We are not going to be stopped by mace or injunctions. We stand on the First Amendment. In the past, on the basis of conscience we have had to break injunctions and if necessary we may do it (here).”⁵³ On Wednesday, April 3, King gave the final speech of his life at the Mason Temple COGIC, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” The speech elicited transcendent hope for those in attendance and called upon a city to face the injustices Loeb imposed upon the black sanitation workers. King charged America to “be true to what you said on paper.”⁵⁴ The next day King was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. Following the death of Dr. King the sanitation workers and the city came to an agreement that

⁵⁰ Michael Honey, “Labor and Civil Rights Movements at the Crossroads: Martin Luther King, the Black Workers, and the Memphis Sanitation Strike,” *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, vol. no. 57 (2003): 27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵³ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 410.

⁵⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” (speech, Mason Temple COGIC, Memphis, April 3, 1968).

recognized the union, provided raises for the sanitation workers, and guaranteed that future promotions were to be based on competency and seniority.⁵⁵ Loeb remained vigilant in his refusal to budge and was afforded the opportunity to escape direct responsibility for the agreement by allowing the City Council to sign the agreement with the union, thereby disavowing personal responsibility for the agreement.⁵⁶

The strike and its aftermath marked the beginning of massive white flight from the city and the end of Loeb's political career.⁵⁷ Memphis, like other cities throughout the country, experienced white flight from the city to the suburbs following King's assassination, as well as the integration of public schools in the city. The push factors evident in the white exodus were linked to the political and racial issues facing the city following Dr. King's assassination. These perceived factors included deteriorating city services, rising taxes, accelerating blight, mounting crime rates, racial mixing of neighborhoods, and the fear of court-ordered busing.⁵⁸ According to Billy Stair, a research analyst for the Tennessee legislature's House Education Committee, parents in Memphis confessed privately that they moved their children to private schools because of "their apprehension over placing their children in an atmosphere of potential racial conflict."⁵⁹ By the fall of 1968 the issue of forced busing in the city had stalled in the federal district court. The May 1968 Supreme Court Case *Green v. County School Board*

⁵⁵ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 490.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 489.

⁵⁷ Otis Sanford, *From Boss Crump to King Willie: How race changed Memphis politics* (Knoxville, UTK Press, 2017), 116-117.

⁵⁸ Marcus Pohlmann, *Opportunity Lost: Race and Poverty in the Memphis City Schools* (Knoxville: UT Press, 2008), 78.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

noted that the “freedom of choice” plan could not be accepted as a sufficient step to bring about a transition to a unitary system. Federal Court Judge Bailey Brown denied the local NAACP’s motion to completely desegregate the district’s faculty. By November of 1968 the case was transferred to Judge Robert McRae, who ordered the Memphis City Schools to conduct and file a facilities survey.⁶⁰ In the hands of Judge McRae the issue of busing became a conduit for further racial polarity in the city.

While the issue of school desegregation and forced busing was being argued over in the federal courts, the city’s high schools were completing another year of integrated athletics. Following a productive junior year at Melrose High in 1967-1968, Larry Finch honed his skills on the hardwood floors of recreational centers and playgrounds across the city as he prepared for his senior season. Finch belonged to a long line of basketball prodigies from Orange Mound. Located in the eastern section of Memphis, Orange Mound is considered by its residents as the preeminent black community in the United States behind Harlem, New York. The community was founded three years after the all-black town of Mound Bayou, Mississippi in 1890. Unlike Mound Bayou, which was founded by African Americans, Orange Mound was established by white real estate developer Elzey E. Meachem for the black community in Memphis.⁶¹ According to sociologist Charles Williams, Orange Mound became a symbol of stability for the black residents of the community and the surrounding white communities. He describes the community as one that developed complex and enduring relationships based on kinship, friendship, church membership, class recognition, love, security, unity, community

⁶⁰ Ibid., 66-67.

⁶¹ Charles Williams, *African American Life and Culture in Orange Mound: Case study of a black community in Memphis, Tennessee, 1890-1980* (New York: Lexington Books, 2013), 13-14.

involvement, and community identification.⁶² By the post-World War II era Orange Mound was self-sufficient with stores, a theater, a high school, a swimming pool, and a park, making it the second largest black community in the country.⁶³

Finch's mother Maple West grew up on Carnes Avenue after moving to Memphis with her mother Willie Mae West from Barton, Mississippi.⁶⁴ Finch's grandmother was divorced from her husband Willie Irvin before Maple turned five, which precipitated the move to Memphis. Maple grew up in a single parent household with a strong black woman as head of the household. When she married Harry James Finch in 1949 following his discharge from the Navy, she hoped to provide her children with a two-parent household. Harry, better known as James, was a cook in the Navy during World War II and was discharged as a petty officer third class.⁶⁵ The military had long been a tool of respectability in the black community and James Finch's service in World War II provided him with hope for a better life when he returned home to Memphis. The Finches continued to live in South Memphis following their marriage and James worked for Shelby Electric where he repaired electric motors. Maple gave birth to Larry in 1951, and over the next nine years the family grew to include eight children.

⁶² Ibid., 24 and 34.

⁶³ "History of Orange Mound," Memphis Melrose High School Historical Yearbook Website, accessed December 20, 2017, <http://www.melroseyearbooks.com/index.php/melrose-history/orange-mound-history>.

⁶⁴ *U.S. Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936-2007*, accessed February 3, 2018, www.Ancestry.com.

⁶⁵ Internment Control Forms, 1928-1962, Internment Control Forms, A1 2110-B, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, 1774-1985, Record Group 92. *National Archives at College Park*, accessed February 3, 2018, www.Ancestry.com.

When Larry was ten, his father passed away from complications incurred from his service in World War II. Maple suddenly became the head of a household with eight young children, so she went to work as a domestic in private white homes to support her family.⁶⁶ As a single black mother, Maple turned to the community to help her raise her family. She also allowed Larry to provide guidance and leadership for his younger siblings. When Maple went to work, it was Larry who was left in charge.⁶⁷ Government cheese became a staple at the Finch household, so much so that Larry refused to eat anything with cheese on it for the remainder of his adult life. Although the times were tough, Maple instilled in her family that you are always to build your family up, and never speak ill will against them.⁶⁸

Maple moved her family to Select Street just as Larry was finishing elementary school. The median income in Orange Mound was half that of nearby white neighborhoods in Memphis, but the community bonded together and ensured its sons and daughters went on to college.⁶⁹ Her move to Select Street signaled her independence as the head of her own household. Maple made \$5.50 a day as a domestic – the two quarters paid for her bus fare.⁷⁰ Like Black women throughout the urban South in the postwar era, her role as a parent obligated her to accept discriminatory wages, but it did not keep her from combatting institutional racism by instilling a belief in her children of the

⁶⁶ Miriam DeCosta-Willis, *Notable Black Memphians* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008), 119-120.

⁶⁷ Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Williams, 26.

⁷⁰ Geoff Calkins, "He loved his city; Memphis reciprocated," *Commercial Appeal*, April 3, 2011.

transformative value of a college education. Her status as a wage earner commanded great respect within the black community. City officials attempted to pigeonhole black women as maids, cooks or laundresses.⁷¹ Maple maintained a level of dignity that influenced her children and laid the foundation for her children's work ethic. Although she relied upon community assistance for help, she always asked if visitors wanted anything to eat when they walked in the door.⁷²

Within Orange Mound, churches further connected the community. The black church was a space that created a spirit of self-help which developed into benevolent and mutual aid societies. Maple made sure that her children attended each, and every service with her at Park Avenue Church of Christ.⁷³ Maple provided a solid Christian foundation for Larry that grounded him in knowing right from wrong. The family walked to church and young Larry knew that regardless of the weather he would be in a pew with his family. Park Avenue Church of Christ provided the primary space for social activity and stability for Maple's family. In Orange Mound, the black church was also the biggest proponent of education through its support of church-run daycares and financial support for Dunbar Elementary and Melrose High.⁷⁴

Finch's character was molded by his family, a family that relied heavily upon each other and the community. One of the pivotal figures in Larry's youth was Leonard Draper. Draper ran a summer league at Gaston Community Center in South Memphis

⁷¹ Laurie Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007), 12.

⁷² Larry Finch Jr., interview by author, January 31, 2018.

⁷³ Dale L. Stephens, *Funeral Program Larry Onis Finch* (Memphis: Stephens Signs and Design, 2011).

⁷⁴ Williams, 77.

where Larry's grandmother still lived.⁷⁵ Larry began playing at Gaston when he was fourteen. Draper began to mentor Finch during the car rides home from Gaston to Select Street. Only eleven years older than Finch, Draper was a big brother figure and helped Larry find a summer job at the Triangle Meat Market on Lamar Avenue.⁷⁶ Larry, as the oldest, was eager to help his mother in any way that he could. Ever cognizant of his basketball future, he quit after he saw a worker lose a finger while slicing meat.⁷⁷ Larry's relationship with Draper was emblematic of what some refer to as his "old soul." Larry always felt comfortable around older men so that he could learn more. Larry was quiet. He studied you first before extending his friendship. Once he made friends, those friends became friends for life. His loyalty to his friends was one of the strengths of his character.⁷⁸

One of the strengths of Orange Mound, despite its poverty level, was the pride that the community held in its schools. Next to the family, and then the church, the schools in Orange Mound directly touched the lives of its citizens the most. Finch attended both Dunbar Elementary and Melrose High in Orange Mound. Dunbar Elementary, right down Select Street from the Finch residence, was named for Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the famous black poet, and was opened in 1958.⁷⁹ Melrose High was

⁷⁵ Michael Messner, *Power Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). Messner asserts that for lower-class boys the community center was not *a* place, but it was *the* place. For young boys like Finch who were raised by single mothers, this is where they built masculine identity, status, and relationships.

⁷⁶ Leonard Draper, interview by author, December 21, 2017.

⁷⁷ Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Williams, 82.

the pride of the community. As a cohesive unit in the community, Melrose High brought together people of different denominational backgrounds, socioeconomic classes, and genders. It also had a degree of integration with the few white teachers and assistant principals who worked there over the years.⁸⁰ Floyd Campbell was the principal of Melrose during Finch's time there. Campbell ran a disciplined school where it was common for him to ring a bell in the hallway, which signaled to all students to stop what they were doing and freeze. He would ring the bell again and the girls would be allowed to go into class first, and then the boys would follow.⁸¹ These lessons were vital for Melrose students who would leave the safety of its halls and enter a city governed by Jim Crow.

Finch was one of the better students in his class at Melrose. He had an uncanny knack to remember whatever the teacher was talking about during class with a near photographic memory. His schedule was filled with accelerated classes. If basketball had not worked out, he would have still attended college bound on his academic ability. His godmother Mildred Turner, an English teacher at the school, always made sure that his writing and communication skills were competent enough so that when he left Melrose, he would be successful.⁸² While at Melrose a friend of Finch's introduced him to his cousin, Vickie Stephens. Vickie was one of nine children, and her older brother Eddie lettered in basketball at Melrose. Finch, as was his norm, studied Vickie and became friends with her before they started dating. Because of his ability to

⁸⁰ Ibid., 84.

⁸¹ Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

⁸² Ibid.

communicate with older folks, he was able to convince Vickie's father to attend one of his games at Melrose. Finch bought Vickie's father two tickets to his next game to gain his respect. The irony was that her father had never attended one of Eddie's games because he worked nights, but Finch convinced him to attend one of his games.⁸³ Finch's charm worked with Vickie's dad and his athletic physique garnered her attention. Walking through the gym one day after school when Larry was shooting, she saw him wearing tight cutoff jeans and told him "Boy, you got some pretty legs."⁸⁴ She, too, had been captured by his smile and huge heart. Leonard Draper described the two as inseparable during their high school years.⁸⁵

Student life at Melrose mirrored the family atmosphere of the Orange Mound community. Students expressed themselves, but they were also mentored and nurtured in a fashion that prepared them for the world outside of Orange Mound. Pep rallies at Melrose were rare occasions for the student body to let loose. It was here that Mr. Campbell allowed the students to express themselves and their support for the football and basketball teams. Basketball games at Melrose were standing room only as the entire community came out to support the team. The games created an atmosphere of pride for the student body and the community.⁸⁶ Although Larry shined as an All-American guard on the basketball team, he also ran track for the Golden Wildcats, belonged to the ROTC, was the chaplain of the Student Council, and was elected Most Versatile Male by his

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ron Higgins, "Larry's Journey," *Commercial Appeal*, March 4, 2007.

⁸⁵ Leonard Draper, interview by author, December 21, 2017.

⁸⁶ Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

senior class.⁸⁷ While he was on the basketball team Finch was mentored by Verties Sails, Melrose's assistant coach. Sails was a father figure who made sure that the boys on the team completed their homework and acted right in class. If they needed food, he made sure they had something to eat.⁸⁸ Sails was another example of how the community took care of its own. Basketball allowed Finch to maneuver through racial boundaries that others in the city feared.

Larry developed a friendship with Johnny Neumann, the white prep star from Overton High. Much of white Memphis viewed Neumann as the "white hope," but to Finch he was a friend who loved the game of basketball as much he did.⁸⁹ Finch and Neumann were friends whose relationship was solidified on the courts of South Memphis and Orange Mound. Larry's competitive drive led him to play games in black neighborhoods throughout the city. Although he became an iconic figure in the Orange Mound community, he developed his game in gyms throughout black Memphis. Finch's closest friend was Ronnie Robinson. The two could be found playing pickup games and in summer leagues together. The common denominator with these relationships was the love of the game. For these young basketball players, the game provided a shared ground to meet test their skills and develop friendships.

⁸⁷ Larry Rea, "Farewell to Finch," *Commercial Appeal*, March 1, 1997.

⁸⁸ Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

⁸⁹ Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: Free Press, 1983). Since the era of black heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, whites have longed for a "white hope." In 1910 James Jeffries succumbed to white pressure to "shut Johnson's smiling mouth," before being defeated by Johnson. For Memphians in the late 1960s, Neumann symbolized this same desire to maintain control of athletics at a time when the black aesthetic was becoming the norm.

Orange Mound was a unique place in an era when Jim Crow reigned. Its black citizens felt as if they had their rights. Why? Because they were surrounded by black homeowners, black-owned stores, a post office, and a strip mall owned by blacks. The few stores that were owned by whites treated the black community with respect. Black children tended to not feel threatened by Jim Crow, at least inside the confines of Orange Mound.⁹⁰ Orange Mound gave Finch a deep sense of who he was. Later in life Finch looked back with pride. "This is my heart right here, Orange Mound, Tennessee," said Finch. "There will never be a place like Orange Mound. Everything in this city starts and ends right here in Orange Mound."⁹¹ This space allowed the community to protect the next generation. Because of the way in which the community fostered a young Finch, he remained loyal throughout his life.

The style of play in American cities varied along racial lines. *Press Scimitar* columnist George Lapedes explained the success of basketball in inner city Memphis, "In the poverty areas of the city basketball is cheaper to play. All you need is a rim and a ball."⁹² Basketball in inner city Memphis was played with a unique style that was flashy,

⁹⁰ Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

⁹¹ "Tigers basketball coach Larry Finch passes away," WMC Action News 5 - Memphis, Tennessee, April 02, 2011, accessed December 20, 2017, <http://www.wmcactionnews5.com/story/14371453/tigers-basketball-coach-larry-finch-passes-away>.

⁹² *The Rebel*, dir. Paul Carruthers, SEC Storied, May 2017, accessed November 13, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC+Storied+The+Rebel. Carruthers documentary details Neumann's career as a rebel who lost his way, yet because of his style of play and lifestyle he much more closely resembles the black aesthetic that many whites feared at the time. Neumann's ability to transcend race by playing basketball in black neighborhoods, with a style that fit into the black aesthetic allows him to be a key early point of reference to Finch. When Neumann becomes more and more of a rebel he is forgotten by Memphians and replaced by Finch, who although he is black, who does not embody the negative tropes of the black aesthetic.

creative, and required self-confidence. Black players around the country in the late 1960s, like the New York Knicks' guard Walt Frazier, wore bushy afros, goatees, thick head bands, and wrist bands. They played the game with a style that personified a unique black cultural aesthetic.⁹³ "In your face" became the defiant way in which black players verbally and physically assaulted their opponents on the court. Originally the jump shot, Finch's weapon of choice, was the black player's assertion of physical superiority.⁹⁴ Finch's ability to elevate over defenders and shoot the jump shot made him one of the most highly recruited players in the city. The jump shot was later eclipsed in the black basketball lexicon by the slam dunk, but it was frowned upon by basketball traditionalists.⁹⁵ White traditionalists preferred fundamental basketball that was easily identifiable by a series of passes, back door cuts, and screens set to create a shot for a teammate. For years the set shot was the favored way to shoot the basketball. The jump-shot and the dunk were considered flashy and part of the inner-city game. In Memphis, as throughout the rest of the country, the style of play diverged along racial lines.

Basketball is the city game. Its battlegrounds are strips of asphalt between tattered wire fences or crumbling buildings; its rhythm grows from the uneven thump of a ball against hard surfaces. Pete Axthelm describes basketball as more than a game; it is "a major part, of the fabric of life." He describes the city game as pretty simple: "kids

⁹³ Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1992), xi-xii.

⁹⁴ Gena Caponi-Tabery, "Jump For Joy: Jump Blues, Dance, and Basketball in 1930s African America," found in *Sports Matters: Race, Recreation and Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2002). Tabery argues that the "jump" was part of the black aesthetic in the 1930s and made its way into mainstream culture through music and sport during the 1930s. Like jazz music, the jump shot was part of the improvisation as soloists but was still considered part of the collaborative element of the ensemble. Tabery refutes the historical introduction of the jump shot by white players Luisetti, but instead points to the free-flowing style of the African American game from the 1930s.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, xiv-xvi.

develop ‘moves.’ Other young athletes may learn basketball, but city kids live it.”⁹⁶ New York City had the Rucker Tournament and Philadelphia had the Baker League to showcase this brand of stylish and innovative basketball.⁹⁷ By 1969 the Rucker and the Baker tournament had been pipelining players from Philly and New York to major colleges throughout the country. Memphis did not have anything comparable to these showcases. The city’s black players either played at HBCUs in the South or at schools in the Mid-West and North, where Jim Crow was already eroding.

Finch’s emergence, along with the dominance of Ronnie Robinson in the post, signaled the return of Melrose basketball prominence under Coach William Collins. In his eight years at the helm, Collins produced Harlem Globetrotter Jewel Reed, Tulsa star Bobby Smith, Ronnie Robinson, and Finch. Bobby “Bingo” Smith was considered by many to be one of the most talented basketball players to ever come out of the city. He began his varsity career in eighth grade and by the time he graduated he was the city’s all-time leading scorer.⁹⁸ Smith was initially offered a scholarship by Memphis State Coach Dean Ehlers to play for the hometown Tigers. When Ehlers rescinded the scholarship offer in the late summer of 1965, Smith was forced, like so many other black basketball players before him, to leave Memphis to play major college basketball.⁹⁹ As a school in the Deep South, Memphis State was not ready for its first black basketball player when Smith graduated in 1965. As Finch’s notoriety grew, Orange Mound

⁹⁶ Pete Axthelm, *The City Game* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), xv-xvi.

⁹⁷ Vincent Mallozzi, *Asphalt Gods: An Oral History of the Rucker Tournament* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 2003), 3.

⁹⁸ Gentry, 86.

⁹⁹ Zach McMillan, “Memphis State: Quite a Commitment,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 30, 2003.

remained skeptical of the sincerity of Memphis State to offer one of its own a scholarship.

Carl John Neumann was born in Cincinnati, Ohio on September 11, 1951, the second of two sons to Robert and Margaret Neumann. Robert and Margaret met in Cleveland where they both grew up before moving to Cincinnati. Robert Sr.'s mother passed away when he was four, and he was raised by his maternal grandparents. Robert joined the United States Navy in 1942 and served as an aviation ordinance officer. He settled his family in the upper-middle class neighborhood of Rosewood, located on the northern outskirts of Cincinnati.¹⁰⁰ In 1948 The Gardens, home to the NBA's Cincinnati Royals, opened to fanfare as a new type of suburban arena.¹⁰¹ Neumann's older brother Bob brought Johnny to games at The Garden to watch Oscar Robertson play. During these games the brothers kept a notebook of the moves Robertson made, along with the subtleties in his game that they could recreate in their own games.¹⁰² Taking these lessons to heart Bob developed his game enough to sign scholarship papers with Memphis State in the spring of 1960, following a successful career at Cincinnati's Woodward High School. Their father uprooted the family and moved them to Memphis in the fall of 1961, so they could watch Bob play for Dean Ehler's Tigers squad. The Navy's base in Millington, Tennessee allowed Robert Sr. to transfer to the Memphis area

¹⁰⁰ B. Holland, Find a Grave database, April 26, 2015, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/145603845/robert-herman-neumann>.

¹⁰¹ Aharon N. Varady, *Bond Hill: Origin and Transformation of a 19th Century Cincinnati Railroad Suburb*, report, 9th ed. (Cincinnati, OH: Henry Watkins Press, 2005).

¹⁰² *The Rebel*, dir. Paul Carruthers, SEC Storied, May 2017, accessed November 13, 2017, [https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC Storied The Rebel](https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC+Storied+The+Rebel)

and remain active duty. Johnny was only in fourth grade when the family moved to Memphis, but a love for the game was already instilled in the younger Neumann.

Bob Neumann Jr. developed into one of the stars of the Memphis State program under Bob Vanatta and Dean Ehlers. Bob Jr. was an integral part of the Tigers 1962 NCAA tournament team. Although he missed all but eight games during his junior year with an injury, he returned his senior year to lead the Tigers in scoring.¹⁰³ While his older brother was starring for the Tigers, Johnny was just entering middle school at Colonial Middle School in East Memphis. His coach at Colonial, Bob Yancey, recalled that Johnny continued to mimic Oscar Robertson in drills.¹⁰⁴ Schools in the city remained strictly segregated as did the basketball courts. The younger Neumann gained entrance into pickup games at the Roane Field House by tagging along with his brother and as his game continued to develop he continued to look for greater challenges. With his emergence as a star at all-white Overton High in East Memphis, Neumann was dominating white high school players and wanted to test himself against the city's best black high school players. Local prep reporter George Lapidès described Neumann's crossing the color line to play on the playgrounds of Orange Mound and at Gaston Community Center simply as "He (Johnny) wanted to go to play where the players were good enough to play against him."¹⁰⁵ Neumann claimed that, "this is where you made

¹⁰³ Memphis State Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1963-1964.

¹⁰⁴ *The Rebel*, dir. Paul Carruthers, SEC Storied, May 2017, accessed November 13, 2017, [https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC Storied The Rebel](https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC+Storied+The+Rebel)

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

your name, on the playground. You earned respect.”¹⁰⁶ Neumann was not a native of the city and placed his love for basketball in front of any cultural norms associated with Jim Crow. Coupled with his brother’s notoriety at Memphis State, young Neumann crossed over racial boundaries into black neighborhoods to test his skills against some of the city’s best black talent. His desire to compete against the best talent in the city transcended the proscribed racial boundaries in the city, yet his reputation as the best basketball player in the city was a source of pride for white Memphians.

Overton High opened in 1959 to accommodate the growing white population in East Memphis and endeared itself to the city’s affection with the “Lost Cause” by adopting the moniker Rebels as their mascot. One of the Memphis City Schools Board of Education’s largest projects in the late 1950s, was built to accommodate the growing populations in the Colonial and Sherwood neighborhoods. It opened with modern amenities that made the East Memphis school one of the best in the district. Within ten years the school went from 250 students to an enrollment over 1,500.¹⁰⁷ Neumann played for Bob Miller, a “boyishly looking, exuberant coach,” who was enjoying the benefits of one of the South’s top recruits on his team.¹⁰⁸ Neumann possessed a remarkable combination of athleticism, hoop intelligence, and on-court showmanship.¹⁰⁹ He was an All-American that SEC schools coveted more than any other local player, including

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ “Hewlett Helped Get Overton High Started,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 23, 1965.

¹⁰⁸ George Lapides, “Overton’s Coach Successful Even Before Neumann,” *Press Scimitar*, February 20, 1969.

¹⁰⁹ Ed Odeven, “Documentary on former hoop star Neumann’s life provides a cautionary tale,” *The Japan Times*, July 19, 2017.

Finch. Adolph Rupp's recruitment of Neumann for the University of Kentucky legitimized him as the preeminent white player in the city. Rupp had long been a powerful symbol of segregation in the SEC, refusing to recruit black players to Kentucky.¹¹⁰ Rupp's recruitment further ingrained the perception that Neumann was the great white hope. At a time when the city's racial climate was being challenged by the recent sanitation workers' strike and the larger national civil rights movement, white Memphians were in search of a "white hope." By the late 1960s black athletes were beginning to dominate the game of basketball on a national level. The NBA was now dominated by black players and the world champion Celtics were coached by their own black star, Bill Russell.¹¹¹ The college game was being dominated by UCLA and its black star Lew Alcindor. When the city of Memphis began to desegregate its athletic events in 1968, white Memphians became fearful that the racial dynamics taking place on a national level were capturing their city as well. Neumann's presence signified a sense of counter-resistance for the white community from the burgeoning dominance of basketball by players from the city's black players.

Overton's Johnny Neumann was not your stereotypical white basketball player. He was eccentric. He displayed a flair that usually described black players. His game was compared to the flashy style of LSU's "Pistol" Pete Maravich. Maravich played the game in a fashion that many felt was cultural appropriation. Black players were chastised for their flashy passing and selfish play, but players like Maravich were idolized for that

¹¹⁰ Frank Fitzpatrick, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: Kentucky, Texas Western and the game that changed American sports* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 130.

¹¹¹ Aram Goudsouzian, *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2010), 225.

same style. Neumann's aptitude on the court resembled the game played by blacks, centering on improvisation. Before moving to Memphis, Neumann lived in Cincinnati, where his dad was a traveling salesman. Sports became the bond between Johnny and his older brother Bob, who led the Memphis State Tigers to the NCAA regional tournament in 1962.¹¹² Johnny patterned his game after Oscar Robertson of the Cincinnati Royals and Pete Maravich of the LSU Tigers. An inch and a half taller than Maravich, Neumann muscled in shots in the post with a flair akin to Maravich's.¹¹³ Neumann secured his reputation during his junior year, when he was named second team all-state by the AP and led the city in scoring scorer at 26.6 points per game.¹¹⁴

The 1969 MIAA City Basketball Championship brought together the city's two premier prep basketball players and their respective communities for a highly anticipated matchup between all-black Melrose High and all-white Overton High. The Melrose community was excited because for years they were denied the opportunity to play white schools, and now the creation of the MIAA meant that white schools were willing to play black schools.¹¹⁵ The build-up to the game included media coverage worthy of the biggest basketball game in the city. The Memphis State Tigers, under Moe Iba, struggled throughout the season, so fans turned to this high school basketball game in hopes of seeing the next generation of Tiger stars.¹¹⁶ Neumann's recruitment by the SEC's

¹¹² Curry Kirkpatrick, "Red-hot new pistol in Rebel land," *Sports Illustrated*, October 12, 2015.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Gentry, 88.

¹¹⁵ Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

¹¹⁶ "1968-69 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed October 16, 2017, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1969-schedule.html>.

Kentucky and Ole Miss made some skeptical of the Tigers's chances to sign him. Finch's Melrose team was a more balanced unit, but his sweet shooting touch made him the second most sought-after recruit in the city behind Neumann. William Collins likened Finch to Bingo Smith, the ex-Melrose star who was jilted by Memphis State, because of his shooting range and his ability to take the ball to the basket.¹¹⁷ Before the season the local prognosticators predicted that Neumann and Finch would meet in the city championship, and neither disappointed.¹¹⁸

The Mid-South Coliseum expected over 9,000 people to watch. Two local AM and one FM station were prepared to bring the game to those who could not get a ticket to get into the game.¹¹⁹ Many fans, like Paul Finebaum, sat outside in their cars before the game, fearing that the line was so long they would not get into the game.¹²⁰ Finebaum made it in, but at 7:15 pm the Mid-South Coliseum ticket windows hung signs that read "SOLD OUT" as over 10,000 fans packed into the Coliseum.¹²¹ Once inside the Mid-South Coliseum the city remained segregated. The Melrose community and its black fans sat on one side and Overton's white fans sat on the other side. Finch and the Wildcats set the tone in the first three minutes of the game. By the time the first quarter ended, Melrose was ahead 27-13. It never looked back. Finch played like he was on a mission

¹¹⁷ Andy Edson, "It's Neumann vs Finch Tomorrow Night," *Press Scimitar*, February 20, 1969.

¹¹⁸ Andy Edson, "Melrose Challenges Overton Friday," *Commercial Appeal*, February 18, 1969.

¹¹⁹ Larry Rea, "The 380th Game Will Decide It," *Commercial Appeal*, February 21, 1969.

¹²⁰ *The Rebel*, dir. Paul Carruthers, SEC Storied, May 2017, accessed November 13, 2017, [https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC Storied The Rebel](https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC+Storied+The+Rebel)

¹²¹ Larry, Rea, "Melrose Ends Overton's Streak," *Commercial Appeal*, February 22, 1969.

to prove that he was the best player in the city. He scored 16 of his 21 points in the first quarter.

Neumann and his teammates were no match for Melrose. The Rebels had no answer for 6'6" Ronnie Robinson, who was a force in the paint. Melrose held a 45-37 half-time advantage and Coach Collins credited the Wildcat bench's depth for the lead.¹²² Mid-way through the first half, Neumann broke his hand going for a loose ball. On the way down, he hit his hand on Robinson's knee brace. Neumann told the manager to wrap his hand and "don't tell my dad."¹²³ He understood that physical toughness was a requirement to win, especially against Melrose. He continued to play and finished with 34 points and exhibited a toughness that equaled his talent.¹²⁴ Neumann was plagued with fouls throughout the night. Each time Neumann went to the bench his teammates struggled against the bigger and faster Wildcats. With 3:16 left in the fourth quarter, Neumann committed his fifth personal foul and the game fell out of reach for the Rebels. Melrose triumphed, 76-65.¹²⁵ "We just made up our mind to win a championship," Finch told reporters after the game.¹²⁶

Neumann alone was no match for the depth of talent that Melrose possessed, and Overton suffered its first defeat of the year at the hands of Finch and his Golden Wildcat

¹²² Andy Edson, "Melrose too Much for Spunky Overton," *Press Scimitar*, February 21, 1969.

¹²³ *The Rebel*, dir. Paul Carruthers, SEC Storied, May 2017, accessed November 13, 2017, [https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC Storied The Rebel](https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC+Storied+The+Rebel)

¹²⁴ Larry Rea, "Melrose Ends Overton's Streak," *Commercial Appeal*, 21 February 21, 1969.

¹²⁵ Ed Odeven, "Documentary on former hoop star Neumann's life provides a cautionary tale," *The Japan Times*, July 19, 2017.

¹²⁶ Larry Rea, "Melrose Ends Overton's Streak," *Commercial Appeal*, February 22, 1969.

teammates. Coach Miller commended his Overton group for playing hard and with tenacity.¹²⁷ Melrose's win meant that the first two MIAA city championships were captured by two all-black schools, who until 1968 were kept from competing with the all-white schools for the city championship. The popularity of the MIAA city basketball championship elevated the city's love affair with basketball and it provided, for a moment, a space where both the black and white community could gather together to cheer on their favorite basketball teams. Players around the city began to see this game every winter as the apex of the local prep basketball season. Hamilton High junior Clint Jackson describe the impact of this new game on local basketball when he claimed that, "the state tournament to us was not as prestigious, as being in the city championship game. Everybody wanted to make it to the Coliseum, that was our Madison Square Garden."¹²⁸ The 1969 game set the standard by which all MIAA city championship games would be judged moving forward.

The 1969 MIAA City Basketball Championship game became the prologue for the relationship between the city of Memphis and Larry Finch. Finch's star shone bright enough to bring an array of major college basketball coaches to Orange Mound to recruit him, from John McLeod of Oklahoma to John Wooden of UCLA. As coaches from across the country came through attempting to lure him away, Memphis State remained his top choice, but Coach Collins remained disgruntled over Bingo Smith's treatment by Memphis State four year earlier. Collins believed that Finch's best interest was to follow the same path as Smith and attend Tulsa. But Finch wanted to stay home and play for

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Clint Jackson, interview by author, July 13, 2016.

Memphis State. As the oldest of eight children he felt a responsibility to be there for his mother, and the only place that she could see him play was at Memphis State.¹²⁹ Leonard Draper, director at the Gaston Community Center, helped convince Finch that Memphis State would take care of him. Maple Finch turned to Draper for advice for her oldest son. After years of mentoring Finch, Draper was a trusted family friend who helped assure Finch's mother that Memphis State would be true to its word and take care of her son. Draper recalls Maple Finch turning towards him and saying, "I'm turning my son over to you."¹³⁰

When Finch announced his intentions to sign with Memphis State to Coach Collins, the divide within the community became even more apparent. Finch consulted with Melrose assistant Verties Sails about his decision to stay home and sign with the Tigers. Sails offered his support without reservation. When it came time for signing day, fellow Golden Wildcat Ed Bell recalled "a lot of tension in the room" when Finch signed.¹³¹ In an open sign of protest of Finch's decision, Coach Collins did not attend. Instead, Sails stood behind Finch and his mother Maple as he signed. It took years for many in the Orange Mound community to forgive both Sails and Draper for standing behind Finch's decision to sign with Memphis State. Many in Memphis's black community referred to these men as "Uncle Toms" for having influenced Finch's decision to attend Memphis State.¹³² Collins left Melrose High that spring and moved to

¹²⁹ Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 17, 2018.

¹³⁰ Leonard Draper, interview by author, December 21, 2017.

¹³¹ Larry Rea, "Farewell to Finch," *Commercial Appeal*, March 1, 1997.

¹³² Leonard Draper, interview by author, December 21, 2017.

Tech High School, which opened an opportunity for Sails to become the next head basketball coach at Melrose.

Overton's Neumann signed with the University of Mississippi, leaving Tiger fans to wonder how good the Tigers could have been with Neumann and Finch in the backcourt. Neumann's recruitment to Ole Miss was a source of controversy in the city. Neumann later confirmed in divorce proceedings that the Ole Miss athletic department paid for his living expenses while he was in Oxford.¹³³ Neumann averaged 38.4 points per game on the freshman team and then averaged 40.1 points per game and leading the nation in scoring during his only season of varsity competition as a sophomore.¹³⁴ Neumann left Ole Miss with two games remaining in his sophomore season when he signed a five-year, \$2 million-dollar contract with the Memphis Pros of the ABA. During his ABA career he was once again considered the "white hope" when he was traded from the Virginia Squires to the Kentucky Colonels to increase the number of white players on a Colonels team that was predominately black.¹³⁵ Neumann's collegiate and professional careers were marred by stereotypes that defined his mantra on the court as part of the "black aesthetic," while being unfairly labeled as the "great white hope."

Memphis was always Larry Finch's home and following his success in the 1969 MIAA City Championship game the city became infatuated by his persona. Finch

¹³³ Al Harvin, "People in Sports," *The New York Times*, July 09, 1975.

¹³⁴ Terry Pluto, *Loose Balls: The Short, Wild Life of the ABA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990),235.

¹³⁵ Gary West, *Kentucky Colonels of the ABA: The Real Story of a Team Left Behind* (Morley: Acclaim Press, 2011), 305.

became part of the social fabric of the city. Basketball created one of the few spaces in the city where blacks and whites could meet without confrontation. The relationships that Finch developed as a young man in Orange Mound set the foundation for the young black man that Memphis State fans rallied around to rejuvenate their basketball program. Finch's high school and collegiate careers occurred as the city was at a crossroads in its history. Earlier generations of black athletes from Orange Mound were forced to accept segregation or leave the Deep South. Finch was afforded an opportunity to stay home and play at Memphis State in this new era. Following his collegiate playing career, he was then given the opportunity to return as an assistant coach and then as the school's first African American head coach. Sociologist Zandria Robinson refers to this period as the post-soul era, an era that signified the cultural shift from past to present and back again.¹³⁶ Finch carved out a new identity of being black, of being southern, of being a southern black in this era that immediately followed King's assassination in Memphis.

In 1979, ten years after the Melrose v. Overton city championship game, Magic Johnson and Larry Bird met in the NCAA championship game. According to Nielsen Media Research that game received a 24.1 rating, which meant that nearly a quarter of the television sets in America were tuned into the game that night.¹³⁷ The game between Michigan State and Indiana State generated so much national interest that it brought the NCAA's March Madness to a new level.¹³⁸ "College basketball was on the launching

¹³⁶ Zandria Robinson, *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2014), 4.

¹³⁷ Seth Davis, *When March Went Mad: The Game that Transformed Basketball* (New York: Holt, 2010), 4.

¹³⁸ Ken Rappaport and Barry Wilner, *The Big Dance: The Story of the NCAA Basketball Tournament* (New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2012), 68-70. Both Rappaport and Davis' works point towards the

pad in 1979,” according to Al McGuire. “Then Bird and Magic came along and pushed the button.”¹³⁹ The 1969 MIAA championship game held that same level of excitement and impact on the city of Memphis. Melrose assistant Verties Sails proclaimed that “the city championship game was more important than the state championship. Those were bragging rights!”¹⁴⁰ In only its second year of existence, the city flocked to the Mid-South Coliseum to watch Finch and Neumann compete. One year after the assassination of Dr. King this game defied the suggestion that blacks and whites could not come together on common ground in Memphis. Following the 1969 MIAA city championship the MIAA became part of the continuing battle over desegregation in the city when school busing divided the city once again. By 1974 the Memphis Christian Athletic Association was declaring its own city champion from among the white private schools established following forced busing.

In 1973, Earvin Johnson was forced to attend predominately white Everett High as part of the forced integration in East Lansing. Racial tensions were high as white kids did not want blacks there, and black kids like Johnson wanted to remain at black schools.¹⁴¹ Basketball provided East Lansing with an opportunity to sort out its racial conflicts. Johnson went on to become a McDonald’s All-American at Everett as the white community embraced their 6’9” point guard from the other side of town. George

blossoming of college basketball into March Madness during the 1970s. Samuel Walker and Randy Robert’s *The Road to Madness* furthers this notion of the growth of college basketball. Finch’s emergence at Memphis State parallels the growth of the collegiate game nationally.

¹³⁹ Davis, 9.

¹⁴⁰ *The Rebel*, dir. Paul Carruthers, SEC Storied, May 2017, accessed November 13, 2017, [https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC Storied The Rebel](https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC+Storied+The+Rebel)

¹⁴¹ Davis, 19-20.

Fox, Johnson's high school coach, claimed that by attending Everett that he "learned how to deal with racial problems. He mingled with white kids, he dated white girls, if truth be known, and nobody seemed to mind."¹⁴² The same political push for integration through busing that impacted East Lansing, Michigan, divided the city of Memphis. Had Neumann and Finch arrived in high school seven years later, they would have been caught in the racial conundrum of busing in Memphis. In Memphis in 1969, basketball reconciled racial problems for the moment, but once the game was over the racial schism remained as strong as before. White Memphians accepted the integrated MIAA city championship as long as the schools remained predominately segregated.

Like Bird and Johnson, Neumann and Finch were rivals and friends full of racial symbolism. For two hours fans from white East Memphis and black Orange Mound gathered with fans from around the city to decide a city champion. The Mid-South Coliseum brought the city together in one place, even if that place remained segregated. Black fans stayed on the Melrose side of the arena, and white fans stayed on Overton's side of the arena. For the city this was a step forward, but the reality is that the racial divides that existed outside of the Mid-South Coliseum remained during the game. Basketball created an opportunity to have common ground, and for the hopes of whites and blacks to be played out in front of them. Outside of the Mid-South Coliseum the white political establishment struggled to find common ground with the black community. The game did not solve the city's poverty rate, the economic disparity

¹⁴² Ibid., 23.

between the two communities, or the disparity between white schools and black schools. It only provided a brief reprieve from the realities of life outside of the arena of sport.

The 1969 MIAA City Championship game became emblematic of the myth that basketball healed the wounds of the city. In the next chapter the myth of basketball as a racial healing trope will become fully embedded in the psyche of the Memphis State faithful during the team's run to the 1973 NCAA finals. The Tigers games became one of the few places where whites and blacks came together on common ground. As the city united behind the Tigers run through the NCAA tournament, Larry Finch and his teammates became symbols of hope for racial reconciliation in the city. This myth, that sport healed the racial issues present in the city, was promulgated by both local sports reporters and politicians to shroud the underlying racial problems faced by the city.

Chapter 2

“To Bring this town together...”

The Tigers’ run to the NCAA championship game against UCLA in 1973 created a myth, recounted by Memphians, that described how a young, charismatic black athlete from the “other” side of the Beltway healed the racial wounds of the city. Larry Finch became the focal point of the Tigers’ rise to national prominence during his three-year career at Memphis State. Before the Tigers improbable run to the NCAA finals, the nation last focused on Memphis during the 1968 Sanitation Workers Strike and Dr. King’s assassination. Since that tumultuous time, the city was in search of a healing salve. The 1969 signing of Finch and Ronnie Robinson from Melrose marked a shift in the program’s fortunes. Before Finch, the Tigers were a regional program that received minimal attention from national media. In each of its three previous NCAA tournament appearances before 1973, the Tigers were defeated in the first round.¹ The 1973 run placed the Tigers on the national map, just as NBC’s new \$1.165 million contract created more interest in March Madness by moving the finals to prime time on Monday night.² As the city of Memphis experienced its deepest run into the NCAA tournament, politicians corralled the spirit created by Finch and his Tiger teammates to help them navigate the shifting racial atmosphere in the city. Shepherded by the local media and the Memphis fan base, this narrative of racial unity became part of the lore surrounding Finch and his Tigers.

¹ University of Memphis Men’s Basketball Media Guide, 2015-2016.

² Ken Rappaport and Barry Wilner, *The Big Dance: The Story of the NCAA Basketball Tournament* (New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2012), 100.

Before the arrival of Finch, black athletes from the city were forced to leave the city to find universities to compete in intercollegiate athletics. The Tigers were white Memphis's team. For the black community, cheering for the Tigers before Finch was somewhat of a foreign concept. When Herb Hilliard walked on to the Tigers basketball team in 1967, he became the first African American to play at MSU. Hilliard was a graduate from Woodstock High School in Millington, and therefore not considered a Memphian by most blacks in the city.³ When Finch arrived on campus with Ronnie Robinson, the Tigers produced an opportunity for black Memphians to cheer for their own Tigers. There was an underlying racial tension that permeated campus when Finch and Robinson arrived as students in the fall of 1969. Student Harold Byrnes described MSU's campus in 1970 as a place where, "you could cut the racial tension on campus with a knife." He added that, "it was like a war and people were thrown together."⁴ Into this racial cauldron Finch and Robinson began their career. Iba hoped that the duo from Melrose would help turn the program around, and in the process allow basketball to be used as a unifying tool on campus and in the city. Local basketball fans had already watched in amazement as Finch and his Melrose High team defeated Johnny Neumann's Overton High team and waited in anticipation for what Finch could bring to the struggling Tigers. The freshman team invigorated the Memphis State fan base with a style of play that brought excitement to the game. Fans began to pour into the Mid-South

³ "Tigers to Honor Herb Hilliard," University of Memphis Athletics, February 24, 2017, accessed October 07, 2017, <http://www.gotigersgo.com/news/2017/2/24/mens-basketball-tigers-to-honor-herb-hilliard.aspx?path=mbball>.

⁴ Trey Heath, "Finch shined during era of racial tension," *Daily Helmsman*, March 5, 2005.

Coliseum before the varsity games, just to see Finch and Robinson play in the freshmen games.

On the day before Finch played in his first varsity basketball game in 1970, Reverend James Netters, a black member of the City Council, declared, “there is as much polarization at the grassroots level as ever... One serious event, one big event could ignite it again (like in 1968).”⁵ Poverty in the black community remained as endemic as ever. The only discernible change for blacks in the city was that Mayor Loeb was gone and in his place was Wyeth Chandler. But Chandler’s election in 1971 only continued the plantation mentality that defined black subjugation and poverty in the city. Netters’s fears materialized when federal judge Robert McCrae Jr. issued his 1972 court order to desegregate Memphis schools through busing. Busing became the central piece in the struggle for racial equality in the city and further divided the city along racial lines. Over the course of his three years on campus, Finch provided a distraction from political issues as he and Ronnie Robinson reinvigorated the Tiger basketball program. Two or three times a week the Tigers basketball team provided an opportunity for blacks and whites to come together, united behind a desegregated basketball team. In the confines of the Mid-South Coliseum, desegregation worked and brought the city together. However, the white establishment used the team’s success as a political tool of diversion from the racially divided reality that existed outside of the arena.

Sports journalism, following World War II, could serve as an advocate for social justice. Wendell Smith of the *Pittsburgh Courier* led the movement to force Major

⁵Zach McMillin, “Finch was Memphis’ Unifier,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 2011.

League Baseball to give blacks the same opportunity offered to white players. Baseball historian Jules Tygiel contends that at a time when few whites thought of racial issues, Smith and his fellow black sports writers injected the integration controversy into the broader public arena.⁶ Just as Smith advocated for Jackie Robinson, George Lapidés of the *Press Scimitar* promoted the narrative of Finch and the Tigers healing the city. Lapidés's unique position as the sports editor at the *Press Scimitar* gave him a platform that allowed for him to describe Finch in this fashion. Just four years earlier, Rabbi James Wax helped to resolve the impasse between Loeb and the sanitation workers, and in 1972, Lapidés, a Jewish sportswriter, created the bridge between the white and black communities through basketball. The *Press-Scimitar*, the afternoon paper, historically defended issues of social justice for the black community. By initiating this narrative of healing, Lapidés opened an opportunity for basketball fans, politicians, and others to mend the wounds following the assassination of Dr. King.

Following the MVC championship loss to Louisville in 1972, Lapidés was convinced that the Tigers “have done more to unify this city than anything else that has been done or undone previously.” He added that “most whites, I think, give it no thought that Finch, Robinson and Fred Horton are black, and most blacks, I also think, care less that Don Holcomb and Bill Laurie are white.”⁷ Lapidés interviewed the mayor, who was using the late February basketball game as an opportunity to improve his perception in the community, and questioned Chandler on his position regarding the Tigers. Chandler, a prudent politician, retorted, “The unified support of Memphis for the Tigers was a great

⁶ Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and his Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983), 36.

⁷ George Lapidés, “Never-to-Forget Weekend Dulled Only by Score,” *Press Scimitar*, March 13, 1972.

example of how a common cause can unite all segments of the city into one gigantic cheering section.”⁸ Lapidès had placed this narrative in Chandler’s lap. He reminded his audience that “MSU has an integrated basketball team with black stars, and whites and blacks alike have been pulling for the Tigers.”⁹

Only ten days earlier, Chandler had met with a group of white parents and students from Westwood over the racial issues confronting them because of the increasing black population in the southwest Memphis neighborhood school. The white students claimed that “troubles started after some black boys insulted some white girls.”¹⁰ Chandler’s disregard for the opinions of the black students alienated him from the black community. The tension in the Westwood community became emblematic of the racial friction throughout the city, as the court cases surrounding future desegregation in the city were being litigated. Tiger basketball provided an opportunity for Chandler to get away from the tension in his own city when the Tigers played in the 1972 MVC championship game in Nashville against Louisville. Chandler avoided the racial issues in Westwood by traveling to Nashville to support the city’s team, the Tigers. For his part, Lapidès continued to build this healing narrative for Memphians in his articles chronicling Finch and the Tigers rise to national prominence.

Chandler carried two public personas in the city over the course of the next year. The first celebrated the Tigers’ unifying spirit. The other reinforced his commitment to the segregation of the city’s public schools. He used Finch as a shield for the white

⁸ George Lapidès, “Mayor Sees Some Good in Memphis State Loss,” *Press-Scimitar*, March 13, 1972.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Wayne Chastain, “New Disorders at Westwood,” *Press-Scimitar*, March 3, 1972.

establishment from the attacks on his administration in the black community over busing. As the son of former mayor Walter Chandler, Chandler was a product of the city's white political establishment and he had used his name recognition to gain political experience on the city council. When Chandler ran for mayor in 1971, he relied heavily for support from Loeb's white constituencies. Ninety percent of whites in the city voted for Chandler in 1971, and he never garnered more than three percent of the city's black votes in any of the elections he won. He was indifferent towards the black community during his tenure as mayor, because his voting base was white Memphis.¹¹ For white Memphis, Larry Finch made them feel like they were allowing blacks to integrate Memphis, even as little changed.

When Coach Gene Bartow arrived at Memphis State at the start of Finch's sophomore year, he replaced Moe Iba's reliance on a deliberate offense with fast-break basketball, allowing Finch to flourish. Ten seconds into opening night of the Bartow era, Finch drilled a twenty-foot jumper that propelled the Tigers to a 99-79 victory over the University of California at Davis. Finch sat most of the first half in foul trouble, but he scored twenty-one points in the second half to finish with 24 points for the game.¹² The unbridled cheers from that crowd began a kind of catharsis in Memphis, on and off the court. While nearly all the fans inside the Mid-South Coliseum that night were white, all five Memphis State starters were black -- a rarity for a program in the Deep South in 1970.¹³ That night saw the emergence of a star for Memphis State, Larry Finch. Bill

¹¹ Otis Sanford, *Boss Crump to King Willie: How Race Changed Memphis Politics* (Knoxville, UTK Press, 2017), 157.

¹² Ron Higgins, "Farewell to Finch." *Commercial Appeal*, March 1, 1997.

¹³ Zach McMillan, "Memphis State: quite a commitment," *Commercial Appeal*, March 30, 2003.

Laurie, the point guard for the 1973 Tigers, described Finch as “confident in his own abilities, which allowed him to make players around him better, with encouragement, not by screaming at people.”¹⁴ Finch became the star player that Bartow built around in his quest to bring the Tigers to national prominence. The Tigers completed Finch’s first varsity season 18-8, a twelve-game improvement from the previous year.¹⁵

Finch’s success on the hardwood at Memphis State drove the resurgence of the Tiger basketball program and elevated the Tigers from a regional program to one with a national profile. Following his sophomore season, he was named the Missouri Valley Conference’s Player of the Year. The *Commercial Appeal* celebrated Finch’s sophomore campaign as the finest individual effort in Tiger basketball history.¹⁶ Finch’s smiling picture that accompanied the article painted a picture of him as fun loving, good natured, and a young man black man who represented the university well. His smile hid the hard truth that he had to overcome.

The relationship between Finch and Bartow was the quintessential father-son relationship. Coaches are seen traditionally as father figures: strong, solid and secure men who act as role models to boys and young men, teaching them the skills and work ethic necessary to become responsible and successful citizens.¹⁷ This sense of

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "1970-71 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed May 22, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1971-schedule.html>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Michael Messner, *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 102.

paternalism endeared Finch to white Memphians in the Tiger's fan base. Bartow's up-tempo style of play allowed Finch to flourish as a player. Finch grew into the leader on and off the court that Bartow needed to rejuvenate the Tiger basketball program. Finch worked as hard or harder than his teammates, and never took a day off. This carried over to the classroom as he never missed a class. Like his mother Maple, who went to work every day, Larry's work ethic was contagious and spread throughout the team. In return, Bartow relied on Finch to be his leader on and off the floor. Walk-on Tom Miller remembered that "if there was a message to the team he used Larry to convey it. Even when there were older guys on the team, he used Larry." Miller also added that Finch "was never one of those attitude guys, even to the walk-ons."¹⁸ Finch's charisma was captivating to the Tiger fan base. Other Tiger players, such as Fred Horton, whose reputation for tough physical play was well earned, were not as endearing to the predominately Tiger faithful. Not that Finch was soft, but after he fouled you, he reached his hand up and helped you off your feet. Finch's sense of decency and sportsmanship alleviated many of the fears that white Memphians had of black males as overly aggressive who failed to follow sport decorum.

By the end of his junior year Finch led the conference in scoring, smashed the Memphis State single season scoring record, and won the Missouri Valley Conference player of the year award.¹⁹ Before the Tigers final home game against Louisville, Denny Crum said, "If there's a better all-around guard in the country – and by all around I mean

¹⁸ Tom Miller, interview by author, December 26, 2017.

¹⁹ Aram Goudsouzian, "Back to One City, The 1973 Memphis State Tigers and Myths of Race and Sport," March 21, 2016, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/back-to-one-city/>

all phases of the game – I’d hate to play against him.”²⁰ At the time, the Tigers’ biggest rival was Louisville, another urban university that many Memphians believed looked down upon Memphis State. Before Finch the Tigers were 2-13 against Louisville, but during Finch’s playing career the Tigers were 4-3.²¹ Finch beat out Louisville’s Jim Price for MVC Most Valuable Player in 1972. Finch turned the Louisville series into a rivalry during his years as a Tiger. Because of that, he forever endeared himself to the Memphis faithful. When the Tigers lost the 1972 MVC title to Louisville in a one game playoff, they were forced to accept an NIT bid. At the time the NCAA was still only taking one team from each league into its tournament, and the disappointment that followed led to a lethargic performance in their first-round loss to Oral Roberts in the NIT. Sitting on the edge of the national recognition that comes with playing in the NCAA tournament, Finch and his teammates sharpened their focus and honed their skills heading into his senior season.

As the Tigers returned to campus in the fall of 1972, the city was entrenched in a bitter struggle over the racial status of its schools. Federal judge Robert McRae Jr. ruled that Memphis could no longer maintain a system of single-race schools. He issued a plan to bus 13,000 of the 145,581 Memphis City Schools students to achieve racial balance.²² McRae became the face of busing in Memphis. A graduate of Memphis’s Central High, he believed that it was time for blacks in Memphis to have the same opportunities that he

²⁰ Buck Patton, “Who’s the Best? Only Time Will Tell,” *Press-Scimitar*, February 29, 1972.

²¹ Zach McMillan, “The favorite son: On-court heroics of Finch, others helped ‘change hearts and minds.’” *Commercial Appeal*, April 2, 2003.

²² Beverly Bond and Janaan Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 140.

once had. Whites in Memphis opposed to busing echoed the feelings of former mayor Henry Loeb, who rolled down his window at an intersection in the city, and hollered at Judge McRae, “Hey, you son-of-a-bitch, quit integratin’ those schools,” then grinned and sped away.²³ An organization of white parents opposed to busing emerged calling themselves Citizens Against Busing (CAB). Their resistance to busing included burying a school bus and protesting with placards that read, “Here lies a school bus. No mourning for us. No more fuming. May this be the end of busing.”²⁴ Most white Memphians were content with the status quo.

At the heart of this issue was the de facto segregation in the city schools. For years the white establishment avoided adhering to the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board* ruling by offering small concessions to the black community. White Memphians on the school board justified their position by convincing themselves that blacks did not want to go to school with whites any more than whites wanted to go to school with blacks.²⁵ By 1972 the local branch of the NAACP, led by Maxine Smith, had led a number of protests speaking out against the inequalities in the segregated school system. The NAACP found an ally when McRae replaced Marion Boyd on the federal district court in Memphis. In March 1972, the MCS school board offered two plans to McRae for his approval: Plan A was a minimal busing and maximum pairing of schools, and Plan

²³ John Branston, *Rowdy Memphis: The South Unscripted* (Nashville: Cold Tree Press, 2004), 117. An editor and writer for *The Memphis Flyer*, Branston uses stories he crafted over the course of his career and brings them together in this unique construction of the history of Memphis. His grassroots accounts of the individuals who made Memphis “rowdy” allowed for a much more nuanced understanding of the city’s construction of southern identity.

²⁴ Bond, 141.

²⁵ Sanford, 120.

B called for busing to all schools, creating a 30% minority minimum at each school. The Memphis branch of the NAACP suggested a third plan that bussed 61,000 students, twice as many as Plan B.²⁶ In April of 1972 McRae approved Plan A, which called for minimal busing. Yet McRae's ruling escalated the white community's angst. For some, it was all-out panic. For whites, having Negroes attending white schools was distasteful, but sending their children to black schools was an abomination.²⁷

Mayor Wyeth Chandler banded together with CAB groups in the city and pushed for an amendment to the City Charter to block city tax dollars from being used to pay for busing students in the city schools.²⁸ Chandler began to actively campaign against busing, making appearances with CAB groups at both Hillcrest and East High Schools. He threw his support behind their intent to boycott, saying he was, "100 percent behind their efforts to fight this busing." If this boycott stopped the busing, "the loss of two days to a child's education would be insignificant."²⁹ Chandler's impassioned support of CAB clearly demonstrated his position against desegregation. The space created by the Mid-South Coliseum was acceptable for racial mingling and unity, but mixing of races at school was not. Segregated schools were a part of the affective geography in the city, which allowed for an emotional connection deeply rooted in the historical patterns of Jim Crow neighborhoods. At school busing, Chandler and many within the white establishment drew a line in the sand.

²⁶ Virginia Duke, "To Disturb the People as Little as Possible: The Desegregation of the Memphis City Schools," (master's thesis, University of Tennessee at Knoxville, 2005), 37.

²⁷ Sanford, 124.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 38.

As the beginning of the school year approached, the status of Plan A remained in legal limbo. In June 1972, an appeal to the *Northcross v. BOE Memphis City Schools* (1961), the original federal desegregation case in Memphis, forced a stay on Judge McRae's ruling that implemented Plan A. The stay was lifted in August, with instructions to institute Plan A in January 1973.³⁰ This created a scenario where students all over the city started school in one building, and after developing relationships with their teachers and peers, they were forced to start all over in the middle of the year. White parents throughout the city feared the worst and began to seek out options for their children. Up until this moment, the schools in Memphis were built upon the concept of neighborhood schools. McRae's court order implementing Plan A nullified the accepted racial norm of neighborhood schools.

The response of white parents in the city created one of the largest private school networks in the nation. White churches throughout the city decided to pre-empt the forced segregation of the schools in the city by opening schools in the hallways of their churches. Sunday school classrooms became classrooms for many white children whose parents opposed bussing in the public schools. White Memphians veiled their exodus by claiming to seek a Christian environment for their children. Two and a half weeks before the implementation of Plan A in January 1973, East Park Baptist Church recommended "the establishment of a private, church sponsored school that would provide academic excellence within a Christian environment."³¹ Pastor Peyton Allen placed his sister Pat

³⁰ Ibid, 39.

³¹ "History of Briarcrest School," Briarcrest Christian School, accessed October 07, 2017, <https://www.briarcrest.com/page/about/history>.

Allen, a Memphis City Schools teacher, in charge of the committee that was entrusted to open Briarcrest Christian School.³² Ten Southern Baptist churches in the Whitehaven community met in April 1972 at a local restaurant to discuss a vision for a Christian school in Whitehaven. The Southern Baptist Educational Center (SBEC) was conceived and a thirty-six acre lot at the corner of Holmes and Tulane was purchased for the site of the school. Plans were made for the school, grades 1-12, to open in the fall of 1973. In the interim the elementary students used Broadway Baptist Church's facilities and the high school used Graceland Baptist Church.³³ Within three years, white Memphians in neighborhoods throughout the city had opened over 85 private Christian and/or CAB schools and took with them over 35,000 students.³⁴

As the 1972-73 Memphis State basketball season approached, the *Daily Helmsman* once again lauded Finch's role in the city stating that he "stole the hearts of Memphis basketball fans, and racism is no longer quite so popular in the city as it once was."³⁵ The Tiger faithful who attended games at the Mid-South Coliseum viewed Finch as a "calm, friendly and self-assured young man," according to the *Helmsman*.³⁶ While lawyers and politicians struggled with the issue of busing in the city's schools, the Memphis State campus prepared for its last season with Finch. Finch and his running mate Ronnie Robinson made a pact between themselves to bring Memphis State to the

³² Ibid.

³³ "History SBEC," Northpoint Christian School, accessed October 07, 2017, <http://ncstrojans.com/about-us/history/>.

³⁴ Bond, 140.

³⁵ Tim Church, "Tigers Eye NCAA Title as cage Season Begins," *The Helmsman*, December 1, 1972.

³⁶ Ibid.

national championship game of the NCAA tournament. Finch knew that he had to live up to the preseason hype that went with being labeled as one of the best guards in the country. Ladell Anderson, head coach of the Utah Stars of the American Basketball Association, labeled Finch as the best senior guard in the entire nation.³⁷ On top of all the preseason hype from the media, the Tiger faithful had been requesting season tickets since the 1972 season ended in April.³⁸

Racial tensions made their way to campus at the beginning of the season. The anti-war movement and the black power movements brought protests to Memphis State's campus, like so many other campuses around the country. Basketball games became a visible arena to make political points for the Black Student Association at Memphis State.³⁹ Over the course of the season the BSA protested American racism and imperialism by sitting down during the Star-Spangled Banner. This display of resistance by the BSA led to increased racial friction on campus. In a letter to the editor in the *Helmsman*, a white student seethed, "rather than bringing ourselves closer together, actions such as these (by the black students) only serve to further polarize the races in the City of Good Abode."⁴⁰ *The Helmsman's* sports editor referred to the complaint as an example of the "redneck ethic of control over the conduct of others that is dangerous."⁴¹

³⁷ Jeff Weinberger, "Finch, Robinson Reflect on new Season, Future," *The Helmsman*, December 5, 1972.

³⁸ Bob Jones, "Tigers Paint an Early Sellout Sign," *Commercial Appeal*, August 8, 1972.

³⁹ Aram Goudsouzian, "Back to One City, The 1973 Memphis State Tigers and Myths of Race and Sport," March 21, 2016, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/back-to-one-city/>

⁴⁰ "Student decries Conduct at Basketball Games," *The Helmsman*, January 16, 1973.

⁴¹ Tim Church, "Sports Talk on a Variety of Themes," *The Helmsman*, January 19, 1973.

For Finch, assimilation at the university was made easier because of his status as a star basketball player. For other black students who were not in the limelight the cultural shock of attending Memphis State created challenges. Finch's high school sweetheart Vickie Stephens followed Finch to Memphis State but remembers feeling like a "fly in buttermilk."⁴² The language, the behavior, the mannerisms for black students attending Memphis State were new and forced many to feel out of place. They also felt prejudice from white teachers and white students. For many blacks at Memphis State this was their first exposure to so many white students. As the Tigers began to win, these tensions seemed to move to the back pages and not appear as prevalent as they did when the season opened. The old sport adage that "winning cures everything" was one of the ingredients in the recipe for the racial healing trope of 1973.

These racial slights pointed to the racial difficulties faced by blacks on campus who were not athletes. For black athletes at white universities any relationships with white co-eds were fraught with danger, especially in the Deep South. Coaches at white universities who were recruiting black athletes to star on their campuses also told their players to "stay away from white women." Perry Wallace, the first black basketball player in the SEC at Vanderbilt, dated a black co-ed during his time on campus, thus avoiding the increased stress of challenging another racial boundary. Wallace recalled the fear of "having to always look over your shoulder was simply not peaceful."⁴³ When Vickie Stephens followed Finch to MSU in the fall of 1969 as an undergraduate student this alleviated the stress that both Finch and Bartow would have faced if Finch was not in

⁴² Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

⁴³ Andrew Maraniss, *Strong Inside* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2014), 270.

a steady relationship with a black co-ed student. Out of the spotlight, Stephens often faced the daily stresses of being black on the Memphis State campus on her own, whereas Finch was given a pass due to his status as the star athlete for the Tigers basketball team.

In the fall of 1972, the Tigers' championship hopes were heightened with the addition of 6'9" junior college All-American Larry Kenon from Amarillo Community College in Texas. Kenon, a Birmingham native, was so athletic that he could dunk two basketballs at the same time. He seemed the missing piece in the post that the Tigers needed to advance through the NCAA tournament bracket. Finch remained the hometown hero who received the accolades, but without Kenon the Tigers would not have reached the same heights. The 1972-73 Tiger roster featured four black starters and one white starter, Bill Laurie. Bartow's starting five would have caused more problems for the university a few years earlier. Gene Haskins's starting five in the 1966 NCAA championship game for Texas Western against Kentucky was recent memory, and something that was still a problem in the Deep South. Laurie, the 5'10" point guard, allowed Bartow to have a white player in what many believed to be the most intellectual position on the floor.⁴⁴

The high expectations for the Tigers were deflated early in December, as the team started the season 2-3. The early season woes were part of the chemistry issues faced by adding Kenon into the equation. Kenon believed that Finch and Robinson did not particularly enjoy sharing the spotlight with the newcomer.⁴⁵ Kenon's perspective

⁴⁴ Zach McMillan, "Valley Goal: The Tigers' talent, tenacity were essential to winning title." *Commercial Appeal*, April 3, 2003.

⁴⁵ Jeff Weinberger, "Kenon-Finch Ready for ABA Battle," *The Helmsman*, November 13, 1974.

changed after he saw teammate Billy Buford cry after losing to Texas 80-79 in early December. He was profoundly impacted by the moment and decided to place his personal issues aside. Kenon marked that moment as the one where he gained an understanding of how important winning was to these Tigers.⁴⁶ By January the Tigers had found their way. Finch's 34 points against Florida Tech in mid-January allowed him to become the all-time leading scorer in the school's history.⁴⁷ Also that night, Ronnie Robinson became the all-time leading rebounder in school history. Ten days later Finch once again wowed the Tiger faithful with a 48 point performance against St. Joseph's of Indiana. The *Commercial Appeal* described Finch as "simply amazing" and "the heartbeat of Memphis State basketball."⁴⁸ The emergence of Kenon, the continued excellence from Finch and Robinson, and an improving chemistry allowed the Tigers to go on a fourteen-game win streak starting in late December. Memphis State student Sheila Davis recalls that the winning streak "was overwhelming, and that the campus and city were on fire with excitement."⁴⁹

In the midst of the Tigers' win streak, on January 22, 1973, buses rolled down the streets of Memphis for the first time in the fight to bring educational equality to the city. 40,000 students were truant from school on the first day of busing. Within the next few weeks students began to trickle back into the city schools.⁵⁰ White kids were bused into

⁴⁶ Bobby Hall, "'73 Tigers Recall Highs, Slow Start," *Commercial Appeal*, February 12, 1994.

⁴⁷ Tim Church, "MSU Blows Past Fla. Tech, Looks to Billikens Saturday," *The Helmsman*, January 12, 1973.

⁴⁸ Bobby Hall, "Finch Captures Scoring record as Tigers Romp," *Commercial Appeal*, January 21, 1973.

⁴⁹ Sheila Duke, interview by author, December 16, 2017.

⁵⁰ Duke, 41.

predominately black schools. Black kids were bused into predominately white schools. Skepticism surrounding Plan A was felt on both sides of the racial divide. The organization of Reverend Billy Kyles, People United to Save Humanity, was present at black bus stops to protect black students and bus drivers. Years of racial distrust led to Kyle urging black men to protect their women and children from those opposed to busing. He also attacked Mayor Chandler's membership in CAB and questioned his resolve to enforce the federal court order to begin busing.⁵¹ While many whites kept their children out of school in protest, many blacks prepared for the worse. The racial climate recalled Reverend Netters's premonition that the city was a powder keg awaiting one match to explode into racial chaos. The federal courts, the Memphis City School Board, the NAACP, and the Citizens Against Busing created one of the largest educational exoduses in the history of public education. Busing did not create the suburbs in Memphis, but it expedited the process. The only thing that slowed white flight eastward was the annexation of East Memphis, Frayser, Parkway Village and Oakhaven in the years preceding Plan A, which only slowed the loss of whites inside city limits.⁵²

The cost of white flight in the city school system was disconnectedness. Neighborhoods that had previously held strong communal bonds around their school slowly lost that communal feel. As white flight became the norm, students migrated from Sheffield High School, to Wooddale High, to Kirby High, each time moving towards the outer boundaries of the city limits. Shelby County continued to build the infrastructure necessary to escape east. Contractors continued to build bigger and more luxurious

⁵¹ "Bussing Underway," *Tri-State Defender*, January 27, 2013.

⁵² Branston, 118-119.

houses to make white Memphians feel comfortable with the racial balance that was the norm before school busing. Five years after the first desegregated basketball city championship in 1968, the politicians and citizens of the city returned Memphis to an even more segregated world.

The Tigers dropped a road game late in mid-February to rival Louisville that ended hopes of an undefeated MVC regular season.⁵³ In the next to last game of the season the Tigers defeated New Mexico State 54-53 and secured the NCAA tournament bid from the MVC. As the Missouri Valley Conference champion, the Tigers had received a bye into the Sweet 16 of the 25-team NCAA tournament. After a one-sided victory over West Texas State on senior night, Larry Finch hugged his long-time friend and running mate Ronnie Robinson at half court of the Coliseum. Robinson and Finch received a three-minute standing ovation from the home crowd when Bartow subbed for them with 1:10 left in the game.⁵⁴ Sports writer George Lapidès defined the moment as one “that will live forever.”⁵⁵ Lapidès lauded Finch and Robinson as special heroes who were adopted by most Memphians. Their actions off the court thrilled Memphians as much as their actions on the court. Finch and Robinson were both named to the all-conference first team for the MVC and Finch was named as an honorable mention on the United Press All-American team.⁵⁶ Inside the Coliseum, the city’s racial discord seemed miles away. Here in this space, two kids from Orange Mound lifted the Tigers from the

⁵³ Tim Church, “MSU Record Marred by Louisville Victory,” *The Helmsman*, February 13, 1973.

⁵⁴ Tim Church, “MSU Seniors Bow Out in One-Sided Victory,” *The Helmsman*, February 16, 1973.

⁵⁵ George Lapidès, “A Moment that Will Live Forever,” *Press-Scimitar*, February 19, 1973.

⁵⁶ “Kenon, Robinson and Finch Win MVC Honors,” *The Helmsman*, March 16, 1973.

doldrums of the MVC. Over the next month the Tigers began a journey that further entrenched Finch as a healing factor in the city.

While the Tigers were wrapping up a championship season and the fans were cherishing their last chance to see Finch and Robinson in blue and gray, six miles away at city hall the racial tension reached new levels. On February 6, John Ford, the newly elected councilman, became embroiled in a heated public discussion with the white chairman of the city council, Thomas Todd. Ken Keele, president of CAB, had requested city council funding for CAB schools. Ford told Todd, “Why don’t you just shut the hell up,” when Todd repeatedly denied Ford’s demands to speak against the CAB schools request. The following week Harold Ford, Reverend Kyles, and about one hundred other followers demanded a voice against funding CAB schools. Todd once again denied any of the Ford entourage the opportunity to speak, and when the crowd became unruly, he chided Ford’s followers: “Mob rule does not get us anywhere and I feel you are trying to intimidate this council or me.” Harold Ford addressed the council and chastised black councilmen J.O. Patterson and Fred Davis for siding with their white colleagues to keep the black folks present in the city council chambers from speaking.⁵⁷ The city’s political patterns were shifting with the emergence of the Ford political machine. John Ford’s presence on the council assured black Memphians that attempts by CAB proponents to fund segregated schools using tax dollars would not happen.

The Tigers opened their 1973 NCAA tournament in a region that included four teams ranked in the top 13 in the nation. Memphis State won its first two games against

⁵⁷ Sanford, 148- 149.

South Carolina and Kansas State by a combined total of 36 points.⁵⁸ In the game against South Carolina, Larry Kenon led the team with 34 points and 20 rebounds, but it was Larry Finch who delivered the “killing blows to the Gamecocks.”⁵⁹ Kenon’s play in the NCAA regionals solidified his position as a top draft pick, but it was Finch whose play remained the focal point of the Tiger fanbase. Finch’s 32-point shooting performance against Kansas State two days later further captivated Memphians. Finch later proclaimed, “That’s my favorite game, because it put us in the Final Four.”⁶⁰

As the team arrived at the Memphis International Airport from Houston following their quarterfinal victory, the pilot came over the intercom and said, "Congratulations to the Memphis State Tigers." He said, "I understand there is quite a mob at the airport waiting to bring y'all back home." A crowd estimated at over 5,000 awaited the Tigers at 12:20 am bearing signs that read: “UCLA – The Memphis State of the West.”⁶¹ *The Helmsman* described the atmosphere at the airport as pandemonium. “People covered the floor, people were sitting on reservation counters, on a car put there by some unsuspecting car dealer, everywhere.”⁶² *The Tri-State Defender*, Memphis’s black newspaper, joined the jubilation and supported the city’s newfound unity behind the Tigers. Finch’s 57 points over the weekend and his status as regional MVP was

⁵⁸ Zach McMillan, “All the way: Tigers didn't waltz into UCLA meeting.” *Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 2003.

⁵⁹ Tim Church, “Regional Victories Send Tigers to NCAA Finals,” *The Helmsman*, March 20, 1973.

⁶⁰ Ron Huggins, “From Melrose to Tigers, Finch was Self-made Star,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 3, 2011.

⁶¹ Zach McMillan, “All the way: Tigers didn't waltz into UCLA meeting,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 2003.

⁶² Tim Church, “Victorious Tigers Return Home to Jubilant Homecoming,” *The Helmsman*, March 20, 1973.

highlighted by the *Defender* as it exalted Finch.⁶³ The next stop for the Tigers was St. Louis for the Final Four where Providence, Indiana, and UCLA awaited them.

The Tigers made their way north to St. Louis for the program's first Final Four appearance. Finch donated his Temptations tape and Billy Buford added, "and naturally, we've got to have that *Shaft* tape."⁶⁴ The Tigers looked to Stax recording artist Isaac Hayes, the definition of 1970s black manhood, to inspire them to break the jinx. Hayes, from Memphis, was the first black artist to sell a million dollars' worth of records. His deep penetrating voice, rapped with the audience and drew them in, in ways similar to how Finch's jump-shot drew fans in. Hayes was a man of fashion who made a statement when he stepped on stage. He wore unique colorful combinations of tights, a pair of boots, and a chain outfit that wrapped around his waist and neck. Historically chains represented bondage to black men, and now it was a symbol of black power and along with his bald head, beard and shades, Hayes became a symbol of black militancy.⁶⁵ Black women fell for Hayes's expression of black sexuality and black men dug the lyrics. Finch and his teammates were enthralled by his soundtrack from the 1971 movie *Shaft*. With the theme song from *Shaft*, Hayes, the leading artist for Memphis's Stax studios, announced a shift from the soulful sound that emanated from the black church to a more

⁶³ Bill Little, "Road to St. Louis for Memphis State Tigers 'Easy'," *Tri-State Defender*, March 24, 1973.

⁶⁴ Zack McMillan, "All the Way: Tigers Didn't Waltz into UCLA Meeting," *Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 2003.

⁶⁵ Robert Gordon, *Respect Yourself: Stax records and the Soul Explosion* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 237-238. Stax Studios was another bridge in the city of Memphis that united whites and blacks. The Stax sound became the soundtrack for black liberation, the song of triumph, and the sound of the path toward freedom. The black aesthetic was firmly entrenched in the soulful sounds emanating from its South Memphis studio. Gordon wraps the studios story around its struggle for success that brought out the city's best and the city's worst. Like Finch the studio was praised and lifted as an iconic symbol of hope in the city.

militant black funk sound prevalent in the 1970s.⁶⁶ The movie itself was part of the new genre of blaxploitation, films dedicated to “all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of the man.”⁶⁷ Finch, the proclaimed leader of the 1973 Tigers, announced a shift from Memphis State’s all-white “Dixie Darlings” to the predominately black team that brought Memphis to its first Final Four. In 1969 Nina Simone covered Bob Dylan’s iconic classic that expressed Finch’s impact on the city of Memphis and Tiger basketball, *The Times They were a Changin*.

The Tigers were familiar with the St. Louis Arena, but the unfavorable results from previous NCAA games there haunted them. They held an 0-7 record in NCAA tournament games played in St. Louis, and were set on breaking the jinx that the city held over them in tournament play. When the game tipped off, the city of Memphis all but shut down for the game. WMC estimated that 250,000 television sets were tuned into NBC’s signal and another 100,000 radios were set to WMC-790 for Jack Eaton’s call of Saturday’s semifinal game with Providence.⁶⁸ *The Press-Scimitar* called Finch’s matchup with Providence’s Ernie DiGregorio another opportunity for the Melrose product to do what he has been doing since high school: “prove he is as good or better than somebody else.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ibid., 264.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 258.

⁶⁸ Zach McMillan, “All the way: Tigers Didn't Waltz into UCLA Meeting,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 2003.

⁶⁹ Buck Patton, “MSU Prepares for Act of Providence,” *Press-Scimitar*, March 23, 1973.

The Tigers' semi-final opponent, Providence, was 27-2 and ranked number four in the country. Providence College is a small Catholic college run by the Dominican Fathers. Like the Memphis State faithful, the Providence fan base provided avid support for their hometown Friars. Providence's previous teams were led by Lenny Wilkens from Brooklyn, John Thompson from D.C., and Johnny Egan from Hartford. But, the 1972-1973 team was led by two local products from Providence, Marvin Barnes and Ernie DiGregorio.⁷⁰ Like Finch and Robinson, the two local products restored faith in their hometown basketball program. Unlike Finch and Robinson, who both came from Orange Mound, Barnes and DiGregorio came from two different worlds. The six-foot tall DiGregorio came from North Providence, where he was a hero from Providence's Italian community, enjoying the economic successes of post-war America. DiGregorio's family lived in a split-level colonial home where Sunday dinners resembled the typical large Italian family gathering. Opposite of DiGregorio was 6'9" Marvin Barnes from black West Providence. When Barnes arrived on campus in the fall of 1971 he was not thrilled about playing with "Ernie D." "First of all, he was white, which wasn't exactly my favorite color. Secondly, he was way too cocky." Eventually the teammates from two different worlds grew to not only like each other, but to lead their team to the Final Four. DiGregorio described the two's newfound friendship as one ground in similar interests and in the goal of playing professionally. Over the course of Barnes's freshman season, where he was forced by NCAA rules to play on the freshman team, Ernie D and Barnes both came to practice early and stayed late, working on ways to capitalize on each other's strengths. Before the end of Barnes's freshman season, he became a regular at the

⁷⁰ Joe Jares, "Mad for Marvin B. and Ernie D.," *Sports Illustrated*, February 14, 1972.

DiGregorio Sunday night family dinners, and Ernie D. was playing pickup games in West Providence on its asphalt courts. Ernie D. also described the unique nature of their friendship, “In Providence, being best friends with someone of a different race just wasn’t done. There was definitely a ‘stick with your own kind’ type of attitude. Marvin and me, we didn’t pay any attention to that color barrier bullshit.”⁷¹ Over the course of their run to the Final Four, winning brought together Italians from along Atwell Avenue in North Providence and blacks from West Providence to cheer for the Friars.⁷²

Barnes was arguably one of the most talented players in the Final Four. Unlike Finch, who knew that he always wanted to stay home and play for Memphis State, Barnes was almost a Cincinnati Bearcat, following a stellar prep career at Providence’s Central High School. Barnes’s recruiting visit to Cincinnati was his first plane trip, and it ended up being so turbulent that his plane was detoured to Baltimore. Barnes, visibly shaken, took a Greyhound bus back to Providence.⁷³ Providence coach Dave Gavitt’s pitch for the hometown program was made that much easier following the turbulent attempt to visit Cincinnati. Barnes grew up in West Providence federal housing, and like Finch was example of black players from the “other” side of town, playing for predominately white colleges. Barnes faced isolation on Providence’s campus as one of only thirty-eight African-Americans enrolled at the school. He described how white students treated black students on campus as if “we had some highly contagious disease.” A priest on campus once told Barnes that he needed to “start smiling because he was

⁷¹ Mike Carey, *Bad News* (New York: Sports Publishing, 2016), 27-28.

⁷² Joe Jares, “Mad for Marvin B. and Ernie D.,” *Sports Illustrated*, February 14, 1972.

⁷³ Carey, 26.

scaring the preppie types on campus, with their crew cuts, Izod shirts, Irish wool sweaters, and tasseled penny loafers.”⁷⁴

In contrast to Barnes’s perception as angry, Finch was seen by Memphis State’s white students as personable and approachable. Tiger’s team photographer Phyllis Dibell, a white co-ed, described Finch as someone who was “fabulous. He talked to you, made you feel good. He was cute.”⁷⁵ Finch’s personality endeared him to the Tiger student body, while Barnes was labeled as a thug from inner city Providence. Barnes persona was further marred before the 1972-1973 when he accepted a plea bargain in a case filed by Larry Ketvirtis, PC’s 6’10” backup center. Ketvirtis accused Barnes of hitting him in the mouth with a tire iron.⁷⁶ Meanwhile in Memphis, wealthy white boosters invited Finch to their houses for post-game parties with their families and he signed autographs for young white Tiger fans after games.⁷⁷ Finch became a beloved figure on campus and among the predominately white Tiger fan base, whereas Marvin Barnes became known as “Bad News.”

The Friars had reeled off 17 straight wins heading into the national semifinal game, including six over ranked teams.⁷⁸ In the first eight minutes of the game Barnes

⁷⁴ Ibid., 33-34.

⁷⁵ Aram Goudsouzian, "Back to One City, The 1973 Memphis State Tigers and Myths of Race and Sport," March 21, 2016, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/back-to-one-city/>

⁷⁶ Carey, 44 and 48.

⁷⁷ Aram Goudsouzian, "Back to One City, The 1973 Memphis State Tigers and Myths of Race and Sport," March 21, 2016, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/back-to-one-city/>

⁷⁸ Peter Farrelly, “Me and Ernie D The Popular Filmmaker on his – and his home state’s – love of Providence hoops,” *Sports Illustrated*, July 14, 2013.

controlled the boards, Ernie D made a behind the back pass between two Tiger defenders to guard Kevin Stacum for a wide open lay-up, and the Friars were in control.

DiGregorio's inspired play gave the Tigers fits and led the Friars to a 49-40 lead at the half.⁷⁹ The Tigers' dream season looked like it was finished. Nat Holman, the legendary former CCNY coach who had won both the NCAA and NIT tournaments in 1950, called the Friars' inspired play, "the best eight minutes of basketball I've ever seen."⁸⁰ The Tigers caught a break when Barnes collided with Ronnie Robinson and banged his knee with Providence leading 24-18.⁸¹ Without Barnes in the lineup, Bartow instructed his charges to feed Larry Kenon the ball inside. Without Barnes to offer any resistance, Kenon responded with 28 points and 22 rebounds. Barnes reentered the game with 5:51 remaining in the second half. He pulled the Friars to within one point on a flat-footed layup. Following the layup, Gavitt pulled Barnes out as his knee had completely locked up. The Tigers went on a 13-1 run after Barnes left the game to secure the 98-85 victory.⁸² Finch told reporters after the game that the initial push by Providence was because the Tigers "weren't used to that hurly-burly stuff."⁸³ In the end it was the Tigers' size and Barnes's absence that overwhelmed the Friars. The Tigers win set up a

⁷⁹ Buck Patton, "MSU Prepares for Act of Providence," *Press-Scimitar*, March 23, 1973.

⁸⁰ Carey, 54.

⁸¹ Aram Goudsouzian, "Back to One City, The 1973 Memphis State Tigers and Myths of Race and Sport," March 21, 2016, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/back-to-one-city/>

⁸² Carey, 55

⁸³ Buck Patton, "MSU Prepares for Act of Providence," *Press-Scimitar*, March 23, 1973.

finals-match up with UCLA.⁸⁴ Providence fan Peter Farrelly, who was 16, compared Barnes's injury to that of Roy Hobbs in *The Natural*, except in the movie Hobbs was given another chance.⁸⁵ For the Providence faithful it was a painful blow to an anticipated rematch with UCLA.

Following the game, the Tigers were congratulated by Tennessee Governor Winfield Dunn, Isaac Hayes, former Memphis State president C.C. Humphreys, and Tigers athletic director Bill Murphy. Finch let the media know that "Black Moses" was our good luck charm. Isaac Hayes, a frequent spectator at Tiger home games, traveled to St. Louis to see the game and was present on the trip when the Tigers played his *Shaft* soundtrack.⁸⁶ White Memphis fans indulged Finch's expression of blackness because the Tigers were winning. Finch represented a new construction of blackness in the city. Finch was approachable, charismatic, and humble. Even when Finch wore silk shirts with butterfly collars, a black leather jacket, tight pants, and a captain's hat to ensure that he was "dressed to the nines," he was someone with whom the white student body and fan base felt comfortable. Five years earlier, sanitation workers carried signs that read: "I Am a Man" on the streets of Memphis. Finch's role as a valorous sports figure enabled him to reconstruct the way that white Memphians viewed the black players on the 1973 roster. Bartow described the moment as "probably the finest hour in Memphis State's athletic history." Finch echoed the jubilation surrounding the moment as he told

⁸⁴ Aram Goudsouzian, "Back to One City, The 1973 Memphis State Tigers and Myths of Race and Sport," March 21, 2016, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/back-to-one-city/>

⁸⁵ Peter Farrelly, "Me and Ernie D. The Popular Filmmaker on his – and his home state's – love of Providence hoops," *Sports Illustrated*, July 14, 2013.

⁸⁶ "Laurie 'Underestimated' Ernie D," *The Helmsman*, March 28, 1973.

reporters, “No, I don’t care who we play in the championship game. We’re there, and that’s the most important thing.”⁸⁷

In 1973, the NCAA moved the national championship game to prime-time television. That allowed 38 million television viewers to watch Memphis’s title quest against vaunted UCLA. By the early 1970s the NCAA Tournament had become a big business, and UCLA represented a brand of excellence that enhanced the sport’s image and the tournament’s viability.⁸⁸ UCLA coach John Wooden, the Wizard of Westwood, was challenging Adolph Rupp’s hold for the title of greatest coach in college basketball history. His UCLA teams were in the middle of a twelve-year run where they won ten national championships. UCLA entered the 1973 NCAA tournament riding a 71-game win streak that surpassed the previous record of 60 straight wins set by Bill Russell’s University of San Francisco teams of the 1960s.⁸⁹ UCLA dispensed Indiana University in its semi-final game with relative ease, 70-59.⁹⁰

The national media believed that Providence had held the best chance to knock off UCLA. The Tigers entered the game as an improbable David attempting to slay Goliath. Bartow opened by employing a man-to-man defense against the Bruins. Bruins guard Greg Lee kept feeding the ball into the post, where star center Bill Walton was near perfect, going 11-12 from the field in the first half. Halfway through the first half Bartow

⁸⁷ Basil Brooks, “Tall-Walking, Jubilant Tigers of MSU Hurl Challenging Growl at UCLA,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 25, 1973.

⁸⁸ Smith, John Matthew. *The Sons of Westwood: John Wooden, UCLA, and the dynasty that changed college basketball*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 219.

⁸⁹ Rappoport, 39.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 220.

abandoned the man-to-man defense and employed a one-two-two half court zone defense. Lee continued to lob the ball into Walton over the outstretched arms of Larry Kenon.⁹¹ The Tigers caught a break when Walton garnered his third foul with 4:14 left in the first half. Closing the half on an 8-0 run, the Tigers pulled even, 39-39, at the half. Finch's two free throws to start the second half gave the Tigers the lead, 41-39.⁹² The Tigers were ready to shock the basketball world. Most of the media outlets outside of Memphis gave the Tigers little chance to defeat UCLA and concluded that they had only reached the finals because of Barnes's injury in the semifinal game. But in that one brief moment, the Tigers looked to be on their way to becoming national champions.

That was the last lead the Tigers held for the remainder of the game. Walton continued his excellence by scoring the next eight points from the 11:42 mark in the second half. The Bruins regained control of the game. During a second half-time out, UCLA guard Greg Lee asked Coach Wooden if someone else besides Walton should shoot. Perplexed, Wooden replied, "Why?"⁹³ Walton finished with 44 points on 21 of 22 shooting, breaking the championship game record of 42 points held by Gail Goodrich.⁹⁴ Finch's smooth jumper, along with the athletic play of Robinson and Kenon, kept the Tigers in the game, but they were no match for Walton and the Bruins. With 2:51 remaining on the clock, Walton sprained his ankle and Finch helped carry Walton off the

⁹¹ Ibid., 223.

⁹² Aram Goudsouzian, "Back to One City, The 1973 Memphis State Tigers and Myths of Race and Sport," March 21, 2016, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/back-to-one-city/>

⁹³ Smith, 223.

⁹⁴ Bob Jones, "Mighty UCLA Ends MSU Dream Season," *Commercial Appeal*, March 27, 1973.

floor to the sidelines. Finch showed humility and humanity as the crowd cheered Walton's performance. The Bruins won 87-66. Walton avoided the media after the game, refusing to answer their questions and saying, "I don't want to talk about it, man. I'm really in a hurry to see my friends."⁹⁵ Walton's refusal to address the media was central to his own identity as part of the counter-culture movement and its disdain for the mainstream.

In sharp contrast to Walton's adversarial relationship with the media, Finch embraced the opportunity to represent his hometown. He was the face of the program, and of the entire city. Finch's arrival at the pinnacle of the basketball world signaled to the rest of the country that the city was healing. The city was only five years removed from the National Guard patrolling the city's streets following Dr. King's assassination. In those five years Finch rose from the local prep star to the face of the city's marquee basketball program. Finch, a young black star from Orange Mound, became the face of Memphis for the country to see. His athletic heroics had revitalized the Memphis State basketball program landing them in the NCAA finals against UCLA. His image was displayed on national television and became part of the healing image of which Mayor Chandler boasted.

The Commercial Appeal applauded Finch's 29 points in his last game as a Tiger as a "fitting tribute to a career which has seen him establish most of the school's scoring records."⁹⁶ UCLA guard Larry Hollyfield told reporters, "That Larry Finch is one of the

⁹⁵ Smith, 224.

⁹⁶ Bob Jones, "Mighty UCLA Ends MSU Dream Season," *Commercial Appeal*, March 27, 1973.

two toughest guards that I have faced in my career.” Coach Wooden stated, “I knew about Finch. Memphis State is one of the best teams we’ve played.”⁹⁷ Finch relished in the moment of the game. During the game Finch had talked it up with Hollyfield. According to Finch, Hollyfield told him, “Nice shot,” Finch replied that Hollyfield tried to steal his ball and he let him know, “you ain’t gonna get that ball. I don’t play that way.”⁹⁸ Finch was devastated by letting down the city against UCLA, but his character and determination only further endeared him to the Tiger fan base. For Finch his goal was to lead Memphis State to a national championship, and his competitive nature led him to look back on his performance against UCLAS as a disappointment because he failed to meet his objective.⁹⁹ Finch’s character as a man allowed him to help Walton off the floor, but his character was so competitive he never truly got over losing the game.

Following the defeat to UCLA, the Tigers boarded a plane and returned home to Memphis. The *Press Scimitar* posted a picture of Finch exiting the plane at the Memphis International Airport next to a caption entitled “A Grateful City Greets Its Team.”¹⁰⁰ This time, Coach Bartow had the team board a bus and bypass the airport terminal. After landing at the Memphis airport, the team bus made its way through Orange Mound on its way to the Mid-South Coliseum, where 6,000 fans awaited the Tigers. Tiger fan Keith Easterwood was thirteen and remembers hitchhiking and jumping on the back of a pickup truck on Southern Avenue to get to the Mid-South Coliseum to welcome the Tigers

⁹⁷ Jeff Weinberger, “Tigers’ Effort Refutes Press,” *The Helmsman*, March 30, 1973.

⁹⁸ Bruce Patton, “Tigers High in Their Praise of Bruins,” *Press-Scimitar*, March 27, 1973.

⁹⁹ Larry Finch Jr., interview by author, January 31, 2018.

¹⁰⁰ “A Grateful City Greets Its Team,” *Press-Scimitar*, March 27, 1973.

home.¹⁰¹ Free to all fans that night, Easterwood and Memphians from all over town made their way to the Coliseum one last time to thank the Tigers. For Easterwood, “the diverse nature of that crowd was something I had never seen.”¹⁰² At the Coliseum, the governor and the mayor joined the team for the welcoming party. African American city councilman Fred Davis singled out Finch and Robinson, saying “They have been the catalyst and done as much to bring this town together as any two people in town.”¹⁰³ Davis recognized the significance of two black athletes from Orange Mound, who allowed the city to come together more than any two politicians on that stage had done over the same period. Bartow spoke briefly and turned the program over to Finch. When he did, the crowd exploded with an emotional outburst of support for Finch, which caused Finch to tear up. Finch then emceed the introduction of the rest of the team.¹⁰⁴

The city continued to revel in the Tigers’ success. *The Commercial Appeal* boasted that although UCLA won the game, the Tigers landed two members, Finch and Kenon, on the Final Four all-tournament team to UCLA’s one. The final blow dealt by the Tigers was when Gene Bartow was named Coach of the Year by the National Basketball Coaches Association over UCLA’s Wooden.¹⁰⁵ Although Finch and the Tigers returned with the runners-up trophy, they were champions in the eyes of Memphians.

¹⁰¹ Keith Easterwood, interview by author, October 10, 2017.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ “It Was a Great Homecoming for Tigers,” *Tri-State Defender*, March 31, 1973.

¹⁰⁴ Tim Church, “Crowd of 6,000 Greets History-Making Tigers,” *The Helmsman*, March 30, 1973.

¹⁰⁵ Bob Jones, “MSU Can Savor Sweet Spoils of NCAA Success,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 28, 1973.

Finch and Robinson were the catalysts, the hometown players that brought the city together. Four years earlier Finch had gone against the norm when he chose to make his own path at MSU, a university that many in the black community thought would never accept him as a man. Finch ended his career holding six career marks in the Tiger record book: single game scoring record, most points in a season, most points in two seasons, most points in three seasons, most field goals in a season, and career assists.¹⁰⁶ Finch never missed a game during his three-year span on the varsity team. His productivity, and effort set the standard for excellence in the program. Along the way, the Tigers became a perennial contender for conference champion and drew recognition nationally. These feats were accomplished at a time when racial strife divided the community. Bennie Crosnoe, a Tiger fan who traveled to St. Louis for the Final Four, claimed that, “About that time the games came along, there was a coming together of the races in this city we hadn’t seen before.”¹⁰⁷ Clarence Jones, a freshman guard on the 1973 team summed it up best when he said, ““It was basketball that brought the city together,” he said. “At the time, it was special.”¹⁰⁸ Finch’s loyalty to the city never waned as a player. The unpopular choice to stay and play for Memphis State, at a time when the school was viewed with justifiable suspicion by the black community, defined Finch.¹⁰⁹ The city rewarded Finch by celebrating his play on the court and celebrating his

¹⁰⁶ Bob Jones, “Tiger Duo Named First to Star List,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 2, 1973.

¹⁰⁷ Zack McMillan, “Spirit of ’73,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 6, 2003.

¹⁰⁸ Aram Goudsouzian, “Back to One City, The 1973 Memphis State Tigers and Myths of Race and Sport,” March 21, 2016, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/back-to-one-city/>

¹⁰⁹ Geoff Calkins, “He Loved his City; Memphis Reciprocated,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 3, 2011.

persona in a way that no previous black athlete from the city had ever experienced. For years the *Commercial Appeal* had enraged black Memphians with a stereotypical black male caricature, Hambone. Following the loss to the UCLA Bruins, the *Commercial Appeal* printed a cartoon with two kids – one white, one black – sitting on a sidewalk, looking slightly dejected. Behind them a sign read “Larry we love you!!!”¹¹⁰

Finch’s Tigers unified the city in its support of MSU basketball, but the city remained divided over desegregation. Within three years of the initial implementation of busing MCS’s director of research and planning, Dr. O.Z. Stephens, summed up the failure of busing in Memphis when he stated, “Consistent evidence does exist in the MCS system to support the contention that recent court ordered desegregation decisions and the subsequent implementation of desegregation plans have contributed to rapidly increasing resegregation of the public school population – thus thwarting efforts to achieve the goal of meaningful integration.” The city of Memphis actively supported the Tigers on the court, but off the court they remained as divided as before. Judge McRae’s courage in the face of resistance from the white establishment led to a decision with noble intentions. In the court of public opinion, however, the exodus of white students from public schools to private and county schools spoke clearly to their position on integration. Finch and his Tiger teammates were cheered on by white Memphians, but herein lies the paradox. African American writer John Edgar Wideman, a former basketball standout at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1950s, concludes that basketball is an art form that unites the community, celebrates family, and reflects the unique character of the

¹¹⁰ Aram Goudsouzian, "Back to One City, The 1973 Memphis State Tigers and Myths of Race and Sport," March 21, 2016, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/back-to-one-city/>

black family. But the sport is also a unique metaphor for the complex attitudes towards race in America.¹¹¹ The celebration of Finch as an iconic figure who united Memphis provided white Memphians a glimpse into what family means in black Memphis, along with the unique characteristics found within black Memphis that contradict the racial stereotypes permeated by cartoons such as *Hambone*. Finch's celebration provides insight into the complex realities that allowed the city to remain divided racially, politically, and socially.

Following the return of the Tigers from the NCAA championship game in St. Louis, Finch was lauded as a unifier in the city by white and black politicians. For three years white Memphians claimed Finch as their own and took pride in the fact that "they" had developed Finch into a star. Tim Church, a student reporter for *The Helmsman*, summed it up best when he said, "Both of these young men (Finch and Robinson) were ignored, simply because they were black. Both have expressed appreciation for the help they received from various teachers and coaches, but that help came from the ghettos, not East Memphis. Because they were black, Memphis gave these two men the back of their hands twenty years ago, and left them in the ghetto where survival was the major issue. Both returned twenty years later to show Memphis a standard of excellence that the city would do well to adopt in other areas."¹¹² Church's editorial embodies the problems with the narrative that Finch and the 1973 Tigers healed the racial issues in the city. Memphis remained as divided as it had been in 1968. The Mid-South Coliseum provided a

¹¹¹ Tracie Church Guzzio, "Race and Basketball in the Works of John Edgar Wideman," found in Amy Bass ed., *In the Game: Race, Identity and Sports in the Twentieth Century* (New York: MacMillan, 2005), 224.

¹¹² Tim Church, "Form of Memphis Unity Remains to be Seen," *The Helmsman*, March 28, 1973.

performative space where whites and blacks met for a common goal: Tiger glory. White and black politicians latched on to the success of the Tigers, but the racial reality was only momentarily forgotten. Beyond the Tigers, the city struggled with white flight, political fracture, and a broken school system.

Beyond the myth was a city divided. When Finch signed his scholarship papers with MSU against the wishes of many in the Melrose community, he exposed the fear and trepidation that many in the black community felt towards Memphis State. In the next chapter the role of the city's historically black college, Lemoyne-Owen, in the city's sports history will be explored. The Magicians 1974-1975 Division III national championship team remains an anomaly to most Memphians, yet to LOC's alumni and fanbase it sits as an integral piece in the city's sports history. As major universities began to integrate, HBCUs lost their basketball luster and importance to the collegiate game. Hidden behind the veil of segregation, LOC's championship team exposes the limited scope of basketball's healing abilities. Even the attempts of the *Press-Scimitar's* George Lapidés to place LOC's accomplishment in its proper place in the city's sport iconography, white Memphis continued to ignore the school's accomplishment as if it never took place.

Chapter 3

Champions Behind the Wall:

The 1974-75 LeMoyne-Owen Magicians

The story of the 1975 LeMoyne-Owen national championship season provides a unique perspective into the myth of the healing trope of basketball in Memphis. In the fifteen years leading up to the 1974-1975 season, Coach Jerry Johnson toiled in obscurity on the corner of Walker Avenue and Neptune Street as the small HBCU's head basketball coach. Bruce Hall, the home to the Magicians, was located directly across the street from the federally funded housing project Lemoyne Gardens. For most white Memphians, the Lemoyne-Owen campus was part of a separate community meant to be kept behind the wall of segregation. Even as Larry Finch and Ronnie Robinson signaled a new relationship between the city's best black basketball players, and the city, there remained a divide that basketball could not bridge. While Finch, Robinson and the other black basketball players at Memphis State faced unique challenges on MSU's predominately white campus, Coach Johnson's players faced another set of hardships. As integrationists moved forward with plans to bring the city together through the desegregation of public schools, the role of HBCUs like Lemoyne-Owen began to be questioned by many in the white community, and many in the black community thought that HBCUs were outdated following the integration of historically white colleges.

HBCUs provided a parallel opportunity for black athletes to compete against each other since Jim Crow kept black players from competing against white players in the South. Unofficial gentlemen's agreements dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century kept black players on college teams in the North from playing against schools in

the South.¹ Sports on historically black college campuses became a response to the prevailing notion of African American inferiority. Set against the backdrop of contrasting educational ideals, sports at HBCUs pointed towards the vitality of student culture on black campuses. Collegiate athletics offered a limited means through which historically black schools could become assimilated, on their own terms, to a national collegiate culture.² Therefore, sports at HBCUs were crucial in that they contributed to a much desired sense of institutional pride and national reputation, and engendered school spirit by bringing students, faculty, and alumni together to share in the thrill and excitement of common pursuits.³ As a smaller HBCU, Lemoine College focused on the success of its basketball program to create this sense of pride. Prior to integration, many Southern-born African American athletes were forced to attend HBCUs that were close to their homes. This created a family-like atmosphere surrounding black schools – they were as much a part of the community as were the families themselves. Networks of relatives remained strong because the family members were close by.⁴ Lemoine-Owen,

¹ Charles Martin, *Benching Jim Crow: The Rise and fall of the Color Line in Southern College Sports, 1890-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 18.

² Patrick Miller, “To Bring the Race Along Rapidly: Sport, Student Culture, and Educational Mission at Historically Black Colleges during the Interwar Years,” in *The Sporting World of the Modern South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 136. A later article in *The Sporting World of the Modern South*, Rita Liberti’s discusses the role of women’s basketball at historically black universities in “We Were Ladies, We Just Played Like Boys: African American Women and Competitive Basketball at Bennett College, 1928-1942.” Liberti discusses the varying views on the role of women’s athletics at HBCUs and further nuances the role of athletics at HBCUs. Whereas leaders at some HBCUs contended that athletics ran counter to the middle-class feminine ideal grounded in refinement and respectability. Others, like Bennett College, balanced and negotiated various understandings of class, race and gender arrangements as they supported women’s basketball. LOC did not have a women’s basketball team in 1974-1975, but by discussing the intersection of gender and athletics at HBCUs we can better understand the overall role of athletics and respectability in the black community.

³ David K. Wiggins ed., *Separate Games: African American Sport behind the Walls of Segregation* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2016), xiii-xiv.

⁴ William Rhodes, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 137.

like so many other HBCUs, symbolized much more than simply an institution of higher learning; it was a source of pride for African Americans in Memphis. According to graduate Charles Diggs, “the hardworking families, poor, middle class, and a few upper-class supported the students at Lemoyne.”⁵ Lemoyne-Owen provided a space for the black community in Memphis to come together. As the basketball team traveled and competed against larger HBCUs throughout the South, its national reputation grew.

Coach Johnson’s courage to leave the all-black Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference to become the lone all-black school in the Volunteer State Athletic Conference placed LOC at the forefront of athletic integration in the Deep South. LOC’s inclusion in the VSAC provided hope for racial reconciliation throughout the region. Even as LOC broke through previous barriers of racial discrimination, the team received limited media coverage outside of Memphis’s black weekly newspaper, *The Tri-State Defender*. Despite its national success, the white political and social establishment in the city largely ignored them. Local sports reporter George Lapidés, who helped construct the healing trope of Finch, referred to the 1975 Magicians NCAA Division III title as the “coup de grace” for Memphis sports.⁶ Lapidés understood the importance of this team’s victory to the historical narrative of basketball in the city. Unlike the white politicians who catered only to the whims of their constituents, Lapidés offered an authentic

⁵ Shirletta J. Kinchen, *Black Power in the Bluff City: African American Youth and Student Activism in Memphis, 1965-1975* (Knoxville: UTK Press, 2016), 119. Kinchen’s grassroots analysis of the black power movement on LOC’s campus forces one to confront the unique position of LOC in the black community. The longtime bastion of black bourgeoisie, middle-class values faced its own identity crisis in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The LOC board’s influence from prominent white men in the city caused the friction Kinchen chronicles. Yet, it is the safety and security that LOC provided for its black students from the city’s “plantation mentality” that allowed LOC to remain as a continued center of the black community’s higher educational needs.

⁶ George Lapidés, “One phase of basketball ends,” *Press Scimitar*, March 17, 1975.

understanding of Lemoyne-Owen's accomplishment. As a sports writer for the progressive *Press-Scimitar*, Lapides's opinions on LOC were never adopted in the same fashion as his views on the Tigers.

In 1968 LeMoyne College, which was founded by the American Missionary Association of Congregational Church in 1870, merged with Owen College, a two-year college founded in 1954 by the Tennessee Baptist Missionary and Education Convention, to create Lemoyne-Owen College. When Jerry Johnson began his college coaching career, it was as head coach of LeMoyne College. By 1975 the school's population remained small, with approximately 900 students enrolled.⁷ LeMoyne's historical roots reach back to Reconstruction. It was known for its work in educating the black community and held the honor of being the oldest continually running college in the city. LeMoyne's 1870 founding predates Christian Brothers College in 1871, Memphis State in 1912, and Rhodes (formerly Southwestern) in 1925.⁸ Lemoyne-Owen College has been a symbol of stability and pride in the black community since its earliest days. In the years before Johnson took over the basketball program, Lemoyne-Owen struggled to field competitive teams. With his arrival on campus in 1959 the fortunes of the Magician basketball programs changed. Johnson infused McLendon's fast paced brand of basketball in Memphis.

⁷ *NCAA Division III Basketball Championship Program*, 35.

⁸ "History," Christian Brothers University, accessed June 21, 2016. <https://www.cbu.edu/CBUhistory> ; "U of M History," About U of M, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://www.memphis.edu/about/umhistory.php>.; "College History," Rhodes College, accessed June 21, 2016. <https://www.rhodes.edu/content/college-history>.

The racial integration of white universities in the Deep South unfolded in the late 1960s through the mid-1970s and created a brawn drain from the HBCU talent pools. Athletic programs at southern universities did not stray very far from the mainstream of their state's social and racial norms. Even after African Americans won admission into undergraduate classrooms, a retreating color line still encircled the basketball court and preserved the whiteness of its special space.⁹ Black athletes in Memphis became prime targets for schools in the Deep South from conferences like the SEC. Vanderbilt University's signing of Perry Wallace and Dillard Godfrey in 1966 began the conference's process of integration. Wallace was a member of the 1966 Nashville Pearl High basketball team that defeated Memphis's Treadwell High in the first integrated TSSAA State Championship game. By choosing to attend Vanderbilt, Wallace was in effect opening the avenue for other coaches in the SEC and in the state of Tennessee to recruit players from predominately black high schools. Other SEC schools followed over the next five years to sign one or two black players to their rosters. While many of the best black athletes were now signing with white universities with larger athletic budgets, better facilities, and more exposure, HBCU coaches were further limited.

When LOC left the Southeastern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference in 1968, this marked an attempt by the conservative, black middle-class board at the college to adapt to the changing social atmosphere. Lemoyne College had been a member of the SIAC since 1932. Founded in 1913, the SIAC was the second oldest HBCU athletic conference. It produced two of the first four blacks who played in the NBA.¹⁰ In the

⁹ Martin, 254.

¹⁰ "SIAC History," SIAC, accessed April 26, 2018, http://www.thesiac.com/sports/2010/2/2/gen_0202103837.aspx.

SIAC Lemoyne College competed against many of the best black schools in the nation, but as integration became part of the changing social structure in college athletics nationwide, Johnson decided to become proactive. The process began in 1964 when Al McGuire, who was coaching at Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina, contacted Johnson and suggested that LOC join the Volunteer State Athletic Conference. McGuire left Belmont Abbey in 1964 to take the job at Marquette University, but not before he convinced Johnson to seek membership in the VSAC. Lemoyne-Owen's board of trustees was intrigued by the possibility of joining a league outside of the all-black SIAC, but only if Johnson could find other HBCUs to join the VSAC with LOC. As athletic director, Johnson contacted Fisk College, Knoxville College, and Lane College and convinced them to join Lemoyne in moving to the VSAC.¹¹

Just as the VSAC was nearing an agreement to accept the four HBCUs into the conference, an incident on the campus of Knoxville College in March of 1968 dissuaded Lane, Fisk, and Knoxville Colleges from moving forward. Three black students from Knoxville College were arrested by the Knoxville Police Department for allegedly transporting molotov cocktails to campus. The president of the college, Dr. Robert L. Owens III, and the leader of the Student Social Action Committee, Curtis Johnson, went to the police precinct to ensure that the rights of the three were being protected. While they were at the precinct the crowds on campus began to swell. A.J. Boruff, a white taxi driver for Checker Cab Company, drove on campus in the early hours of the morning. According to Knoxville Police reports, his cab was overturned by a mob of black student protesters and he was shot with a .22 caliber shotgun. The Knoxville College students

¹¹ Jerry Johnson, interview by author, March 29, 2018.

claimed that he was chased off campus by a group of students and that Boruff was killed by someone other than a Knoxville College student. Tennessee governor Buford Ellington offered a \$5,000 reward for any information leading to the arrest of the perpetrator. The Knoxville chief of police believed that there was a conspiracy among the students at Knoxville College to conceal information concerning the murder.¹² The tension between Knoxville College's student body and the city's white establishment illustrates the impact of the Black Power Movement on HBCU campuses and the BPM's burgeoning impact on civil rights nationally. Black college campuses across the country, many with moderate administrations born from assimilationist ideals, were faced with a growing militant Black Power Movement. Knoxville College's moderate administration decided to follow the advice of the *Atlanta Daily World* to "take more seriously the Black Power Movement and take the necessary steps to curb those students suspected of advocating disorder and violence."¹³ They also decided that it was in the school's best interest to remain in an all-black conference and not join the VSAC with Lemoyne. Once Knoxville College decided to forgo joining the VSAC, Lane College and Fisk College also removed their requests to join.¹⁴ Lemoyne was now on its own and became the lone HBCU member of the VSAC in the fall of 1968. By the 1970s historically black colleges were gaining admission into integrated leagues in both the NAIA and the NCAA. Lemoyne Owen's membership in the VSAC was an example of both the progressive

¹² George Curry, "An Unsolved Murder case in a College in Knoxville," *The Harvard Crimson* (July 1968). Accessed April 26, 2018. <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1968/7/23/an-unsolved-murder-case-at-a/>

¹³ "Tragedy at Knoxville," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 14, 1968.

¹⁴ Jerry Johnson, interview by author, March 29, 2018.

possibilities and the controversial impact of college sports on racial relations in Tennessee.

The Black Power Movement pushed the boundaries of race on college campuses throughout the country. The BPM urged black athletes to protest their positions in society and on campus. At the University of Texas at El Paso, Syracuse, Oregon State, and Cal-Berkeley, black student athletes risked their educations, and in some cases, their professional careers, boycotting athletic events critical to the financial well-being of their respective schools.¹⁵ Tommy Smith's and John Carlos's victory stand demonstration during the 1968 Mexico City Olympics set the stage for the expansion of black resistance across campuses nationwide for black athletes in the 1970s.

Following the assassination of Dr. King in Memphis in 1968, the black freedom struggle shifted from the Civil Rights Movement's primary goal to affect the moral consciousness of white Americans to one that developed the moral, cultural, and political consciousness of African Americans toward the necessity of black unity, power, and agency through the Black Power Movement.¹⁶ Historian Ibram X. Kendi claims that this late 1960s movement carved its own unique space on college campuses as compared to the black freedom struggle earlier in the 1960s, which focused on off-campus resistance

¹⁵ David Wiggins, *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in White America* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1997), 147.

¹⁶ Ibram Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Student and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972* (New York: MacMillan, 2012), 67. During the late 1960s and early 1970s LOC was confronted by the changing political environment on campus precipitated by the black campus movement. As a historically black college LOC leaned heavily on its black middle-class bourgeoisie status in the community. This period saw LOC change presidents three times and struggle with the changing construction of racial politics in its own community. Black student activism on campus forced the administration and trustees at LOC to reevaluate itself. Martha Biondi's *The Black Revolution on Campus* chronicles how the BCM forced change on college campuses across the country. She contends that the BCM successfully pressured universities to embrace black studies programs and draw stronger connections with their black students' cultural roots.

and activism.¹⁷ This Black Campus Movement took place on both historically white and historically black colleges and universities. In Memphis, the off-campus activism of the Black Power Movement was evident during the 1968 Sanitation Worker's Strike with the Black Organizing Project. In Memphis this shift to on-campus activism took only a few months. On November 25, 1968, a handful of Lemoyne-Owen students, along with local black power movement leaders from the Invaders and the Black United Front, occupied Brownlee Hall.¹⁸ These students were pushing a black power agenda aimed at the historically conservative, black middle-class values that the school represented to the black community in Memphis.

The student occupation of Lemoyne-Owen's Brownlee Hall was part of a larger Black Campus Movement across the country. Black students at HBCUs protested the closed-mindedness of their professors, the Euro-centric bias that remained in their classes, and the lack of scientific evidence to support these assumptions. This type of thinking by academics, politicians and benefactors was used to mask the preponderance of whiteness – white ideas, people and scholarship – as normal.¹⁹ A handwritten manifesto by an unnamed senior, entitled "Force and Power," circulated around campus. It claimed that as a black student, "I have potential power, but it has been confiscated. I am Black, but I am being white-indoctrinated." The manifesto outlined the students' demands, including more Black curriculum, use of a student lounge, knowledge of the qualifications of the President, lowering of tuition, and improved dormitory facilities for

¹⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁸ Kinchen, 130.

¹⁹ Rogers, 5.

athletes. The twenty-hour take-over of Brownlee Hall ended with the students releasing control of the building. The administration agreed to their demands, except for lower tuition.²⁰ The black power movement forced schools like Lemoyne Owen to look introspectively at their mission and to move from the education of the Negro to the education of the black student.

In contrast to the tensions in the classroom at HBCUS, schools like LeMoyne-Owen escaped elevated racial tensions in their sports programs because of their monolithic racial construction. The turmoil found in the athletic departments of predominately white universities in the late 1960s and 1970s was absent from the athletic departments at historically black colleges and universities. Although HBCUs were hotbeds for political protest, the racial dynamics for athletes prevented HBCUs from having the same impact through sport. Sociologist Harry Edwards contends that black athletes at schools like LeMoyne-Owen were guided by three distinct social structures that prevented dissension. First, black athletes at historically black colleges, unlike their fellow athletes at white institutions, could find new social contacts when groups of black students made demands on them that were not consistent with their role as athletes. Second, black athletes at HBCUs could not be true to their essential values of the black student movement if they treated the black coach as a scapegoat and charged discrimination. Finally, attacking black coaches at HBCUs was out of the question because it was inconsistent with the Black Power movement's demand for more black coaches in organized sport.²¹ LeMoyne-Owen's players lived on a campus that embraced

²⁰ Kinchen, 125-138.

²¹ Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport* (Homewood, Ill., Dorsey Press, 1973), 148-151.

their culture while their Memphis State counterparts, many of whom were from the same Memphis neighborhoods, faced a different set of racial challenges. The 1974-1975 team focused on basketball and escaped distractions that black players at schools like Memphis State were forced to confront.

Black colleges could serve as educational safe havens where children of sharecroppers felt nurtured and motivated. As the game of basketball grew nationally, predominately black colleges provided athletic opportunities denied by Jim Crow. Playing in segregated leagues and denied the opportunity to compete against predominately white schools, black college basketball remained hidden behind the wall of segregation. Black coaches at these schools were obscure. Players who once opted for HBCUs signed with predominately white universities that offered better facilities and more exposure. As racial barriers eroded, and white colleges recognized how much black talent they had ignored, they cherry picked it until it became nearly all theirs.²² As Memphis State began to recruit black athletes with the help of prominent black voices in the community, such as Leonard Draper, the black talent pool in Memphis remaining for HBCUs began to dwindle.

In 1948, one year after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in professional baseball, the NAIA began to accept teams with black players into its tournament. By the mid-1950s the NAIA tournament was dominated by Tennessee State University. McLendon's teams won three straight NAIA national championships from 1957-59. Since its inception in 1951, McLendon was an integral player in the National Athletic

²² Richard Sandomir, "Civil Rights on the Basketball Court," *New York Times*, March 15, 2008.

Steering Committee (NASC). This group of black college coaches studied the problems of segregation and discrimination in intercollegiate athletics and suggested ways to change the game.²³ The success of Tennessee State in NAIA tournaments in the late 1950s embarrassed the NCAA. To lure black colleges away from the NAIA, the NCAA initiated a small school tournament in 1958, the Division II tournament.²⁴ As HBCUs integrated the NCAA, the NCAA maintained segregation by relegating HBCUs to Division II. They argued that because HBCUs lacked large enough attendance during football season, they did not merit Division I status. The HBCUs responded by initiating football “Classics.” These games brought together two HBCU football programs to a large off-campus stadium in a nearby major city, to meet the attendance mark set for Division I eligibility.²⁵ As a school without a football program, the Magicians missed out on the attendance push of the football “Classics” and would have been relegated to small school status by the NCAA. As a member of the VSAC, LOC was also a member of the NAIA, which made it a target for the NCAA in its attempt to monopolize control of college athletics. For LOC there was no rush to be boxed into a small school division, so they decided to remain in the VSAC.

²³ Milton Katz, *Breaking Through: John B. McLendon, Basketball Legend and Civil Rights Pioneer* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007), 69-70. See: Scott Ellsworth’s *The Secret Game*, which further emboldens McLendon as a racial pioneer and civil rights advocate, while existing within the segregated world of HBCU basketball. Johnson’s relationship with McLendon and McLendon’s influence upon Johnson marks the importance of Johnson to not only black basketball, but also links Johnson directly with the game’s founder James Naismith.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁵ William Anderson, interview by author, June 21, 2016.

Jerry Johnson's youth was emblematic of early twentieth century black life in the Southwest. Johnson's father's family was part of the post-emancipation migration that saw black families arrive in East Texas. The Johnsons lived in Longview, Texas, and owned land on what became known as the East Texas oilfield. Racial tensions in town erupted during the Longview Race Riot of 1919. Black residences and businesses were burned, and one black man was killed. During the 1920s cotton prices fluctuated and timber supplies dwindled, leading to economic uncertainty for Longview.²⁶ In 1930, it was discovered that in East Texas lay the largest and most prolific oil reservoir in the United States.²⁷ Johnson's family was forced to sell its plot of land and the rights to the oil fields underneath that land by the white men who owned the oil companies. In return for selling the land, Johnson's father was given a job with the oil company as a repairman at the oil refinery. Forced to wear an asbestos suit to go into the furnaces at the refinery and repair the bricks, Johnson's father passed away due to health issues with his lungs before Johnson graduated from high school.²⁸

Johnson's mother was from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and raised her family there while her husband remained in Longview and worked for the oil companies. Johnson attended Booker T. Washington High in Tulsa, where he became an all-state football player. Johnson's original love was football, but he remained active in other sports in Tulsa

²⁶ Eugene W. McWhorter, "LONGVIEW, TX," *Texas State Historical Association*, June 15, 2010, accessed March 29, 2018, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hd103>.

²⁷ "East Texas Oilfield Discovery," American Oil & Gas Historical Society, February 14, 2018, accessed March 29, 2018, <https://aoghs.org/petroleum-pioneers/east-texas-oilfield/>.

²⁸ Jerry Johnson, interview by author, March 29, 2018.

through the Catholic parochial leagues. Johnson intended to enroll at Wiley College to play football after graduation because it would bring him closer to his father's family in Longview. Tragedy struck Johnson again when his mother passed away during his senior year.²⁹ When Johnson arrived at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, the school was best known for its debate team, which had toppled national champions University of Southern California and Harvard. Although football was secondary to the debate team, Wiley College introduced football to black colleges in the region and was a leader in forming the Southwestern Athletic Conference.³⁰ Johnson starred on the gridiron and was twice named as a *Pittsburgh Courier* All-American selection.³¹ When Johnson's fullback decided to transfer, he followed his battery mate to Fayetteville State Teacher's College in North Carolina. He spent the summer with his teammate in Gary, Indiana, working in a steel mill before heading to Fayetteville State.³² Without either parent, Johnson saved his money from the steel mill and started his time in North Carolina with enough money to survive on his own.

Johnson's arrival at Fayetteville State marked a major turning point in his life. The 1939 football team completed its season 8-1 and was one of the best teams in the school's history. Johnson started at running back.³³ He also joined the basketball team at Fayetteville State. The Broncos competed in the Colored Intercollegiate Athletic

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "Wiley College History," Wiley College, accessed June 27, 2016. <https://https.wileyc.edu/history>.

³¹ "The 93rd Birthday Celebration for the Legendary Coach Jerry C. Johnson," RSS, accessed June 27, 2016, http://athletics.loc.edu/news/2011/6/15/GEN_0615112735.aspx?path=general.

³² Jerry Johnson, interview by author, March 29, 2018.

³³ Roger Saylor, "Fayetteville State University Football Historical Data," Fayetteville State University, accessed April 03, 2018, <http://www.fsubroncos.com/ot/fast-Football-Data.html>.

Association against John B. McLendon's North Carolina Central teams. McLendon's fast break style and pressure defense revolutionized college basketball during the 1940s. As a member of the Broncos, Johnson experienced the up-tempo brand of basketball that McLendon taught at North Carolina Central. North Carolina Central's opponents were usually worn out physically by the fast pace and there were games where the referees were forced to stop the game due to their own exhaustion. In 1941 McLendon's North Carolina Central won the inaugural Negro National Championship Tournament in Cincinnati.³⁴ Playing against McLendon's teams convinced Johnson that coaching basketball was the path for him. While at Fayetteville State, Johnson met his wife Vaster Marrow, a native of Tillery, North Carolina, and they were married in 1943.

Following his two years at Fayetteville State he accepted a position as the head coach for football, boys basketball, and girls basketball at Longview High in Hickory, North Carolina. Over his eighteen-year tenure at Longview, his boys basketball teams won five state championships and his football team one state championship. McLendon recruited a number of Johnson's players and mentored Johnson as a coach. McLendon imparted various elements of his fast break style and pressure defense to Johnson. When McLendon took the head coaching position at Tennessee A & I in 1954, Johnson sought a spot on McLendon's staff in Nashville. McLendon instead suggested in 1959 that he accept the men's basketball position at a small HBCU in Memphis, LeMoyne College. McLendon made a phone call on behalf of Johnson, which helped him land the job. Of the many lessons McLendon imparted to Johnson, one of the most influential was when he told Johnson to "be careful not to recruit too many boys from the same town. Get

³⁴ Katz, 33 and 46.

good kids from as many places as possible.”³⁵ One of the keys to Johnson’s success was his ability to mold teams together with this advice, one that runs contradictory to the common belief in Memphis that a coach can create a championship team from within the city.

Johnson’s career provides insight into how coaches found success during Jim Crow, and he remained competitive following desegregation by following many of the same formulas. He continued to sign players from various cities and did his best not to sign too many players from the same high school. One of the keys to his success was his recruitment of players through local community and recreational centers. While major white colleges relied solely upon high schools to locate their players, black coaches like Johnson learned that the best players were found congregating and competing at community centers. With limited budgets, black coaches were forced to spend their own money for recruiting trips. By learning who the directors were at the recreation centers in each city, they were able to see the best players in town without having to visit every high school in town. Johnson’s 1975 Magician team included players from Memphis; Chicago, Illinois; Tuscaloosa, Alabama; and Cleveland, Ohio. For years to follow, his teams were filled with players using McLendon’s philosophy of recruiting.

The VSAC, created in the 1940s, was a prominent fixture among NAIA schools in Tennessee through the 1980s.³⁶ When the VSAC opened its doors to Lemoyne-Owen

³⁵ Jerry Johnson, interview by author, March 29, 2018.

³⁶ "Volunteer State Athletic Conference," Wikipedia, accessed June 17, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Volunteer_State_Athletic_Conference&oldid=714480004.

in 1968, the conference was embracing integration that began in 1954 when the NAIA invited Tennessee A & I to participate in its pre-season tipoff classic in Kansas City. John McLendon's team also played in the NAIA tournament that season, becoming the first all-black school to play in an integrated post-season tournament.³⁷ By the beginning of the 1974-1975 season, Lemoyne Owen had been a member of the VSAC for six years and the other members had at least one black player on their roster. Although Lemoyne-Owen and Coach Johnson hoped to join the VSAC with other HBCUs, the events of March 1968 at Knoxville College left LOC as the only HBCU in the VSAC. Lemoyne-Owen faced racially charged crowds who were less than welcoming to the Magicians.

The Magicians opened the 1974-75 season as the defending regular and post-season Volunteer State Athletic Conference champions. Charles "Razor's" Edge led the Magicians the previous season on their way to the NAIA District tournament and left a void that needed to be filled. In the 1974 NAIA District 24 semifinals the Magicians defeated Cumberland University by eight before falling to Kentucky State 75-65 in the district finals.³⁸ Falling one game short of the NAIA national tournament to Kentucky State left a bitter taste for the Magicians and Coach Johnson. Kentucky State's enrollment was much larger than LeMoyne-Owen's, and it was considered a national power in the early 1970s when it won NAIA national tournaments in 1970, 1971, 1972, and 1973.³⁹ When the NCAA initiated a small school tournament in 1975, the NCAA

³⁷ Katz, 79 and 82.

³⁸ "1974 NAIA Men's Division I Basketball Tournament," *Wikipedia*, accessed June 27, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1974_NAIA_Men's_Division_I_Basketball_Tournament

³⁹ "NAIA Division I Basketball History," NAIA.com, April 19, 2009, accessed May 21, 2018, http://grfx.cstv.com/photos/schools/naia/sports/m-baskbl/auto_pdf/MBBDIChampionshipHistory1223.pdf

Division III Tournament, Johnson was open to the idea. This new tournament would give his team an opportunity to play for an NCAA championship and avoid Kentucky State.

LeMoyne-Owen looked to a trio of players to replace Edge's leadership and productivity. They were known as the "Three Man Wrecking Crew" by the *Tri-State Defender*.⁴⁰ The 6'1" Robert Newman and 6'4" Clint Jackson were both highly touted local recruits from Hamilton High in 1971, who as local Memphis kids hoped to follow in the footsteps of Finch and Robinson and sign with Memphis State.⁴¹ Both played in frequent pickup games at the Elma Roane Fieldhouse on Memphis State's campus heading into their senior year, but they were surprised when Coach Gene Bartow did not offer either a scholarship out of high school.⁴² Word leaked out that Bartow did not think that Memphis had any major prospects in its 1972 class. Following the public sign of disrespect by Bartow, Hamilton Coach Lloyd Wright vowed never to send a Hamilton High graduate to Memphis State.⁴³ The black community remained leery of Finch's signing, and with Bartow's statement about the lack of talent in the city, he alienated its black coaches. Overlooked by Memphis State, Newman and Jackson originally signed with Tennessee State and John B. McLendon. Both saw limited time during their first year at TSU and decided to return home to Lemoyne-Owen.

Completing the "Three Man Wrecking Crew" was Willie Parr, a 6'7" post player from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Parr spent the 1973-1974 season on the bench behind Edge,

⁴⁰ Ben Little, "Sports Horizons," *Tri-State Defender*, March 1, 1975.

⁴¹ Ray Jordan, "Unbeaten Hamilton Claims First City Championship," *Commercial Appeal*, February 20, 1971.

⁴² Robert Newman, interview by author, June 27, 2016.

⁴³ Clint Jackson, interview by author, June 21, 2016.

a 1974 NBA draft pick of the Knicks, but during the 1974-1975 season Parr became the centerpiece of the team.⁴⁴ Parr possessed a rare combination of skills and athleticism, and at 6'7" his ability to handle the ball like a guard complemented his shooting ability from inside and out.⁴⁵ Parr was an accomplished player out of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, who received multiple offers to play college basketball. An all-state player at Druid High, he averaged over 35 points a game in high school and on one occasion scored 57 points against Mobile's Blount High, who only scored 47 as a team.⁴⁶ After his senior year at Druid, Parr remained in Tuscaloosa, academically unable to get into any of the schools who had recruited him. During the winter of 1972, when Lemoyne-Owen traveled to Stillman College for a game, Coach Martin sought out Coach Johnson and suggested Parr to him. Johnson offered Parr an opportunity to come and visit Memphis the following summer. Once Parr arrived in Memphis, he never went back to Tuscaloosa. Instead he chose to stay and play for Coach Johnson. Parr remembers that Johnson placed him in a house just off campus called the "Big House" where he roomed with the rest of the out of town players. Parr found a father figure in Johnson, who took care of him and made playing basketball fun.⁴⁷

Joining Willie Parr in the "Big House" was Jerry McNeal from Decatur, Georgia. McNeal grew up in the Decatur Housing Authority projects in a community just northeast of Atlanta. The Decatur Housing Authority projects, part of the Black Beacon Hill

⁴⁴ Ben Little, "Sports Horizons," *Tri-State Defender*, March 1, 1975.

⁴⁵ Robert Newman, interview by author, June 27, 2016.

⁴⁶ Willi Parr, interview by author, July 1, 2018.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

community, fed into all-black Trinity High. The black community was held together through their connection to sports, which was exemplified by the school's 1966 negro state championship.⁴⁸ In 1968, during McNeal's junior year, the Decatur schools integrated by closing Trinity High and sending all its students to Decatur High. Although many of the black players felt isolated in their new surroundings, they found friends through basketball as they won the school's first regional championship in basketball.⁴⁹ The following year, McNeal's senior campaign, saw basketball once again bring the community together as the team won Coach Bob Reinhart's first of three state basketball championships at the school.⁵⁰ McNeal credits his years at Decatur High during the early years of integration in Georgia with preparing him for what he would face at LOC in the VSAC. McNeal's older brother, Bob Welch, worked in the business office at LOC and convinced Johnson to offer McNeal an opportunity to come to Memphis following McNeal's freshman season at Tyler Community College in Texas. Following a successful freshman campaign at Tyler, the coach informed McNeal and his black teammates that Tyler's experiment in integration was over and they would not be offered scholarships for the following season. Confronted with the harsh reality of Jim Crow that remained in Tyler, Texas, McNeal followed his brother to Memphis and the safety of an HBCU at LOC.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Carla Parker, "Trinity High Alums Remember Athletic Success," *The Champion*, June 19, 2015.

⁴⁹ Denise Dillon, "Trophy from 1969 Championship Game Replaced," WAGA, January 11, 2018, accessed July 17, 2018, <http://www.fox5atlanta.com/news/trophy-from-1969-championship-game-to-be-replaced>.

⁵⁰ "Latest News," *Decatur Bulldog Basketball*, January 17, 2014.

⁵¹ Jerry McNeal, interview by author, July 17, 2018.

Milton Stephens, from Cleveland, Ohio, rounded out Johnson's starting five and was another resident of the "Big House." Stephens grew up on the east side of Cleveland that had been transformed by the Second Great Migration into a predominately black neighborhood and by the late 1960s his high school, East High, was a predominately black school.⁵² At East High he played for Charles Lyons, a firm disciplinarian who used unique substitution patterns to keep his players fresh at the end of games.⁵³ The Bombers only played other black schools in Cleveland during the regular season, and did not see any integrated or all-white teams until the regional level of the state playoffs.⁵⁴ After a two-year stint at Cuyahoga Community College Tri-Cities, Stephens's college coach, David Green, contacted Coach Johnson and suggested Stephens. On his recruiting visit to Memphis, he met Jerry Dover, Willie Parr and Robert Newman and knew immediately that he had found a home. Stephens received other offers from predominately white schools in Ohio, but he felt more comfortable at an HBCU like LOC because of his experience in segregated Cleveland.⁵⁵ Like the majority of the 1975 LOC roster, Stephens faced racial tension during his prep school days and looked to Coach Johnson and LOC to provide a sense of comfort and insulation from racial tensions found at predominately white schools.

⁵² Leonard Moore, "The School Desegregation Crisis of Cleveland, Ohio, 1963-1964: The Catalyst for Black Political Power in a Northern City," *Journal of Urban History*, (January 2002), 135. Moore's article analyzes the racial issues that faced Cleveland during the desegregation of its schools. Memphis would be faced by similar racial discourse ten years later with the advent of Plan Z. Milton Stephen's decision to attend LOC, where he felt safer surrounded by a black community he was more comfortable around.

⁵³ Grant Segall, "Charles E. Lyons Coached East High Basketball," *The Plain Dealer*, July 01, 2011.

⁵⁴ Milton Stephens, interview by author, July 17, 2018.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Lemoyne Owen started the 1974-1975 season with three early victories, including a triple-overtime victory over Belmont on opening night. Two nights later the Magicians defeated Lincoln University by seven before facing off against crosstown opponent Christian Brothers College.⁵⁶ CBC employed a methodical offense that screened continually and employed numerous back door cuts. CBC's style of basketball exemplified typical basketball in white America. Los Angeles Laker and former UCLA star Kareem Abdul Jabbar described the clash in cultural styles taking place in America at the time when he declared that "white college basketball was patterned and regimented like the lives awaiting its players. The black schoolyard game demanded the flash, guile, and individual reckless brilliance each man would need in the world facing him."⁵⁷ Following the success of the Loyola University, which started four black players in the 1963 NCAA Finals, and Texas Southwestern, which started five black players in the 1966 NCAA Finals, the value of the black athletic aesthetic was beginning to permeate college basketball.⁵⁸ Although it took the rival NCAA until 1966 to reach this plateau, the NAIA was continuing to build upon its own acceptance black sports style that McLendon initiated in 1954. Johnson considered himself part of McLendon's coaching tree and was more than competent in employing McLendon's up-tempo style of play familiar among HBCUs throughout the South. Lemoyne-Owen defeated CBC 54-52, which confirmed that basketball played by all-black schools merited the same level of

⁵⁶ "Magicians Top Lincoln U," *Press Scimitar*, December 5, 1974.

⁵⁷ Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 76. George explores the importance of the black aesthetic to game, and its relevance as the first black basketball players who played professionally with whites. Many of the games preeminent black players were products of HBCUs. The black aesthetic that was brought into white professional basketball, remained a constant in HBCUs like LOC.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

respect as Adolph Rupp's regimented classroom style of play. LOC's ability to find success against CBC and other teams with a regimented style would prove to be beneficial in the NCAA's Division III tournament that March.

Although the move to the VSAC was a progressive step forward, Johnson continued to schedule other predominately black schools. Before the NCAA's introduction of Division II to lure HBCUs away from the NAIA, schools like Lemoyne-Owen played challenging schedules against the best all-black schools found throughout the South. Although the future of college basketball was moving towards complete integration nationally, LOC's schedule still echoed the segregated past. To this day the SIAC considers itself one of the most storied conferences in all of college athletics.⁵⁹ Johnson continued to schedule former SIAC foes Tuskegee University, Florida A & M, Xavier University of New Orleans, and smaller HBCUs like Lane College and Dillard University. During one of these games in New Orleans against Dillard University, the Magicians were victims of foul play. While they were shooting around, their locker room was ransacked, and most of the team lost their clothes.⁶⁰ One of the challenges facing HBCUs as college basketball began the process of integration was the ability of HBCUs to compete against larger historically white colleges and universities who played in modern facilities, complete with security. Smaller HBCUs such as Lemoyne-Owen and Dillard University played in venues that were much smaller and their athletic budgets

⁵⁹ "SIAC History," SIAC, accessed April 26, 2018, http://www.thesiac.com/sports/2010/2/2/gen_0202103837.aspx.

⁶⁰ Robert Newman, interview by author, June 27, 2016.

limited not only how they traveled but also the security of their locker rooms before and during games.

Although road trips exposed the financial limitations that restricted small HBCUs, they also provided insight into the close familial sense created through those difficulties. When the team went on the road Coach Johnson allowed Jerry McNeal to drive his Cadillac Eldorado, and then the rest of the team would fit into two station wagons that followed behind.⁶¹ Milton Stephens remembers the road trips as an opportunity to bond with his teammates. Five guys, all over six feet tall, packed into a station wagon singing the soulful sound of the times that originated around the corner from Bruce Hall at Stax Studios on McLemore Avenue. Whether it was David Porter, Isaac Hayes, or Otis Redding, the soulful sounds of Stax music provided the background for laughter and conversations that built lifelong friendships.⁶² These trips brought the LOC players closer together on trips throughout the South as they maneuvered through the remnants of Jim Crow. The student body at LOC often drove the ninety miles to Jackson, Tennessee, to see the team play Union or Lambuth. They, too, packed into cars and brought a good number of fans to support the team on the road.⁶³ Outside of the school's regular season games and non-league HBCU opponents, Coach Johnson took the team north over winter break to test their mettle against larger HBCUs in the Chicago Classic.

The Chicago Classic at Kennedy-King College shed light on the potential of HBCU basketball during this era, but also revealed the difficulties faced by black college

⁶¹ Jerry McNeal, interview by author, July 17, 2018.

⁶² Milton Stephens, interview by author, July 17, 2018.

⁶³ Stevenson Bratcher, interview by author, July 31, 2018.

basketball in this time of increased integration of college basketball. In December of 1973 LeMoyne-Owen won national attention when it upset highly touted Morgan State University in the opening round of the Chicago Classic. The opening round upset included overcoming Morgan State's 7'0" Marvin "the Human Eraser" Webster. Webster was the MEAC's two-time player of the year and the third overall pick in the 1975 NBA draft.⁶⁴ The Bears were a team that reflected the strength of HBCUs during this period. Relegated to the NCAA's Division II as an HBCU, Morgan State's 1973-1974 team won the Division II national championship while still producing players with NBA talent.⁶⁵ Following the Magicians' second round victory over former SIAC foe Xavier, *The Chicago Tribune* labeled them the Cinderella of the tournament.⁶⁶ In the finals the glass slipper fell off as the Magicians fell to MEAC power Maryland Eastern Shore, which played three future NBA draft picks.⁶⁷ This tournament gave LOC's Willie Parr the opportunity to be evaluated by pro scouts, while he was competing against some of the best talent in the country. Parr's performance against Webster opened the eyes of pro scouts and became an integral part in his being a 1976 NBA draft pick.⁶⁸ While the 1973 Chicago Classic demonstrated the strength of collegiate basketball played by HBCUs, the following year's tournament revealed the weaknesses of collegiate basketball played by predominately black schools.

⁶⁴ 2008-2009 Morgan State University Men's Basketball Media Guide (Baltimore: Morgan State, 2008), 91.

⁶⁵ Ken Murray, "Record Setting Morgan State Player Marvin Webster Dies," *Baltimore Sun*, April 8, 2009.

⁶⁶ Mike Conklin, "Magicians in Finals Today of Cage Meet," *Chicago Tribune*, December 29, 1973.

⁶⁷ "1974 Maryland-Eastern Shore Hawks," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed June 23, 2016. <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/maryland-eastern-shore/1974-schedule.html>.

⁶⁸ Willie Parr, interview by author, July 1, 2018.

The 1974 Chicago Classic never lived up to the expectations of the Magicians, nor to the fans of Chicago who were expecting a tournament with competitive games and future professional talent. The tournament faced financial difficulty due to the lack of funds to cover the team's traveling expenses. Only three teams arrived in Chicago to play: Lemoyne-Owen, Shaw College (Michigan), and Mississippi Valley State University. For the Lemoyne-Owen players, the hotel provided by the tournament was worse than the weather. Nicknamed the "Surprise Hotel" by some of the players, its doors all faced the street and did not lock.⁶⁹ In their first and only game, the Magicians defeated Shaw College. Ricky Means, a 6'7" finesse player for LeMoyne-Owen, had his best game of the season in the 95-86 win. Mississippi Valley State refused to play and returned to Itta Bena, Mississippi, because it didn't get the money it was guaranteed. For schools whose budgets were already miniscule in comparison to larger universities, the economic necessity of being paid outweighed the opportunity for national exposure. When Mississippi Valley State returned home without playing a game, the tournament committee awarded the tournament championship to the Magicians, and Means was named the MVP.⁷⁰ The financial woes of the Chicago Classic exposed the struggles faced by black college basketball programs as historically white colleges and universities began to drain more black players from predominately black leagues, causing a lack of revenue for these programs.

Nestled into the northeast corner of campus on the corner of Walker Avenue and Neptune Street sits Bruce Hall, which is the center of athletics for Lemoyne Owen. It

⁶⁹ Clint Jackson, interview by author by e-mail, June 23, 2016.

⁷⁰ "Lemoyne-Owen Finds New Way to Win Trophy," *Press Scimitar*, December 30, 1974.

provided an intimidating home court advantage for LOC and caused trepidation for many of the VSAC teams upon their arrival on Walker Avenue. The bleachers reach up seven rows and sit below a series of windows at twelve feet that run the length of the gymnasium. The student body of LOC and the community from the Lemoyne-Gardens housing projects filled the gym's bleachers from top to bottom, as well as the bleachers on the stage. Fans stomped on the benches and created an intense environment that elicited fear in opponents. The rosters of some VSAC teams were not always the same when they made their return trips to Bruce Hall.⁷¹ Players fed off the energy from the fans during home games. When describing this atmosphere, former LOC student Stevenson Bratcher said, "Ain't nothing like it. That gym was packed every night. Most of the kids were inner city kids and each sport supported the others because everybody knew everybody."⁷² Not only was Bruce Hall the center of LOC on game nights but it also was a multi-purpose facility that met other needs for the school besides hosting basketball games. On the level below the gym floor there are locker rooms, classrooms, and the athletic department offices. At the west end of the gym, the stage gives the small school an auditorium. The cozy confines of Bruce Hall reflect the status of Lemoyne Owen as a small school with a limited budget. During the 1974-75 season most home games surpassed Bruce Hall's 2,000-seat capacity and created an atmosphere contagious for winning.⁷³

⁷¹ Milton Stephens, interview by author, July 17, 2018.

⁷² Stevenson Bratcher, interview by author, July 31, 2018.

⁷³ Robert Newman, interview by author, June 27, 2016.

During an era when inroads were being made at Memphis State towards desegregation, Lemoyne-Owen remained a safe haven for black college students in the city. Although high school athletics were integrated, the neighborhoods and the schools in those neighborhoods remained segregated. As the historically black college in Memphis, the student body at LOC was made up primarily of students from the city's black high schools. Rivals during their high school years at Melrose, Hamilton, Manassas, Carver, Northside, Douglass, or BTW, now they came together as one at Lemoyne-Owen. It was a community that thrived inside of a divided city, but one that nourished the social, economic, and academic needs of the black students entrusted to its care. Classes were smaller at LOC and allowed for personal relationships to develop amongst not only the student body but between the professors and students. Professors stayed after class to talk with students or returned with their students to their offices for further discussion. These relationships fostered academic growth and created a stronger sense of community within the school. Before and after classes students met at the Four Way Grill on Walker Avenue and Mississippi Boulevard for soul food.⁷⁴ The Four Way Grill was an institution in the Lemoyne-Owen neighborhood since 1946, when one of Boss Crump's chauffeurs opened the restaurant.⁷⁵ Attending Memphis State would have meant foregoing the security and comfort of the black community at LOC to break ground in a world foreign to most black students from Memphis in the 1970s. Many

⁷⁴ Stevenson Bratcher, interview by author, July 31, 2018.

⁷⁵ "Four Way Restaurant Owner Willie Earl Bates Dies," WMC Action News 5 - Memphis, Tennessee, May 20, 2016, accessed July 31, 2018, <http://www.wmctionnews5.com/story/32030004/four-way-restaurant-owner-willie-earl-bates-dies>.

black students chose Lemoyne-Owen to avoid being lost in the shuffle of larger schools like Memphis State.

Following their return from Chicago, the Magicians dropped their first game back to Dillard University by five before reeling off four straight wins to improve to 12-1 on the season. When the team arrived in Tuscaloosa to play Stillman College they looked poised to run the table on the remainder of their schedule. Playing Stillman was a homecoming for Magician Willie Parr. Parr was a product of the McKenzie Housing Projects, one of six boys from his mother Melanie Bride. Unable to take care of all six sons, Willie was sent to live with his father John Lee Parr when he was two. A product of the West Side of Tuscaloosa, Willie attended 32 Avenue Elementary, Druid Middle, and Druid High School.⁷⁶ Parr's high school coach, Hugh Martin, was Druid's first all-state player before becoming an all-conference guard at Alabama State. Martin returned to Druid after graduation and turned the program into the perennial negro basketball power in the state of Alabama. Six years earlier as a sophomore on the Druid High team, Parr was part of the inaugural season of integrated high school basketball in the state of Alabama.⁷⁷ Parr remembers the games well and the large crowds that attended the games because "young people didn't have anything else to do at the time."⁷⁸ Parr's size, agility, and scoring ability led the Dragons to back to back 4-A basketball state championship game appearances during his sophomore and junior years.⁷⁹ His experience in high

⁷⁶ Willie Parr, interview by author, July 1, 2018.

⁷⁷ Stan Voit, "Dragon Cage Mark Speaks for Itself," *The Tuscaloosa News*, November 24, 1968.

⁷⁸ Willie Parr, interview by author, July 1, 2018.

⁷⁹ Ed Darling, "Dragons Fall to Decatur," *The Tuscaloosa Times*, March 8, 1970.

school, playing against all-white schools in Alabama, helped prepare Parr for competition in the VSAC. The crowds in the gyms Lemoyne-Owen played in were smaller, but the desire to play championship basketball still drove Parr to compete. Against Stillman, Parr led the way with 22 points, but the rest of the team got caught looking past Stillman in their second loss since Christmas break.⁸⁰ Even as the team secured another VSAC Western Division championship over the next few weeks, the team remained under the radar, as only the *Tri-State Defender* chronicled the team's run through the regular season.⁸¹

In the late 1960s, the NAIA maintained its grip on HBCUs despite the NCAA's creation of Division II. The NCAA and the NAIA were in a war for control of college athletics and basketball was a major pawn in the chess match between the two associations. The NCAA attempted to lure another HBCU away from the NAIA when it offered the Magicians the opportunity to play in its inaugural Division III tournament. LOC would not be forced to rescind its membership in the VSAC or the NAIA. Instead it would only have to announce by mid-January if it would be accepting the NCAA's offer to compete in its tournament. The NCAA understood that schools like Lemoyne-Owen were at a disadvantage when compared to larger schools like Kentucky State, which had larger student populations and athletic budgets. Kentucky State's prominence in NAIA District 26 placed Coach Johnson in a unique situation when the NCAA offered the opportunity to compete in its new Division III tournament. Johnson had already made the decision to compete in the tournament, but he allowed the players to vote on the

⁸⁰ Ben Little, "Sports Horizons," *Tri-State Defender*, February 1, 1975.

⁸¹ "Lemoyne Clips Stillman," *Press Scimitar*, February 7, 1975.

decision. The team listened to the persuasive argument Coach Johnson made for the new tournament.⁸² LOC was now directly in the middle of the chess match between the NCAA and the NAIA, and with its decision to join the NCAA Division III tournament, it became one more victory as the NCAA continued its domination of March Madness. With two games remaining in their regular season, the Magicians were rewarded by the NCAA as the host site for the South Region in its inaugural Division III basketball tournament.⁸³

The Magicians entered the VSAC tournament as regular season champs who had already committed to play in the NCAA Division III tournament. The Magicians defeated Belmont University, Lambuth University, and Carson-Newman University on the way to claiming another VSAC championship. Playing the tournament in Jefferson City on the campus of Carson-Newman brought with it memories of racial tensions. Earlier in the year after a LOC victory, the team was run out of town by the KKK. A racial slur from one of the Carson-Newman players, aimed at one of the Magicians, led to a scuffle between the teams and LOC being escorted off campus through the cafeteria. Once the team returned to their hotel, Coach Johnson was alerted to imminent danger from the local klavern. Rumors surfaced among the players that there was a burning cross and an imminent threat of danger to their lives. Johnson gathered the team and immediately began the return trip to Memphis.⁸⁴ As the lone HBCU in the conference,

⁸² Randy Covitz, "No Pressure on Magicians," *Press Scimitar*, February 27, 1975.

⁸³ "Magicians Will Host Tourney," *Press Scimitar*, February 19, 1975.

⁸⁴ Jerry McNeal, interview by author, July 17, 2018.

the reality of racial animus on the road became more prevalent thereafter at Carson-Newman. The “Three Man Wrecking Crew” were able to put those thoughts aside and guide the Magicians to victory in the 1975 VSAC tournament, and each would earn All-Tournament honors.⁸⁵ Following their latest VSAC championship, the Magicians faced the unknown for the first time by choosing to play in the NCAA Division III tournament. In 1975, the new NCAA Division III tournament welcomed thirty teams in eight separate regions from around the country. LOC was awarded the highest seed in the South Regional and would host the opening two rounds.

As the NCAA Division III tournament opened in Memphis, the Magicians faced another obstacle. With a limited coaching staff as well as a limited athletic budget, Coach Johnson was unable to scout any of the three opponents the NCAA sent to Memphis for the opening rounds. LOC opened with Transylvania University from Lexington, Kentucky, in the first round. The Pioneers arrived at Bruce Hall with a 19-6 record and were riding a seven-game win streak.⁸⁶ The *Press-Scimitar* provided the only preview of Transylvania University, and that was only a list of the team stats that it had received from the wire service. Just as Coach Johnson had steered his team through the debacle at the King College Classic in Chicago, he focused solely on what he could control: his team. The Magicians’ aggressive man-to-man defensive pressure allowed them to pull away in the second half. Johnson’s team, like those coached by John B. McLendon, utilized their speed and superior conditioning to pull away.⁸⁷ The Magicians

⁸⁵ “Magicians Win Cage Title,” *Tri-State Defender*, March 15, 1975.

⁸⁶ “Magicians Will be Shooting in the dark,” *Press Scimitar*, March 7, 1975.

⁸⁷ Ken Jones, “Only Miles Stands in Magicians Way,” *Press Scimitar*, March 8, 1975.

were victorious the next night in their South Regional Finals matchup with Miles College. Against Miles College, it was the Magicians' bench depth that propelled them to the next round.

Johnson's treatment of transfer players was one of the keys to his success that created the depth he needed to compete at a small school like Lemoyne-Owen. Newman and Jackson were transfers and they were joined by 6'4" shooting guard Terry Gray, a Manassas High graduate who transferred back to LOC from Texas Southern University. Gray's performance against Miles helped catapult the Magicians past Miles College. Assistant Coach Powell praised Gray in his postgame interview, saying that: "We teach our kids here to play as a team and the job Gray did proves we have a strong bench."⁸⁸ Johnson never sugarcoated his assessment of players who transferred into the program. Many of the transfers were forced to sit out a year, not because of NCAA or NAIA rules but because Johnson felt they were not ready to play immediately for him. He challenged his transfers to become better. These clear appraisals not only offered a second chance, but also reinvigorated the drive and passion that so many of these young men had lost. Transfers knew that he gave them the attention they needed as individuals and that he cared more about them as young men than as simply basketball players.⁸⁹

As the Magicians continued their path through the NCAA Division III tournament, the city of Memphis began to take notice. Before the Wittenberg game, Mayor Wyeth Chandler gave Robert Newman and Wille Parr "keys to the city."⁹⁰ Unlike

⁸⁸ "Strong Bench Lifts Lemoyne," *Press Scimitar*, February 10, 1975.

⁸⁹ Lee Sanders, interview by author, July 5, 2018.

⁹⁰ "Strong Bench Lifts Lemoyne," *Press Scimitar*, February 10, 1975.

the fanfare at the airport that followed the return home of the Memphis State Tigers following their Elite 8 victory over Kansas State in Houston, the Magicians' ceremony was quietly held on the Lemoyne-Owen campus. There were no claims that the Lemoyne-Owen team brought the city together. White Memphis remained in the dark about the success of the Magicians. Chandler merely completed his civic duty by offering two of the Magicians a token of the city's appreciation. LOC's status as a small college relegated any news surrounding the program to the back pages of the local media.

The path to the Final Four for LOC ran straight through Bruce Hall, something that was not possible in the NAIA or the NCAA Division I tournaments. The Wittenberg Tigers from Springfield, Ohio, sent Coach Bob Hamilton to Memphis to scout the Magicians during the South Regional finals. Hampered once again by the financial limitations, Johnson was unable to scout Wittenberg before the Great Lakes Regional Finals game.⁹¹ As the Magicians continued to advance through the tournament, the *Commercial Appeal* and the *Press-Scimitar* both began to cover the team's run. According to the *Commercial Appeal* Wittenberg ranked as the fourth best defensive team in the nation, holding its opponents to 60.4 points per game. For the Magicians, who were ranked eleventh in the nation offensively, this seemed to most prognosticators the pivotal point on which the game would be won.⁹² Yet, when the game tipped off it was Wittenberg who came out firing on all cylinders, hoping to outrun the Magicians. Over 2,000 fans crowded into Bruce Hall to watch the Tigers and Magicians do battle.

⁹¹ Basil Brooks, "Magicians March to a Better Beat," *Commercial Appeal*, March 11, 1975.

⁹² Bobby Ervin, "Defense-Minded Wittenberg Challenges Lemoyne Owen," *Commercial Appeal*, March 10, 1975.

Coach Johnson and the Magicians were caught by surprise as Wittenberg led 36-35 at half.⁹³ The Magicians regained control of the game for good behind Willie Parr's team high twenty-one points.⁹⁴ The 6'7" NAIA All-American announced to all who were watching that his skills were on an All-American level regardless of the collegiate association he played in. With their victory over Wittenberg, the Magicians were now headed to the Final Four in Reading, Pennsylvania.

When the Magicians arrived in Reading for the inaugural NCAA Division III Final Four, they were the only HBCU school in attendance. Like McLendon's teams in the 1950s, LOC was blazing a trail for other black schools to follow, but there was a price to pay. LOC's hectic, up-tempo style of play was still typecast as "black ball," and Coach Johnson's merit as a coach was challenged by prevailing myths that black head coaches were inherently less capable. 1975 marked the twentieth anniversary of Crispus Attucks Indiana State High School Championship, when Oscar Robertson's all-black team defeated Dick Barnett's all-black Roosevelt team. Both teams were coached by black men. This game undermined the myth that black players needed the guidance of the white man to accomplish anything great.⁹⁵ 1975 also marked nine years since Don Haskins started five blacks for Texas Western in its NCAA championship victory over Adolph Rupp's Kentucky team. College basketball was evolving, but these prevailing

⁹³ Randy Covitz, "Like Magic, L-O Makes NCAA Semis," *Press Scimitar*, March 12, 1975.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Andrew Ramsey, "The Skies Refused to Fall: Crispus Attucks High School and Indiana Basketball," found in *The Unlevel Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 254-257.

stereotypes followed the Magicians north as they prepared to compete for their first national championship.

On a cold March night in Reading, Pennsylvania, 1,500 brave fans weathered the icy roads to pack the George C. Bollman Physical Education Building on the campus of Albright College. The first semi-final saw Glassboro State (Rowan State) of New Jersey ease by Brockport State of New York by eight.⁹⁶ LOC then squared off against Augustana College from Rockford, Illinois. Some of the players recalled hearing boos from the stands before the opening tip and they assumed it was because they were the only all-black team in the Final Four.⁹⁷ Having been the lone HBCU in the VSAC, the Magicians were used to racial tensions coming from the stands. When the game began, they went on a ten-point run in the first half using their speed and outside shooting ability to gain control of the game. They never looked back. Vikings head coach summed up LOC's domination of the game in his post-game interview: "They are simply unbelievable shooters. It deflates the confidence of a defensive player to be all over a shooter from 25 feet from the basket and still have him make it."⁹⁸ Newman led all scorers with 32 points and the tandem of Milt Stephens and Willie Parr dominated the boards as Coach Johnson praised his team's efforts in their semifinal victory.⁹⁹ The Magicians were confident in their chances of winning. Robert Newman proclaimed, "It's in the bag." Clint Jackson said, "I can smell it." Willie Parr told the world, "We're going

⁹⁶ Bobby Ervin, "Lemoyne's Victory Is No Magic," *Commercial Appeal*, March 15,1975.

⁹⁷ Jerry McNeal, interview by author, July 17, 2018.

⁹⁸ Ken Jones, "Magicians Smell NCAA Championship," *Press Scimitar*, March 15,1975.

⁹⁹ Bobby Ervin, "Lemoyne's Victory is No Magic," *Commercial Appeal*, March 15,1975.

after it.”¹⁰⁰ The eyes of Memphis were now upon the Magicians as the *Commercial Appeal* and *Press-Scimitar* reported LOC’s victory in the semifinal game and quest for a national championship.

Unlike the night before, when the team heard boos from the stands, in the minutes before the finals the Magicians were greeted by cheers. Their play the night before earned the respect of those in attendance at Albright College.¹⁰¹ Glassboro State entered the game as winners of sixteen of their last twenty games and had never seriously been challenged on its way to the Finals.¹⁰² Early in the first half it was Greg Ackles, the Profs’ shooting guard, whose series of short jumpers pushed Glassboro State out to an early 23-16 advantage.¹⁰³ As the first half was winding down the Magicians caught a break from the officials. A foul that was whistled on Profs guard Denny Flaherty was assessed to Greg Ackles. With four minutes remaining in the half, Ackles was forced to sit out to avoid picking up his fourth foul. Lemoyne-Owen countered with a 10-4 run to claim a 30-27 halftime lead. According to the *Reading Eagle’s* John Smith, who was on press row, the official scorekeeper gave Ackles the foul in error, while both the press and the official NCAA statistician both had Ackles with two fouls. The officials refused to talk to the press or the NCAA statistician. The error at the score table gave the Magicians a lead they refused to relinquish for the rest of the game. LOC never led by more than seven points in the second half and Glassboro cut the lead to three with 2:07 left in

¹⁰⁰ Ken Jones, ‘Magicians Smell NCAA Championship,’ *Press-Scimitar*, March 15, 1975.

¹⁰¹ Jerry McNeal, interview by author, July 17, 2018.

¹⁰² *NCAA Division III Basketball Championship Program* (Reading: Albright College, 1975), 18, 24, 26, and 30.

¹⁰³ Bobby Erving, ‘Determined Magicians Claim National Title,’ *Commercial Appeal*, March 15, 1975.

regulation. The Profs had a number of chances to pull within one, but when Jerry McNeal made three of four foul shots in the final fifteen seconds the game was secured. The Magicians won 57-54 and became the first NCAA Division III champions. They were the first NCAA men's basketball champions from Memphis.¹⁰⁴ Robert Newman, who Coach Johnson claimed was a special player, was awarded the tournament's most outstanding player.¹⁰⁵

When the team landed at the Memphis Airport there was very little fanfare. Herein lies the key to understanding the peculiarity of the Lemoyne-Owen championship. The narrative that was played out in 1973 contended that the Memphis State basketball team brought the city together, both black and white. Led by two local black basketball stars, who played at the predominately white university, the city unified during one of the most tumultuous periods in the city's history. The story of the 1975 LeMoyne-Owen national championship is the story of a segregated past that the city never openly acknowledged, a history that tells of two cities: one white and the other black. Black colleges, like LeMoyne-Owen, were vital institutions: even as emblems of Jim Crow, they testified to the signal importance of education and striving in black life and culture since the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁶ The 1975 Lemoyne-Owen championship was important to the black community, but to white Memphians their accomplishment existed on the other side of a parallel community that they knew little about and were invested in even less.

¹⁰⁴ John Smith, "Lemoyne-Owen NCAA 3 King," *Reading Eagle*, March 16, 1975.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. and Jerry Johnson, interview by author, March 29, 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2012), 142.

For Jerry Johnson, this was another mark of success for a man determined to defy the odds. As a young boy who lost both of his parents before he graduated from high school, he continued to strive for success. He made a way for himself through two historically black colleges while maintaining economic self-sufficiency. He found success coaching high school football and basketball in segregated North Carolina before landing in Memphis on the recommendation of John McLendon. A lifetime under segregation could not temper his desire to define success on his own terms. Upon his return from Reading and the Division III tournament he defined success for his team as he always had, on his own terms. “We were the only school who didn’t have our games on radio or television, but we won over a large following from some of the other teams in the tournament.” Johnson went on to debunk the myths associated with basketball played by historically black colleges. “We did everything they said that we couldn’t do – play defense and play slow. For two and a half minutes we didn’t let Glassboro State do anything. You can’t say that we don’t play defense.”¹⁰⁷ These comments, both reported in *Tri-State Defender*, were meant to not only create pride within the black community but also address the negative notions that whites in the city had about Lemoyne-Owen basketball.

Lemoyne-Owen’s 1975 championship basketball season sheds light on the role of historically black colleges and universities during the early stages of desegregation in the Deep South. The late 1960s saw the integration of basketball throughout the Deep South

¹⁰⁷ Ben Little, “Sports Horizons,” *Tri-State Defender*, March 22, 1975.

when Perry Wallace (Vanderbilt University) benched Jim Crow in the SEC and Charles Scott (University of North Carolina) did the same in the ACC. HBCUs throughout the South faced a new paradigm that saw historically white colleges and universities begin to drain both the best black academics as well as the best black athletes away from them. Faced with limited budgets and playing in antiquated facilities, HBCUs faced an uphill battle to compete with historically white colleges and universities. Teams like Lemoyne-Owen received less notoriety in the media and were often relegated to second class status in their own communities. Memphis remained a community divided by imaginary and real lines created by Jim Crow that kept LOC from receiving more attention. The following year Lemoyne-Owen played two games at the Mid-South Coliseum against VSAC foes Lambuth College and Union University.¹⁰⁸ During the 1981-1982 season, the VSAC forced the Magicians to play all of their home games away from Bruce Hall. The conference cited “incidents at Bruce Hall that included poor crowd control and other security problems.” The VSAC’s use of coded language made it apparent to Lemoyne-Owen’s administration and coaching staff that the location of the school in black South Memphis made the visiting white schools uncomfortable. LOC considered joining four other HBCU’s (Rust College, Lane College, Knoxville College and Stillman College) in a new league that would have provided an automatic birth in the NCAA Division III tournament for the conference champion.¹⁰⁹ Instead Coach Johnson was able to contact

¹⁰⁸ *1975-1976 Lemoyne Owen College Basketball Program* (Memphis: LOC, 1975).

¹⁰⁹ George Lapidés, “Magicians May Leave the VSAC,” *Press-Scimitar*, February 19, 1982.

an old colleague from the SIAC and return Lemoyne-Owen back to its former conference.¹¹⁰

Jerry Johnson's mark on the city was much more than the 19775 Magician championship team, and places him among the iconic basketball coaching legends hidden behind the wall of segregation. Johnson returned the team to the NAIA tournament in 1978 and for the next three seasons advanced to the national championship in Kansas City.¹¹¹ His 1980 tournament team advanced to the Elite 8 before losing to eventual champion Cameron College (OK).¹¹² When LOC left the VSAC and returned to the SIAC they became members of the NCAA's Division II due to their affiliation with the SIAC. In his years at the helm of the Magician program he coached eight NBA players, numerous high school coaches, seven college coaches, four principals, a city councilman, and a mayor of Memphis. He finished his career with 818 victories to 400 losses, making him the second winningest coach in NCAA Division II history behind Clarence "Big House" Gaines of Winston-Salem State.¹¹³ A strong family man, Johnson was married for 53 years to his wife Vaster, who was a fixture in the black community as an elementary teacher. They had three children: Wandra Johnson Haywood, a nurse with the Veterans Administration in Florida; Dr. Jerry Johnson Jr., a physician in Philadelphia;

¹¹⁰ Jerry Johnson, interview by author, March 29, 2018.

¹¹¹ Sandi Martin, "Who's Worrying," *Press-Scimitar*, January 15, 1981.

¹¹² "NAIA Division I Basketball Championship Records," NAIA.org, accessed June 28, 2018, http://www.naia.org/fls/27900/1NAIA/SportsInfo/Championships/DIMBB_Championship.pdf?SPSID=640716&SPID=96230&DB_LANG=C&DB_OEM_ID=27900.

¹¹³ "LeMoyne-Owen College Event Honors Coach Johnson," MEAC/SWAC SPORTS MAIN STREET, accessed June 24, 2016, <http://meacswacsports.blogspot.com/2010/07/lemoyne-owen-college-event-honors-coach.html>.

and Oliver Johnson, a computer professional in Atlanta.¹¹⁴ The son of a manual laborer who lost both of his parents while in his teens became one of the winningest coaches in college basketball history and claimed the city of Memphis's only collegiate national basketball championship.

Thirty-five years after winning the inaugural NCAA Division III national championship, the 1975 Magicians received their championship rings. In another casualty of LOC's athletic budget, the team did not receive rings for their accomplishment at the time. The players never openly complained. On February 6, 2010, the 1975 national championship team received their rings during a home game at Bruce Hall.¹¹⁵ The ring ceremony appeared only on their own press release. The narrative of basketball as a healing salve in the city of Memphis excludes the 1975 Magicians basketball team. LeMoyne-Owen and its basketball team remain a point of pride in the black community, but for most white Memphians, LeMoyne-Owen remains concealed by Jim Crow's shadow.

LOC's championship season exposes the reality that the veil of segregation played in the city, the city's brief foray into professional basketball through the ABA explains further the limited value of basketball as a racial unifier. The ABA used the same arena as the Tigers, yet it never received the same welcome from the city's basketball fanbase. The schizophrenic nature of the organization, its ownership, and the

¹¹⁴ Jesse McClure, "Jerry C. Johnson," *JMcClure2's Blog*, August 6, 2008, accessed April 10, 2018.

¹¹⁵ Jerry Dover Jr., "1975 NCAA Basketball Champions to Be Honored at Lemoyne-Owen College," Lemoyne Owen College, February 4, 2010, accessed December 26, 2015. www.loc.edu/documents/pressreleases/02022010.pdf.

league never endeared itself to Memphis fans as did Tiger basketball. The changing racial dynamics of professional basketball in the 1970s reverberated throughout the teams stay in the city. The racial makeup of a professional team was more problematic than a collegiate team that still fought for good old "State U." Even as the Memphis organization signed both the city's white hope in Johnny Neumann and the city's favorite son in Larry Finch, neither could draw enough of a fan base to sustain the franchise. This next chapter focuses on the ABA in the city and the unique way in which race and sport intersected through the city's professional basketball team.

Chapter 4

Memphis goes Pro...

In the 1970s, some versions of basketball became a focal point for Memphians to rally around. But, if basketball truly provided a healing trope for the city, the introduction of professional basketball to the city in 1970 should have performed the same type of unifying power. The American Basketball Association's short-lived stay in the city allows for further analysis of the relationship between the city and basketball. The league's reputation as more of a "black" league with its style of play, physicality, and athleticism provide insight into the racial attitudes that continued to plague the city. The instability of Memphis's ABA franchise mirrors the political instability that was present in the city during this same period. The variegated characters that surrounded the Memphis franchise echoed the uniqueness of the ABA, but also provided a product that should have been marketable to various communities throughout the city. The failure of the ABA to prosper in the city in the 1970s speaks to an underlying racial discord. It provides a counter narrative to the myth that basketball was a healing trope for the city during the ABA franchise's five year stay in town.

The ABA was a league with renegade sports owners who were determined to change the world of professional basketball. They drafted underclassmen, encouraged free agency, held multiple drafts, and challenged the way the game was played. The ABA introduced the three point shot and a freer style of play that more closely resembled the modern version of the game, as compared to the low scoring defensive battles in the 1970s NBA. The ABA's all-star game festivities introduced us to the dunk contest and in its most valued commodity, Julius Erving aka "Dr. J." This new league's flashy players

made names for themselves with their exuberance and style. The ABA seemed to be the next practical step for Finch to endear himself to the city and for the city to grow more connected with its favored son. Yet, while the collegians he starred against in his career at Memphis State flourished professionally, Finch was mired in basketball obscurity.

The ABA was the brain child of Dennis Murphy, who teamed with NBA legend Bill Sharman to propose a new professional basketball league. George Mikan, the league's first commissioner, gave the league legitimacy and the red, white, and blue basketball.¹ The NBA in 1967 was as drab as its brown ball, and Mikan knew a rival league needed an eye-catching gimmick to capture the public's attention. The country was undergoing a cultural revolution and bogged down in an unpopular war in Vietnam. The red, white, and blue basketball became part of an anti-establishment culture that was becoming predominant throughout the country.² The ABA lived on the edge, as did its Memphis franchise. In the summer of 1970, P.L. Blake bought the franchise and moved the team from New Orleans to Memphis. Over the course of its five years in the city, the team changed names three times, and its ownership identity was as schizophrenic as any in the league. The Memphis franchise was owned by Blake, then the public through stock sold to fans, then eccentric baseball owner Charlie Finley, and then ABA commissioner Mike Storen, who briefly stabilized the franchise during the 1975 season,

¹ Terry Pluto, *Loose Balls: The Short, Wild Life of the ABA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 44. Pluto's compilation of stories and anecdotes from the doomed league, is the definitive history of the ABA. Unlike the Kentucky and the Indiana franchises who have their own monoliths on their franchises, Memphis's entry into the ABA must first be vetted through Pluto's portrayal of the league and its characters.

² Mark Montieth, *Reborn: The Pacers and the Return of Pro Basketball to Indianapolis* (Indianapolis: Halfcourt Press, 2017), 92.

but failed to gain local financial backing. It spelled disaster for the franchise.³ The league was forced to pay the team's bills before selling the franchise to a group in Baltimore. The new Baltimore franchise folded before playing its first game, which signaled the demise of the franchise.

The New Orleans Buccaneers were successful in the ABA's first two seasons. Playing at the Loyola University fieldhouse, the Bucs dominated the Western division under the leadership of coach Babe McCarthy.⁴ In their third year, the team moved from the Loyola University fieldhouse to the smaller Tulane gymnasium. The Bucs won 13 out of their first 14 home games but faded after losing rookie all-star "Skeeter" Swift to a knee injury in December. The people of New Orleans stopped coming to games and the franchise was at risk to fold.⁵ P.L. Blake, a native of Greenwood, Mississippi, bought the Buccaneers on August 21, 1970, and immediately moved the team to Memphis.⁶ Blake played football at Mississippi State and made his fortune as a real estate man.⁷ Memphians welcomed him and the ABA to the city. Mayor Loeb welcomed the newly renamed Pros, saying, "This city grows when something is added and something big has

³ Pluto, 244-245.

⁴ "1967-68 New Orleans Buccaneers," Basketball-Reference.com, accessed August 3, 2016. <http://www.basketball-reference.com/teams/NOB/1968.html>.

⁵ Arthur Hundhausen, "Remember the ABA: New Orleans Buccaneers." Remember the ABA: New Orleans Buccaneers, accessed August 3, 2016. <http://www.remembertheaba.com/New-Orleans-Buccaneers.html>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bill Burk, "Pros Owner Stays Busy," *Press Scimitar*, September 2, 1970.

been added by this basketball team.”⁸ Loeb purchased the first two season tickets at City Hall from Blake in a ceremony designed to kickstart season ticket sales in early September. He claimed, “I plan to be at as many games as I can.”⁹ Jack Dolph, the ABA’s commissioner, claimed that the league studied the city’s economic growth projections, TV market, and facilities before selecting Memphis. Dolph called the Mid-South Coliseum as one of the three best places in the country to play basketball.¹⁰ With the ABA in Memphis, the city was set to put its love for basketball to the test.

The team entered the city during one of the most tumultuous political periods in the history of the city. After decades of political tranquility under the Crump machine, a shift in the political and racial dynamics in the city meant that the ABA never received the full attention of the political establishment. The emergence of Harold Ford Sr. in the 1970 election as a state legislature marked the beginning of a political shift in the city. Over the course of the ABA’s five year stay in Memphis, Ford had taken Boss Crump’s ingredients for building a political machine and made it work for black Memphians.¹¹ From 1970 to 1975, the period that mirrored the ABA’s stay, the city faced a hike in its upward crime rate, a rate that led the nation.¹² What was once considered one of the country’s most beautiful cities under Crump, was now deemed one of the most dangerous.

⁸ Bill Burk, “Memphis Pros Await League OK,” *Press Scimitar*, September 1, 1970.

⁹ “Loeb Helps Pros Launch Season Ticket Sale,” *Press Scimitar*, September 29, 1970.

¹⁰ Bob Phillips, “Memphis Rolls Out ABA Red Carpet,” *Press Scimitar*, September 22, 1970.

¹¹ Otis Sanford, *From Boss Crump to King Willie: How race changed Memphis politics* (Knoxville: UTK Press, 2017), 155.

¹² Menno Duerkson, “Crime Drop Continues,” *Press-Scimitar*, February 28, 1977.

The ABA began its stay in Memphis in a precarious fashion that foreshadowed the team's tenure in town. Immediately after Blake released the franchise's new moniker, sportswriters all over the country declared the Pros one of the most unimaginative nicknames in all of sports. Blake used the same uniforms from New Orleans, but he removed B-U-C-S and replaced them with P-R-O-S. The franchise's reputation was tarnished from the outset because Blake was too frugal to change the team's moniker to one that was more appropriate for Memphis.¹³ Blake's financial conservatism mirrored Memphis's political establishment's tight fiscal policies. With paternalism reminiscent of Loeb, Blake expected that his players would gladly accept the recycled uniforms.

When the team arrived in Memphis, it brought with them two names familiar to Memphis basketball fans: former Memphis State guard Mike Butler and former Mississippi State head coach Babe McCarthy. Butler drew comparisons to Bob Cousy because of his adroit dribbling and passing skills, honed at Kingsbury High School. The colorful McCarthy had long been a legend to Memphis sports fans with his colorful tirades on the sidelines for Mississippi State.¹⁴ McCarthy's success at the collegiate and professional levels brought optimism to the city, but this honeymoon was short-lived when he traded Butler to the Utah Stars before training camp opened. Memphis fans may have been hurt, but Butler understood the business behind the deal and remained optimistic that the city was ready for the ABA.¹⁵

¹³ Bob Phillips, "Memphis Rolls Out ABA Red Carpet," *Press Scimitar*, September 22, 1970.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ George Lapidés, "Pros Trade Butler to Utah," *Press Scimitar*, September 11, 1970.

The Pros' head coach McCarthy was best remembered for his role in resurrecting the Mississippi State men's basketball program and for challenging Mississippi's devout adherence to Jim Crow when he took his team north to play an integrated Loyola University of Chicago team in the NCAA tournament. Hired in 1955, McCarthy led Mississippi State to a 24-1 record in 1959 and its first SEC championship.¹⁶ Ranked #4 in the AP poll, McCarthy hoped for relief from the state's "unwritten law," but to his dismay, university president Ben Hilburn denied his request to let them play in the NCAA tournament.¹⁷ McCarthy, as was the custom of the day, remained quiet. The 1962-1963 Mississippi State team won seventeen games and McCarthy appealed on his statewide radio show for Mississippians to support his team's participation in the NCAA tournament.¹⁸ McCarthy said, "it makes me sick to think that these players might again be denied a chance to compete for the national title."¹⁹ In previous years, McCarthy, alumni, and fans had acquiesced to the dictates of Mississippi's unwritten law, as part of what historian James Silver coined the "closed society." Since Reconstruction Mississippi's segregationists imposed coercive doctrines on all racial matters, forbidding freedom of thought, and squelched dissenting opinions or beliefs.²⁰ Mississippi State's

¹⁶ Kyle Veazey, *Champions for Change: How the Mississippi State Bulldogs and their Bold Coach Defied Segregation* (Charleston: The History Press, 2012), 13-14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁸ Russell Henderson, "The 1963 Mississippi State University Basketball Controversy and the Repeal of the Unwritten Law: 'Something more than the game will be lost,'" *Journal of Southern History*, vol.63, no. 4 (Nov., 1997), 831.

¹⁹ Charles Martin, *Benching Jim Crow: The Rise and Fall of the Color Line in Southern College Sports, 1890-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 250.

²⁰ Henderson, 832.

new president Dean Colvard, a North Carolinian, made the unprecedented decision to break the unwritten rule in 1963.²¹

Colvard's decision created a stir among the state's diehard segregationists. The Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* cautioned: "If Miss. State U. plays against a Negro outside of the state, what would be greatly different in bringing integrated teams into the state? And then why not recruit a Negro of special basketball abilities to play on the Miss. State team? This is the road we would be traveling."²² Two days before the team was set to leave, a judge in Union, Mississippi, issued an injunction against the team leaving the state.²³ The team avoided the injunction by sending the freshman team to the airport first, while the varsity remained back at the dorms. After receiving the all-clear signal, the varsity team hurried to the airport and left the state.²⁴ The Mississippi State basketball team escaped the segregationist state politicians bent on preventing the team from playing. At Michigan State University's Jenison Fieldhouse, 12,143 witnessed Mississippi State's white captain Joe Dan Gold shake hands with Loyola's black captain Jerry Harkness as the gym lit up with flashbulbs to record the moment for posterity.²⁵ The Ramblers started four black players against Mississippi State, as they had done all year long. Although McCarthy's team lost 61-51, by simply playing against a team with

²¹ Veazey, 85.

²² *Ibid.*, 841.

²³ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁴ Henderson, 848.

²⁵ Veazey, 100.

four black starters, McCarthy set the foundation for future racial change in the SEC.²⁶ McCarthy battled against the “closed society” with the central tenet of the Civil Rights Movement – equality of opportunity.²⁷ The color line was definitively less rigid when it came to sport, and McCarthy provided hope for those struggling against Jim Crow in Mississippi and the Deep South.

Blake hired local Memphis sports writer Charles Cavagnaro as general manager in hopes of bringing a familiar face into the front office. Even with Cavagnaro’s local connections, the team’s arrival in Memphis was so late in the summer that eleven of the team’s home dates were already booked at the Mid-South Coliseum.²⁸ By the start of the regular season only 180 season tickets were sold.²⁹ The team struggled to build a fan base. By December, Blake lost over \$200,000, which he attributed to low attendance. Cavagnaro quickly found out that Blake did not have the funds to sustain moving forward, so after only four months in the city, Blake sold the team.³⁰ With the exit of Blake, league officers came in and took over control of the finances, but left Cavagnaro in charge of daily operations.

²⁶ Dana O’Neil, "A Game That Should Not Be Forgotten," ESPN, December 13, 2012, , accessed November 16, 2017, http://www.espn.com/mens-college-basketball/story/_/id/8741183/game-change-mississippi-state-loyola-cannot-forgotten-college-basketball.

²⁷ Henderson, 854.

²⁸ Pluto, 239.

²⁹ "Remember the ABA: Memphis Pros," Remember the ABA: Memphis Pros. Accessed August 03, 2016. <http://www.remembertheaba.com/Memphis-Pros.html>.

³⁰ Steve Carp, "ABA a League Apart," *Las Vegas Sun*, June 9 1997. Accessed August 04, 2016. <http://lasvegassun.com/news/1997/jun/09/aba-a-league-apart/>.

On the same night the Pros opened preseason play against the Kentucky Colonels in Paducah, the NBA hosted an exhibition game between the Bullets and the Knicks at the Mid-South Coliseum. This was an example of the all-out war between the two leagues. The *Press Scimitar* gave the Bullets and the Knicks top billing in the sports section, as the NBA beat the ABA in its home market.³¹ The Pros and Colonels responded in classic ABA fashion with a high scoring game that came down to a disputed three-point shot at the buzzer by Memphis's Skeeter Swift.³² Three weeks later on October 20, 1970, the Pros welcomed the New York Nets to the Mid-South Coliseum as 13,000 Memphians cheered them on. The *Press Scimitar* described the city's first professional matchup: "New York, the big leagues big leaguer, the city with the Jets, the Mets, and the Knicks furnish the opposition tonight."³³ Dick Palmer broadcasted the game live for WREC, and like many ABA broadcasters he came into the position by a stroke of luck. Following his one game audition during an exhibition game against the Dallas Chaparrals at UT-Martin, he was offered the job. It was the first professional basketball game he had ever seen and the only connection he had to the franchise was his relationship with Babe McCarthy, with whom he had done some advertising work previously.³⁴ If the opening night had been an indicator of success instead of an aberration, then the ABA might have built a relationship with the city as strong as the one Memphis State maintained.

³¹ "Knick, Bullets Here Tomorrow," *Press Scimitar*, September 28, 1970.

³² Bob Phillips, "Pros' Disputed Field Goal Stops a Classic Comeback," *Press Scimitar*, September 30, 1970.

³³ Bob Phillips, "Memphis Steps into Big Leagues Tonight," *Press Scimitar*, October 20, 1970.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

One of the endearing traits of McCarthy was his country, backwoods demeanor that was as rugged as many of the Memphians who migrated to the city from the surrounding countryside. McCarthy brought with him another symbolism of white southern manhood when he signed Wendell Ladner out of Southern Mississippi. During Ladner's workout for the Pros, McCarthy tore in to him. "Son, you're just a damn embarrassment to me. When I had you in my summer camps you were big, but you were cat-quick. And now look at you, you lard-ass. When are you going to get in shape?" Wendell said, "I'll get in shape when the pro season opens." Babe retorted, "None of these damn NBA scouts will have your fat ass. But I'll tell you what – since I've known you all your life, I'll take you and give you a \$500 bonus. If you make it, I'll pay your ass."³⁵ Ladner showed up for 1970-1971 camp at 220 pounds, down 35 pounds from his workout, and made an impression with his hard-nosed, over-the-edge style of play that many blue-collar Memphians could relate to. He was a perfect match for McCarthy, and McCarthy a perfect coach for him.³⁶

Los Angeles Times columnist Jim Murray described basketball in the ABA as "not so much a game as a dock fight with backboards. They recruit their teams from Central Park after dark. If they did on a street corner what they do under the basket, someone would call the cops."³⁷ Fights under the basket were common. Technical fouls were the norm. Ejections were few and far between. Ladner embodied the hooligan nature of ABA post play, yet it was the media's perception that the violence in the league came

³⁵ Pluto, 267.

³⁶ Jim O'Brien, "Remember the ABA: Wendell Ladner Biography," accessed August 04, 2016. <http://www.remembertheaba.com/ABAArticles/OBrienArticleLadner.html>.

³⁷ Montieth, 347.

from the overwhelming blackness of the league. The image of the powerful and violent black man was permeating American culture. Blaxploitation films like 1971's *Shaft* popularized the concept of tough black dudes sticking it to "the man."³⁸ Black players in the ABA wore afros, dunked the basketball, and ran back on defense with a fist raised high in the air as a salute to the black power movement.³⁹ Most of the enforcers in professional basketball were African American, which only reinforced cultural stereotypes of violent black masculinity. As a southern white male, Ladner refused to back down and he continued to challenge these perceptions with his physical play in the post.

Basketball in the Deep South was moving towards acceptance of integrated teams. The 1971-1972 Memphis State Tigers included Finch and five other black players on its twelve-man roster.⁴⁰ Of the two professional basketball leagues, the ABA was considered by many the blacker league. When the Indiana Pacers opened their first ABA season in 1967 seven of their players were black, while at the same time the NBA was adhering to an unspoken color barrier that kept rosters half-white at the minimum.⁴¹ During its time in New Orleans, the Bucs adhered to a policy of not having more black players than white players on its roster, but when the franchise moved to Memphis in 1970 seven of its thirteen players were black.⁴² By the 1972 season, the Memphis roster included Les

³⁸ Adam Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts: Dr. J., Pistol Pete, and the Birth of the Modern NBA* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 202.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁴⁰ Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1970-1971.

⁴¹ Montie, 114-115.

⁴² "Memphis Pros/Tams/Sounds," NBA Hoops Online, accessed November 24, 2017, <http://nbahoopsonline.com/History/Leagues/ABA/Teams/BaltimoreHustlers/Roster.html>.

Hunter, a Loyola alum who played against Mississippi State in the 1963 “game of change,” along with David Lattin from Texas Western, who was one of five black starters against Kentucky in the 1966 National Championship game.⁴³ In the spring of 1971 the Pros signed Ole Miss phenom Johnny Neumann, adding a white star to the roster. Neumann’s attraction as the “white hope” from his prep days at Overton High and collegiate days at Ole Miss were a tool to help lure more fans to the Mid-South Coliseum as the Pros struggled at the gate. Unlike Memphis State, which had an established fan base as the hometown university, the Pros were forced to build their fanbase from scratch. Supporting Memphis State meant supporting the boys from “good ole State U,” but supporting a professional basketball team where the men wore afros, goatees, and gold chains meant an acceptance of black male culture that many whites resisted.

Without a fan base in place and an image that personified the black athletic aesthetic, the Pros turned to unique marketing strategies to bring more fans to games. In early November the team sold tickets for Monday night games for \$1, to lure fans away from Monday Night football on ABC.⁴⁴ The first night backfired on the organization as hecklers cajoled Mike Butler on his first return trip to Memphis since he was traded away during camp. After the game was over Butler told reporters, “I don’t want to live in Memphis anymore. This is a hick town.”⁴⁵ Although Butler left the city enraged, \$1 Night brought 6,791 fans to watch the game against the Stars.⁴⁶ In December, the Pros

⁴³ "1972-73 Memphis Tams Roster and Stats," Basketball-Reference.com, accessed November 16, 2017, <https://www.basketball-reference.com/teams/MMT/1973.html>.

⁴⁴ Bob Phillips, “Pros Face Big Test with Utah Tonight,” *Press Scimitar*, November 2, 1970.

⁴⁵ George Lapidés, “Mike Butler Rips Into Home Town,” *Press Scimitar*, November 3, 1970.

⁴⁶ Bob Phillips, “Pros Travel to Sikeston ‘Home’,” *Press Scimitar*, November 3, 1970.

offered college students from the two teams playing in the Liberty Bowl \$1 tickets and anyone with a Liberty Bowl ticket stub \$2 for admission.⁴⁷ Only 2,100 fans came to the Coliseum for this promotion.⁴⁸ Ladies Night, which included a fashion show and raffle for trading stamps for women, created a circus atmosphere. This promotion led to only 1,846 fans.⁴⁹ The message was clear: regardless of the promotion, fans in Memphis were not interested.

The Pros struggled to win on the court during their first year in Memphis. Forced to travel for eleven of their home games to Sikeston, Missouri, or Jackson, Tennessee, the Pros finished 41-43. They finished in third place in the Western Division behind the Indiana Pacers and the Utah Stars. Due to the ABA's playoff system, the Pros matched up with the first-place Pacers in the first round of the 1971 ABA Playoffs. After being blown out in game one by the Pacers on the road, the Pros led by nine in the fourth quarter of game two. Unfortunately for the Pros, the joy was momentary as the Pacers hit two free throws with one second left to salvage a win. When the series returned to Memphis, only 4,107 fans showed up at the Mid-Coliseum for game three and 3,681 for game four. Considered by many to be one of the premier playing venues in the ABA, the Coliseum felt like an empty cavernous tomb. Unwilling to support the Pros in a fashion akin to their love for the Tigers, most Memphians, learned of the team's two one-point losses in the local newspapers.⁵⁰ The Pros were swept out the playoffs and were in

⁴⁷ "Pros Entertain Denver Tonight," *Press Scimitar*, December 11,1970.

⁴⁸ Bob Phillips, "Three Joneses Too Many," *Press Scimitar*, December 12,1970.

⁴⁹ Bob Phillips, "New Pros Player Lost in Shuffle of a 'Wild Circus,'" *Press Scimitar*, December 16,1970.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

jeopardy of getting swept out of the league. Poor marketing strategies, a team that played one-fourth of their home games on the road, and a community not willing to support black players associated with the ABA spelled early trouble for the franchise.

The organization needed new ownership if it was going to remain solvent and remain in the city. Local Memphians with the financial wherewithal to support a professional sports franchise shied away from the ABA because of its instability. To avoid folding, the team offered a unique solution to its financial problems: it offered public stock. Anyone living in Tennessee was eligible to buy stock, and over 4,000 people paid \$5, or \$10, or \$50, for Pros stock certificates.⁵¹ Impressed by the community's support, ABA Commissioner Jack Delph referred to Memphis's bid to take over the franchise as "an impressive display of a community's faith in itself."⁵² Memphis Area Sports Inc., the financial group that purchased the Pros through the sale of stock, vowed to keep the team in the city. Financial problems continued with the new public ownership group. During the first stockholders meeting, held at Christian Brothers College, dissension arose from a group of stockholders who demanded more representation on the board of directors. Fearful of an elitist board, Father Timothy Tighe questioned Herb Kosten, director of Memphis Area Sports, why there were not any working-class men on the board, if the board was to represent all parts of the community.⁵³ Twenty new board members were added in response. Local Memphis companies began to accept half payments for debts Blake incurred as part of their civic

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Jimmy Gentry, "Memphis Group Purchases the Pros' Franchise," *Commercial Appeal*, February 13, 1971.

⁵³ Woodrow Paige, "Pros' Stockholders Show Their Concern," *Commercial Appeal*, June 5, 1971.

duty to help save the franchise. Not all the help was altruistic. One of the firms made it very clear that, “if we don’t save this team, we’ll never get pro football in Memphis.”⁵⁴ Football had long been the major spectacle in the South, generating interest far beyond college campuses.⁵⁵ Its form of athletic competition lent itself to combat analogies, and its preponderance in the South was a continuation of the fighting spirit associated with the “Lost Cause.” For many Memphians who longed to hold onto the cultural values of “the Lost Cause,” football was more important than professional basketball.

When the Memphis Area Sports Inc. named Buddy Leake chairman of its new board of directors, there was a newfound hope that permeated the organization. Leake, a 1951 graduate of Christian Brothers High School, where he had been an all-state football player before playing for Buddy Wilkerson at the University of Oklahoma, brought a wealth of knowledge from the sports world to the table. Following a career in the Canadian Football League, he returned to Memphis to work for the Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company.⁵⁶ In the brief period where Leake controlled executive decisions, the franchise looked to be placing itself on solid footing. In May 1971, when the ABA and NBA met to discuss a merger, there was a new level of excitement in the city. Cavagnaro represented the Pros at the negotiations in New York City. He believed that Memphis was about to be rewarded with an NBA franchise.⁵⁷ Memphis, along with other ABA cities, believed that if the NBA and ABA merged, then the league was a

⁵⁴ Woodrow Paige, “Pros Offer Plan to ‘Satisfy’ Debt,” *Commercial Appeal*, June 20, 1971.

⁵⁵ Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 313.

⁵⁶ “John Leake’s Obituary,” *Oklahoman*, February 21, 2014.

⁵⁷ Woodrow Paige, “The Pros Welcome the Decision to Merge,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 8, 1971.

success. Unfortunately for the city of Memphis, the merger talks only resulted in a series of preseason games between the two leagues.⁵⁸

When the Memphis Pros signed Johnny Neumann during his sophomore campaign at Ole Miss, Memphis joined the unique style of free agency conducted by the ABA. The renegade league pursued players that would have signed with the NBA under normal circumstances. At Ole Miss he averaged 38.4 points per game and led the freshman team to a number two ranking nationally and a 25-1 record. When he left Ole Miss with two games to go in the season, he averaged 40.1 points per game and led the nation in scoring.⁵⁹ Neumann signed a five-year, \$2 million-dollar contract with the Memphis Pros. He joined the team for the remainder of the 1970-1971 season and the club figured he would become a valuable asset moving forward. With the franchise in financial crisis, the team needed something to attract fans. Neumann was the type of exciting player that was a known commodity in the city and his flashy style of play projected to place fans in the stands. The ABA seemed like the perfect fit for his game. At 6'6" he was still bigger than many of the guards in the ABA, which allowed him to get his shot off and score in the paint. Although Neumann could score at ease on the professional level, his arrogance and immaturity shattered a promising career.

Neumann's problems began on the court but filtered off the court. His college coach allowed him free rein to shoot as he wanted, but when he arrived in Memphis Babe McCarthy, an old school disciplinarian, did not take well to Neumann's shot selection or

⁵⁸ Bob Phillips, "Pros Stock on upswing in merger Aftermath," *Press Scimitar*, May 10, 1971.

⁵⁹ Ed Odeven, "Documentary on former hoop star Neumann's life provides a cautionary tale," *The Japan Times*, July 19, 2017.

his lack of team play. His teammate George Thompson described Neumann's spending sprees where a young Neumann with too much money in his pockets would go into a clothing store and tell the clerk, "give me all of them."⁶⁰ In an incident indicative of his spending flamboyance, Neumann was held at customs following a 1972 exhibition game in Toronto. He refused to open his suitcase for the customs officer. He missed the team's plane back to Memphis because he refused to leave the items behind.⁶¹ Instead of leading the Pros to the upper echelons of the ABA, he became an example of how too much money too fast can ruin a player.

The 1971-72 ABA season for the Pros was marred by discontent in the locker room and financial instability in the board room. McCarthy fined Neumann \$100 for a lack of discipline for shooting another shot after looking to the sidelines and seeing that McCarthy had sent a substitute to check in for him.⁶² Neumann told the press that the problem was much deeper than one shot. He claimed that "there is a great deal of unrest on this team because of him (McCarthy)."⁶³ Neumann quit the team that night. Understanding the vulnerability and immaturity of his star player, McCarthy called Neumann's Ole Miss teammate Steve Farese and the son of Neumann's agent, Big John Farese. McCarthy convinced the younger Farese to get Neumann back for their next game. After talking with McCarthy, Steve Farese drove from Oxford to Neumann's

⁶⁰ *The Rebel*, dir. Paul Carruthers, SEC Storied, May 2017, accessed November 13, 2017, [https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC Storied The Rebel](https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC+Storied+The+Rebel)

⁶¹ Gary P. West, *Kentucky Colonels of the ABA: The Real Story of a Team Left Behind* (Morley, MO.: Acclaim Press, 2011), 159.

⁶² Woodrow Paige, "Neumann Fined After Words with McCarthy," *Commercial Appeal*, February 14, 1972.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

house in Memphis and convinced Neumann that if he quit, he was doing exactly what McCarthy and his naysayers wanted him to do. The reverse psychology worked, and Neumann jumped into his 1971 Pantera and drove to the Mid-South Coliseum. Neumann left Farese in the 1971 Pantera, went into the arena, and proceeded to lead the team with 38 points.⁶⁴ The Pros struggled to a 14-18 record through December. The largest crowd of the season turned out on February 4 to see the Carolina Cougars, with three former Memphis players, defeat the Pros. The team went through two prolonged losing streaks in the season's final two months, finished with a 25-58 record, and were left out of the playoffs.⁶⁵

Following a dismal season on the court and on paper, the local ownership was eager to sell the team. Operating in red throughout the season, the ownership group first approached former St. Louis Hawks owner Ben Kerner in April 1972 to gauge his interest in purchasing the club. Leery of the publicly owned franchise and its debt, Kerner declined.⁶⁶ After a subsequent refusal by Joseph and Mamie Gregory of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, the franchise looked to be doomed.⁶⁷ In an eleventh-hour attempt to save the team, Buddy Leake and Avron Fogelman signed a tentative deal with Langdon "Zip" Viracola from Dallas to buy the club.⁶⁸ The deal was sent to the ABA league

⁶⁴ *The Rebel*, dir. Paul Carruthers, SEC Storied, May 2017, accessed November 13, 2017, [https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC Storied The Rebel](https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC+Storied+The+Rebel)

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Woodrow Paige, "Kerner Cites 'Uncertainties' in Rejecting Pros' Offer," *Commercial Appeal*, April 25, 1972.

⁶⁷ Woodrow Paige, "Sinking Pros Grab a Dallas Lifeline," *Commercial Appeal*, June 12, 1972.

⁶⁸ Bob Phillips, "Pros Case Goes to 'Jury'," *Press Scimitar*, June 12, 1972.

offices, but when Viracola balked at the league's insistence that he pay an indemnity fee, he withdrew his offer. The ABA made a motion to kill the Memphis franchise, and it was seconded.⁶⁹ Professional basketball looked finished in the city until Fogelman convinced the league to table the final vote for half an hour. Fogelman made one last frantic call to Charles Finley.

Charles O. Finley, the owner of baseball's Oakland Athletics, provided a ray of hope for the nearly defunct Memphis organization. Fogelman and Leake gathered the necessary paperwork and made the trip to Chicago to secure a deal with the eccentric insurance millionaire who owned baseball's Oakland A's. Finley was an intense and complex person. He was a creative innovator, a self-made salesman and businessman, and a megalomaniacal puppet-master.⁷⁰ Finley agreed to purchase the franchise and he assured them that the team was to remain in Memphis. Memphians hoped that Finley's dogged determination to win, his desire to outwork his opponents, and his creative marketing ploys were enough to steady the franchise. The stockholders in Memphis approved the sale and although they received no money for their stock, they too had a hand in saving professional basketball in their city.⁷¹

Finley immediately left his mark on the franchise by changing the franchise name and colors. Finley awarded \$2,500 dollars to the local fan who came up with the

⁶⁹ Bob Phillips, "Hectic Week Ends with Pros in Memphis," *Press Scimitar*, June 17, 1972.

⁷⁰ Michael Green and Roger D. Launius, *Charlie Finley: The Outrageous Story of Baseball's Super Showman* (New York: Walker & Company, 2010), 2. Green's portrayal of Finley as a man of inconsistencies, miserly and autocratic one minute, charitable and paternal the next allow for Finley's two years in the ABA as a perfect fit for the upstart league. Embraced as the savior for the city's ABA franchise, he would come to be vilified by the city following his departure. His own instability matches that of the city's team and the ABA.

⁷¹ Woodrow Paige, "Franchise to Finley," *Commercial Appeal*, July 7, 1972.

franchise's new name: Tams, an acronym for *Tennessee, Arkansas and Mississippi*.⁷² The name referenced the poetic hero "Tam O'Shanter," paying homage to the city's Scottish heritage and its geographic location.⁷³ Finley next made a loud splash by bringing his Oakland A's kelly green, Fort Knox gold, and wedding gown white to the Tams.⁷⁴ To secure success on the floor, Finley hired Bob Bass as head coach and general manager. Bass's experience with the Denver Rockets provided ABA coaching experience for the club. Then Finley hired Adolph Rupp as the team's president.⁷⁵ Finley called him, "the man who knows more about basketball than anyone else alive."⁷⁶ Rupp had been forced out by the administrators at the University of Kentucky and was looking for a way to prove that he was still relevant. Rupp believed that he, with Finley's money, could resurrect the struggling Memphis franchise. Finley paid Rupp over \$40,000 a year as president, but he had no intention of allowing the "colonel" to control the basketball operations. Rupp made appearances at the games and in the Tams offices at the Mid-South Coliseum, but that was it. In June 1974, Rupp quit his role with the Tams and called the ABA "a bush league." Three months later he accepted a spot on the board of directors with Kentucky's ABA team, the Colonels, a job at Finley.⁷⁷

The new season brought a renewed vigor to the city and the franchise. When the ABA added an expansion franchise in San Diego, the team moved out of the Western

⁷² Woodrow Paige, "Search for Nickname Begins," *Commercial Appeal*, June 28, 1972.

⁷³ "Mid-South, Greet Your New ABA Team: The Tams," *Commercial Appeal*, July 16, 1972.

⁷⁴ Green, 166.

⁷⁵ Pluto, 240.

⁷⁶ Woodrow Paige, "Baron Will Direct Memphis March," *Commercial Appeal*, July 16, 1972.

⁷⁷ Fitzpatrick, 224.

division. The Tams now faced the New York Nets, Virginia Squires, Carolina Cougars and the Kentucky Colonels in the Eastern division.⁷⁸ The *Press Scimitar's* George Lapidés, consummate advocate for basketball in the city, urged Memphians to head to the Mid-South Coliseum to support the team. Lapidés lauded Finley for the twenty-five piece band at all home games, fifteen “attractive usherettes,” and the abundance of kelly green blazers on Tams employees.⁷⁹ Finley’s unique marketing ploys did not always sell in the ABA’s only Deep South location. He attempted to bring back a popular ploy in Oakland: Mustache Night. During the A’s 1972 run to the World Series the ploy had been tremendously successful and allowed him to take a shot on the painfully conservative baseball establishment.⁸⁰ Memphis did not have the same ties to the countercultural movement, and the ABA was more of a renegade league. Thus, the mustache promotion resoundingly failed in Memphis.

Memphis native Fred Smith opened his Federal Express operations in 1973, at the same time that Finley was attempting to stabilize his new ABA franchise. Smith’s concept of overnight express service sounded as ludicrous as moustache night at the Mid-South Coliseum, but it was Smith who raised over \$72 million in capital and launched one of the most successful air transportation companies in the world.⁸¹ The oil embargo imposed by OPEC in 1973, to counter President Nixon’s taking the United States off the gold standard, caused Smith to lose almost a million dollars a month during his first year

⁷⁸ Woodrow Paige, “Aging ABA Opens Sixth Season with Major Face-Lifting,” *Commercial Appeal*, October 8, 1972.

⁷⁹ George Lapidés, “Missing Opener Necessary for Charlie Finley,” *Press Scimitar*, October 5, 1972.

⁸⁰ “Tams Endorse Moustaches,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 24, 1972.

⁸¹ John Harkins, *Metropolis of the American Nile* (Oxford: Guild Bindery Press, 1982), 196.

of operations.⁸² But, by 1976 Federal Express bounced back and the demand for their services were larger than its fleet.⁸³ Finley was never able to offer a product as valuable to the city of Memphis as Smith's. Had Smith's Federal Express reached its current levels of production and professional sports sponsorship, the ABA would have found an avid sports philanthropist to support its struggling franchise. But Smith was only 27 in 1973 when he began operations. Unfortunately for the city he lacked the resources to provide financial stability for the city's floundering ABA franchise that he would later in his life.

Finley's renegade style did nothing to help turn the Tams into a winning club. As an owner Finley was always looking to make the exciting deal, but he also traded away players on a whim. Finley would "trade his own mother if he could get the right player he felt he needed."⁸⁴ Finley brought fan favorite Wendell Ladner back to the Tams for the 1972-1973 season, but by January, Bass and Ladner were at each other's throats. Ladner was then sent to the Kentucky Colonels for a rookie and an undisclosed amount of cash.⁸⁵ By the middle of March, the team faced certain elimination from the playoffs. In jeopardy of being sold again, the Tams struggled with attendance. Meanwhile, the Tigers filled the Coliseum, as the city became enamored with Finch, Kenon, and Robinson on their march to the NCAA Finals. In another uniquely ABA stunt, the Tams

⁸² Kimberly Amadeo, "The Truth About the 1973 Arab Oil Embargo," *The Balance*, accessed November 15, 2017, <https://www.thebalance.com/pec-oil-embargo-causes-and-effects-of-the-crisis-3305806>.

⁸³ Harkins, 196.

⁸⁴ Green, 162.

⁸⁵ Woodrow Paige "Tans Send Ladner to the Colonels," *Commercial Appeal*, January 20, 1973.

drafted Kenon in a regional draft that was held behind closed doors.⁸⁶ This move was designed to preempt the NBA from landing one of the top eligible players in college basketball.

The war between the ABA and NBA for the services of the Tigers' Kenon became another example of the heated relationship between the two leagues. The ABA understood Kenon's value, so they sent New York Nets owner Roy Boe to negotiate a contract with Kenon. The *Sporting News* labeled Kenon as "the best college player to turn pro" in 1973.⁸⁷ Kenon signed with Boe and the Nets, but his rights remained with the Tams from the January regional draft. Robert Carlson, legal counsel for the Nets and league commissioner, was forced to handle the dispute created between the Tams and Nets over Kenon's rights within the league.⁸⁸ Carlson ruled that the Nets possessed Kenon's rights and left the Tams without their draft pick, one with regional appeal that would have brought more Tiger fans to watch Tams games. Kenon had longed for the spotlight during his one season with the Tigers, and by signing with the New York Nets he was finally out of Finch's shadow.

Following Kenon's secret selection by the ABA and the unscrupulous tactics by which the ABA signed him, NBA franchises were weary of the ABA's influence with Finch and Robinson. Their draft stock plummeted from possible first round selections to fourth-round selections. When the NBA held its 1973 draft, both homegrown Tiger stars paid the price for the ABA's draft antics with Kenon. The Memphis State faithful were

⁸⁶ Woodrow Paige, "Tams' Secret Choices are Kenon, Lewis," *Commercial Appeal*, April 5, 1973.

⁸⁷ Michael Recht ed., *ABA Official Guide 1973-74* (St. Louis: The Sporting News, 1973), 37.

⁸⁸ Bill Young, "Carlson Ducks as Kenon Plot Thickens," *Commercial Appeal*, May 2, 1973.

shocked by Finch and Robinson's fall in the NBA draft. Gene Bartow claimed that it was "ridiculous how they went so low."⁸⁹ Robinson was drafted by the Suns with the 60th pick in the fourth round, and Finch by the Lakers with the 68th pick in the fourth round.⁹⁰ Finch was expendable to an organization that already enlisted all-star shooting guard Gail Goodrich and his back-up Pat Riley on their roster. Caught in the war between the NBA and the ABA, Finch's rights were traded to the Rockets. Finch went to Houston, but after failing to make the Rockets roster, he was unsure if he would ever get a chance to play professionally. He returned to Memphis and worked local basketball camps.

Late in the Tams training camp, Finch finally received an opportunity to play professionally in Memphis. New head coach Bill Van Breda Kolff convinced Finley to sign him. Van Breda Kolff claimed that, "since I became coach of this team, all I've heard is that we ought to sign Larry Finch. We're extremely happy to have him." He went on to say that, "not only does Larry have a great deal of talent, but he also is a winning player."⁹¹ The *Commercial Appeal* lauded the signing by reminding fans of his success at Melrose High and Memphis State. They also noted Finch's desire to team up with his friend Johnny Neumann. Since their high school summer league days at Gaston Community Center, to their days at Overton and Melrose, these two had become friends on and off the court. They followed different trajectories to the professional ranks, but they were both excited to be reunited and to be playing together.

⁸⁹ Bob Jones, "NBA's Early Snub Stuns Tiger Stars," *Commercial Appeal*, April 25, 1973.

⁹⁰ "1973 NBA Draft," Basketball-Reference.com, accessed December 02, 2017, https://www.basketball-reference.com/draft/NBA_1973.html.

⁹¹ Woodrow Paige, "Tams Take Positive Step, Sign Larry Finch," *Commercial Appeal*, September 11, 1973.

When Finch signed with the Tams of the ABA he became part of the city's struggling franchise, but he also watched as his collegiate contemporaries went on to successful professional careers. During the 1973-1974 season Ernie DiGregorio became one of the most prolific guards in the NBA. The same guard that the Tigers and Finch defeated in the 1973 NCAA semi-finals became the NBA's rookie of the year for the Buffalo Braves by averaging 8.2 assists per game, with a season high of twenty-five assists against the Portland Trailblazers.⁹² Braves owner Paul Snyder made DiGregorio one of the highest paid NBA players with \$400,000 annual contract. He understood the value of a young Italian-American in Buffalo, a city with a solid Italian-American community. DiGregorio led the Braves to 1974 NBA playoffs, while Finch and Neumann finished last in the ABA's Eastern Division, out of the playoffs.⁹³ The Memphis community supported Finch when he was a member of the hometown Tigers, but the same fervor and love for Tiger basketball was never duplicated by the city during Finch's professional playing days in the ABA.

Marvin "Bad News" Barnes epitomized the problems that white America saw in professional basketball in the 1970s. Barnes became the rookie of the year in the ABA in 1975 following his career in Providence that included a knee injury in the 1973 NCAA semifinals against Memphis State. Barnes lamented "not making it to the championship game was a killer...I think we would have torn them (UCLA) apart."⁹⁴ League

⁹² Criblez, 108.

⁹³ Pluto, 19.

⁹⁴ Mike Carey, *Bad News: The Turbulent Life and Times of Marvin Barnes, Pro Basketball's Original Renegade* (New York: Sports Publishing, 2016), 55. Carey's portrayal of Barnes as "Bad News" furthered white basketball fans fears of the dark side of the black aesthetic. Black athletes who came from the other side of the tracks brought with them a lifestyle more conducive to lifestyle in the ghetto than in suburban

executives in both leagues struggled with the concept of how to sell a black sport to the white public. Black players like Marvin Barnes furthered negative stereotypes. At his press conference announcing his signing with the St. Louis Spirits he wore a yellow hard hat and told reporters he'd rather work in a factory than play for less than \$1 million.⁹⁵ In his first pre-season camp he showed up to practice late and claimed that he "lost his car in a lot downtown." The problem was that his car was a Bentley and a rarity in downtown St. Louis.⁹⁶ When rookie broadcaster Bob Costas arrived late in January to the Mid-South Coliseum for a Spirits game against the Tams, Costas worried about getting fired. Barnes told Costas, "Don't worry, Bob, they ain't going to can you. By now you've got to know me and Ozzie Silna (Spirits owner) are tight." Two months later, after scoring 19 points in a loss to the New York Nets, Barnes grabbed two basketball groupies and partied into the night. He missed the team flight to Virginia by five hours, so he chartered a private plane and left the bill for the flight with the Spirits GM Harry Weltman. Bad News responded after being pulled from the starting lineup by scoring 43 points in 41 minutes against the Squires.⁹⁷ For all of his shortcomings, Barnes' talent was on par with any of the great players in the league, including Julius Erving. In the 1975 playoffs the Spirits, led by Barnes's play in the post, knocked off Dr. J's defending ABA champions

America. The ABA's portrayal as the black of the two leagues furthered this fear that was epitomized through Barnes.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 73.

⁹⁶ Pluto, 363.

⁹⁷ Carey, 78-81.

and top seeded New York Nets.⁹⁸ For white America, Barnes was the epitome of everything wrong with professional basketball.

As Finch watched his collegiate rivals flourish in both the ABA and NBA, he remained loyal to Memphis. Unlike collegiate athletics, where playing for good ole “State U” brings accolades and adoration, professional basketball is a business. Willem “Butch” van Breda Kolff, although he had collegiate experience, expected players to act like professionals. Van Breda Kolff was loud and aggressive on the sidelines, once earning four technical fouls in one game.⁹⁹ On the contrary, Finch’s leadership style was calm and reserved. Finch did not like to belittle his teammates. Although Finch was a hometown favorite, the professional basketball in the ABA was less suited for Finch to prosper in the same fashion as he had with Memphis State. In a rare highlight with the Tams, Finch scored 22 points in a win against the Virginia Squires during his second season. Finch told reporters after the game, “Thirty-eight minutes, that’s the most I’ve ever got to play. We played my game – we ran. That’s the way I played in high school.”¹⁰⁰ The crowd that night was the second largest of the season, bringing back memories for Finch of his high school and collegiate playing days. This one November game was more of an anomaly in Finch’s professional career than the norm. The crowd that night was a byproduct of a promotion with the Memphis Grizzlies football team that offered \$1 admission to the ABA game with a ticket stub from the Grizzlies game.

⁹⁸ Criblez, 141.

⁹⁹ Pluto, 272.

¹⁰⁰ Ron Cobb, “Finch finds Himself in Unusual Position,” *Commercial Appeal*, November 30, 1974.

As Memphis's ABA franchise struggled to fill the Mid-South Coliseum, professional wrestling drew 12,000 fans every Monday night.¹⁰¹ Wrestling, pronounced "wrasling," elicited more fan support than the ABA with performative exhibitions that reveled in predetermined outcomes. Since the nineteenth century, wrestling in the southern backcountry was so prevalent that it has often been described as the region's first amateur sport. By the 1970s, due to a lack of major league professional franchises, the sport thrived on southern soil.¹⁰² Scholar Sharon Mazor has claimed that wrestling's appeal lies in three basic premises. "First, the performance is directly catered to the fans and includes them as active participants in the carnival like atmosphere. Next, that the pleasure peculiar to wrestling is the nature in which it engages audiences in affirming and challenging cultural norms. Finally, the myth of wrestling represents an underlying social and moral ethos as a model of lower-class expressions of the desire for a non-ambiguous moral order where virtue does not always prevail."¹⁰³ The ABA was rugged and physical, but it did not cater directly to the needs of the fans. The league was challenging the cultural norms found in Memphis with a roster laden with black athletes. The chaotic nature of Monday night wrestling, its carnivalesque atmosphere, and the

¹⁰¹ *The Rebel*, dir. Paul Carruthers, SEC Storied, May 2017, accessed November 13, 2017, [https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLL/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC Storied The Rebel](https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLL/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC+Storied+The+Rebel)

¹⁰² Louis M. Kyriakouides and Peter A. Coclanis, "The Tennessee test of Manhood: Professional Wrestling and Southern Cultural Stereotypes," found in *The Sporting World of the Modern South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 277. They also assert that the construction of southern manhood in the 1970s could be found in the southern embodiment of the urban and blue-collar wrestler within the "good ol' boy" mold of regional stereotypes.

¹⁰³ Sharon Mazor, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Oxford: University Mississippi Press, 1998), 6-8. Mazor argument that professional wrestling is played according to the protocols of both sport and masculinity, and thus fulfills the clichés of sportsmanlike conduct draws a direct contrast to the ABA. The leagues black aesthetic ran, for the most part, contradictory to the social and culturally acceptable norms in the city. Thus, wrestling drew more crowds for a sport that was fixed, than the ABA where the outcomes were not predetermined.

performed brutality gave white fans in Memphis an escape from the shifting racial paradigm outside of the Coliseum. Wrestling provided national exposure with Jimmy “The Mouth of the South” Hart, Austin “The Idol,” Ric Flair, and Jerry “the King” Lawler all performing, thus giving Memphis a major league presence in the wrestling world.¹⁰⁴ The ABA never provided a national presence for the city in the way that wrestling did at the time.

By the end of December 1974, the Tams were once again in the cellar of their division. As the team spiraled downward, Finley let the organization fend for itself. Reported attendance was 1,600 fans per game, but even those numbers were exaggerated.¹⁰⁵ A 1-12 record during December spelled the end for Johnny Neumann, as the Tams traded him to the Utah Stars for four players.¹⁰⁶ Neumann was confounded, but the trade reunited Ronnie Robinson and Finch.¹⁰⁷ Van Breda Kolff hoped that Robinson, at 6’9”, could solidify a post presence for the Tams. Robinson’s introduction into the Tams lineup brought a limited improvement for the team, but it never equaled the production that the Tams lost when Larry Kenon signed with the New Jersey Nets. The carnival continued when Finley put all of his professional sports franchises on the market

¹⁰⁴ *It Happened at the Mid-South Coliseum: Monday Nights*, perf. Andy Kauffman, Andre the Giant, Jerry Lawler, Ric Flair (70s-TV.com), DVD.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Randy Covitz, “December-It Was the Worst Month yet for the Tams,” *Press Scimitar*, January 2, 1974.

¹⁰⁷ *The Rebel*, dir. Paul Carruthers, SEC Storied, May 2017, accessed November 13, 2017, [https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC Storied The Rebel](https://www.amazon.com/The-Rebel/dp/B014TIYZLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1510596319&sr=8-1&keywords=SEC+Storied+The+Rebel)

for sale: the Tams, the A's, and the California Seals of the World Hockey Association.¹⁰⁸ Memphis fans readied themselves for another round of auctioneering.

During the 1974 All-Star weekend, the ABA held its winter meetings in Norfolk, Virginia, and the Tams were the center of attention, as Finley failed to show.¹⁰⁹ Finley's absence was not only a stand against the league's nullification of the team's draft rights to Larry Kenon, but it also announced his intention to sell the club. Finley was shopping the team to Stax Recording Company, Memphis's locally owned studio that by 1973 included revenues upwards of eleven million dollars. Stax's co-owner Al Bell was committed to the black community. He kept Stax politically active both locally and nationally and was intrigued by the opportunity for Memphis to have the first black-owned professional basketball franchise.¹¹⁰ In early March 1974 Stax vice president Larry Shaw announced the impending purchase of the team and its desire to lure better players to Memphis.¹¹¹ Shaw was brought into Stax by Al Bell to sell "the Memphis Sound" and build a large-scale national community to operate alongside, but not be contingent upon, the established white corporate world.¹¹² Unfortunately, by early 1974 Stax was extended beyond its means and owed over \$10 million in debt to local bank Union Planters. Stax was implicated in the payola scandals that were under federal investigation, and its books were in the process of being audited by the federal

¹⁰⁸ "Finley Heeds Doctor's Advice," *Press-Scimitar*, January 10, 1974.

¹⁰⁹ "ABA Meetings Include Review of Tams' Future," *Commercial Appeal*, January 27, 1974.

¹¹⁰ Robert Gordon, *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 306, 315.

¹¹¹ "Stax Poised with Large Eraser," *Press-Scimitar*, March 6, 1974.

¹¹² Gordon, 245.

government.¹¹³ Black economic nationalism almost saved the ABA's Memphis franchise. If Stax had purchased the Tams from Finley it would have created the first black owned professional sports franchise in America, outside of Negro leagues baseball.¹¹⁴ Stax's downward financial trajectory led to the failure of the deal.¹¹⁵

The Tams stumbled to a 21-64 record heading into the final game of the 1973-74 season against the San Diego Conquistadors. Twenty-four of the sixty-one losses were by fewer than five points. Eighteen times, the Tams had an opportunity with the last possession to win the game.¹¹⁶ Memphis fans watched Finley trying to sell the team, local prep star Neumann traded away, Finch unable to reproduce the success he had as a Tiger, and their team miss the playoffs. Van Breda Kolff was disappointed but remained optimistic about the team's future.

The spring of 1974 also marked the beginning of Harold Ford Sr.'s drive to become the first black Congressman from Tennessee. Ford's success as a state representative marked him as the unquestioned political leader of the black community, and the next logical step was for him to unseat the white Congressional incumbent, Dan Kuykendall, in Tennessee's 9th Congressional District.¹¹⁷ Kuykendall refused to debate Ford during the campaign, a means to deny him equal status on the ballot. Instead, Ford showed up to every public forum or debate he was invited to, and when Kuykendall

¹¹³ Ibid., 337 and 339.

¹¹⁴ Woodrow Paige, "Stax Says Snags Cleared from Path to Tams Sale," *Commercial Appeal*, March 6, 1974.

¹¹⁵ "Finley Shows Bargaining Style," *Commercial Appeal*, February 13, 1974.

¹¹⁶ Woodrow Paige, "Lady Luck Snubs the Tams," *Commercial Appeal*, March 26, 1974.

¹¹⁷ Sanford, 150.

refused to show, he placed a briefcase on the empty chair where Kuykendall was supposed to sit. During the debate Ford answered questions and then went to the briefcase and gave Kuykendall's answer based upon his voting record, which allowed Ford to expose Kuykendall's support of the pharmaceutical industry over the needs of senior citizens and the working class.¹¹⁸ The white establishment in the city placed its support behind Kuykendall when both the *Commercial Appeal* and *The Press-Scimitar* endorsed Kuykendall. Ford used his family's name and an incredibly active grassroots campaign to secure the black vote. Stax legend Isaac Hayes also produced an advertisement played by black radio stations designed to convince black women to vote for Ford.¹¹⁹

The city's racial divide became more pronounced on election night. Ford placed two trusted confidants in charge of counting votes from each precinct in the Ninth Congressional District. Ford remained leery of the white establishment's political mechanisms that had kept blacks out of office in the city. His confidants placed staffers at every polling place in the district, and as soon as the polls were closed and the votes were counted, they relayed the numbers back to Ford's headquarters. As the polls closed, his campaign headquarters predicted that he won by 500 votes. The local media reported that Kuykendall had won by over 5,000 votes. Ford went to the Election Commission and immediately demanded a recount, which was denied. An Election Commissioner was heard telling the Ford campaign, "You niggers go home."¹²⁰ A cleaning woman at

¹¹⁸ Harold Ford Jr., *More Davids Than Goliaths* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 12.

¹¹⁹ Sanford, 151-153.

¹²⁰ Ford Jr., 13-14.

the Election Commission informed Ford that there had been a tremendous amount of activity in the garage, and upon further examination Ford found several boxes of uncounted ballots in the garage. Ford immediately went to the press and refused to leave the Election Commission until the ballots were counted properly. Ford eventually won by 532 votes over Kuykendall, who had to pause in the middle of his victory speech to receive word that he had lost.¹²¹ Ford's victory signaled a major political victory for the black community. Following his victory, many whites in the city used his election as an excuse to flee to the suburbs. One year earlier, Chandler used basketball in the city to distract the city from the issues that divided it. The failure of professional basketball to perform the same healing trope exposes the limited ability of basketball to unite the city.

By June 1974, the ABA's league offices decided to become more actively involved with the Memphis franchise in its attempt to save the club from folding. In an unprecedented move, ABA commissioner Mike Storen resigned and purchased the team.¹²² Storen grew up in Michigan City, Indiana, where he played high school football and graduated from Notre Dame High School. After graduating from Depauw University, he entered the Marine Corps in 1957, and was sent to officer training school in Quantico, Virginia. After the Marines, he spent two years as the sales director for the NBA's Baltimore franchise before accepting the position as director of promotions and ticket sales with the Cincinnati Royals.¹²³ As an ex-Marine, Storen enforced military style discipline. As president and general manager of the Indiana Pacers, his team led the

¹²¹ Ibid., 15.

¹²² Ray Jordan, "Storen Resigns ABA Post to Purchase Tams," *Commercial Appeal*, July 15, 1974.

¹²³ Montieth, 39-41.

league in attendance and was part of the ABA's most intense rivalry with the Kentucky Colonels.¹²⁴ The Mid-South Coliseum seemed an empty cavern during the Finley era and Memphis welcomed Storen's experience in putting fans in seats.

Storen immediately endeared himself to the community by renaming the team the Sounds, which better resembled the city's identity. The new moniker represented the musical heritage of the city that included Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Al Green, and Isaac Hayes.¹²⁵ Storen's key intended financial partners in Memphis were Isaac Hayes and Holiday Inn founder Kemmons Wilson. Hayes was at the height of his musical career and had just won a \$5.3 million lawsuit with Stax over his musical rights.¹²⁶ Hayes's concern for the black community led him to support Storen's attempt to keep the ABA alive in Memphis, just as he funded the construction of the Lorraine Village apartments in St. Croix for low income families.¹²⁷ Like Bell, Hayes had trouble saying no to opportunities in the community. Hayes's payments to Storen were inconsistent, and in one instance he met Storen at his Sounds office after hours with a brown grocery bag containing \$100,000. Fearful for his safety, Storen quickly returned the bag to Hayes and never received another payment from him.¹²⁸

On the court Storen looked to recreate the success he achieved in Indiana before moving to the league offices. He hired Jim Mullaney, a native New Yorker, as the team's

¹²⁴ West, 74.

¹²⁵ Ray Jordan, "'Sounds' is New Nickname," *Commercial Appeal*, July 25, 1974.

¹²⁶ Gordon, 339.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 308.

¹²⁸ West, 120.

next coach. Mullaney's coaching resume included stops at Providence College, the Los Angeles Lakers, the Kentucky Colonels, and the Utah Stars. He brought legitimate professional experience to a franchise in disarray, as well as a blue-collar toughness that matched Memphis's blue-collar identity. Storen's shrewd business acumen convinced Utah's new owner James Collier to release Mullaney from the last two years of his contract in Utah.¹²⁹ Then, Storen set out to bring as many former of his former Pacers to Memphis as possible. He acquired center Mel Daniels, guard Freddie Lewis, and the rights to forward Roger Brown from the Pacers.¹³⁰ These three cost the franchise \$150,000 and were viewed as aging veterans past their primes.¹³¹ The Mid-South Coliseum made forty-two weekend dates available for home games.¹³² In stark contrast to the dates made available to the Pros when they arrived in Memphis in 1970, the Sounds home dates were ready made for promotion. Mayor Wyeth Chandler allowed city employees to use payroll deduction to purchase a half-season ticket for \$44, or \$2 a game.¹³³ The city was once again finding unique ways to support the ABA and the experience Storen brought to the franchise created a sense of hopefulness that the club would survive.

Following the 1974-1975 season the prospect for the survival of the ABA in Memphis once again looked dim. Under Storen's guidance, the number of fans coming

¹²⁹ Ray Jordan, "Mullaney Awaits Word from Sounds," *Commercial Appeal*, August 13, 1974.

¹³⁰ George Lapides "Tams Acquire Mel Daniels, Freddie Lewis," *Press-Scimitar*, July 23, 1974.

¹³¹ Pluto, 245.

¹³² "Sounds Key '74-'75 Card to Weekend," *Commercial Appeal*, August 27, 1974.

¹³³ "City Unveils Ticket Plan," *Press-Scimitar*, September 19, 1974.

through the gate went up but fell short of a level to sustain the team. Sports columnists George Lapidès pressed on in his campaign to keep the ABA in town. He chastised “the local wealth for not assuming a leadership role.”¹³⁴ Following the team’s final loss of the season to the Kentucky Colonels, the ABA’s president John Brown told reporters that “we are going on the assumption that we (the ABA) will have no program in Memphis. We can’t run a league going around and putting out fires.”¹³⁵ While the city was reeling from the failure of the ABA, it rejoiced in the decision of the World Football League to extend play for a second season in Memphis in the fall of 1975.¹³⁶ The Memphis Grizzlies, owned by John Bassett, pulled off one of the biggest coups in professional sports when they signed Larry Csonka, Jim Kick, and Paul Warfield. The Miami Dolphins’s “Big 3” left the NFL for the Memphis franchise in the WFL.¹³⁷ Mayor Chandler was elated to hear the news of the three NFL stars coming to play with the Grizzlies at the Liberty Bowl, but he remained silent on the future of the ABA.¹³⁸ The white establishment in the city, politically and economically, was placing its support behind the new professional football league. In contrast to basketball, where the athlete is exposed for the fans to see in shorts and a tank top, football players are covered from head to toe with pads. Black football players are more concealed by their uniforms and

¹³⁴ George Lapidès, “Sounds Woes Give ABA No Choice,” *Press-Scimitar*, April 15, 1975.

¹³⁵ Ron Cobb, “Its Either Memphis or Nowhere for the Sounds,” *Press-Scimitar*, April 15, 1975.

¹³⁶ Randy Covitz, “WFL Announces it Will ‘Play Ball’ in 1975,” *Press-Scimitar*, April 16, 1975.

¹³⁷ George Lapidès, “McVay Overjoyed with ‘Big Three,’” *Press-Scimitar*, April 16, 1975.

¹³⁸ “Return of WFL Elates Mayor,” *Press-Scimitar*, April 17, 1975.

therefore are a less visible symbol of blackness. Memphis, a city in the middle of a racial struggle for control, simply chose football over basketball.

In one last attempt to save the ABA, Avron Fogelman, leader of the Memphis ownership group, reached a verbal agreement with the Grizzlies' owner Bassett to solidify the group financially. Bassett then hired Storen as executive vice-president for the Grizzlies, which now linked the city's professional football and basketball teams.¹³⁹ By the end of August, the Sounds became expendable to the ABA. On Thursday, August 28, 1975, the ABA announced that its Memphis organization was moving to Baltimore.¹⁴⁰ When the decision became final, Larry Finch, the lone Memphian remaining on the roster, was in shock. He said, "I really thought it would be back."¹⁴¹ Finch's faith in the city never wavered. He returned to Memphis State to finish his degree as the Sounds departed for Baltimore. This was Finch's cue to move forward with his life after his playing career.

George Lapidés eulogized the team's five year stay in the city: "Here Lies the Memphis Pros-Tams-Sounds. Born August 1970, Died July 1975. Victim of Poverty, Mismanagement and Terrible Teams."¹⁴² The final roster of the Memphis Sounds was predominately black in a city where black crime was climbing, city government was

¹³⁹ Mike Fleming, "Bassett Offers His Organization to Help Sounds," *Commercial Appeal*, August 25, 1975.

¹⁴⁰ Ray Jordan, "Sounds' Farewell Expected Today," *Commercial Appeal*, August 28, 1975.

¹⁴¹ Ray Jordan, "Professional Basketball Finally Hustles Out of Memphis," *Commercial Appeal*, August 29, 1975.

¹⁴² George Lapidés, "A Sad Ending for Memphis' Pro Basketball," *Press-Scimitar*, July 17, 1975.

struggling to find its identity, the public schools were experiencing a mass exodus because of busing, and white flight was a reality.¹⁴³ The ABA's failure in Memphis exposed the inability of professional basketball to bring the city together. George Lapidès's motives were genuine in trying to express what he, and many like him, believed: that Finch and Tiger basketball brought the city together. Lapidès attempted to boost the city's professional basketball team in the same fashion. Instead of a love affair between the city and the ABA, the white establishment pursued the World Football League and professional wrestling with more fervor. The white working class embraced professional wrestling and drew crowds consistently larger than the ABA did in the same arena. Professional basketball was a limited attraction in 1970s Memphis.

The ABA's renegade reputation that promoted the black athletic aesthetic was ill-fated from its inception. Its brief stay sheds light on the difficulties facing the city socially and politically. During this same period, Finch led the hometown Memphis State Tigers to the NCAA Finals. As a young black man from the other side of the tracks, the white establishment embraced him, his story, and the school on their way to creating a façade that covered the underlying racial issues facing the city. When Finch left the university and became a part of the professional basketball world as a black man, his role and value to the city was minimized. The failure of the Memphis's ABA franchise can not be blamed on Finch. Its failure exposes professional basketball's association with race, which can be more masked at the collegiate level. Those issues were more

¹⁴³ Todd Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 30. Boyd argues that the black aesthetic began to dominate basketball in the 1970s. Basketball became the black sport. The streetball style that permeated the playgrounds in inner city black neighborhoods now began to dominate the professional game. Memphis accepted this new aesthetic under the guise of paternalism at Memphis State under Bartow, but the city was not prepared to support a markedly greater shift towards blackness in an ABA franchise.

exaggerated in 1970s Memphis, a city in the Deep South at odds with its own racial identity.

The next chapter returns to Memphis State and analyzes the tenure of Verties Sails Jr. as the first African-American assistant basketball coach at Memphis State. Sails's role as the first black assistant coach sheds further light inherent in weaknesses of the myth that basketball unified the city. During his tenure the Tigers basketball program returned to mediocrity under head coach Wayne Yates as Sails was left to confront racial hurdles on his own. Sails's success in Memphis's high school ranks at Melrose placed him among the city's successful young coaches, yet Sails was viewed merely as a recruiter or as a liaison between Yates and the team's black players. His groundbreaking role as the first black assistant coach in the MSU basketball program laid the foundation for Finch to follow, but it also came at a price that exposed the racial issues prevalent within the university and its athletic program.

Chapter 5

Memphis' Black Basketball Coaching Moses: Verties Sails

While playing basketball at Melrose High, Finch developed a life long friendship with assistant coach Verties Sails. Sails became Finch's mentor and stood by him throughout his playing and coaching career. After Finch signed with Memphis State Sails became the next head boys' basketball coach at Melrose High. His success there placed him at the forefront of names that Memphis State considered in 1975 to become the first full-time African American assistant coach in the school's history. At the time, schools throughout the Deep South limited black recruiters to only bringing black players to their universities. These recruiters were given part-time positions as secondary members of the coaching staff. When Sails became the first full time African-American assistant coach in the Deep South, he was given the responsibilities of not only recruiting, but of also coaching the freshman team, scouting opponents, and aiding in in-game decisions. Sails broke through the barrier that suggested that only white men were capable of coaching basketball at predominately white colleges and universities throughout the South. Like many of the other racial pioneers in sport, Sails faced numerous obstacles over the course of his four-year tenure as an assistant at Memphis State.

Sails and Finch are part of the same coaching tree that stretches back through the city's basketball tradition. Sails's commitment to Finch as a player at Melrose High helped Finch defy the will of many in the Orange Mound community when he signed with Memphis State. Throughout Finch's playing days at Memphis State he returned to the Orange Mound community because of men like Sails. In the history of Memphis

basketball, Sails's role sets hidden under Finch's shadow. But Sails never openly complained about the racial slights that denied him further opportunities at Memphis State. Instead he remained an intricate piece of the basketball fabric in the community as the basketball coach at the local community college, Shelby State. Sails may not have reached the promised land of head men's basketball coach himself, but he did lay the foundation for Finch's role as the first African American head basketball coach at Memphis State.

On March 28, 1942, Verties Sails Jr. was born into a world framed by the societal norms of Jim Crow. As a young boy in Rosemark, Tennessee, a small community just north of the Shelby County line, in Tipton County, he was unable to attend white schools. When he reached high school age his parents sent him to Woodstock High School just south of Millington. The Woodstock Training School offered black high school students a chance to work and earn their way through school. The students were given agricultural, vocational, and other jobs in the operation of the school plant.¹ Woodstock's mission correlated with Booker T. Washington's concept of racial uplift through economic and educational improvement. Principal R.J. Roddy governed Woodstock for over thirty years and believed that his students needed the best teachers. To do this, he brought in teachers from all over Tennessee, following the model set by Tennessee's

¹ Linda Moore, "Former Students gather in North Shelby County for Woodstock High School Centennial," *Commercial Appeal*, October 05, 2013.

Normal Institute (Tennessee State University).² Roddy's no-nonsense administrative style instilled discipline in his young charges, including a young Sails.

As a young boy growing up in Rosemark, baseball was Sails's first love, but after arriving at Woodstock he soon developed a passion for basketball. Woodstock competed in the competitive negro prep leagues in Memphis, and like other segregated schools, they were not allowed to play white schools. The sports pages of *The Memphis World* and *The Tri-State Defender* were filled weekly with the negro prep league battles in Memphis and Shelby County. Woodstock was a power in local negro league prep basketball in the 1950s and claimed the school's only Tennessee High School Athletic Association (black) state championship in 1951.³ In the fall of 1959, Sails's senior year, a new assistant coach arrived on campus and left an indelible mark upon Sails. Sam Montgomery, a former player under legendary Tennessee State University Coach John McLendon, opened fall workouts by allowing the team to condition by playing three on three. Instead of the half court games the Woodstock players were accustomed to, Montgomery insisted that the games be played the entire ninety-four feet of the court.⁴ To Sails and his teammates this seemed preposterous, but it signaled a change from their accustomed conservative style. Montgomery became Woodstock's head coach the following year, but these lessons on how the speed of play impacted the game stuck with Sails throughout his coaching career.

² Ibid.

³ Keith Gentry, *2015-2016 Shelby Metro High School Basketball* (Memphis: Gentry's Statistical Service, 2015), 91.

⁴ "Verties Sails," interview by author, March 28, 2016.

John B. McLendon's influence stretches far throughout the reaches of collegiate basketball. Verties Sails was indoctrinated into his style of play under Montgomery at Woodstock High. McLendon's basketball lineage can be traced directly back to James Naismith from his time as a student under Naismith at the University of Kansas. Unable to play on Kansas's all-white varsity basketball team, McLendon became a student of the game and learned as much as he could from Naismith. Later, as the coach at Tennessee A & I, McLendon's motion offense and up-tempo style led Tennessee A & I to three National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics championships during the same time that Sails was a student at Woodstock.⁵ Sails's introduction to McLendon's style laid the foundation for a coaching philosophy dependent upon an up-tempo game that showcased the abilities and talents of its players.

Following his playing career at Woodstock, Sails was offered a scholarship to attend Lemoyne College and play for Coach Jerry Johnson, another disciple of McLendon. Sails was a seldom used reserve who was described as, "one of the most dependable substitutes on Lemoyne's varsity basketball team. He is an accurate scorer and a good playmaker."⁶ Although he was never the star at Lemoyne, Sails studied Coach Johnson's system and recruiting style. His ability to bring players to Lemoyne's small campus in South Memphis from across the country stuck with Sails. As a member of the SIAC, Lemoyne's talent and schedule were as competitive as Memphis State's, yet due to Jim Crow they were relegated to second class status. Sails's reserve role helped him see how a team works from the ground up. Sails watched how players in front of

⁵ Richard Sandomir, "Civil Rights on the Basketball Court," *New York Times*, March 15, 2008.

⁶ "Magicians Take on Fisk U. Bulldogs Monday Night in Annual Homecoming Battle," *Memphis World*, February 9, 1963.

him succeeded and failed. His four years at Lemoyne under Johnson provided a foundation that would serve him well over the course of coaching career.

Sails first became an assistant coach at Melrose High under William Collins. Collins's Melrose program was one of the most successful in the city and produced a number of collegiate stars. Sails inherited a team that won the MIAA City Championship but lost most of its offensive talent. Undeterred, Sails led a solid group of young players to Melrose's second consecutive MIAA city championship over Manassas High and continued through to the TSSAA state championship game against Nashville Cameron, where they lost 62-52.⁷

Sails continued his ascent in the Memphis prep ranks in 1971 when Melrose returned to the 1971 MIAA City Championship game for the third straight year. After missing the 1972 MIAA championship game, Melrose returned to the top of Memphis prep basketball with a lineup that included John Gunn, Alvin Wright, and James Bradley. Melrose reclaimed the MIAA City Championship in 1973 and then in 1974 secured its place in the pantheon of the city's greatest teams ever by competing the 1973-1974 season undefeated. Melrose defeated Northside High 71-69 in overtime in the 1974 MIAA City Championship game, ran the gauntlet through the TSSAA state playoffs, and defeated Brownsville Haywood 76-30 for the state championship.⁸ Sails returned Melrose High to the top of prep basketball, forged Melrose's legacy as a state basketball power, and became a sought-after commodity by Memphis State.

⁷ Gentry, 91.

⁸ Ray Jordan "Melrose Wins Heated Final," *Commercial Appeal*, February 23, 1974; and Gentry, 91.

Following Gene Bartow's departure to the University of Illinois in March of 1974, the Tigers announced that Wayne Yates would take over as their new head coach. Following a successful career for the Tigers, Yates played one season with the Los Angeles Lakers and another with the ABA's Oakland Oaks before returning to college basketball under Gene Bartow as an assistant coach.⁹ Soon after being elevated to the head coaching position Yates hired Sails and M.K. Turk as assistants. Yates's primary objective in hiring Sails was to secure a commitment from Melrose's All-American center John Gunn. Before Sails agreed to join the Tigers coaching staff, he told Yates, "if you want me, then you are going to have to sign Alvin Wright to a scholarship along with Gunn." Yates was not fully convinced of the Melrose guard's ability to play Division I basketball. Yates needed Gunn's athletic abilities and Sails ability to communicate with the black players he was recruiting. Sails's persistence and empathy for his players were secondary to his own professional goals. Wright's older brother Herb was the first black basketball player at Shelby State after attending Melrose High, but Herb never played at Melrose because he needed to help support his family. When Alvin got to Melrose, Sails knew the family and understood that if Alvin was going to have a chance to play for Melrose, then he needed to help support his family financially. Sails allowed Alvin to work the concession stand after school and during other games when he was not at practice or playing in a game himself.¹⁰ He believed Wright deserved the opportunity and could compete at the Division I level. Sails's perseverance and commitment to his players as young men forced Yates's hand and led to Wright signing with the Tigers.

⁹ *Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1974-1975.*

¹⁰ Verties Sails, interview by author, March 28, 2016.

Verties Sails Jr. became the first African American full-time men's assistant basketball coach in the Deep South. The Tigers gained a man qualified to coach on the Division I level, a man who could recruit the city's best high school talent, and a man who maintained respectability in the face of racial division. Yates's hiring of Sails was pragmatic, yet Sails's winning pedigree included four city championships, one state championship, and a .790 winning percentage.¹¹ When Memphis State president Bill Jones and athletic director Bill "Spook" Murphy agreed to hire Sails, they valued his image in the community. Sails projected himself in a way that garnered the respect of white Memphians. Sails did not belittle referees during games. He was a stern taskmaster yet did not explode at his players during games. He was viewed as a gentleman by his peers. During a home game against Frayser, Sails carried himself in a way that garnered the respect of the white community. Only one referee showed up for the contest, he turned to his team and told them "say nothing to the referee. You are not to question a single call."¹² Sails understood the racial implications of either his team or his coaching staff disputing any decision by the lone white referee.

Sails's ability to gain the respect of the white community in Memphis while simultaneously maintaining that of his black peers is critical to understanding his character. Melrose's biggest rival in the early 1970s was Hamilton High, coached by Sails's longtime friend Lloyd Williams. During practices and games Sails would use Wright's comments in the local papers as motivation for his own team, but after the intense rivalry games were played out on the floor, Sails could be found with Lloyd

¹¹ "Sails Jr., Verties," Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame, Accessed March 30, 2016. <http://tshf.net/halloffame/sails-jr-verties/>.

¹² Verties Sails, interview by author, March S8, 2016.

Williams at a local restaurant, renewing their friendship.¹³ Sails was one of the pioneering coaches who had the foresight to form the MIAA and create the city basketball championship that began play at the Mid-South Coliseum in 1968. His commitment to his players in the Orange Mound community began with his days at the local community center, including his support of a young Finch. His team's success also created a sense of pride within the black community. His ability to negotiate successfully between the white and black communities were signs that he could help Memphis State continue to build bridges across the city.

Early in the fall of 1974, Sails was summoned to the athletic director's office to set boundaries for the school's first African American men's basketball coach. MSU's athletic director Spook Murphy made it clear to Sails that respectability was a vital factor in his hiring. Murphy was an iconic figure in the Memphis State community who spent fourteen years as head football coach before becoming the school's athletic director in 1972. His role in moving the Tigers into the Missouri Valley Conference helped to improve the school's position nationally in both basketball and football.¹⁴ Murphy's concern was to protect the national reputation of the school in an era when racial relations on campus were tenuous around the country. Murphy told Sails, "if you have any trouble out here don't go running to Maxine Smith or the newspapers. You come see me and I'll take care of it."¹⁵ Murphy wanted to avoid racial strife and bad publicity as much as possible. Murphy's fear was grounded in his experiences with Smith, who had made a

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 1973-1974 *University of Memphis Men's Basketball Media Guide*, 9.

¹⁵ Verties Sails, interview by author, March 28, 2016.

career of fighting segregation at MSU following her 1957 admission denial.¹⁶ Smith's vocal differences with the university made the school's administration leery of hiring someone who was a racial protester. Murphy viewed Sails's quiet, nonaggressive style as a necessary trait, but for many within the black community, it was Smith's resistance that gained progress within the city. Sails would be forced to walk a thin line between the two during his time at Memphis State.

One of the traits that made Sails a great coach was his concept of meritocracy. He displayed an authenticity that players could sense. Sails's ability to empathize with his players and understand them as people first and basketball players second allowed him to be successful. Sails believed that if you let players compete against each other, then the best players would rise to the occasion and deserve to be rewarded. Off the court, Sails believed that the same principle holds true in life. He treated people with respect, and in return he expected the same. During his five years at MSU, this principle was tested repeatedly on and off the court due to the racial climate prevalent in the city. As Sails broke racial boundaries at the university, there was resistance by some whites who were not yet for change.

Early in the fall of 1974, when Murphy called Sails into his office. He was setting the boundaries for Sails on campus. As MSU's athletic director, Murphy was asserting his position as the preeminent voice on racial issues in the department. Under the cultural norms of the period, Sails was expected to adhere to his decrees. Over the course of the next five years Sails faced numerous racial slights. Sails was not alone in these trials.

¹⁶ Michael Lollar, "Memphis Civil Rights Legend Maxine Smith Dies at 83," *Commercial Appeal*, April 26, 2013.

His family also experienced racial insults, which drew more ire from Sails than the personal slights he faced. Sails treated his players fairly and expected the same from the Memphis State community. A product of Jim Crow society, he understood that the white establishment was not going to offer him the same egalitarian treatment that his players received on the court. These slights were part of the price that Sails paid for being the first African American assistant coach at MSU.

During Sails's first season at MSU a series of incidents demonstrated these racial dynamics. His wife Francine, who was pregnant, was denied entrance into the gated parking lot at the Mid-South Coliseum before an early season game. Located next to the Mid-South Coliseum, each of the coaches' wives had parking passes to this gated area except for her. When she asked if she was supposed to have a pass, Sails knew she was denied access because she was black. The day after the incident, Sails tracked down the athletic ticket manager for the university and questioned him directly. Sails was told there was a clerical mistake. Coach Sails refused to accept that excuse and told the ticket manager, "that of all the coaches on the staff, wouldn't you figure that my wife would be first to get a pass to avoid this very situation?"¹⁷ Sails did not go to the NAACP, the *Commercial Appeal*, or to *The Tri-State Defender*. Instead, the next day he went directly to the man in charge of parking passes in the athletic department offices on campus.

In another incident at the Coliseum, Francine became thirsty before the game and made her way to the Rebounders Room, where boosters met before games to socialize. She was again denied entrance. Fearing for her husband's job, she kept the slight to

¹⁷ "Verties Sails," interview by author, March 28, 2016.

herself. When she finally shared the incident with her husband, Sails became infuriated. At the next home game, Sails sent his wife back to the Rebounders Room to seek entrance. Only this time, he stayed slightly behind her, far enough so as not to be seen around the corner in the circular shaped Coliseum. When she attempted to enter the Rebounders Room, Murphy was close enough to the door to recognize her. She was again denied entrance. Having watched from afar, Sails made his way around the corner and confronted Murphy. Murphy's quick cover-up and apology did not sit well with him.¹⁸ Sails had been instructed to play by the rules, yet Sails' self-definition as a man demanded that these same rules apply to Murphy.

While Sails's tenure as the first full-time African American assistant coach at MSU was underway, the city of Memphis struggled with racial transition. Veteran Memphis City Schools superintendent John P. Freeman presented a reorganization plan to the school board that placed Willie Herenton as the deputy superintendent for instructional services – thus becoming the highest ranking black public school official in the history of Memphis. Freeman's foresight into the racial dynamics of the city and his belief in Herenton's ability as an administrator led him to propose this new organizational chart. He knew that Herenton needed as much experience, in the highest position possible, to break the racial barrier blocking his path to becoming the city's first African American superintendent. Three years later, Freeman announced his retirement and set the stage for one of the most bizarre transfers of power in the history of Memphis City

¹⁸ Ibid.

Schools. The School Board, made up of six whites and three blacks, conducted a national search for their next superintendent. Herenton and Dr. William Coats, superintendent of the Grosse Pointe, Michigan, public schools in suburban Detroit were the frontrunners for the position. The Memphis City Schools, due to white flight and the growth of private schools in the 1970s, were seventy percent black, yet Coats emerged as the frontrunner even though his experience was with predominately white suburban districts.

A backroom deal, engineered at James Blackburn's house amongst white board members, ensured that Coats would emerge victorious at the August 20 board of education meeting. Frances Coe, one of the white board members at Blackburn's house, revealed to one of the three black board members in casual conversation that a secret deal had been engineered to secure Coats's victory. Racial tension at the board meeting the following night reached unprecedented levels as the vote split along racial lines: five whites voted for Coats, and the three black members voted for Herenton and Juanita Watkins, left out of the backroom deal, voted for Dr. William Payne, a third finalist. Following the vote, Maxine Smith remarked, "I thought we had taken a turn for the better, but we have not. Racism is still America's number one problem. It definitely is around this table." Fellow black board member George H. Brown added, "The biggest difficulty Dr. Herenton had is that he stayed in the oven too long and had a permanent tan." After flying to Memphis to receive the offer, Coats felt the racial tension and declined the school board's offer. Coats saw clearly that the school board and the city were divided racially.

Frances Coe summed up the racial climate: "Blacks feel that because the system is 73 percent black, a qualified black should be the superintendent and that in rejecting

the black deputy superintendent, we would be giving further proof to young blacks that a black cannot win a top position in our society.” Then she also pointed out that, “Whites feel that choosing the deputy over an outside candidate who had received a majority vote would signal that the system will have an increasing black majority. . . . There is also a growing feeling among whites that the system is being controlled by the NAACP and recent events have strengthened that feeling.” In the next ballot, Coe and James Blackburn voted for Herenton, which allowed him to attain the board’s approval. White board member Mal Mauney took issue with Blackburn and Coe: “they caved in to the bitter opposition and the inflammatory statements made by black board members and the other so-called black leaders.”¹⁹ The racial issues surrounding Herenton’s rise to superintendent mirrored the racial climate in the city.

In February of 1975 racial discord reached the Tiger basketball program. Yates and some of the black players on the team were at odds. In this era, socially conscious student bodies and faculties became increasingly outspoken on administrative policies and involved themselves in hotly debated issues on campuses across the country. Most alarming to administrators on predominately white campuses were the demands being placed on them by black students, including athletes. Black athletes spearheaded the “athletic revolution” by challenging the racial discrimination that existed in athletic departments at various universities across the country.²⁰ In February 1975, a group of

¹⁹ Otis Sanford, *From Boss Crump to King Willie: How Race Changed Memphis Politics* (Knoxville: UTK Press, 2017) 205-213.

²⁰ David Wiggins, *Glory Bound Black Athletes in a White America* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1997), 123-124. In his chapter devoted to revolts by African American athletes on college campuses describes the issues confronted at three white universities during the 1970s. His unique perspective as an athlete at Oregon State provides lenses through which to view the realities faced by black athletes on white college campuses.

black players at MSU refused to show up for the taping of the Coach Wayne Yates Show. Yates was furious and decided to dismiss those players.²¹ *Sports Illustrated* writer John Underwood referred to desperate coaches who were “bewildered, angry, disillusioned, and no longer certain of their mission, or in some cases of their relevance.”²² Their authority was being challenged. When Yates was confronted by this group of black players, he was disillusioned, bewildered, and angry enough to dismiss them from the team for their actions.

Yates required the players who appeared on his show to follow a specific dress code, and the black players wanted to wear new black leather jackets. Yates assumed these jackets were symbols of the black power movement present on college campuses across the country. He forbade the players from wearing them. Frustrated by Yates’s decision, the black players sought Coach Sails’s advice. He suggested they not wear the jackets and go on the show as they had done in the past, following Yates’s dress code.²³ Sails was sent by Yates to Chicago to scout DePaul, and while he was away, the black players decided to boycott the show. Yates frantically left messages at Sails’s hotel in Chicago and at his Memphis home.

Outside of their black teammates, black athletes found themselves on campuses that were predominately white. Memphis State’s campus had a small black population in the 1970s, and if one of these black players had decided not to boycott the show, he was likely to become a social outcast. Tigers point guard Alvin Wright was originally not

²¹ Bill Little, “Sports Horizons.” *Tri-State Defender*, February 15, 1975.

²² Wiggins, 124.

²³ Verties Sails, interview by author, March 28, 2016.

part of plan to boycott the show. From his high school days at Melrose, Wright trusted Sails to guide him, but this time Sails was out of town and the peer pressure to join his black teammates was too strong. Wright was in a precarious situation. He did not want to become a social outcast among the few black friends he had on campus, his black teammates.

The Tri-State Defender reported that after an emergency meeting with athletic director Bill Murphy, other university officials, and Yates, the coach held a “special practice” for the dissident black members of the team.²⁴ These members were allowed back on the team and an incident was avoided. One of the key people behind the scenes was Sails, who flew back into town Saturday morning. When he walked in the front door of his house, his wife handed him the phone and communicated the urgency of the moment based on the frequency of messages left by Yates. Yates demanded that Sails report to campus immediately to meet with the black players who boycotted his show. Unable to communicate with his black players, Yates needed Sails to remedy the situation.

The meetings lasted until it was time for the players to get on the bus to go to the Coliseum for their game against the University of Milwaukee. Following the meetings, Sails drove home to shower and shave with just enough time to make it back to the Coliseum for tip off.²⁵ The press release placed the athletic director Murphy at the center of the reconciliation between Yates and his players, but it was Sails who bridged the racial divide between Yates and the black players, solving the crisis. Yates, still venting

²⁴ Bill Little, “Sports Horizons,” *Tri-State Defender*, February 15, 1975.

²⁵ Verties Sails, interview by author, March 28, 2016.

from the attack on his authority, suspended Bill Cook and Marion Hilliard for a bed check violation the week following the television show boycott.²⁶ Reconciling the counterculture and civil rights resistance with coaches' authoritarian power was a problem for coaches around the country, including those at Memphis State.

As the Tigers completed their first season under Coach Yates, the Tigers traveled to New York City to play in the 1975 National Invitational Tournament against Oral Roberts. When the team arrived at Madison Square Garden they passed Georgetown University's basketball team in the hallway, which caught the eye of the Alvin Wright and James Bradley. What they noticed as the team walked by was Georgetown's head coach, John Thompson. "Big John" Thompson walked in with his all-black basketball team from a predominately white private university on the east coast. To see a figure who loomed as large as Thompson moved the Tigers's black players to question when their school would hire a black man as head coach. Both Bradley and Wright asked Sails, "Who was that man?" Coach Sails responded, "That's Coach Thompson from Georgetown."²⁷

Thompson's storied career as head coach at Georgetown University began in 1973, the fall after Finch and the Tigers advanced to the NCAA finals against UCLA. Thompson, a Washington, D.C. native, a graduate of Providence College, and a former Boston Celtic, became the first black head basketball coach at Georgetown. The *Washington Post* celebrated Thompson's hiring as the sixth black coach of a

²⁶ Bill Little, "Sports Horizon," *Tri-State Defender*, Feb 22, 1975.

²⁷ Verties Sails, interview by author, March 28, 2016.

predominately white college in the country.²⁸ Thompson had a reputation for discipline and for placing studies before basketball. His success at St. Anthony's, a small Catholic high school in Northeastern Washington, D.C., positioned him to earn the opportunity at Georgetown. Thompson's selection over the white head coach at Dematha High, Morgan Wooten, signaled a direct shift in the intentions of the Georgetown athletic department. Dematha High School, a Catholic school in the neighboring white suburban enclave of Hyattsville, Maryland, was a national power, and Wooten was the logical choice to become the next head coach at Georgetown. The rivalry on the courts between Thompson and Wooten had racial implications of its own. Wooten avoided playing Thompson's St Anthony's team in local tournaments and refused to play Thompson in black neighborhoods because, "he didn't think (white) followers of Dematha, would feel comfortable in (black) neighborhoods like Howard."²⁹

Father Henle, the president of Georgetown who hired Thompson, came to Georgetown in 1969 following a year of racial tumult in the city. Henle initiated a series of programs that brought more inner-city youth to Georgetown as students following the 1968 race riots in the city. The hiring of Thompson further solidified the university's commitment to providing opportunities to blacks from inner city Washington. Thompson then built Georgetown into a national basketball powerhouse, with a 98 percent graduation rate among players who came predominately from black America.³⁰ For the

²⁸ Leonard Shapiro, *Big Man on Campus: John Thompson and the Georgetown Hoyas* (New York: Holt and Company, 1991), 88.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

Tiger players who were black, seeing Thompson opened their eyes to the possibility of a black head coach at Memphis State.

The Tigers black players turned to Sails and declared: “You mean he’s the head coach?”³¹ After Sails revealed that he was, the young man turned to him and said, “We’re all going to Murphy right now to tell ‘the man’ that we demand that you become our head coach.”³² Flattered by the young men’s enthusiasm Sails and his wife Francine begged the young men not to go to Murphy. Sails’s egalitarian ideology applied to him in the same manner that it applied to his players; he believed that you earned your position. At that moment Sails was content with his position as an assistant coach and expected that through his hard work and success, he would earn the opportunity to be the head coach at Memphis State. Thompson went on to be the first black basketball coach to coach in the Final Four in 1982, and in 1984 the first to win a national championship at the NCAA Division I level.

Following the 1984 title game Thompson told *Washington Post* reporter Ken Denlinger, “The biggest thing that leaps out in my mind is all of the people, particularly of my race, who I felt never had the opportunity to experience what I have.”³³ Thompson mentioned fellow black coaches from Washington, D.C. who were never given the opportunity to be head coaches at the Division I level. He also mentioned Smokey Gaines and John McLendon from the ranks of historically black colleges. By 1984, Sails had been passed over for the head coaching job at Memphis State and was part of that list

³¹ Verties Sails, interview by author, March 28, 2016.

³² Ibid.

³³ Shapiro, 222.

of black men who never received their opportunity. Like Thompson, Sails was successful at the high school level and was a proven recruiter. Unlike Thompson, Sails never received the opportunity to become a head coach at the Division I level.

Sails also faced challenges on the court. When he was brought on staff in 1974, many considered it a ploy to land Gunn, with no basis for his expertise on the sidelines as a coach. Many believed that Sails should know his role as an assistant unless there was a “racial” issue that needed attention. Assistants make suggestions during games and allow the head coach to make the final decisions on multiple levels, which places the assistant in a subservient role. This relationship between Yates and Sails was tested during the final regular season game of the 1977 season when Tiger forward James Bradley’s on-court altercation led to a bench-clearing brawl. Sails had urged Yates to substitute Bradley out of the game. Yates chose to leave Bradley in.

On this night, Oklahoma City’s pressing defense had created 29 Tiger turnovers in a very physical game. Bobby Hall, *Commercial Appeal* beat writer labeled the game as, “more like a season opening performance than a regular season finale.”³⁴ The fight began after Bradley fouled Oklahoma City’s Calvin Montgomery late in the second half, after the outcome was already secured in Oklahoma City’s favor. OCU’s Mark Gwatney took issue with the hard foul and exchanged words with Bradley. Bradley proceeded to swing and hit Gwatney. Both benches cleared, and Bradley was restrained by Yates.³⁵

³⁴ Bobby Hall, “Tigers Must Face Metro Action with Memories of Chief Defeat,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 27, 1977.

³⁵ Ibid.

Bradley's temperament at Melrose High led other major basketball programs to shy away from him. The most egregious incident transpired during his senior year in the waning moments of a loss to Northside in the Martin Luther King Tournament; Bradley spat on a Northside player, causing a fight that spread into the stands. Sails coached Bradley at Melrose and understood Bradley's disposition. Sails convinced Yates, following Bradley's one-year stint at Connors State Community College, that his athletic talent outweighed the potential risk. During the Oklahoma City game, Sails had warned Yates of the imminent danger of leaving Bradley in the game's waning moments which was already out of reach. Yates, by dismissing Sails's plea, affirmed his authority as head coach. The fight could have been avoided if Yates simply accepted Sails' opinion. When the fight broke out, Sails kept sitting on the bench.³⁶

The altercation that Bradley initiated further exposed the racial challenges that Sails faced. Tiger A.D. Bill Murphy was displeased with Coach Sails's response to the fight and made his feelings known in an ambiguous fashion. Murphy sat directly behind the bench during the Oklahoma City game. The following Monday, in the athletic dining hall, Murphy ate lunch. Sails overheard the conversation at Murphy's table: "When a fight breaks out, this man won't even participate." The statement was made distinctly enough that Murphy's group and anyone in proximity heard it, including Sails. Sails was one table away, where he silently ate his lunch and listened to Murphy. Following lunch, Sails followed Murphy back to the athletic offices in the Roane Field House to confront him. Sails demanded to be treated like a man. He reminded Murphy of his own plea to Sails: "if you have any problems, see me directly and do not to go talking to everyone

³⁶ Verties Sails, interview by author, March 28, 2016.

else.”³⁷ Murphy had questioned Sails’s manhood in front of all that were present in South Hall.

By questioning Sails’s role in the bench clearing brawl, Murphy was questioning Sails’ masculinity. Murphy, the former MSU football coach, expected his men to enter the fray in defense of brotherhood. Murphy had also missed the discussion between Sails and Yates, when Yates ignored Sails. Sails was known to his players as the quiet in the storm. They also knew that if you repeatedly did not follow his instructions, then you would draw his ire. He would not tolerate “that mess.”³⁸ He had respected Murphy’s wishes with previous racial slights by not running to the media or the NAACP. He expected the same of Murphy. If Sails had jumped off the bench and acted inappropriately, then he would have been chastised for not having the requisite level of respectability needed to be a coach at MSU. Sails was trapped in a situation over which he had little control. In the face of this racial mindset, Sails chose respectability over impudence.

Sails’s calming demeanor, his persistence and his understanding of the racial climate were vital during a period when the echoes of Jim Crow could still be heard throughout the city. There were times that Sails was forced to accept, as an assistant coach, the role his former Melrose players were given. Sails believed that John Gunn’s play in early practice sessions merited a starting spot in the Tiger rotation, but Yates believed otherwise. Gunn became frustrated with his role. Sails told him, “son all you can do is to go out there every day at practice and be the best player on both ends of the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Hank McDowell, interview by author, April 13, 2016.

floor.”³⁹ Sails maintained his egalitarian approach to the game, but as an assistant he was relegated to a secondary role and had to acquiesce to coaching decisions made by Yates. In Sails’s first season, when Yates divided the team into two units, Sails was relegated to working with the second unit while M.K. Turk, the other fulltime assistant, was placed in charge of the first team. Sails was often slighted because of his lack of collegiate coaching experience, but these scrimmages were an opportunity for him to prove his value as a tactician. These scrimmages also gave Gunn his opportunity to prove his abilities against the first team. In these scrimmages Sails employed an up-tempo style that destroyed zone defenses by beating the defense down the floor every time. In one of these early sessions designed to work on zone offense and defense, Yates stopped the scrimmage and openly questioned Sails in front of the entire team. John Gunn yelled out, “Aww Yates, your boys just getting beat and you can’t stand it!”⁴⁰ Gunn’s bravado stated what Sails already knew but was not allowed to say because of his position as an assistant. Sails use of an up-tempo style showcased Gunn’s athletic ability and eventually allowed him to earn a starting spot in the Tigers lineup.

Gunn held a special place in Sails’s heart, since he had tutored Gunn on and off the court since his freshman year at Melrose. Sails watched as Gunn blossomed into one of the most heavily recruited high school post players in the country his senior year, in a class that included Moses Malone. Sails again played a major role in Gunn’s growth once they both arrived at Memphis State. Their relationship exemplified the ways that Sails believed in his players and created a family atmosphere. His empathy extended past

³⁹ Verties Sails, interview by author, March 28, 2016.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

the court. He held a personal attachment to each of his players. Gunn showed continued growth during his first two years leading the Tiger faithful to hold high hopes for the former high school All-American. At the beginning of Gunn's junior year however, he was diagnosed with Stevens-Johnson Syndrome, a disease that affects the skin and mucus membranes. He struggled at practice before being hospitalized three games into the season. On December 21, 1976, the Tigers were playing Ole Miss at the Coliseum when Larry Finch made his way to the bench to notify Sails that Gunn had passed.⁴¹ Sails knew from the inflection in Finch's voice what he was about to hear. When the announcer notified the crowd, the Mid-South Coliseum felt as if "an iceberg had passed through there."⁴² Sails's heart stopped at that moment in the same way that a father's heart does with the loss of a son.

Over the next two years the Tiger program hovered in mediocrity following the loss of Gunn. In the final weeks of the 1978-1979 season Yates resigned as head coach with four games remaining in the regular season, under the heavy pressure of the media scrutiny and alumni discontent.⁴³ Tiger fans questioned the direction of the program following the success of Gene Bartow. The *Commercial Appeal* called Yates's resignation the byproduct of spectator pressures and player misfortunes. Problems for Yates began mounting when Dennis Isbell dropped out of school after the 1977-1978 season. Yates lost another player when guard Buster Hancock quit the team after losing his starting job in December 1978. Yates's inability to rein in James Bradley's temper

⁴¹ John Varlas, "Former Tiger John Gunn's Star Shines 40 Years Later," *Commercial Appeal*, December 21, 2016.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Bobby Hall, "Emotional Memphis State Shocks Louisville," *Commercial Appeal*, February 18, 1979.

was further magnified following an altercation in the Mid-South Coliseum parking lot that caused him to break his hand and miss three weeks of the season. The second semester opened with Tony Rufus academically ineligible. The problems continued to mount for Yates when Tommy Lowery quit school and redshirt freshman Steve Meachem was arrested by narcotics agents.⁴⁴ Marred by a series of events that depleted the Tigers' bench depth, the administration decided that Yates had lost control of the program and they pressured him into resigning.

Sails was left out of the conversations between Yates and the administration concerning the future of the program. The resignation created confusion for the team and the coaching staff as they arrived at the Roane Fieldhouse for practice on February 7 following the press release by Yates and the university announcing his resignation. The press corps began questioning the coaching staff: Who would coach this Saturday against Louisville at the Coliseum? Had Yates suggested to any of his assistants that this was a possibility? Had the athletic department, the AD, or any booster made the staff aware that Yates was going to resign? Into this melee of media questions stepped a team and a coaching staff with questions of their own.⁴⁵ Yates held a brief closed-door team meeting and reiterated that, "I was not fired. I resigned. There's not really anything else to say." The Tiger players and coaches were shocked by the sudden announcement. Freshman guard Otis Jackson recalled Sails being totally shocked. Sails looked on from the stands in the Roane Fieldhouse as the team began to stretch before practice. Visibly choked up, Sails told the *Commercial Appeal*, "Coach Yates and I came here together.

⁴⁴ Al Dunning, "Yates Quits MSU Post: Cites Unity," *Commercial Appeal*, February 8, 1979.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

We lost some games and we won some games, but we always did it together. Man, tell me this isn't happening." When asked about the remainder of the season Sails replied: "Something like this can knock a team down. It's hard to tell. I think these young men will play as hard as they can. Coach Yates deserves that."⁴⁶ Sails's connection with Yates as part of the coaching fraternity rang truer than the racial slights he had been forced to face over the previous five years.

The Tigers archrival Louisville arrived in Memphis that Saturday for a key Metro Conference game. With no word from the administration or from Yates, the assistants continued to lead practices. Yates returned to practice on Friday and led an emotional team to a 60-53 win over Louisville.⁴⁷ James Bradley led the way with multiple blocks, including one of Louisville's high-flying Darrell Griffith, and Otis Jackson's play from the guard position helped lead the Tigers. Following the victory, the Tiger players presented Yates with a game ball signed by all the players.⁴⁸ Following the emotional win over Louisville, the Tigers lost three of the next four games to finish at 13 - 15.⁴⁹ The Yates era was over and the search for his replacement began.

By 1979 the Memphis State basketball program had become dependent upon the talents of black basketball players to elevate its program. But was the school ready for its first African American head coach? Sails had proven his worth as an assistant coach and

⁴⁶ Mike Fleming, "Yates Shocks His Squad," *Commercial Appeal*, February 8, 1979.

⁴⁷ "1979 Louisville Cardinals," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed April 10, 2016. <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/louisville/1979-schedule.html>.

⁴⁸ Bobby Hall, "Emotional Memphis State Shocks Louisville," *Commercial Appeal*, February 18, 1979.

⁴⁹ "1979 Memphis Tigers," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed April 10, 2016. <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1979-schedule.html>.

hoped that this was his chance to become the head basketball coach at Memphis State. With a similar coaching resume, Yates had been offered the job in 1974. During his tenure as an assistant, Sails had pleaded with his players to be patient and allow him the opportunity to earn the head job. If Larry Finch had unified the city in 1973 behind Tiger basketball, and if Sails's hiring a year later signaled another step forward, then the next logical step was to hire a qualified black man as head coach.

Yates endorsed Sails "as a highly qualified individual" to the Memphis State athletic department."⁵⁰ Even with the endorsement of Yates, Sails knew that his chances of becoming the next head coach of the Tigers, as a black man, were slim. Shortly after the season ended, the administration sent word to Sails that his job as an assistant was safe for the upcoming season. The same source that delivered the message of security also made it clear that he should not apply for the head coaching job.⁵¹ Using an indirect source, the administration made it clear to Sails that this was not the time for a black candidate to seek the head coaching position at Memphis State. Sails was not deterred. He believed he had earned an opportunity to become the next head coach. To avoid the political ramifications of going through the athletic department, he personally delivered his resume to President Billy Mac Jones's desk. Sails understood the racial norms and climate on campus and knew that his best chance was to go around Murphy. As a member of the old guard, Murphy was expected to maintain the status quo of the white establishment. By bypassing the athletic director, Sails maneuvered through the complicated racial politics on campus at the time. On his way back to the Roane Field

⁵⁰ Al Dunning, "Yates Quits MSU Post; Cites Unity," *Commercial Appeal*, February 8, 1979.

⁵¹ Verties Sails, interview by author, March 28, 2016.

House, Sails was greeted by Murphy who hugged Sails and thanked him for putting the resume on Jones' desk personally. Murphy was relieved that the NAACP, the *Press Scimitar*, and the *Tri-State Defender* would not be able to pin this racial slight on him.⁵²

Early in the search process, Sails's backers voiced their concerns about the legitimacy of the university's intentions. They were concerned he would be left out of the pool of final candidates. Several Tiger basketball players and local high school coaches became concerned that, as a black man, he was not receiving the opportunity he deserved. Melrose coach Dorsey Sims told the *Commercial Appeal*, "a lot of people are concerned about whether he's going to get an equal opportunity for the job. He's not a 'nobody.' He's a viable candidate, he has something to offer." The Memphis chapter of the NAACP recommended to President Jones that a black coach be named to replace Yates. Sails appreciated the support, and because he understood the racial dynamics on campus, he told the *Commercial Appeal* that, "we shouldn't put the buggy in front of the horse."⁵³ In the early stages of the coaching search, black players wondered openly why Sails was not receiving serious consideration for the job. The white players respected Sails and would have accepted him. According to Hank McDowell, the white players on the team believed that Sails was capable and that they would have accepted Sails as the next head coach without any problems.⁵⁴

As the coaching search progressed it became obvious that Sails was going to be left out of serious consideration for the job. The Memphis Rebounders, the team's

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "Sails Backers Voice Concern," *Commercial Appeal*, February 18, 1979.

⁵⁴ Hank McDowell, interview by author, April 13, 2016.

booster club, were initially caught off guard by Yates's resignation and they sought to keep Yates. Jones and Murphy made it clear that their search was for a new head coach, and that they needed to accept the reality of Yates's resignation. They informed the Rebounders that Larry Brown and Dana Kirk were candidates, and that Sails had applied for the job.⁵⁵ As the search progressed, Brown emerged as the leading candidate. Brown's coaching pedigree and experience under Dean Smith at North Carolina excited the Tiger faithful. Dana Kirk's coaching pedigree included his time at Louisville under Denny Crum. In the excitement surrounding the search, the *Commercial Appeal* raised only minimal concern about Sails not being considered as a serious candidate. The conservative nature of the *Commercial Appeal* kept Sails's name out of the discussion for the head job other than to mention that he was an applicant. Black area high school coaches and members of the Memphis branch of the NAACP openly questioned the validity of a search that did not make Verties Sails a genuine option. The city was once again divided over the issue of race, through the proxy of basketball.

In the months that followed, the search committee narrowed the list to three finalists: Larry Brown, Dana Kirk, and Verties Sails. The appearance of Sails as a finalist was a major step forward for the black community. Sails believed that he deserved the same opportunity that he offered his players: the best man wins the job. His inclusion as a finalist gave the perception that the administration valued Sails as a candidate. In the university's evaluation of Sails as a potential candidate they omitted his importance to the program in their current recruiting cycle. Players commit to coaches more than to universities, and if Memphis State had hired Sails in 1979 they would have had one of

⁵⁵ Bobby Hall, "Yates Decision to Resign is Final," *Commercial Appeal*, February 20, 1979.

their best recruiting classes in school history to date. In an era before AAU basketball, social media, and internet rankings, Sails had received verbal commitments from 6'6" Paul Thompson of Smyrna, Tennessee; 6'9" Kalpatrick Wells of Vidalia, Louisiana; and 6'2" Robert Williams of Katy, Texas.⁵⁶ All three of these recruits were eventually drafted by the NBA. When Kirk was hired over Sails, they all went their separate ways: Thompson to Tulane University, Wells to Mississippi State, and Williams to Houston.⁵⁷ Sails was also close to securing a commitment from Sam Bowie, a 7'1" All-American from Lebanon, Pennsylvania.⁵⁸ Although Sails never received a verbal commitment from Bowie, Bowie's coach told Sails, "Of all the coaches who have been up here, Sam's more impressed with you than anybody else."⁵⁹ Bowie starred at the University of Kentucky under Joe B. Hall before being drafted in front of Michael Jordan by the Portland Trailblazers in the 1984 NBA draft. Had the university been prepared to hire Sails as its first black head coach, the university's 1979 freshman class might have been one of the strongest in the entire nation.

Larry Brown was easily the most recognizable name among the finalists and was the frontrunner for the job until Brown was given an ultimatum as part of the job offer. It

⁵⁶ Verties Sails, interview by Geoff Calkins, *Sports Files with Geoff Calkins WKNO*, July 2012, accessed March 27, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsSbs5cfeAc>

⁵⁷ "NBA," Kalpatrick Wells Player Profile, Mississippi State, NCAA Stats, Awards, accessed May 27, 2016. <http://basketball.realgm.com/player/Kalpatrick-Wells/Summary/64349>. Used this web-site "RealGM.com" to place Sails 1979 recruiting class into perspective. By tracking out where these players played college basketball and where they were drafted the strength of Memphis States' tentative recruiting class can be measured.

⁵⁸ "NBA." Sam Bowie Player Profile, Los Angeles Lakers, Stats, NCAA Stats, Game Logs, Bests, Awards, accessed May 27, 2016. <http://basketball.realgm.com/player/Sam-Bowie/Summary/4633>.

⁵⁹ "Verties Sails," interview by author, March 28, 2016.

has long been rumored around the university that Spook Murphy made it clear to Brown that if he took the offer, he would also hire Larry Finch as a full-time assistant coach. Finch had joined the staff of former Tiger coach Gene Bartow at the University of Alabama-Birmingham for the 1977-78 season, and Murphy was set on bringing Finch home to Memphis. Murphy understood that Finch's connections in Memphis would allow him to recruit homegrown talent for Memphis State. Bubba Lockett, a 1979 graduate of Christian Brothers high school, was being recruited by Finch to sign with UAB and by Sails to sign with MSU. Following Kirk's resignation, Lockett watched the saga on campus with heightened interest for his own playing career. Lockett believed that Brown shied away from accepting the position because Murphy had already offered an assistant's job to Finch.⁶⁰

Brown expected full control of the program, including the hiring of his own assistants. Once Brown removed his name from consideration, Kirk became the leading candidate for the job. Murphy's demands that guaranteed the return of Finch to Memphis State also left Sails out of the discussion for the head coaching position. This was another example of a subtle racial slight by Murphy. Kirk, with only three years of Division I head coaching experience, was willing to accept Murphy's mandate to hire Finch as an assistant. Once Kirk was hired, and Finch secured as an assistant on Kirk's staff, Sails became expendable. With Finch and Sails on staff, Memphis now had two black assistant coaches, which was past the "acceptable" quota for black assistants at a school in the Deep South. Murphy's backroom dealings secured the return of hometown hero Finch to the university, even as it delayed the hiring of the school's first African-

⁶⁰ Bubba Lockett, interview by author, August 22, 2017.

American head coach. Sails knew that his time at MSU was over and that it was time for him to move forward with his career. When the head coaching position opened at Shelby State Community College, Memphis's local junior college, Sails applied and was hired.

In a recent interview local sports columnists Geoff Calkins described Sails as, “an anachronism in the world of loud, look at me now coaches because its never been about him, its been about the work. It’s about the players.”⁶¹ Coaches are given the task of turning a group of individuals to “Us.” Sails’s persistence in the face of continued racial slights at Memphis State forged his character. His empathy for his players at both Melrose High and Memphis State provides insight into the difficulties faced by black coaches during this era and it also solidified his relationship with those who played for him. He cared for them as players and as young men. His authenticity was evident to his players as he fought for the rights of himself, his players, and his family in the face of a plantation mentality. Finally, Sails’s greatness can be measured by the knowledge that he gained along the way from Melrose to Memphis State to Shelby State.⁶² Over the 33 years following the end of his tenure at Memphis State as an assistant coach, Sails remained a fixture in the basketball community.

⁶¹ Verties Sails, interview by Geoff Calkins, *Sports Files with Geoff Calkins WKNO*, July 2012, accessed March 27, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsSbs5cfeAc>

⁶² Seth Davis, *Getting to Us: How Great Coaches Make Great Teams* (New York: Penguin Books Inc., 2018), 2-5. Davis study sets a foundation for understanding great coaches through his use of the acronym P-E-A-K. By evaluating Sails’s impact through his persistence, enthusiasm authenticity, and knowledge my hope was to place Sails in the pantheon of great coached despite the racial challenges he faced in Memphis.

Sails remained in close contact with Finch over the years as a confidant, and mentor. Sails spent many nights at the Finch household discussing strategy while breaking down game tape of Tiger games while he maintained his schedule as the head coach at Shelby State.⁶³ Sails never held a grudge against Memphis State. Instead he focused on what he could control: the teams he coached at Shelby State. His career resulted in over 700 collegiate wins, sixteen Tennessee Community College Athletic Association championships, ten regional championships, and ten appearances in National Junior College Athletic Association basketball tournaments.⁶⁴ Respected by his players and his adversaries alike, Sails became a part of the basketball firmament.

Sails's role as the first full-time African American assistant coach at Memphis State paved the way for Finch to return to MSU first as an assistant, and then as head coach. Change in Memphis took time. Time caused Sails to miss out. The slow shift in the racial climate at Memphis State placated those in the community who feared change. As the years passed Sails was able to look back upon his time at Memphis State and see the bigger picture, a picture that include his protégé Finch becoming the school's first African American head coach. Sails put it in Biblical terms, referring to himself as, "a Moses, who led his people out of Egypt and into the Wilderness, but never got to see the promised land. Joshua was the chosen one to lead his people into the promised land. Larry (Finch) became the Joshua for Memphis State basketball coaches."⁶⁵

⁶³ Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

⁶⁴ Marlon Morgan, "After 33 seasons of junior college coaching, Verties Sails is ready to relax," *Commercial Appeal*, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://www.commercialappeal.com/sports/after-33-seasons-of-junior-college-coaching-verties-sails-ready-to-relax-ep-385416969-329349891.html>.

⁶⁵ Verties Sails, interview by author, March 28, 2016.

Basketball fans in the city welcomed Finch back with open arms and looked forward to Finch's help in returning the Tigers to national prominence. In the next chapter the scandals that surrounded Dana Kirk's tenure as head basketball coach at MSU are examined. Finch was an integral part of the program under Kirk, but the scandal left Finch and his mythical persona unscathed. The unscrupulous actions of Kirk centered around racial issues and how the program "used" its black players. Instead of focusing on the mythical trope of basketball in the city, this next chapter focuses on scandal. Race and sport continue to intersect in this next section through an analysis of the relationship between the team's black players and its white head coach.

Chapter 6

A Shakespearean Tragedy in Memphis

In 1979 the Memphis faithful were eager to find a coach who could once again elevate the Memphis State Tigers into the national discussion. After Larry Brown passed on Memphis State's offer, the Tigers turned to Dana Kirk. A relatively unknown name from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), Kirk, earlier had spent six years under Denny Crum at Louisville. He was tall and wavy-haired handsome, a natural extrovert. He had the handshake of a traveling salesman and the easy charm of "a grown-up Huck Finn wearing a necktie," according to *Commercial Appeal* columnist Al Dunning.¹ Kirk was an expert communicator who was able to sell talented players from Memphis on staying home and playing for the hometown Tigers. His eagerness to move up the coaching ladder was aided by the fact that he was willing to accept MSU's athletic director's one stipulation: bring hometown hero Larry Finch on board as an assistant.

Kirk's tenure as head coach of the Tigers was marred by a series of accusations, indictments, and investigations that mirrored Memphis' murky political waters. Politically the city teetered between a reliance upon the old guard to maintain a status quo controlled by the white establishment and the black community's desire for greater inclusion. In the six years that Kirk coached at MSU, corruption was not limited to the basketball program. The basketball program reflected the scandalous nature of politics in the city. Memphis State's role as the "Dixie Darlings" had long since past and there was a desire to return the team to its 1973 glory. In 1973, politicians had commandeered

¹ Al Dunning, "Kirk: From Pigeon Creek to 'Top 10' Mainstream," *Commercial Appeal*, February 28, 1982.

basketball as a healing trope, but by the end of Kirk's tenure basketball became a symbol of all that was wrong in the city.

Although Kirk catapulted the Tigers to a Number One ranking in the Associated Press (AP) basketball poll and returned the Tigers to the 1985 NCAA Final Four, the cost to the university and the city was high. Kirk resigned at the beginning of the 1986 season after recruiting violations led to an NCAA investigation. He was also indicted by a federal grand jury for point shaving and game fixing. The Memphis branch of the NAACP would claim that Kirk was insensitive to the program's black players; in 1985 it charged that since 1973, *no* black basketball players had graduated. The Tigers may have found an energetic and charismatic leader to resurrect their basketball program, but it came with a heavy price tag.

By the 1980s, the Ford political machine was solidly entrenched. Wyeth Chandler was still mayor, but he was slowly losing popularity within city government. Chandler survived a strike by both the police and fire departments and his perception of himself as the "boss man" cost him the respect of both departments. At the same time, Willie Herenton was emerging as the most popular non-elected black official in the city. As the first black superintendent of the Memphis City Schools, Herenton challenged the status quo across racial lines and pushed for the city council and Mayor Chandler to increase the budget for the city schools. He claimed that the city council was not only irresponsible in not providing more funds for the Memphis City Schools, but also serving

as mere puppets for Mayor Chandler.² Herenton, a life-long Memphian, grew up in poverty in South Memphis, and as a graduate of Booker T. Washington High and LeMoyne Owen College, he understood segregated Memphis.³ Black Memphians had been told through the 1950s and 1960s that if they trusted the system, worked hard, and became qualified, then they would be rewarded. Herenton epitomized this belief when he became the first black superintendent for the Memphis City Schools. Chandler's growing instability, coupled with Ford and Herenton's push for greater control of the city's political landscape, paralleled the instability in the basketball program led by Kirk.

One of seven children, Dana Kirk grew up in West Virginia coal mining country in a small town called Delbarton. At age eight his father died in a mining accident and Dana found himself responsible for helping to make the family's ends meet.⁴ By the time Kirk reached Burch High School, as a fourteen year old kid, he was long, gangly, and in search of himself. Sports was an outlet and a way to succeed for Kirk: he lettered in football, basketball, and baseball. By the time he graduated from high school in 1964 Kirk stood at 6'7". Following a less than stellar academic career at Burch High School, Kirk signed a dual football/basketball scholarship with Morris Harvey College in nearby Charleston, West Virginia, but struggled academically his first year and was placed on probation.⁵ After his junior year Morris Harvey disbanded the football program, so Kirk

² Otis Sanford, *From Boss Crump to King Willie: How Race Changed Memphis Politics* (Knoxville: UTK Press, 2017), 214.

³ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁴ Al Dunning, "Kirk: From Pigeon Creek to 'Top 10' Mainstream," *Commercial Appeal*, February 28, 1982.

⁵ Dana Kirk, *Simply Amazing: The Dana Kirk Story* (United States of America, 1988), 17. Following his indictment by a federal grand jury, Kirk set out to salvage his name. Kirk personally paid for the

transferred to Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia, where he continued to play football and basketball. While at Marshall, Kirk met Ann Bew, who became his first wife. Following graduation from Marshall in 1958, the former athlete began a career as a journeyman coach in the high school ranks.

Over the course of the twenty-one years between his graduation from Marshall and his hiring at Memphis State University, Kirk worked at three different high schools, held two collegiate head coaching positions, and was an assistant coach to Denny Crum at Louisville. Kirk began his career at predominately Hispanic Jefferson High School in Tampa Bay, Florida. His success at Jefferson High School opened the doors for his first big break collegiately in 1966 at the University of Tampa. A National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) school that played a schedule loaded with NCAA Division I foes in order to pay the bills, Tampa hired Kirk despite his lack of college-level experience. In 1971, when Tampa folded its athletic program Kirk was offered an assistant coaching position under Denny Crum at Louisville. Kirk and Crum complemented each other with their unique personalities and shared drive to win. Crum was quiet and reserved; he enjoyed practices more than public appearances, while Kirk's flamboyant personality suited him for public appearances typically expected of high-profile coaches. But one year after the Cardinals' 1975 Final Four run, Kirk was informed of his firing by Louisville Athletic Director David Hart, not Crum.⁶ His dismissal at Louisville caused a rift between Kirk and Crum. In 1976, Kirk moved on to Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, where was hired as the head

publication of his autobiography to clarify his side of the story. The book was distributed mainly to local Walgreen's pharmacies and never made waves nationally.

⁶ Ibid., 37-47.

coach. VCU showed improvement in Kirk's first year and earned a bid to the NIT in his second. Kirk led the Rams to a 20-5 record in his third year, good enough to place him in the conversation for the Memphis job.

The 1980s saw white flight shift the racial demographics of the city. White flight intensified a geography of disparity in the city. Beginning in the 1950s, working-class whites moved just beyond the city's boundaries, first north to Frayser and south to Whitehaven, and then east to Germantown, Collierville, and Cordova, where they built roads, schools, shopping centers, and hospitals. The completion of the I-240 freeway loop in 1984 directed commerce away from the urban core of Memphis and toward the suburbs. The highest concentrations of wealth, educational attainment, and jobs were on the eastern edge.⁷ The 1980s became known as the "Age of Indictment," as a number of local politicians served time for various financial violations.

Edgar Hardin Gillock, a Memphis attorney and state senator, who in 1972 and 1975 had been indicted on charges of misconduct, resurfaced in the early 1980s as an example of the political corruption facing Memphis during this era. On June 14, 1982, Gillock was indicted by a federal grand jury under the Hobbs Act, which prohibits actual or attempted robbery or extortion affecting interstate or foreign commerce "in any way or degree."⁸ Gillock's indictment stemmed from the receipt of \$130,000 in a Shelby County deal with Honeywell. Gillock was sentenced to three years and fined \$10,000.⁹

⁷ Preston Lauterbach, "Memphis Burning," *Places Journal*, March 2016. Accessed June 15, 2017, <https://placesjournal.org/article/memphis-burning/?gclid=CInkhZ38v9QCFdOCswodOVUMfw>.

⁸ *Hobbs Act*, U.S. Code, vol. 18, section 371 (1946).

⁹ *United States v. Bobby, Gillock, Ayers*, 752 F. 2d 1116 (6th Circuit. 1985).

The Ford political machine was in and out of court during this same period. One of Harold Ford Sr.'s 1976 re-election campaign workers, Edward Branch, was indicted on a two-count misdemeanor, which accused him of intimidating and threatening several Republican poll watchers in the 1976 Congressional election. The case against Branch ended in an acquittal when eleven black jurors and one white juror found Branch not guilty on both charges.¹⁰ The political jockeying for control of the city continued when the Justice Department opened a grand jury investigation into insurance fraud by Harold Ford's brother Emmitt. Emmitt Ford, Harold's older brother, rode the coattails of the family name in the fall of 1974 to the District 86 seat in the Tennessee state legislature, the same seat vacated by his brother Harold when Harold defeated Dan Kuykendall for the Eighth Congressional Seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. In March of 1980 Emmitt Ford and his wife Earline Ford were both indicted on charges of insurance and mail fraud that stemmed from a 1977 accident. Emmitt and his wife staged a phony automobile accident and then collected nearly \$54,000 from twenty-nine insurance companies.¹¹ Emmitt used his political position to coax the head of the police department's traffic division to change the original accident report – which listed no injuries – to reflect that his wife had been seriously hurt. Emmitt received a twenty-month sentence in prison and the loss of his legislative seat, while his wife was given a one-year suspended sentence and twenty months on probation.¹²

¹⁰ Sanford, 176-178.

¹¹ "Fraud Charges Levied Against Emmitt Fords," *Commercial Appeal*. March 28, 1980.

¹² Sanford, 179.

In the middle of the grand jury investigation into voter intimidation surrounding Harold Ford Sr.'s 1976 campaign, the Ford political machine offered Harold's brother John as candidate for Shelby County Mayor in 1978. Shelby County Mayor Roy Nixon announced that he was not seeking another term, which opened the door for the Ford machine to make even greater inroads into Shelby County politics. Mayor Wyeth Chandler initiated a back-room, whites-only meeting at the Coach and Four Motor Lodge on Lamar Avenue. This meeting was designed to ensure that a white candidate capable of defeating the growing Ford machine was on the ticket. Chandler vehemently denied that the meeting was racist, even going so far as to tell the *Commercial Appeal* that, "it amazes me that anyone would make an accusation it was a racist meeting, when at least 90 percent of the black population will be voting for a black without regard to background or experience of any other candidate."¹³

Mayor Chandler's plantation mentality once again became transparent. He had no problem with a few black basketball players from Orange Mound uniting a city behind a run for the NCAA National Championship in basketball, but he did have a problem with the Ford family infringing upon white political power. Historian John Hope Franklin argued that sport creates something of a mirage, creating an individual opportunity for the black athlete, while fostering the illusion that things are much better for black Americans than they really are. Franklin stated that, "there are always times when society could absorb a select number, a small number, which would be the exception that proved the rule. . . Where they are in terms of income, where they are in terms of privilege, where

¹³ "Ford, Farris Patch Up Fight on Mayor Race; Withdrawals Expected," *Commercial Appeal*, May 9, 1978.

they are in just terms of making it in society.”¹⁴ Chandler embraced the athletic exploits of Finch and Robinson, but if another Ford gained political office, then blacks had gone too far. From Chandler’s perspective, it was a privilege to represent the city on the hardwood floor of the Mid-South Coliseum, but it was outside of blacks’ place to represent the city in one of the highest political offices. Thus in 1978, when Bill Morris, the white candidate, defeated John Ford for Shelby County Mayor, the old guard maintained the control to which it was desperately clinging.

The Dana Kirk era began with a sub .500 performance during the 1979-80 season. The Tigers’ fans marked Kirk’s arrival with enthusiasm and hoped that he could quickly return the Tigers to post-season play. The new coach’s quick temper and ultra-competitive demeanor on the sideline became the highlight of the season. In a game between the Tigers and Florida State University, Kirk and referee Dan Wooldridge got into a heated argument after Wooldridge called a technical foul on the Memphis State bench. Kirk told Wooldridge that if the Seminoles shoot the free throw for the technical foul, “We Quit!”¹⁵ Kirk then walked his Tigers off the court, prompting Metro Conference commissioner Larry Albus to uphold the forfeiture issued by Wooldridge. Albus placed the blame on Kirk for his actions, as the head coach was responsible “for creating the circumstances” which led to the forfeiture. Kirk pled his case in front of the Assistant Coaches Club following the incident. Kirk redirected the focus from fans’ anger

¹⁴ William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 269.

¹⁵ “Tape is Inconclusive,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 10, 1980.

at him following the Florida State game for his actions during the game to his plans to resurrect the program. "I said we are going on down the road and we are going to win a national championship before it is over... Dana Kirk promises right now just to work a little harder towards achieving my goals."¹⁶ Most importantly, Kirk needed to recruit higher caliber players. If the Tigers were going to win on the court, then Kirk had to win on the recruiting trail. He was a long way from having the talent he needed to compete for a NCAA championship.

With four starters returning for Kirk's 1980-81 Tigers team, the future looked brighter. Otis Jackson, Hank McDowell and Dennis Isbell, the Tigers three leading scorers from the previous season, were ready to lift the Tigers back to national prominence. Again, however, the Tigers fell below fan expectations and finished one game below .500 at 13-14. The Tigers lost in the first round of the Metro Conference Tournament, 72-66, to Virginia Tech.¹⁷ The one high point was Kirk's first victory over Louisville in January at the Mid-South Coliseum. Against Louisville's noticeable size advantage, Kirk employed a series of zone defenses that kept the Cardinals from overpowering the Tigers on the inside. This forced the Cardinals to take more outside shots. The NCAA had not yet adopted the three-point line, but the Cardinal shooters were tempted by the opportunity to show off their range. They sank a few outside shots early, but as the game progressed their shooting percentage dropped. Kirk relished the victory

¹⁶ Bobby Hall, "Kirk Offers Apologies as Tigers Meet Tulane," *Commercial Appeal*, February 12, 1980.

¹⁷ "1980-81 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed June 23, 2017, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1981-schedule.html>.

against his mentor and after the game told reporters, “I’ve got a lot of friends in Louisville who were looking and observing.”¹⁸

In the crowd as the Tigers defeated the Cardinals was 6’10” high school phenom Keith Lee from West Memphis, Arkansas. Kirk and his staff were working to convince Lee to change his commitment from Arkansas State to Memphis State. Three months later Kirk secured his biggest recruiting victory when Lee committed to play with the Tigers. Kirk was at his finest in the news conference following Lee’s signing. He reminded reporters that Lee “took his time in making up his mind. He thought it out thoroughly. He thought this was the best way for him to get a four-year education...I think I sold education harder than anyone else to him and his mother.”¹⁹ Kirk’s polished sales pitch had transformed the Tigers into a bright light in the recruiting world.

With the addition of Keith Lee, the Tigers were poised to give the fans in Memphis a winner. The Tigers finished the 1981-1982 season 26-5 and held an impressive 18-0 record at the Mid-South Coliseum. The Tigers won both the regular season and Metro Conference Tournament championships and ended the season ranked #9 in the AP Poll.²⁰ Keith Lee was a second team AP All-American, the Metro Conference player of the year, and freshman of the year.²¹ The Tigers were rewarded with a #2 seed in the NCAA East regional tournament, where they defeated Wake Forest

¹⁸ John Stamm, “Kirk Masks Feelings – Almost,” *Press Scimitar*, January 23, 1981.

¹⁹ Bobby Hall, “Tigers Land Prize Recruit,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 28, 1981.

²⁰ “1981-82 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results,” College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed June 23, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1982-schedule.html>.

²¹ Kirk, 90.

before falling to Villanova in the East Regional Semi-finals.²² Kirk continued to land the best players in the city when he signed Mitchell High School guard Andre Turner, and when Keith Lee decided to forego the NBA draft, the Tigers were prepared to duplicate the previous year's success.

The year 1982 saw one of the most unique transfers of political power in the city's history. Mayor Wyeth Chandler, who sensed his grip loosening on control of the city, requested a judgeship from governor Lamar Alexander and resigned his position as mayor. Richard Hackett, a relative newcomer to the political scene in the city, put together a grassroots movement that carried him into office. Hackett, a political novice whose experience included being in charge of the Mayor's Action Center under Wyeth Chandler and later city clerk, used race as a way to keep white Democrat Michael Cody from earning enough votes to garner a spot in the runoff election. Hackett painted Cody as a supporter of the ACLU and the NAACP, as well as a political ally of Harold Ford Jr., which conveyed the message to white voters that Cody would be the puppet of the black political community. Hackett earned a spot in the runoff with 30 percent of the vote, finishing second behind the black candidate J.O. Patterson at 41 percent and only four percentage points ahead of Michael Cody. In the runoff election, Hackett claimed victory with 54 percent of the vote, approximately the same number of white registered voters in the election. Although Hackett was a political novice who lacked a college degree and political experience, he was savvy enough to use the racial divide in the city to thrust

²² "1981-82 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed June 23, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1982-schedule.html>.

himself into the mayor's office. Under Hackett the problems facing the city and county continued to divide the city along racial lines. From 1980 to 1990 the city lost five and a half percent of its population to white flight, as white families continued to flee to the eastern edges of Shelby County to avoid the shifting political atmosphere at city hall and inside of the Memphis City Schools.²³ Perhaps Dana Kirk's Tigers could provide a diversion from the issues facing the city? The 1982-83 season provided that opportunity.

In September of 1982, just ahead of the start of Dana Kirk's fourth season at the helm of the Tigers basketball program, Ira Murphy became embroiled in a scandal when he used his power as a judge to manipulate a Prince Hall Freemason Lodge to place money in his pockets. Ira Murphy first made a name for himself in Memphis as part of a group of eight black lawyers who challenged segregation in Memphis City Schools in 1960. Eighteen black school children and their parents filed suit in federal district court in Memphis, accusing the board of education of operating a biracial school district in violation of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board* ruling. Murphy joined Benjamin Hooks, Thurgood Marshall, and Russel Sugarmon in the *Deborah A. Norcross et. Al v. The Board of Education of the Memphis City Schools* case.²⁴ Murphy began his career as politician when he joined the Tennessee state legislature in 1969.

At the heart of the scandal was the abuse of the Prince Hall Freemasons by Murphy and his associate Ronald Smith. The all-black Prince Hall Freemasons, a fraternal organization that confers an ideological bourgeoisie status for its members, had

²³ Branston, 39-41.

²⁴ Sanford, 120-121.

its state headquarters in Memphis at the H.D. Whalum Lodge No. 373 since 1956.²⁵ According to historian Martin Summers, Masons provided black men with an imaginary claim to traditional and nineteenth-century notions of manhood. Through their collective and symbolic ownership of property, Summers argues that Freemasons invented a collective masculine self during a period when owning land, becoming a proprietor, or earning a living through skilled labor was difficult for large numbers of black men.²⁶ Murphy manipulated this system at the expense of the brotherhood of Freemasons in Memphis. His scheme centered around providing a permit to Ronald Smith to operate a bingo hall under the auspices of being as a tax exempt 501(c)(3) organization. Murphy's corruption led to his conviction on eleven counts of mail fraud and one count of obstruction of justice. He was sentenced to five years in a federal prison and assessed a \$5,000 fine that further signaled the scandalous nature of Memphis politics during this period.²⁷

Eleven games into Kirk's fourth season as head coach the Tigers had risen to first in the AP and UPI polls, were undefeated, and were winning by an average of 18 points per game.²⁸ The Tigers brought their 11-0 record to Cassell Coliseum on the campus of Virginia Tech, a difficult arena to play in. The Tigers struggled with foul trouble and hobbled out of Blacksburg with their first loss of the season, 64-56. The Tigers bounced back with wins at Cincinnati and at eventual NCAA champion North Carolina State, but

²⁵ *United States of America v. Ira Henderson Murphy*, 836 F.2d 248 (6th Cir. 1988).

²⁶ Summers, 27.

²⁷ *Ira Murphy v. Board of Professional Responsibility*. 02-S-01-9503-CH-00031 (Sup. Ct. TN. 1996)

²⁸ "1982-83 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed June 23, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1983-schedule.html>.

they finished the season 21-6, which was good enough only for second place in the Metro Conference.²⁹ They also finished second to Louisville in the conference tournament, but received a second straight bid to the NCAA tournament.³⁰ The Tigers received a first round bye and waited on the winner of the Alcorn State versus Georgetown game.

When the Hoyas won, Keith Lee was given the opportunity to prove himself against one of the best big men in the country, Patrick Ewing. This game would measure Lee's pro prospects and Memphis State's chances as a national power. Kirk made the decision to have 6'9" Tiger Derrick Phillips guard Ewing on defense, which allowed Lee to save energy by not having to guard the bigger and stronger Ewing in the post when Georgetown had possession. Lee owned the day with 28 points and 15 rebounds in the Tigers' 66-57 victory over Ewing's Hoyas.³¹ MSU's reward for knocking off Georgetown was to play the Number One seed in the NCAA tournament, the Houston Cougars.

"Phi Slamma Jama" was the most popular fraternity on the campus of college basketball in the early 1980s. The University of Houston not only electrified the NCAA Final Four with three straight appearances (1982-84), but also transformed the game into an up-tempo, above-the-rim game that was more familiar on the concrete courts found in American inner cities.³² Unfortunately for the Tigers, the game's biggest highlight came

²⁹ Kirk, 101.

³⁰ "1982-83 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed June 23, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1983-schedule.html>.

³¹ University of Memphis Men's Basketball Fact Book, 2012-13, 96, accessed June 24, 2017, https://issuu.com/memphisathletics/docs/12-13_mem_mbskb_factbook/95.

³² "Phi Slama Jama - ESPN Films: 30 for 30," *ESPN*, accessed June 24, 2017, <http://www.espn.com/30for30/film?page=phislamajama>.

when Clyde Drexler jumped over 5'9" Andre Turner on the fast break and threw down one of the most memorable dunks in NCAA tournament history. MSU lost to Houston 70-63, and the Cougars went to the national championship game, where they were upset by North Carolina State. Back in Memphis, Kirk sustained his recruiting domination of the city when he signed 7'0" center William Bedford from state champion Melrose, along with guard John Wilfong from state runner-up Briarcrest.³³ Kirk was perfecting the chemistry of recruiting within the city's borders.

Memphis State looked to the new season with aspirations of returning to the Final Four. All five starters returned to the Tiger lineup. Four of the five starters would score over 1,000 points in their career.³⁴ The Tigers opened the 1983-84 season ranked Number Five in the AP poll and won five of their first six games at home. In their first major challenge of the season, however, in Los Angeles, against the UCLA Bruins, the Tigers fell 65-51 and then lost two weeks later, 73-66, to Iowa.³⁵ Following their return from the west coast, the Tigers reeled off twelve straight wins to improve their record to 19-3 and a return to the AP Poll's top ten rankings at Number Eight.³⁶ During the win streak, Bobby Parks injured his knee in a 73-69 win over Florida State in Tallahassee.

³³ Kirk, 106-107.

³⁴ University of Memphis Men's Basketball Media Guide, 2015-2016, 72.

³⁵ Kirk, 111.

³⁶ "1983-84 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed June 24, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1984-schedule.html>.

The team's progress was further slowed when Derrick Phillips also spent time recovering from injuries.³⁷

Despite their injury problems, the Tigers won the Metro Conference regular season title and hosted the conference tournament. They disposed of the University of Southern Mississippi, Florida State, and Virginia Tech on their way to the Metro tournament championship and received their third straight NCAA tournament bid. They were seeded sixth in the Mid-West regional. MSU easily disposed of Oral Roberts and Purdue University before running into Houston for a second consecutive year in the Sweet Sixteen. The Cougars defeated the depleted Tigers 78-71, with Olajuwon recording 25 points and 13 rebounds.³⁸ Falling short of the Final Four, Kirk continued to land the city's most outstanding recruits when he signed the Commercial Appeal's Best of Preps winner Dwight Boyd from Kirby High School and Vincent Askew from Frayser. The Tigers also added 6'9" Dewayne Bailey from Melrose, who had been redshirted during the 1983-1984 season.

The year 1985 was when Kirk and the Tigers reached their destiny, the Final Four. Kirk strengthened the non-conference schedule and the team entered the season ranked Number Eight in the AP preseason poll and remained in the top ten for the entire season.³⁹ The media guide referred to Lee as "The Franchise," touting his All-American

³⁷ Kirk, 112.

³⁸ *University of Memphis Men's Basketball Media Guide, 20015-2016*, 93.

³⁹ "1984-85 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed June 24, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1985-schedule.html>.

pedigree and his decision to forego the NBA draft.⁴⁰ The Tigers got off to a 9-0 start with wins over UCLA and University of Southern California at the Mid-South Coliseum, as well as victories over rivals Ole Miss and Mississippi State, before dropping their first game to South Carolina in Columbia on January 9 to open Metro Conference play. The Tigers went on an eight game win streak before losing to Kansas at Allen Field House. Kirk's team was now capable of reaching the Final Four. Memphis swept rival Louisville and won the Metro Conference tournament by knocking off Florida State.⁴¹ Following a smooth regular season the Tigers earned a second seed in the Midwest region of the 1985 NCAA tournament.

The Tigers began their road to the Final Four in Houston against Ivy League champion Penn. The 1985 NCAA tournament was the first time the tournament expanded to 64 teams, which left the Tigers without an opening round bye. Penn held Keith Lee to eight points thanks to its deliberate style of play, but the Tigers overmatched the Quakers and emerged with a 67-55 first-round victory. The Tigers then confronted their former coach Gene Bartow, and the University of Alabama-Birmingham Blazers in the second round. Kirk's Tigers defeated Bartow's Blazers 67-66 with Keith Lee and Andre Turner combining for 51 points to advance to the Sweet 16.⁴² The team traveled to Dallas for their Sweet 16 matchup with Boston College at Reunion Arena, where they squeaked by Boston College 59-57 behind William Bedford's 23 points. The University of Oklahoma then provided another marquee matchup for Keith Lee, this time in an Elite Eight game

⁴⁰ *Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide*, 1984-1985, 24.

⁴¹ "1984-85 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed June 24, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1985-schedule.html>.

⁴² Kirk, 128.

against Waymon Tisdale. Lee once again shined the brightest, on the biggest stage, and against the best competition, scoring 23 points while holding Tisdale to only eleven.⁴³ With the 63-61 victory over the Sooners, Kirk had delivered on his promise to carry the Tiger program back to the Final Four. The Yates years were a distant memory, as were Kirk's first two years of sub .500 basketball. Memphis State was headed to Lexington, Kentucky, for the 1985 Final Four.

Most of the basketball world was focusing on three other teams there, all from the Big East. Curry Kirkpatrick of *Sports Illustrated* wrote, "Welcome to the return of the Big East Tournament, starring Georgetown, St. John's, Villanova in their original roles and featuring Memphis State as Seton Hall."⁴⁴ The crowning moment for the Big East Conference now forced the Tigers into bottom billing in Lexington. While Patrick Ewing, Chris Mullins, and Ed Pinckney enjoyed the focus of the media world heading into the Final Four, Andre Turner was mocked by the press for his "southern Memphis soul stew" dialect – though the scribes did praise his shot-making heroics against Boston College and ability to navigate the Sooner press in the regional finals. All-American candidate Keith Lee saw scant coverage except for critique of his post-season foul trouble that had limited him in games against Penn and Boston College.⁴⁵

In order for Villanova's Wildcats to secure the all-Big East national championship game prognosticators hoped for, they first had to beat Memphis State. Villanova's

⁴³ University of Memphis Men's Basketball Media Guide, 2015-2016, 93-94.

⁴⁴ Curry Kirpatrick, "Looking back at Villanova's magical run to the 1985 NCAA title 'The Gang's All Here.'" *Sports Illustrated*, April 1,1985.

⁴⁵ Alexander Wolff, "A Little Tiger Turner-bout," *Sports Illustrated*, April 1,1985.

deliberate pace and physical play in this semifinal game against Memphis mirrored the Tigers' game against Boston College. Villanova limited Lee's effectiveness with physical frontcourt play; he was saddled by foul trouble, which forced Kirk to rely more on his bench than he wanted. Andre Turner matched Wildcat guard Gary McLain's play in the first half to keep the Tigers in the contest; it was tied at the half 23-23.⁴⁶ The game remained close throughout the second half, and as time began to tick away, the Tigers were forced to foul. The Wildcats went to the foul line twenty-six times, while the Tigers shot only nine free throws. Lee's eleven points and Turner's ten points left the Tigers one game short of a return to the NCAA championship game. The disheartening 52-45 loss to Villanova marked the lowest point total for the Tigers all season.⁴⁷ They returned home at 31-4. The fan base, despite the loss, celebrated the return of Memphis State basketball to the upper echelons of the basketball world. The euphoria was short lived. Kirk's tenure was about to take a tumultuous turn.

Almost immediately after the painful Final Four loss to Villanova, Memphis State paid the price for hiring Dana Kirk. Kirk's problems started on his own roster. Freshman guard Vincent Askew began an off-again, on-again relationship with Tiger basketball. Askew played in all 35 games, but he was not happy with his secondary role behind Lee. As the star player at Frayser High he was the center of attention and he expected the same treatment from Kirk and the Tiger coaching staff. Many of his friends fueled his

⁴⁶ Kirk, 144-145.

⁴⁷ University of Memphis Men's basketball Guide, 2015-2016, 95 and "1984-85 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed June 24, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1985-schedule.html>.

resentment when they wondered why he did not take open shots that presented themselves against Villanova.⁴⁸ After his high school coach Al Perry was named as an assistant at Indiana State, Askew considered a move to the Sycamores. At the end of April – less than a month after the loss to Villanova – Askew asked for his release from the Tigers, noting that his grandmother, who had raised him, was moving to Chicago, so the transfer to Indiana State was a family decision.⁴⁹ In reality Askew was frustrated by Kirk’s offense, which revolved around Keith Lee. Over the next three months Askew wavered between transferring or staying at Memphis State. During the first week of August, Askew changed his mind again and decided to stay for the 1985-86 season.⁵⁰ The *Tri-State Defender*, the city’s black newspaper, wondered openly whether Askew returned to Memphis State on his own, or whether some wealthy booster had “encouraged” him to return.

For almost three months from the beginning of the Askew commotion until the late winter of 1988, Dana Kirk’s actions off the court drew as much press attention as his on-court leadership. Also, in the spring of 1985, in the month following Askew’s feint toward Indiana State, three black basketball players enlisted the NAACP’s help; they accused Kirk of using black athletes to win games but not caring about their academic or post-athletic careers. Local NAACP director Maxine Smith claimed that “Blacks were being exploited” by the university and called for Kirk’s resignation because of his lack of sensitivity to the issues that black players faced. She cited a low graduation rate for

⁴⁸ Bill Little, “Kirk’s Days Are Numbered,” *Tri-State Defender*, July 20, 1985.

⁴⁹ Bobby Hall, “Askew to ask for release from Tigers,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 29, 1985.

⁵⁰ Bill Little, “A Frustrated Askew Returns,” *Tri-State Defender*, August 3, 1985.

athletes at the university and the imbalance between “the time athletes spend in athletic events and make-up classes.” Smith also questioned the concern that Memphis State had for its players following graduation or the end of their eligibility, claiming that there was no program in place to help black athletes complete their education or to assist in job placement.⁵¹ She recommended an increase in the number of black employees within the athletic department and an enlarged tutorial program removed from the athletic department’s control.⁵² Caught off guard, Kirk and the university were forced to address issues within the program.

Kirk was further condemned by a *Sports Illustrated* article that revealed that only four of thirty-eight scholarship players (10.5 %) in the MSU men’s basketball program had graduated since 1973, six years before Kirk’s arrival; all of them were white.⁵³ African American City Councilwoman Minerva Johnican joined the attack on the university by condemning MSU’s president Dr. Thomas Carpenter for sweeping the issue under the carpet by adding one more tutor. Johnican noted that the university prospered from its athletic revenue but was only willing to add one tutor. She told the *Tri-State Defender*, “Carpenter has become so wrapped up in basketball that he has totally ignored the academic needs of his students.”⁵⁴ In coming months, an NCAA investigation would reveal that, between 1980 and 1984, Memphis State had overpaid student athletes in Pell

⁵¹ “Smith Nudges Kirk: Resign,” *Tri-State Defender*, May 18, 1985.

⁵² Maxine A. Smith, “1986 Annual Report of Executive Secretary,” Folder 26, Box 1, Maxine A. Smith NAACP Collection. Memphis/Shelby County Public Library.

⁵³ Douglas S. Looney, “Trouble Times at Memphis State,” *Sports Illustrated*, June 24, 1985.

⁵⁴ “Smith Nudges Kirk: Resign,” *Tri-State Defender*, May 18, 1985.

Grant funds, both in men's basketball and in other sports, to the tune of nearly \$60,000.⁵⁵ Kirk did not appear to be involved in this violation.

During the 1972 presidential election campaign, the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP) broke into the Democratic Party's National Headquarters at the Watergate Hotel and opened one of the largest political scandals in the history of this country. From June of 1972 until August of 1974 Americans were inundated with media reports, rumors, and denials surrounding the cover-up to the break-in at Watergate. President Nixon's repeated denials were placed under scrutiny by two young reporters for the *Washington Post*, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. In the twenty-six months that followed the break-in at Watergate, seven Nixon staffers were indicted on federal charges, and another 69 government employees were indicted while Nixon echoed his innocence with statements such as, "I am not a crook."⁵⁶ Following the resignation of President Nixon in August of 1974, President Gerald Ford's pardon of Nixon brought an end to arguably the greatest political scandal in American history. Corruption became a part of the Tigers' basketball program under Dana Kirk, which in turn brought the lens of national scrutiny down upon the city.

In the months that followed the Tigers' loss to Villanova in the 1985 Final Four, Memphis State basketball became entangled in scandal. During the spring of 1985 local

⁵⁵ Otis Sanford, "Kirk confirms finances under question: Kirk says finances grand jury's target," *Commercial Appeal*, August 1, 1985.

⁵⁶ Carroll Kilpatrick, "Nixon Tells Editors, 'I'm Not a Crook,'" *Washington Post*, November 18, 1973.; Bill Marsh, "IDEAS & TRENDS: When Criminal Charges Reach the White House," *The New York Times*, October 30, 2005.

media – particularly *Commercial Appeal* reporters Mike Fleming, Chuck Cook, and Otis Sanford – avidly pursued rumors of payments to basketball players by MSU boosters, and, at the same time, a federal grand jury investigating sports gambling looked into some of the same rumors, some which involved Dana Kirk. Part of the coach’s charm was his ability to rally people to support the Tiger basketball program. High-profile collegiate basketball coaches come into contact with hundreds, if not thousands, of fans and supporters of their program every year, and Kirk was no exception. Two Memphians who actively supported Tiger basketball began to appear in federal investigations and media scrutiny of the program. Nick Belisomo, a high-stakes gambler and pawn shop owner, and William Tanner, an advertising executive, were both under surveillance by the federal government for a variety of possible wrongdoings ranging from tax evasion to gambling. The Golden Tiger Club, which disbanded following the 1985 basketball season, was a booster club not officially associated with the university. The organization’s founders included both Belisomo and Tanner. Following the 1981-1982 season, the Golden Tigers Club had presented various MSU leaders with cash rewards, including Kirk and his assistant coaches, who received \$15,000. Tanner was the driving force behind the television deal with the Metro Conference during Kirk’s tenure – a deal which brought in a lot of money for the MSU basketball program and undoubtedly benefitted Tanner too. By June of 1985, Tanner had been convicted of mail fraud and tax evasion and began serving a four-year sentence for those crimes.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, Kirk

⁵⁷ Otis Sanford and Chuck Cook, “Kirk asks tax expert for help,” *Commercial Appeal*, August 1, 1985.

proclaimed, “I am confident that there will be no finding of illegal conduct in connection with this.”⁵⁸

At the annual basketball banquet in 1985, MSU center William Bedford showed up in a flashy 1983 Jaguar, borrowed from booster Ricky Allen.⁵⁹ Allen was a member of the exclusive Memphis State Super Tigers, a booster club that required a minimum yearly donation of \$5,000.⁶⁰ *The Tri-State Defender* compounded Bedford’s woes by making public three speeding tickets that he received while driving Allen’s Jaguar. Kirk’s association with another car dealership group, the Metro Ford Dealers Association, brought to light that dealers furnished him with a car from 1982 to 1986. Free use of a car by a coach did not violate the NCAA rules, but that by a player did. Then there was the issue of a check Kirk received from the Winston Tires Company after the Tigers played in the Winston Tire Classic in Los Angeles in late December 1983.⁶¹ Kirk’s apparent request for money to bring Keith Lee to Winston’s tournament appeared to be an NCAA violation.

Perhaps the most incendiary charges of financial impropriety in the basketball program also surfaced in the summer of 1985. They involved the recruitment of Keith Lee back in 1981. Had his decision to attend Memphis been influenced by cash? In July

⁵⁸ Otis Sanford, “Kirk confirms finances under question: Kirk says finances grand jury’s target,” *Commercial Appeal*, September 26, 1985.

⁵⁹ Bill Little, “MSU cage program receives a jolt,” *Tri-State Defender*, May 8, 1985.

⁶⁰ “Bedford has wreck in Tiger fan’s auto,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 26, 1985.

⁶¹ Mike Fleming, “IRS looking at Kirk’s car connection,” *Commercial Appeal*, September 3, 1986.

The Commercial Appeal published a tape-recorded conversation between “a former Tiger official” and a reporter.

Former Official: Dana had come to me about a month after. He said, “You know I need some money to help get a basketball player.” And I said, “What can I do to help out?” He said, “Well, if you could help me raise about \$12,000 or \$13,000.” I said, “I’d be happy to...Of course I went around to see some people...and then I went down to the bank and borrowed some money and gave it to him.”

CA Reporter: Just on your own?

Former Official: Yeah.

CA Reporter: You borrowed the money under your name?

Former Official: Yeah. So, I gave him the money, and he said he was going to get the best basketball player he ever had.

CA Reporter: Did he ever mention the name of the guy to you?

Former Official: Yeah. He said when we were over in North Carolina one time: “You had more to do with him getting here than anybody will ever know.”

CA Reporter: Keith Lee? That’s who he was?

Former Official: Yeah

CA Reporter: And he’s never paid you back?

Former Official: Lord no.

CA Reporter: You asked him numerous times?

Former Official: Oh yes.

CA Reporter: But, you handed him – what was it, a check from the bank?

Former Official: No, no. Hell no. It was cash.⁶²

Fifteen months later, in October 1986, testimony before the federal grand jury investigating Memphis sports betting would shed further light on this telephone

⁶² Mike Fleming and Chuck Cook, “Kirk Given Loan Funds, Source Says,” *Commercial Appeal*, July 14, 1985.

exchange. The MSU “former official” was former athletic director Bob Patterson.⁶³ The real source of the \$12,000 loan was apparently an unnamed booster. Keith Lee himself testified that Kirk gave him a “shoe box full of money” and, during the course of his four years at Memphis State, a car, a color television, and a stereo.⁶⁴ Lee claimed that Kirk gave him cash payments of \$400 or \$600 a month and a 1975 Plymouth Duster during his senior year. The former Tiger star also told the grand jury that neither assistant coach Lee Fowler nor Larry Finch knew of his financial arrangement with Kirk.⁶⁵ Kirk alone was responsible for this scandal. In his 1988 book, Kirk denied any wrong doing.

As if the allegations of financial misdeeds were not sufficiently shocking, Kirk and his great 1985 team were accused – but later exonerated – of point-shaving. Point-shaving – making a game closer than it would otherwise be in order to help gamblers who bet large sums of money on point spreads – has bedeviled college basketball off and on since a wide-ranging scandal that began with players at the City College of New York, or CCNY.⁶⁶ The accusations against Memphis State began almost immediately after the team’s Final Four appearance in March of 1985. On April 4 three Tulane basketball players and five others were indicted in a point-shaving case before a New Orleans grand jury; that case would lead to Tulane’s decision to drop its basketball program for several

⁶³ Mike Fleming and Otis Sanford, “Grand jury set to call Keith Lee in Kirk case,” *Commercial Appeal*, October 8, 1986.

⁶⁴ Shirley Downing and Anita Houk, “Lee testifies Kirk gave him cash, car for playing,” *Commercial Appeal*, September 30, 1988.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Stanley Cohen, *The Game They Played* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1977), x. Like the 1984-1985 Tigers, the 1949-1950 CCNY basketball team was made up of local grown talent. The pride in the team was elevated when they won both the NIT and NCAA tournament in 1950, a feat never accomplished before or since. Cohen’s portrayal of the downfall of the program and its player’s involvement in gambling provides the foundation from which other college basketball scandals are judged.

years. Dana Kirk testified on behalf of Tulane's star big man John "Hot Rod" Williams, who was accused of point-shaving in a February 20 game against Memphis State. Kirk defended Williams: "Tulane had led for much of the game, and it took some real effort to finally beat them in a close contest. Any suggestion that Williams, or any other Tulane player, had been trying to tamper with the game's result is just not based on reality."⁶⁷ On April 4, 1985, three Tulane basketball players and five others were indicted in a point-shaving case that led to Tulane's self-imposed death penalty.⁶⁸ Williams was acquitted of the charges and went on to a successful career in the National Basketball Association.

In the grand jury investigations, allegations of MSU point-shaving were tied to Kirk's alleged gambling. During its investigation the jury uncovered Kirk's gambling debts at the Colonial Country Club, which exceeded \$75,000, stemming from numerous poker games. The federal district attorney's office was investigating the possibility of point-shaving in the game between Memphis State and the University of Detroit that the Tigers lost 71-66 on February 28, 1985.⁶⁹ The grand jury concluded that the betting trends nationally indicated a high probability of point shaving. Bettors outside of Memphis favored Memphis State and a large number of bettors from Memphis had placed their wagers on the University of Detroit. Supposedly in order to clear his gambling debts, Kirk manipulated the final score by substituting players at key points.

⁶⁷ Kirk, 154-155.

⁶⁸ Frances Marcus, "8 Indicted Tulane Scandal: School to give up basketball," *New York Times*, April 5, 1985.

⁶⁹ Lela Garlington, "Kirk attorneys link probe to allegations: Documents say jury told points shaved," *Commercial Appeal*, May 8, 1987.

The coach vehemently denied any connection between the Tigers' loss in Detroit and his gambling in Memphis. He explained the outcome of the game by focusing on MSU's situation coming in to the game. The Tigers landed in Detroit with a record of 23-2 after having clinched the Metro Conference regular season championship in Hattiesburg two days earlier. The Detroit game, a non-conference February game, was sandwiched between Southern Mississippi on the road and a home game scheduled against Louisville slated for national television. Kirk claimed that the loss at Detroit motivated the Tigers against Louisville and for the remainder of the season.⁷⁰ Both the grand jury and the NCAA eventually exonerated Kirk and MSU of all charges of point-shaving.

As all of these allegations of scandal swirled around in the summer of 1985, the Memphis State fan base initially moved to defend Kirk with a six-point plan that included a marketing blitz aimed at exonerating their embattled coach. David Hitzhusen, chair of the Assistant Coaches Club, held a press conference and began putting pro-Kirk messages on bumper stickers and billboards and in television ads.⁷¹ Kirk's flamboyant style, endearing "Huckleberry" charm, and winning ways had won the loyalty of the MSU faithful, it seemed. But that support, like the support of the university administration, would prove to be short-lived.

Kirk testified before the Memphis grand jury in September 1986, and then returned to what he loved to do most: coach the Tigers. William Bedford became

⁷⁰ Kirk, 126-127.

⁷¹ Group launches Kirk campaign," *Commercial Appeal*, July 27, 1985.

something of a symbol of the program's issues off the floor. Opposing team's student sections jingled their keys when Bedford was announced as a starter during the 1985-86 season.⁷² Despite the distractions, the Tigers remained competitive during the regular season, finishing in second place in the Metro Conference with a record of 27-5, which was good enough to earn an NCAA bid for the fifth straight year. The Tigers defeated Ball State in an opening round game before bowing out to LSU, 83-81, in the Round of 32 on March 15.⁷³

But again, as had happened a year earlier, within weeks of the 1985-86 season issues of wrongdoing surfaced. The Internal Revenue Service requested that Kirk's employers at WHBQ radio and WREG-TV both provide financial records pertaining to payments to Kirk, which was part of the larger grand jury investigation into gambling.⁷⁴ As the grand jury continued its investigation, Robert Ford and Alvin Shultz, both members of the Tigers Assistant Coaches Club, were subpoenaed to testify. Kirk again maintained his innocence, saying, "I am comfortable that there will be no finding of illegal conduct in connection with this."⁷⁵ But, perhaps ominously, throughout the grand jury investigation and an NCAA investigation into possible wrong doing in the basketball program, both MSU president Thomas Carpenter and athletic director Charles Cavagnaro

⁷² Kirk, 164.

⁷³ "1985-86 Memphis Tigers Roster and Stats," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1986.html>, and "1985-86 Men's Basketball Schedule," University of Memphis Athletics - 1985-86 Men's Basketball Schedule, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.gotigersgo.com/mobile/schedule.aspx?schedule=35>.

⁷⁴ Mike Fleming and Chuck Cook, "Federal agents tune in Kirk shows," *Commercial Appeal*, March 25, 1986.

⁷⁵ Mike Fleming, "MSU booster club members testify," *Commercial Appeal*, June 27, 1986.

remained silent. When they did respond to media inquiries, they insisted that the grand jury's investigation was strictly an issue between the federal government and Dana Kirk.

Heading into the 1986-87 season, Kirk felt that the worst was behind him, and that he could once again elevate the Tigers to the Final Four. He had landed the services of three quality recruits: 6'6" forward Sylvester Gray from Bolton High School, 6'3" guard Cheyenne Gibson from Westwood High School, and 6'10" post player Ronnie McClain from Horn Lake, Mississippi.⁷⁶ However, the pressure was mounting, locally and nationally, to address the issues facing the basketball program. The NCAA then placed Memphis State basketball program on two years' probation and banned the men's basketball program from playing in the post-season for one year. It also required the university to return 90% of the \$700,000 that the university made during its 1985-86 run to the Final Four.⁷⁷ The last time that President Carpenter and Kirk talked, Carpenter told Kirk that the "internal investigation" was continuing. One week following that last discussion between the two, Kirk returned to his basketball office on Wednesday, September 17, to find a letter from Dr. Carpenter firing him immediately and citing a need for "new leadership."⁷⁸ After eighteen months of scrutiny by the federal government, the NCAA, and the university, Dana Kirk's tenure as head basketball coach was over. Kirk felt betrayed by the university and its administration. He believed that

⁷⁶ Kirk, 201.

⁷⁷ Kirk, 203.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 206-207.

they had allowed him to be the scapegoat for the university's problems in the athletic department.

Two months later, on November 20, 1986 Kirk, was indicted by a federal grand jury on two counts of tax evasion, four counts of filing false tax returns, two counts of mail fraud, and three counts of obstruction of justice.⁷⁹ Kirk continued to sell himself, the program, and the job he had done: "Our basketball team last year (a participant in the NCAA's Final Four in 1985) was a credit to the university and to this city and did the best it could to win every game it played."⁸⁰ The Sunday edition of the *Commercial Appeal* carried a political cartoon mocking Kirk as the fallen monarch from Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King Richard II*. Kirk was on his knees, prostrate with a scepter in one hand, and a crown of basketballs upon his head, with King Richard's words of despair printed above the fallen Kirk: "O, that I was great as my grief, or lesser than my name, or that I can forget what I have done, or not remember what I must be now."⁸¹ The king of Memphis hoops had fallen from his throne. The program was turned over to Tiger assistant and hero from the 1973 Tiger NCAA Finals, Larry Finch. In this Memphis saga, Kirk was forced to defend himself in a court of law and suffer the consequences of his alleged actions.

As in any good Shakespearean tragedy, Kirk fought to the bitter end. Early in 1987 he filed libel law suits against *The Commercial Appeal* and *Sports Illustrated* for

⁷⁹ Mike Fleming and Lela Garlington, "Kirk Indicted on 11 counts," *Commercial Appeal*, November 21, 1986.

⁸⁰ Mike Fleming, "Grand Jury Turned Talkative Kirk Quiet," *Commercial Appeal*, November 21, 1986.

⁸¹ Scott Stantis, cartoon of Dana Kirk, in *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN, November 23, 1986).

defamation of character.⁸² By June, Kirk had turned against two of his former assistants, Lee Fowler and Larry Finch, accusing Fowler of amending his own tax returns with the help of IRS agent Alice Campbell, who was involved in prosecuting Kirk. He claimed that Fowler's attorney Carl Langschmidt amended Fowler's returns to show income received from working MSU basketball camps, and the adjustments were made prior to the federal investigation and IRS questioning of Kirk. Kirk levied the same claims against Larry Finch.⁸³ Kirk was in an all-out fight for survival, but he miscalculated attacking Larry Finch. Shortly after condemning Finch as an accomplice to the IRS in bringing Kirk down, Kirk's libel suit against *The Commercial Appeal* made its way to Circuit Court Judge Wyeth Chandler. Fourteen years earlier it was then Mayor Chandler who had proclaimed that Finch "unified the city like it's never been unified before."⁸⁴ Kirk's libel suit against *The Commercial Appeal* was thrown out of Chandler's court two more times.⁸⁵

On November 15, 1988 – almost two years after the grand jury's indictments were lodged – Dana Kirk was convicted of five of the eleven charges against him: "one count of tax evasion, three counts of filing false income tax returns, and one count obstruction

⁸² John Branston, "Kirk Files Three Libel Suits Against Newspaper, Others," *Commercial Appeal*, January 24, 1987.

⁸³ Lela Garlington, "Dana Kirk Contends Tax Case Selective," *Commercial Appeal*, June 3, 1987 and Lela Garlington, "Kirk Points Finger at Finch's Tax Return," *Commercial Appeal*, June 20, 1987.

⁸⁴ Aram Goudsouzian, "Back to One City, The 1973 Memphis State Tigers and Myths of Race and Sport," March 21, 2016, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/back-to-one-city/>

⁸⁵ James Chisum, "Libel suits from Kirk dismissed," *Commercial Appeal*, June 24, 1987.

of justice.”⁸⁶ Three months later, on February 10, 1988, U.S. District Judge Odell Horton sentenced the former coach to one year and one day in jail, three years of probation, and a \$275,000 fine. During sentencing Kirk’s attorney brought five witnesses forward to speak on his behalf, one of whom was former Tiger standout Otis Jackson. Despite the character witnesses’ testimony, Judge Horton concluded that, “While Coach Kirk is an outstanding citizen in this community, this does not excuse him from violating the tax and obstruction of justice laws of the Constitution on the United States.”⁸⁷

In March of 1989 Kirk was remanded to the federal prison camp at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. This was the same prison where Nixon’s Attorney General John Mitchell served nineteen months following his involvement in Watergate.⁸⁸ Following his release Kirk contacted President George H.W. Bush and requested a presidential pardon in his case. “George Steinbrenner just received a pardon from the president, right? Muhammad Ali, he was a draft dodger.” Kirk said. “Why should it hurt me?”⁸⁹ It sounded like Kirk was back on the recruiting trail, trying to convince the next high school All-American to play basketball for him. But he never received the pardon.

Kirk was left wondering what happened to his dream as a high-profile college coach. He remained in Germantown, living with his wife Ann and spending time with

⁸⁶ Shirley Downing and Anita Houk, “I am not a criminal,’ ex-MSU coach insists,” *Commercial Appeal*, November 16,1988.

⁸⁷ Anita Houk, “Kirk handed 1-year term, \$20,000 fine,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 11,1989.

⁸⁸ Shirley Downing, “Kirk ordered to prison in Alabama,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 10,1989.

⁸⁹ Steve Wieberg, “Eliminating distress, Kirk seeks presidential pardon,” *USA Today*, August 15,1989.

his family, then he reemerged in the Memphis basketball scene as the general manager and coach of the Memphis franchise in the Global Basketball Association (GBA) in 1991-92. The Memphis Hotshots were a short-lived dream.⁹⁰ The GBA's short stay in Memphis gave Kirk his last opportunity to coach. Kirk next found his way onto the airwaves as the host of a sports radio show on WMC-AM 79, once a week starting in December of 1994.

When Kirk died in 2010, he had been out of the spotlight for over twenty years. *The Commercial Appeal* ran two articles on Kirk: "Coaching Legacy" and "Always Game." Sports columnist Ron Higgins, who had covered Kirk's court case in the mid-1980s, memorialized Kirk as a man who had a passion for coaching. Higgins eulogized Kirk's successes. His former Tiger players defended their coach.⁹¹ Andre Turner remembered Kirk as "fun to be around," and went on to say that "he didn't play favorites and he made us play hard." John Wilfong praised Kirk's system and argued that if he was given a second chance to coach, "he would have won a lot more games." Keith Lee, who was at the center of Kirk's issues, remembered Kirk's coaching ability, saying, "we always had confidence in him at the end of a tight game that he'd tell us the right thing to do."⁹² In death, Kirk received the second chance that he craved in life.

Kirk's downfall allowed for Larry Finch to become Memphis State's first African-American head basketball coach. In this next chapter Finch's tenure as head

⁹⁰ Andy Crossley, "Global Basketball Association (1991-1992) Fun While It Lasted," November 22, 2012, accessed May 28, 2017, <http://www.funwhileitlasted.net/basketball/global-basketball-association-1991-1992/>.

⁹¹ Ron Higgins, "Always game," *Commercial Appeal*, February 16, 2010, and Dan Wolken, "Coaching Legacy," *Commercial Appeal*, February 16, 2010.

⁹² *Ibid.*

coach will be explored in relationship to the narrative that began in the city in 1969 and was cemented during the Tigers 1973 season. Finch's role as a racial pioneer was made possible through his hard work and determination as well as the city's belief in his ability to mend its racial issues. Just as Verties Sails Jr. faced racial hurdles throughout his tenure as the first black assistant coach at MSU, so too will Finch face many of the same hurdles. By examining his treatment as head coach, a better understanding of how race and sport intersected in the city can be ascertained.

Chapter 7
A Favorite Son

In the fall of 1986, following the scandal under Dana Kirk, Larry Finch became the first African American head coach at Memphis State University. In the press release that announced Finch's hiring, athletic director Charles Cavagnaro hailed Finch as "the most recognized" player in the city's history. He claimed that, "every move Finch ever made was done with the same class and integrity that we all know he will bring to the program."¹ Finch's reputation resonated throughout the entire Memphis community. The hero of Melrose's 1969 City Championship team, the star of Memphis State's 1973 NCAA runner-up team, and the face of Tigers basketball was elevated to its highest position, head coach. The *Tri-State Defender* lauded the hire and said there was no time better to hire a black man as head basketball coach at the university.

Finch's hire was not only a personal milestone, but also a breakthrough in racial relations in the city. Longtime beat writer for the *Tri-State Defender*, Bill Little, resonated with pride as he traced Finch's coaching lineage back to Verties Sails and William Collins at Melrose.² Finch's two black coaching mentors were not offered the same opportunity and relegated to lesser roles in the city's coaching fraternity, but they laid the groundwork with their own success, professionalism, and respectability. Maxine Smith, local NAACP president and longtime advocate of racial equality at MSU, sent a letter to Memphis State University President Dr. Thomas Carpenter commending MSU

¹ Bobby Hall, "Finch signs three-year pact, takes MSU basketball reins," *Commercial Appeal*, September 9, 1986.

² Bill Little, "MSU names first Black coach," *Tri-State Defender*, September 27, 1986.

for hiring a Black coach, but also urging the university to offer a compensation package similar to those received by white coaches. Finch was breaking barriers that many believed were permanent markers in the city's landscape. Larry Finch was a folk hero in his own community of Orange Mound and a symbol of hope for a city struggling to shake off its troubled racial past.

Finch returned often to Orange Mound to help work with the community's younger kids at basketball camps. He attended Melrose games during his playing career. So, it came as no surprise when he became the boys' basketball coach at Messick High School in 1976 following his brief professional career. When Memphis City Schools closed Messick the following summer, Finch was forced to look for another coaching position. His old college coach, Gene Bartow, offered him an assistant's position at UAB. Finch also interviewed with UT-Knoxville for an assistant's position and at Shelby State Community College for the head coaching position.³ He accepted Bartow's offer and joined his old mentor at UAB. Eager to return home, Finch joined Kirk's staff in the fall of 1979 after working with Bartow for two seasons. The *Commercial Appeal* lauded Finch's hire as it listed his career statistics and accolades from his years as a player at Memphis State. Finch turned down a \$3,000 pay raise to stay with Bartow at UAB.⁴ Home was Memphis. Billy 'Spook' Murphy, chair of the committee that hired Dana Kirk, recalled that "we couldn't let Larry Finch stay down there (at UAB with

³ Randy Covitz, "Larry Finch joins Bartow at Birmingham," *Press Scimitar*, July 14, 1977.

⁴ "Finch Joins Memphis State's Staff," *Commercial Appeal*, March 25, 1979.

Bartow). We had to get him back. It was very important to get him.”⁵ Murphy understood the importance of bringing the hometown hero home. He also understood the racial dynamics of the city and Finch’s value in the homes of black recruits from Memphis. In Murphy’s eyes and in the university’s, Finch was a unifying force that could bring the city together behind basketball.

Larry Finch was a product of a single parent household in Orange Mound, and his understanding of the way that many black families operated in the city of Memphis was an asset as a recruiter. Following a 1986 *Sports Illustrated* article on the university’s failure to graduate players, Larry Finch went to the front porch of Kenny Moody’s house in South Memphis and promised his mother that Moody would graduate. Moody recalled that when he went into Coach Kirk’s office to sign the papers, Finch stopped him and said, “Where’s your momma? You need to go home and get your momma because you’re not signing anything until she’s here to watch.”⁶ Finch understood Memphis kids, but he also understood their “mommas.” On another recruiting trip Finch went to Mitchell point guard Andre Turner’s house to persuade him to stay home and play for Memphis State. Finch asked Turner’s mother if he could speak with Andre outside. He sat Turner in the passenger seat of his car and told him that as a Memphis kid he was going to Memphis State, no questions, he was going to Memphis State. After the conversation with Turner he went into Turner’s house and told Turner’s mom that he

⁵ Ron Higgins, “Farewell to Finch,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 1,1997.

⁶ Geoff Calkins, “Finch, City’s Basketball Soul, Needs an Assist,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 16,2006.

would take care of her son and there was nothing to worry about.⁷ Finch was not only their coach, he was a mentor, a man their mothers trusted, and a lifelong friend.

In 1983 Memphis's *Commercial Appeal* published a series of portraits of black men and women in the Mid-South called *Black Mosaics*. Finch was portrayed as a patient man who was waiting for his time as the first black head coach at a southern university. He recognized the position of older black coaches who had the qualifications but were denied the opportunity to run a major college basketball program. For Finch, time was on his side, and the opportunity was within his reach, if he remained patient. Finch believed "that race was an issue since day one, but that if everybody would take the time to try to relate to one individual or group, race as a problem would be minimized." Finch proclaimed his simple formula for race relations: "treat people according to the way they treat me... I've learned to deal with people on an individual basis."⁸ Finch believed that everybody had their own way of fighting, for him sports was the simplest of ways to combat racial issues in the city. *Commercial Appeal* reporter Leroy Williams reminded Memphians that many blacks in Orange Mound counseled Finch not to attend Memphis State, where blacks had previously been denied scholarship opportunities, but that Finch decided to stay home and make his mark.⁹ In 1983 Finch was not only in love with his job as an assistant coach at Memphis State, but he also knew that patience was key if he was going to continue to be a central figure in the healing trope of basketball in Memphis. He also understood that patience in the face of segregation was more

⁷ Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

⁸ Leroy Williams Jr., "Patient Finch Sees Time as Being on His Side," *Commercial Appeal*, September 27, 1983.

⁹ Ibid.

acceptable to the white establishment than the revolutionary methods used by the Black Power Movement. Finch's patience allowed him to prevail upon Memphis's white society to abide by the doctrines of fair play and sportsmanship in his quest to be the head coach at his alma mater.

Three years later, the scandal that led to the firing of Dana Kirk in September of 1986 opened the door for Finch to be named interim head coach. In the week that followed, the issue of race came to the forefront in the discussions surrounding who would replace Kirk on a full-time basis. Was Memphis State University ready for its first African-American head basketball coach? When Memphis State fired Wayne Yates seven years earlier, Verties Sails received an obligatory interview and was among the three finalists, but he was never a serious candidate for the job. Like Sails, Finch recruited the majority of players on the Tigers' roster. Finch reminded the city that Sails should have had the opportunity to become a head coach on the major collegiate level and that he never got the chance.¹⁰ The university decided not to conduct a nationwide search. Compelled by the scandal and the fact that the fall term had already begun, the university announced on September 25 that Finch was the new head basketball coach. In so doing, Memphis State became the first school in the Deep South to hire an African American as head coach. Gene Bartow, Verties Sails, and Melrose coach Dorsey Sims all praised his hiring. The local branch of the NAACP expressed its approval: "We are very pleased that Memphis State University has hired a black coach. We are sure Finch will be successful."¹¹ While it sang praises to the university for hiring Finch, it also

¹⁰ Bobby Hall, "Finch see his situation as 'unique,'" *Commercial Appeal*, February 1, 1987.

¹¹ Ron Higgins, "Booster Gets Emotional over Hiring," *Commercial Appeal*, September 26, 1986.

diligently followed Finch's contract negotiations and urged Memphis State to provide equity in pay and the opportunity to benefit from the perks afforded to previous coaches. Executive director of the local NAACP, Maxine Smith, met with Finch in late October to offer her support.¹² Smith, who earlier had chided the university for its treatment of its black basketball players, turned her attention to fighting for pay equity for the university's first black head basketball coach.

Larry Finch's standing as the hometown hero allowed for him to break through this racial barrier. His position as the first black head coach in the Deep South brought with it a platform from which he could address some of the disparities in the coaching ranks. Following his hiring, he spoke openly of the lack of opportunities for black head coaches at major universities in the Deep South. "I can't say why it happens. A lot of people say racism. That might have to be the basic reason, it probably is. But I hate to say that because I'm in a unique situation."¹³ The Southeastern Conference (SEC) did not have a black head coach until the University of Tennessee hired Wade Houston in 1989. UT's location in the Upper South had provided a somewhat less hostile environment for racial change, yet the university still moved slowly in this regard.¹⁴ Finch's hiring opened the door for other black coaches in the South to join the ranks of collegiate head coaches.

¹² Maxine A. Smith, "Report of Executive Secretary," 3 September – 7 October 1986, box 1, folder 26, Maxine A. Smith NAACP Collection, Memphis/ Shelby County Public Library.

¹³ Bobby Hall, "Finch Sees His Situation as 'Unique,'" *Commercial Appeal*, February 1, 1987.

¹⁴ Charles Martin, *Benching Jim Crow: The Rise and Fall of the Color Line in Southern College Sports, 1890-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 237-240.

One of the issues that faced black head coaches was that they received only one opportunity to be successful. When they failed, they were sent back to the ranks of assistant coach and were left out of discussions for head coaching positions. Since the inclusion of black coaching candidates at major universities, white coaches who have been fired have found it much easier to find another head coaching job than their black counterparts. When Finch was hired in 1986 he said, "I know that if I fail, not only do I fail Larry Finch and Memphis State, but I fail for black people everywhere because the opportunities for other young blacks will be diminished."¹⁵ Finch had long faced the racial implications of his decisions on the hardwood. Memphis provided a unique situation for Finch. It provided an opportunity that he would not have received in other cities, but with his hiring came responsibility to his community and to the black coaching community at large. The pressure of being the first black head coach at the university was significant, yet Finch felt that he was well-suited for success.

Success arrived quickly for Finch as he was named the Metro Conference's Coach of the Year following the 1986-87 season. Even as the NCAA restrictions limited post-season play and left the university under NCAA scrutiny, Finch led the Tigers to 23-8 regular season record, which was the fourth best record in school history.¹⁶ When Finch hired Melrose's Dorsey Sims and Christian Brothers College's Dave Loos as assistants, he built his staff with local coaches. Finch's patience, candor, and sincere approach allowed the program to be seen in a new light. Although the team started out slow, they

¹⁵ Bobby Hall, "Finch see his situation as 'unique,'" *Commercial Appeal*, February 1, 1987.

¹⁶ "Finch Beats the Odds," *Commercial Appeal*, March 6, 1987.

won 24 of their last 29 games. In their final game of the season, with the post-season not a possibility, they defeated rival Louisville 75-52 in the Metro Conference Championship game.¹⁷ The sanctions levied by the NCAA denied the Tigers a chance to play in the NCAA tournament, so the team relished its opportunity to win its conference championship against the rival Cardinals. Vince Askew, who considered transferring out of Kirk's program, shined for Finch throughout the season as he led the Tigers in scoring and was named First Team All-Metro. Sylvester Gray was named Metro Conference Freshman of the Year, and it looked like Finch was guiding the Tigers out of the abyss back towards national prominence.¹⁸ Shelby County Mayor Bill Morris praised Finch's success and reinvigorated the narrative placing Finch as "a symbol of racial harmony, understanding and civic pride."¹⁹

As the Tigers began their second season under Finch, Memphis felt a sense of relief as the NCAA reduced the post-season ban to one year, making the Tigers eligible for the 1988 NCAA tournament. Finch's second team confirmed the notion that the Tigers were Memphis' hometown team with two thirds of the roster consisting of players from Memphis. Led by Dwight Boyd (Kirby), Sylvester Gray (Bolton), and Dewayne Bailey (Melrose), the team pushed through a sluggish start and advanced to the conference championship, where they lost to Louisville.²⁰ Their 20-12 record, the

¹⁷ Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1987-88, 55.

¹⁸ Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1987-88, 57 and 59.

¹⁹ Michael Lollar, "Coach Larry Finch Calls the Plays His Own Way," *Commercial Appeal*, January 17, 1988.

²⁰ Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1988-89, 54.

program's seventh straight twenty-win season, earned the Tigers a bid to the NCAA tournament. Placed in the Midwest bracket, the team traveled to South Bend, Indiana, where they defeated Baylor in the first round before bowing out in the second round to Purdue.²¹ Finch maintained the level of success Tiger fans were accustomed to. He ran a clean program, and he kept the roster full of local talent. After all of the issues surrounding the program from the Kirk years, the Memphis fanbase was once again reveling in the team's success.

While Tigers fans cheered, the politics in the city remained racially charged. Scandal stood front and center. Rickey Peete, a black city councilman from the Seventh District, was indicted for violating the Hobbs Act. In October of 1988, Colonial Partners, a Memphis real estate developing company, applied for a permit to build the Pigeon Roost subdivision on Waring Road. Colonial Partners presented their project prospectus to the Memphis City Council's Land Use Board in January of 1989. It received approval and was then slated to move to the City Council for a final vote.²² On February 9, Doug Dickens and Hank Hill of Colonial Partners met with Peete in his office at City Hall. Following this meeting, Peete personally telephoned Hill and told him that for \$2,000, Peete could secure the votes necessary to get approval in the City Council. Hill initially declined the offer and immediately telephoned his partner Dickens. Dickens then telephoned the United States District Attorney's office with Peete's solicitation of a bribe. Hill agreed to wear a wire and meet with Peete later that same afternoon. Hill

²¹ "1987-88 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed July 10, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1988-schedule.html>.

²² *United States v. Peete*, 919 F. 2d 1168 (6th Circuit. 1990)

offered Peete \$1,000 before the vote and \$1,000 after the vote, to which Peete agreed.²³ Peete's solicitation of a \$2,000 showed that graft was still prevalent in urban politics.

Peete's version of the meeting with Hill provides another look into racial tension in the city at the time. Peete argued at his trial that the meeting with Hill had nothing to do with the Colonial Partner bid to develop the Pigeon Roost subdivision. Instead he asserted that Hill was recruiting him to work with those who wanted to oust Mayor Richard Hackett from office. In Hill's testimony Peete had held one finger up, in agreement for \$1,000 for the bribe to garner the votes in the city council for the Pigeon Roost subdivision. Peete testified that he was holding up his middle finger to express his blunt opposition to the mayor as part of the recall effort. Instead of a bribe for the votes necessary for Pigeon Roost, Peete claimed that the money was a campaign contribution. Peete was in arrears with an \$18,000 loan and needed the money for personal reasons, not for his campaign fund. He told Hill, "It's not what you know, but who you know."²⁴ Peete accused the FBI of pursuing him because he had refused to aid in their investigation of Congressman Harold Ford Sr. His theory was that the FBI was conspiring against Peete and Ford along racial lines.

The notion of racial unity promoted through sport was nowhere to be found in the war for political control of the city. Real estate developers Hill and Dickens were white insiders, and Peete was a part of the push by the black community for equitable representation. As a young black city councilman, Peete was learning the harsh realities of the way of politics in Memphis. His naiveté surrounding how the white establishment

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

conducted backroom deals cornered him into a position where they in turn attacked him for many of the same grievances of which they themselves were guilty. Peete's intentions were designed to help his own community in ways that the white establishment had been aiding their own communities for years. As a young black politician, he was not afforded the same luxury of committing those sins. Although Peete helped to push through ordinances that helped the black community and placed money in the pockets of black Memphians, Peete's participation in this scheme cost him two years in prison and six months in a halfway house.²⁵ White city councilman Tom Marshall believed that Peete "was often the glue that held the council together, he was the person many of us would go to in order to quash any kind of racial anxiety on any given issue. He always looked beyond race for the sake of expediency and for professional handling of issues."²⁶ In his attempt to look beyond race, Peete paid the price for the racial discord that permeated Memphis politics.

Following Finch's first two seasons at the helm, the fanbase expected a return to national prominence that included a return trip to the Final Four. Sophomore guard Elliot Perry led the Tigers in scoring and lived up to his accolades as a McDonald's All-American at Treadwell.²⁷ Freshman forward Ernie Smith and junior guard Cheyenne Gibson added scoring punch, but the Tigers lacked a true post player to compete with the elite programs. Although the Tigers would win twenty-one games in 1988-1989, they were eliminated in the first round of the NCAA tournament by DePaul. The optimism of

²⁵ John Branston, "On Rickey Peete: 'An Indictment Against Us All,'" *Memphis Flyer*, June 21, 2007.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1988-89, 41.

the impressive 8-1 streak in February that included wins over Florida State and Louisville was quickly erased with an early exit from the NCAA tournament and losses in the last three games of the season.²⁸ The following season, Finch's fourth, saw the team finish with less than twenty wins for the first time in nine years. The 1989-90 Tigers were never able to string together more than three wins in a row. The sub-par 18-win season ended with the Tigers losing to instate rival Tennessee in the opening round of the NIT tournament at the Mid-South Coliseum.²⁹

Following his fourth season, some fans began to question Finch's ability to lead the Tigers back to prominence. Many around the program began to wonder if Finch was as capable with the clipboard as he was with the ball in his own hands. Finch had been given a pass during his first two seasons. Now he was being held accountable for the recruits he was bringing on campus and for their performance in big games. One of the challenges he faced as head coach was that there were many in the community who still saw him as a young player who they advise and influence. They still expected that Finch take their advice as he had done as a player.³⁰

Heading into the 1990-91 season, Finch knew that the road ahead was going to be tough, but that if the team could weather the storm, then a return to prominence was near. In the spring of 1990, Finch had landed the biggest recruit since Finch himself signed with the Tigers in 1969, Anfernee Hardaway. Hardaway, the local product out of

²⁸ "1988-89 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed July 11, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1989-schedule.html>.

²⁹ "1989-90 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed July 11, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1989-schedule.html>

³⁰ Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

Treadwell High, was the Parade Magazine's High School Player of the Year and one of the most sought-after players in Memphis prep basketball history. Finch beat out local SEC power Arkansas and a number of other collegiate blue bloods. Unfortunately for Finch, Hardaway was forced to take a red-shirt season because of academics as part of the NCAA's Proposition 48.³¹ Proposition 48 was initiated in 1986 by the NCAA to bolster sagging student-athlete academic performance. It required incoming student-athletes to achieve an SAT score of 700 or ACT score of 15 and a 2.0 high school grade-point average in 11 academic core courses for athletics eligibility.³² Coaches across the nation questioned the validity of these measurements, as well as the racial implications for minority students. Prospective freshmen, like Hardaway, who did not meet all academic requirements to receive an athletic scholarship lost their eligibility in their first year. Partial qualifiers were not allowed to get athletic scholarships, although they could receive aid from a booster or from other private or government sources. Georgetown University's John Thompson walked off the court before a game with Boston College in January of 1989 to protest Proposition 48's treatment of minority student athletes. Thompson told reporters after the game, "I will not coach in an NCAA sanctioned game until I am satisfied that something has been done to provide these student-athletes with appropriate opportunity and hope for access to college."³³

³¹ Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1991-92, 31.

³² Gary Brown, "NCAA Graduation Rates: A Quarter-Century of Tracking Academic Success," NCAA.org - The Official Site of the NCAA, October 28, 2014, accessed July 11, 2017, <http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/ncaa-graduation-rates-quarter-century-tracking-academic-success>.

³³ William Rhoden, "Big East; Thompson's Protest Intensifies Debate," *New York Times*, January 16, 1989.

Unlike Thompson, Larry Finch remained quiet on the issue, supported Hardaway in the classroom, and accepted the fate of his team without the Parade All-American. Finch grew up in a segregated Memphis where he realized that there were many things in life that were not fair. He believed that it was his job to figure out how to prosper in the face of adverse conditions, in the same way that he had prospered in the face of adversity as a young man in Orange Mound. If Finch played the racial card in the same way that Thompson did, he would have damaged his reputation as a unifying force in the city. As the Tigers struggled, Hardaway sat. Shortly after the season was completed, Hardaway was shot in the foot during an off-campus robbery in April. He fractured three metatarsal bones in his foot but was quickly on his way to rehab after being chastised privately by Finch., the only hiccup during his Prop 48 season. Hardaway had the bullet surgically removed from his foot and was back to full speed by the end of October, ready for his first season of eligibility.³⁴

The Tigers prepared to move into the state-of-the-art Pyramid of America, located downtown along the Bluff. When the Tigers hosted Arkansas State in the second round of the NIT on March 18, 1991, it became the last game ever played by the Tigers in the Mid-South Coliseum. The Mid-South Coliseum was more than just a piece of the physical geography; it was an integral to the affective geography that projected the unifying narrative around Larry Finch's basketball career. The Coliseum sat on the boundary between East Memphis and Orange Mound. Lakisha Simmons, a scholar of Southern urban spaces, refers to affective geography as the spaces invested with

³⁴ Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1992-93, 41.

emotional meaning that are associated with the past.³⁵ The Coliseum was the place where white and black fans of the Tiger basketball program came together in Memphis to heal the wounds of the city, according to the myth surrounding Finch. Emotionally, the building held a special place in the hearts of the Tiger faithful who promulgated this narrative. As Tiger guard Tony Matlock was scoring the first basket in the Pyramid's history, the city had just experienced a shift in its political paradigm when Dr. Willie Herenton became the first African-American mayor in the city's history, in an improbable 142 vote victory over Richard Hackett.³⁶

Herenton's victory over Hackett seemed a longshot just twelve months earlier when a *Commercial Appeal* poll revealed that Hackett was heavily favored over Shelby County mayor Bill Morris and three black candidates, none of which were Herenton. Many throughout the black community believed that Herenton, the superintendent of the Memphis City Schools, was the most viable black candidate to defeat Hackett because of his growing political stature. When he announced his campaign on July 3, 1991, at the Peabody Hotel in front of over a thousand supporters, he said, "I want to make it emphatically clear that the time is not four years from now. The time is now. We're saying to white Memphis to join hands with black Memphis. I firmly believe we are on our way. City hall, city hall, city hall."³⁷

³⁵ Lakisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015), 212.

³⁶ Branston, 37.

³⁷ Sanford, 231-232.

Herenton's political victory hinged upon his ability to unite the black vote and to convince the Ford political machine that he was the man to break the racial barrier. Earlier that year, in February, Shep Wilburn called for a "People's Convention," in which all registered black voters gathered at the Mid-South Coliseum to vote for a consensus black mayoral candidate. The Coliseum, long celebrated as a unifying space for blacks and whites behind the Tigers, was now being used by the black community to further divide the city in the eyes of the white establishment. White city councilwoman Pat Vade Schaaf tried to block the use of the arena, but the meeting still went forward as scheduled on April 27.³⁸ Consensus was harder to come by in the black community than Wilburn had expected, and that night six candidates were nominated, with Herenton receiving the largest percentage of votes. By the end of the night there was still no one consensus candidate, and adding to the disputed outcome at the Mid-South Coliseum, local black political leader Harold Ford Sr. denied the validity of the "People's Convention" when he vowed to keep searching for a candidate. Five weeks later, Herenton forced the hand of Ford Sr. by resigning as Memphis City Schools Superintendent and filing the necessary paperwork to run for mayor.

The black community met again to attempt to unify. Reverend Ralph White offered his Bloomfield Baptist Church on South Parkway as a venue for a second political summit on Saturday June 15. At this second summit, Ford Sr. intended to announce Otis Higgs as his candidate for the mayoral seat, yet when he arrived at the Bloomfield Baptist Church, Herenton's supporters had packed the church to the rafters.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid., 224-226.

³⁹ Ibid., 228.

In a backroom deal Ford met with Herenton and Higgs. Herenton's force of character persuaded Ford that Higgs could not win and that he could. The deal was done and the black community was now united in its efforts to win the 1991 mayoral election.

Herenton's quest was further aided by a 1991 judicial decision that changed the nature of mayoral elections in the city. Federal District Court Judge Jerome Turner banned the runoff in mayoral elections using the 1965 Voting Rights Act, Section 2, that bans voting practices that discriminate on the basis of race, color, or membership in a language minority group.⁴⁰ In previous elections, white politicians used the run-off as way to divide and conquer. Hackett used this political strategy to win his first mayoral election in 1982. The 1982 mayoral race saw Hackett campaign against J.O. Patterson, a black city councilman, and Michael Cody, a white liberal federal prosecutor. Hackett labeled Cody as a divorcee, and an ally of the ACLU, the NAACP, and Harold Ford Sr., all of which amounted to, in the eyes of the white establishment, Cody being "black." Hackett discredited Cody in the white community and positioned himself in front of Cody for one of the two runoff spots. Hackett earned himself a position in the runoff election and then relied upon the 54% of the city that was white to propel himself past Patterson in the runoff election. Hackett made it quite clear that to win in Memphis politics one needed to know two things: "You need to know your numbers and your colors."⁴¹ Turner's 1991 judicial decision meant that in the 1992 mayoral race, whoever

⁴⁰ John Branston, "Majority Rules: Should the Runoff be Brought Back in Mayoral and Citywide Elections?" *Memphis Flyer*, March 15, 2007.

⁴¹ Branston, 38-40.

could garner the most votes in November would become the mayor, and no longer could the white establishment divide and conquer to maintain control of the mayor's office.

Herenton's campaign was aided with the precipitous introduction of Prince Mongo on the ballot. Robert Hodges, better known by his self-styled moniker Prince Mongo, was a Memphis eccentric and minor political personality. He claimed to be the ambassador of the planet of Zambodia and to be 333 years old. Hodges's political fame in Memphis began in 1991, as an eccentric third candidate in the mayoral election. Infamous for his creative and bizarre public persona, Prince Mongo, he dressed in wildly stylized 1960s "Hippie" outfits. He often wore steampunk goggles, a long blonde wig, and various accessories including a military bandolier loaded with tiny rubber chickens instead of bullets. He referred to everyone as "Spirit," and he "blessed" his followers by tossing white flour on them.⁴² Independently wealthy, he held an affinity for politics in the city of Memphis. He owned a number of nightclubs in Memphis, including The Castle. The Castle, previously known as Ashlar Hall, was built by Robert Brinkley Snowden. Snowden's great-great grandfather Colonel Robert C. Brinkley built the Peabody Hotel and Snowden still owned the hotel during his lifetime. In 1960 the Brinkley family sold The Castle, and it turned it into a restaurant. Hodges bought The Castle in 1990 and turned it into a nightclub. Thus, Prince Mongo became associated with one of Memphis's founding families.⁴³

⁴² Walter Arnold, "Prince Mongo's Castle - Ashlar Hall - Memphis, TN," *The Art of Abandonment*, January 13, 2016, accessed July 11, 2017, <https://artofabandonment.com/2016/01/prince-mongos-castle-ashlar-hall-memphis-tn/>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

This nightclub owner, turned alien from Zambodia, turned “righteous” political candidate, added a bizarre twist of political fate to Herenton’s 142 vote mayoral victory in the 1991. Prince Mongo’s followers, a unique group of Bohemian eccentrics, cast 2,923 votes for Mongo, approximately 1.18% of the votes casted. If seventy-two of the voters who cast their ballot for Mongo had instead voted for Hackett, then Herenton would have lost.⁴⁴ Since the introduction of a commission form of government in the 1920s, mayoral elections had been decided in ways that were mindboggling and irrational to those in the black community. With Prince Mongo’s entrance into the 1991 mayoral election, irrationality allowed the black community in Memphis to gain what it had so long coveted, the mayor’s office. Prince Mongo’s presence does not diminish the political organization of the black community in the years and months leading up to this election, yet without Prince Mongo’s presence in this election, Herenton’s slogan of “the time is now” would have been empty words once again.

Hackett accepted the people’s decision when the election commission issued the results of the voting: Herenton, 122,596 votes, and Hackett, 122,454 votes. Three hours later Hackett told supporters: “a challenge (to the final tally) would not be appropriate despite irregularities in the vote.” In the midst of the jubilation running rampant throughout the black Memphis, pastor L. LaSimba Gray offered a call for political unity: “Brothers and sisters, it’s healing time, a city that was once divided will now be brought together.”⁴⁵ One month later, the Tigers opened the newly constructed Great American Pyramid in a game against 20th ranked DePaul on November 29, televised by ESPN. The

⁴⁴ John Branston, *Rowdy Memphis: The South Unscripted* (Nashville: Cold Tree Press, 2004), 37.

⁴⁵ Sanford, 242.

Tigers Media Guide referred to the 321 feet high, stainless steel edifice as “a cooperative effort of the city of Memphis, Shelby County and Memphis State University that symbolizes a belief in the future.”⁴⁶ Memphis was progressing forward with its first black mayor, a black hometown hero as the program’s head coach, and another local black basketball phenom ready to take the Tigers back to national prominence.

Anfernee Hardaway’s impact upon the program was felt immediately as the Tigers won twenty-three games, advanced to the Great Mid-West Conference championship game and returned to the NCAA tournament after a two-year absence. Hardaway averaged 17 points, 5.5 assists, and 7 rebounds as he led the program back to the Elite Eight. Hardaway became the face of the program, mirroring the popularity that Finch exuded when he played. Coupled with David Vaughn’s presence on the inside, the Tigers were poised to return to the upper tier of college basketball. An overtime win at Vanderbilt at the close of January brought the team together. Finch proclaimed after the Vanderbilt win that “We knew that we could win on the road.”⁴⁷ Although the Tigers lost to Cincinnati in the conference championship, they made the most of their six seed in the NCAA’s Midwest Region.⁴⁸

After defeating Pepperdine in the first round by ten, the Tigers faced regional foe Arkansas. Nolan Richardson’s “Hogs” were not only one of the best teams in the nation, but actively recruiting Memphis kids to come to Fayetteville. Arkansas guard Todd Day

⁴⁶ Memphis State University Men’s Basketball Media Guide, 1991-92, 5.

⁴⁷ Memphis State University Men’s Basketball Media Guide, 1992-92, 41, 59, 60

⁴⁸ "1991-92 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed July 11, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1992-schedule.html>.

was a McDonald's All-American out of Hamilton High who left Memphis and played for Richardson at Arkansas.⁴⁹ This game meant more to both the Tiger faithful and to Finch. David Vaughn's winning shot with five seconds remaining in the game propelled the Tigers to a two-point upset over the favored Hogs. Finch needed the win to keep recruiting hometown talent. Finch's recruiting successes in the city were directly related to his playing days and his time spent playing in community centers all over town. His photographic memory allowed him to remember every back street he had been on previously.⁵⁰ When Finch signed Hardaway and then defeated the Hogs in the NCAA tournament, Finch regained the momentum he needed to keep the fence around the city's best talent.⁵¹

The overtime victory over the Razorbacks propelled the Tigers to the Sweet Sixteen against Georgia Tech. Billy Smith's running one-handed jumper as time expired saved the game for the Tigers, who had trailed the entire game, and forced overtime with the Yellow Jackets. In the extra period, the Tigers gained control from the foul line and went on to post a four-point victory. The win over Bobby Cremins's team allowed the Tigers to return to the Elite Eight for the first time since 1985.⁵² The Midwest bracket proved cruel to the Tigers, forcing them to play their conference nemesis Cincinnati for a fourth time in the Elite 8. Bob Huggins's Bearcats, led by Nick Van Exel's 22 points, polished off the Tigers for the fourth time and ended Memphis State's 1992 NCAA

⁴⁹ Keith Gentry, *2015-2016 Shelby Metro High School Basketball* (Memphis: Gentry's Statistical Service, 2015), 128.

⁵⁰ Larry Finch Jr., interview by author, January 31, 2018.

⁵¹ Gentry, 83-84.

⁵² Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1992-93, 59.

tournament.⁵³ The emergence of Penny Hardaway and success from the season brought a renewed sense of anticipation for the Tiger faithful moving forward.

Finch's goal of bringing a national championship back to Memphis seemed to be within his reach as the team looked forward to the 1992-1993 season. Hardaway was named a John Wooden Player of the Year candidate and he adorned the Tigers media guide cover as a symbol of the hopes of Tigers fans. Hope turned to gloom during the home opener when David Vaughn suffered a season-ending injury. Before his injury in the opening moments of the second half, the Tigers built a twenty-point lead against Arkansas. But without Vaughn's presence in the post, the Razorbacks were able to knock off the Tigers. The second half proved to be a precursor to a season where the team sorely missed Vaughn's post presence.⁵⁴ The preseason Tigers were ranked as high as #8 in the AP poll, but following their trip to the Maui Classic in Hawaii, the Tigers, 3-4, dropped out of the AP Poll.⁵⁵ Hardaway and the Tigers righted the ship and finished the regular season at 8-2 in the Great Midwest Conference. The Tigers fell in the conference championship to Cincinnati, but earned the school's fourteenth NCAA tournament bid, and a #10 seed in the Southeast Regional. Hardaway's 17 points were not enough to push the Tigers past Western Kentucky in the opening round.⁵⁶ Following the disappointing loss, Hardaway declared for the upcoming NBA draft. Finch battled to keep the Tigers relevant nationally when he signed McDonald's All-American guard

⁵³ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁴ Memphis State Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1993-94, 53.

⁵⁵ "1992-93 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed July 13, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1993-schedule.html>.

⁵⁶ Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1993-94, 64.

Sylvester “Deuce” Ford Jr. from Fairley High and forward Cedric Henderson from East High. This signing class signaled that Finch was still capable of keeping the best talent at home, but it also gave the Tigers the number one ranked class in the country according to recruiting expert Bob Gibbons.⁵⁷ With the exodus of Hardaway, the Tigers would have to rely heavily upon this group of incoming freshmen.

“Deuce” Ford was recruited as the heir apparent to Hardaway. After winning the state championship at Fairley under Sylvester Ford Sr., his father wanted him to leave Memphis to join the Fab Five at Michigan, or to play in the Southeastern Conference at Tennessee or Georgia. As a Memphis kid, Ford Jr. felt the allure and pull of playing for the hometown Tigers and signed with Memphis State in hopes of following in the footsteps of Finch and Hardaway. When “Deuce” arrived on campus that fall, he was still hampered by injuries that led to him having steel rods placed in both legs following his senior season in high school. His drive and determination to win the state championship at Fairley meant that he played on the stress fractures longer than he should have. When workouts began in the fall of 1993, it became obvious that Ford was not the same caliber of player that he was before the surgery.⁵⁸ Unable to perform at the speed he had in high school, Ford soon fell out of favor with Finch and by midway through the season he was out of the starting lineup. Fellow freshman point guard Chris Garner, from Treadwell High, sparked the Tigers defensively with 74 steals and shined in the backcourt that was meant for Ford. Sophomore David Vaughn returned to the Tiger

⁵⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁸ Mark Bialek, “Deuce’s Downfall: The Former McDonald’s All-American Never Lived up to Expectations,” *Memphis Flyer*, July 29, 1998

lineup and posted 20 double doubles (points and rebounds) to lead the way in the paint.⁵⁹ Neither the play of Vaughn or Garner were enough to lead the Tigers to post-season play.

The Tigers finished under .500 for the second time in Finch's tenure at 13-16, and the losing began to take its toll on Finch. Finch remained adamant in his belief that he could not only return the Tigers to the Final Four, but also bring home the national championship that was so close to in 1973. A local television station replayed the games each night after the local news. When Finch returned home he could be found watching the game again at his house in his consummate desire to win. Over the years, the more he lost, the greater the weight became to fulfill that promise.⁶⁰ The skeptics began to reemerge with another finish under .500, but this time it came on the heels of one of the best recruiting classes in school history. These skeptics began to question the ability of Finch to lead the Tigers back to the Final Four. He could recruit, but his ability to coach was in question.

Over the next two seasons the Tigers bounced back and looked as if Finch had once again righted the course of program back towards national prominence. In the summer of 1994 president Lane Rawlings changed the name of the university from Memphis State to the University of Memphis. As the university looked to move past its perception as a regional state school to a national university, Finch brought in a recruiting class capable of lifting the Tigers to NCAA glory once again. His biggest recruiting coup came with the signing of another McDonald's All-American, Lorenzen Wright out of

⁵⁹ Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1994-95, 72.

⁶⁰ Larry Finch Jr., interview by author, January 31, 2018.

Booker T. Washington High.⁶¹ Wright played for Finch's MSU teammate, Fred Horton, at Washington and was the nephew of former Tiger guard Alvin Wright ('78). Wright told *Sports Illustrated* later that year that: "I have known Coach Finch forever and I came here because I knew he would do right by me."⁶² Finch used his local connections again to sign high rising Michael Wilson from Shelby State Community College. After graduating from Melrose High, Wilson had played for Verties Sails as Shelby State who remained close to Finch. With high school All-American Wright, preseason All-American candidate David Vaughn, and conference Newcomer of the Year Cedric Henderson, the Tigers looked to have one of the premier front lines in all of college basketball.⁶³

The 1994-95 Tigers returned the program back to national prominence with a Sweet Sixteen appearance. Eleven of the fourteen players on the roster had attended high school in Memphis. Finch was again on top, bringing the city together at the Pyramid to cheer on their Tigers. They reeled off thirteen wins in a fifteen-game span from December to February to solidify the team's NCAA chances and another twenty-win season.⁶⁴ The Tigers won the regular season Great Midwest Conference title but lost to Cincinnati in the tournament semifinals. Disappointed by their conference tournament loss, they were reenergized when they were seeded #6 seed in the NCAA's Mid-West

⁶¹ Ibid., 62.

⁶² Kelly Whiteside, "7 Memphis," *Sports Illustrated*, October 24, 1995.

⁶³ University of Memphis Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1994-1995, 23.

⁶⁴ "1994-95 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results," College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed July 13, 2017, <http://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1995-schedule.html>.

Region.⁶⁵ Greeted by their long-time rival Louisville in their first-round game, they defeated the Cardinals by twenty-one points, the largest margin of loss for the Cardinal in the NCAA tournament. The team's win moved Finch's record against rival Louisville to 13-10 as both a player and coach.⁶⁶ T-shirts appeared around town with the slogan: "I'd rather be a Finch than a Cardinal."⁶⁷ In the second round the Tigers survived a scare from Purdue in a dramatic two-point win as David Vaughn hit the game winning basket at the buzzer.⁶⁸

The win over Purdue advanced the Tigers to the Sweet Sixteen for the second time in Finch's tenure. Its reward was a matchup with local rival and defending national champion Arkansas. The Tigers were ahead by one with :14 remaining when a "phantom call" on Tiger guard Chris Garner gave Razorback Corey Beck two foul shots. Beck, a Fairley High product, hit one of the two and forced overtime. The Razorbacks opened with a 9-2 run in the extra period and ended the Tigers hopes of advancing further in the tournament.⁶⁹ Following the game Finch criticized the officiating and was later fined by the NCAA for his comments.⁷⁰ Finch's critics returned and again pointed to his bench coaching abilities as reason for the team's failures. Earlier in December, local sports radio even predicted that Finch would get fired if he had lost to interstate rival

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Congress, House of Representatives, Representative Steve Cohen of Tennessee Honoring the life of Memphis State basketball player and coach, Larry Finch. 112th Congress, 1st Session, (6 April 2011): 5367.

⁶⁷ Larry Finch Jr., interview by author, January 31, 2018.

⁶⁸ Dennis Freeland, "Tiger Basketball in the Nineties: A Decade of Decline," *Memphis Flyer*, December 16, 1999.

⁶⁹ Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1995-96, 64.

⁷⁰ Memphis State University Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1995-1996, 87.

Tennessee. The Tigers won. They then proceeded to win the conference, make the NCAA tournament, and advance to the Sweet Sixteen. Finch told reporters later that: “I was attacked personally, but you just have to keep believing in yourself. Everybody has an opinion.”⁷¹

The 1995-1996 season brought another change to the Tiger program as it joined Conference USA for its inaugural season. C-USA, was a twelve-team conference that was birthed with the sole purpose to increase the profits for its predominately basketball focused member schools. At the center of the genesis of the league was a six-year \$30 million contract from ESPN that would create the basis for the league’s financial stability and growth.⁷² The Tigers returned seniors Chris Garner, Michael Wilson, and Rodney Newsom, along with underclassmen Lorenzen Wright and Cedric Henderson. Preseason prognosticators believed they were ready to return to the NCAA tournament and make a deep run. Entering the season ranked #13 in the AP Poll, they got off to a hot start, winning their first eight games. The team played catapulted up to #3 in the AP Poll before losing on the road to John Calipari’s top-ranked University of Massachusetts Minutemen by three.⁷³ The trouble began when the Tigers lost to rival Louisville and then Big East opponent Georgetown by over twenty points in a two-week time span.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Kelly Whiteside, “7 Memphis,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 24, 1995.

⁷² Gerry Callahan, “USA! USA! Born Out of the All-American Desire to Increase Profits, the New Conference USA is an Instant Power,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 24, 1995.

⁷³ University of Memphis Men’s Basketball Media Guide 1996-1997, 49.

⁷⁴ “1995-96 Memphis Tigers Schedule and Results,” College Basketball at Sports-Reference.com, accessed August 1, 2017, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cbb/schools/memphis/1996-schedule.html>.

Although the Tigers never dropped out of the top 25 in the polls, they never reached the level of expectation set for the team by the media and fans before the season began.

Although Finch celebrated win number 200 in ten seasons against Southern Mississippi in late February, the critics remained perched to attack.⁷⁵ An early exit from the C-USA tournament held in Memphis left the Tigers with a #5 seed in the NCAA's West region. The Tigers traveled to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where they met Drexel University, a #12 seed. Drexel thoroughly outplayed the Tigers in the opening half behind the play of their undersized post player Malik Rose. In the locker room at halftime, Finch did his best to convince the Tigers that they needed to improve their play. The Tigers were looking past Drexel with the anticipation of playing Syracuse in the next round.⁷⁶ Rose thoroughly outplayed Lorenzen Wright on his way to the best game of his career. When the Tigers came out in the second half, they watched as Drexel kept pounding it inside to Rose, and when they collapsed on Rose, Jeff Meyers and Mike DeRocckis scorched the Tigers from behind the three-point line. Rose's 21 points and 15 rebounds spelled the end to the Tigers season. Finch felt the weight of another early exit from the NCAA tournament. Instead of a second-round matchup with Syracuse, the eventual national finalist, the Tigers limped home looking for answers. Heading into the next season, the Tigers were hard hit by graduation with the loss of Garner, Newsome, Wilson and Wright.

⁷⁵ University of Memphis Men's Basketball Media Guide, 1996-1997, 50.

⁷⁶ Larry Finch Jr., interview by author, January 31, 2018.

The Tigers opened the 1996-1997 campaign 1-4 and hastened the university's push to force Finch out as its head coach. Finch was first approached by the university after the December 18 game against Louisiana-Monroe, and he refused to accept their buyout on the spot. Instead, with the aid of longtime friend Reverend Bill Atkins, Finch sought to be compensated properly by the school.⁷⁷ As was the case when he was hired as head coach, Finch was not offered the appropriate compensation without first seeking legal counsel. Following a 61-47 win over Oklahoma at the Pyramid, the university held a press conference and announced that Finch was resigning and would accept the school's buyout offer. Ironically, university president Rawlins referred to Finch as "the most important figure in Memphis sports history."⁷⁸ Finch's attorney Ted Hansom, who negotiated Finch's first head coaching contract in 1986, loudly proclaimed that "Finch is being made the scapegoat."⁷⁹ Finch's wife remembers "not know anything other than what I read in the newspapers about his firing."⁸⁰ Larry Finch Jr., who was a sophomore on the team, never heard anything before his teammates. "I heard the rumblings, but it wasn't anything I hadn't heard before."⁸¹ If Finch knew anything about the firing, he kept it to himself to protect the ones he loved most. Finch had prided himself on doing what was best for his family and for his school.

⁷⁷ Dennis Freeland, "Dead Man Walking," *Memphis Flyer*, February 12, 1997.

⁷⁸ Phil Stukenborg, "Finch Resigns; Buyout Ends Tiger era," *Commercial Appeal*, January 31, 1997.

⁷⁹ Thomas Harding, "Finch is 'scapegoat,' Attorney says," *Commercial Appeal*, January 30, 1997.

⁸⁰ Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

⁸¹ Larry Finch Jr., interview by author, January 31, 2018.

Finch was at the center of the healing trope of basketball for the city, yet when the university felt the tug of financial strain they turned on Finch. Since his hiring, many fans, alumni, and boosters had trouble separating Finch the player from Finch the coach, and as the seasons wore on they became frustrated by their inability to influence him. They still saw him as the boy from Melrose who would respectfully listen to their advice. As their head coach, the man in charge, he listened less and made his own decisions. In the end he was responsible for the wins and losses, not those outside voices.⁸² Publicly, Finch never spoke ill of the university, of Rawlins, or of Johnson. Memphis State basketball was his family, it was the center of his life since 1969. As much pain as the removal caused for Finch internally, he never outwardly expressed his disappointment in being let go. It broke his heart more than anything else because he could not make winning happen. He was denied the opportunity to reach the goal he set for himself, to win a national championship for Memphis State.⁸³

Finch's plight had been perilous from the onset of his tenure as head coach. He ran a clean program, he graduated players, but his record was always questioned. Athletic director R.C. Johnson provided a vague five-point analysis of the criteria used by the athletic department to evaluate Finch. The city's "most important figure in sports history" had been let go with not one clear point rendered by anyone in the administration. Melrose principal LaVaughn Bridges called Finch "a man from Orange Mound, a model for the community."⁸⁴ Finch often spoke with the kids in Orange

⁸² Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

⁸³ Vickie S. Finch, interview by author, February 7, 2018.

⁸⁴ Kevin Robbins, "Community Where it All Began Feels for Finch," *Commercial Appeal*, January 30, 1997.

Mound. He told them, “You can be anything you want to be. But you have got to listen to the people that care about you. With that, and the help of the Lord, you can do anything.”⁸⁵ For years Larry Finch had heeded the advice of Verties Sails, Gene Bartow, Ronnie Robinson, Herb Hilliard, Dana Kirk and others as he forged a career marked by unparalleled success in Memphis’s basketball history. The university’s decision to move the Tigers from the Mid-South Coliseum to the Pyramid was the biggest factor in Finch losing his job. The 20,142 seat Pyramid required more season ticket holders, and when the university decided to carry Tiger home games on live television, the numbers in the arena went down.⁸⁶ By the 1990s, modern college basketball was becoming an economic juggernaut and this new paradigm removed loyalty from the coaching ranks, replacing it with economic impact figures that were often outside of the control of the coach. Former Tiger head coach Dana Kirk, a sports talk show host on WMC-AM 79 at the time, painted an accurate portrayal of the situation: “When you’re off in attendance you’ve got problems. The University of Memphis is the heartbeat of Memphis, Tennessee, and the athletic department is big business. If you’re losing money, you’ve got to make corrections.”⁸⁷

If Memphis was to remain relevant in college athletics, the Great American Pyramid was to play a vital role in this growth. Originally an \$80 million-dollar project designed by Memphis real estate mogul and former owner of the Denver Nuggets, Sidney

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Thomas Harding, “Finch is ‘scapegoat,’ Attorney says,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 30, 1997.

⁸⁷ Ron Higgins, “Kirk Takes to Airwaves at Full Speed,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 27, 1994.

Shlenker, the city was responsible for \$56 million of its total cost.⁸⁸ By November 1991 the Pyramid stumbled to completion. Sidney Shlenker was fired by the city after failing to gather \$50 million dollars for financing. Later, his management company sought protection in bankruptcy court for over \$16 million.⁸⁹ Doomed financially from the start, the Pyramid was designed to include shops, restaurants, and museums that never came to fruition, resulting in the arena's sole use for concerts and sporting events. This added financial pressure was passed on to its main tenant, the Tigers men's basketball team. Winning would bring fans downtown to spend money. When the Pyramid did not bring fans downtown, the entire downtown business district felt its impact. Without a music museum or a theme park, the Tigers alone were responsible for attracting people the downtown business district. The economic failure of the Pyramid brought down Finch, the figurehead of the university's basketball program.

The Tri-State Defender saw Finch's resignation in a different light. It argued that the university's all-time winningest coach lost his job due to "blatant racism."⁹⁰ Leading the charge of Finch supporters who felt racially betrayed by the university was Dr. L. Lasimba Gray, the pastor of the New Sardis Baptist Church. Willie Herenton's 1991 mayoral victory led to Gray urging the city to unite behind Herenton, but the unexpected firing of Finch reminded Gray and blacks throughout the community of the risks that black pioneers in Memphis faced. Many in the black community urged Finch not to sign with Memphis State in 1969 for fear that he would not be treated fairly. After dedicating

⁸⁸ Woody Baird, "Memphis Will Celebrate," *Reading Eagle*, September 15, 1989.

⁸⁹ Woody Baird, "Big Pyramid, Little Wonder," *The Fredericksburg Free Lance Star*, November 9, 1991.

⁹⁰ Bill Little, "Larry Finch Accepts Fate," *Tri-State Defender*, February 8, 1997.

close to thirty years of his life to the university, he became the scapegoat for the financial fiasco of the Great American Pyramid. From the black community's perspective, they saw a university uplifted by the play, the spirit, and the long-term commitment to the university by Finch. His reward was being forced to resign in the middle of the season.

Larry Finch handled the entire process with the dignity that had marked his tenure since his arrival on campus in 1969. On the night when Rawlins and R.C. Johnson announced his fate, Sunday Adebayo ran over and hugged Finch as his name was announced as a starter. Finch's eyes welled up with tears. After the game Finch said, "I won't ever forget Adebayo for that."⁹¹ Finch referred to Lane Rawlins as a "class act" during the press conference announcing his resignation. Finch still held true to the life-long lessons from Verties Sails, "If you can't say anything good, don't say anything at all."⁹²

The Tigers won Finch's last game as head coach. Finch reflected, "the fans were just great, and I saw a group of young men really rise up to the occasion." Former players from Keith Lee to Rodney Douglas showed up to pay homage to their coach. Bartlett banker Harold Byrd epitomized the feelings of so many Memphis fans when he said, "we wanted national television to know what we think about him. He's the Jackie Robinson of basketball in Memphis. Larry did the bottom line right, with integrity, class and no cheating." The desire for Larry Finch to be a savior matched a widespread hunger for a greater American redeemer in Memphis. Following Finch's final game as coach, Tiger official scorer Jimmy Hayslip, who had worked every home game for Finch as a

⁹¹ Bobby Hall, "Finch, Tiger icon, coaches home finale," *Commercial Appeal*, March 1, 1997.

⁹² Michael Lollar, "Coach Larry Finch calls the plays his own way," *Commercial Appeal*, January 17, 1988.

player and coach said, “I think he did more to solidify this city after Dr. King was killed than all the politicians combined. At that crucial time, he was the glue that held the city together.”⁹³

Outside of the Mid-South Coliseum, Memphis was a very complicated place. The desegregation of its schools led to one of the largest exoduses in the history of public schools in the nation, creating one of the nation’s largest private school communities. Harold Ford Sr. became the first African American elected in the history of Tennessee to the House of Representatives from Memphis. In the 1980s, both white and black political offices became targets of federal and state indictments. These scandals only further divided the city. The white establishment employed Larry Finch to quell the storm of political upheaval taking place before their own eyes. He created a soft middle ground for the white political establishment that struggled openly with this new racial paradigm. For his part, Finch relished the role as unifier in the city. He remained apolitical during his basketball career and was adamant that, “If the world was like an athletic program – a winning team – It would be a lot better.”⁹⁴ Unfortunately for Finch the worlds of sport and politics collided in 1996 when he was forced out as head coach. For lifelong Memphians, Finch brought the city together behind basketball during one of the most turbulent times in the city’s racial past. For others, the Tiger basketball program only

⁹³ Bobby Hall, “With an Emotional Finale, Finch Leaves his Home Court a Winner,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 2, 1997.

⁹⁴ “Finch Strives for the Ultimate,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 15, 1973.

masked the deeper racial wounds that remained present over the course of Finch's basketball career.

Instead of signaling Memphis' arrival as a city in the New South, the most iconic basketball figure in the city's history paid the ultimate price for its failure. To ease this pain the local press looked back on bygone days with pride and joy, remembering not the failures, but Finch's heroics as a player and as a coach. As a black man in the Deep South, he was not never afforded another opportunity to coach again. White Memphians remember the Coliseum as a space to cheer on their Tigers and see the racial possibilities. But after the games, they returned to a world that remained segregated by race. For black Memphians, many of whom had warned Finch against going to Memphis State, basketball provided hope that a shift in the cultural paradigm in the city was possible. But after the games were over, black Memphians still confronted with the legacies and realities of Jim Crow in their daily lives. On the court, their native son, Finch, became a symbol of hope, even as his life revealed the barriers that remained.

From Finch's playing days at Melrose High through his coaching tenure at Memphis State, basketball was always at the center of his world. For Finch, basketball provided a way to bring people together. He believed that if the world was more like an athletic team that came together for the better of the whole, then the world would be a better place. Finch was born into a world of Jim Crow, in a city that leaned heavily on its old Southern culture. He came of age following one of the city's darkest moments and made a bold decision to go where others before him had been denied. His abilities on the basketball court allowed him to make inroads as a pioneer on Memphis State's campus as the school's first black basketball star. Surrounded by his high school running mate and

high school sweetheart he changed how many Memphians viewed of young black men. Local politicians and journalists alike were drawn to his persona and began to present his success as an example of racial healing in the city. Unable to resolve the deep-seated racial issues present in this era, these men turned to Finch's story as a symbol that progress was being made in the city.

Outside of the Mid-South Coliseum the city remained divided, when Finch graduated the university continued to struggle with racial progress. Across town, on the other side of the Beltway, all-black Lemoyne-Owen College captured the city's first national championship. Hidden behind the veil of segregation, most white Memphians remained oblivious to the school's basketball triumph. Later, when former Melrose prep coach Verties Sails Jr. became the first African-American full-time assistant basketball coach at Memphis State, the issue of race remained a stumbling block on campus and in the community. Sails made inroads in recruiting black athletes, helped defuse racial conflicts within the program, and supported his head coach, yet he still faced racial slights throughout his tenure. Denied an opportunity for the head coaching position at Memphis State, Sails was relegated to near obscurity as Shelby State Community College's head basketball coach.

The ABA provided the city with another opportunity to rally behind the exploits of its hometown team. Instead the racial dynamics of professional basketball players who made more money than the fans, and actively defied acceptable cultural norms led to failure. The Mid-South Coliseum never reached a fevered pitch for the ABA like it had with the 1973 Tigers team. Neither Johnny Neumann or Larry Finch could resurrect the troubled franchise.

When Finch returned to Memphis as an assistant coach under Dana Kirk, the city once again embraced him. Finch's boss Dana Kirk set out to win at any cost, and in the process further exposed the racial discord within the city. Accused of exploiting black players and funneling money to Tiger players, Kirk became a symbol of the ills of college basketball. Finch's ascension to the head chair in university's basketball program was a byproduct of Kirk's failure and the timing of his demise. Many in the black community feared that their leading black candidate would get passed over again, as had Sails in 1979. Finch's position as head coach, once secured by contract, was tenuous as many around the program continued to see him as the young boy who brought MSU fame in 1973, not the man capable of leading a major university's basketball program. His demise was a product of poor economic planning by the city and the changing athletic climate of the collegiate game. He was still hailed as the city's favorite son, even in the hour of his demise.

Finch's life began as a young boy growing up in Boss Crump's segregated Memphis. Over the course of his life he witnessed the changing racial shift in the city from Crump to the city's first black mayor in Dr. Willie Herenton. Many of the same politicians and journalists who praised him and promulgated the myth of Finch as racial unifier remained in the city throughout his basketball career. Memphians, and Memphis State basketball fans reveled in what Finch built, a basketball program with national acclaim. Nevertheless, in many ways the city remained as divided along racial lines in 1997 as it had when Finch's Melrose team won the MIAA city championship in 1968 or his Tigers team advanced to the NCAA finals against UCLA in 1973. Finch was a symbol of hope for a city torn by racial strife. The university, its fan base, and many in

the city believed that one man could unify a city through sport. Finch understood the racial dynamics of his hometown and believed that his basketball career was one way he could make Memphis a better place. For a few brief hours at a time, Finch over the course of his basketball career united the city behind its love for basketball success. However, once the city left the arena it returned to a city divided and struggling over race.

Epilogue

In 1998, the year after Finch was forced to resign, he turned to local politics as way to remain engaged with the city that he loved. Finch made a strong showing against Republican incumbent Guy Bates in the race for Shelby County Registrar. Finch's mother Maple suffered a heart attack on the eve of the election and his heart immediately turned to caring for her. Bates won by 127 votes. Bates outspent Finch by a three-to-one margin and relied upon the white Republican majority in Shelby County to overcome Finch's popularity and retain his seat. Finch's respectability remained evident in his concession speech when he told his supporters, "We didn't have the money of some of the well-oiled machines, but by the same token we did the best with what we had and took our votes to the people."¹ His concession speech sounded familiar to Memphians as Finch refused to bad mouth his opponent. Instead he focused on how his campaign gave its best effort.

Finch suffered a heart attack and two strokes in December of 2002.² At age 51, he was left paralyzed on his left side and lost one of his most endearing character traits, the ability to speak.³ The Tigers had struggled since Finch's forced resignation and were on their third head coach in five years, still looking for their first NCAA tournament bid

¹ Kriste Goad, "Slim loss is the least of Finch's concerns," *Commercial Appeal*, August 8, 1998.

² Michael Messner, *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). Messner asserts that boys from lower class black families are more apt to seek careers in athletics as the means of constructing their masculine identities. Thus, when forced to disengage with their athletic careers they stumble and seem confused because the major focus of their life has been taken from them.

³ Zack McMillan, "Family and Friends Help Coach Finch Reach for His Biggest-ever Rebound," *Commercial Appeal*, December 15, 2002.

since his departure. Finch's deteriorating health became apparent to the community and his former players rushed to his aid. Ken Moody organized a benefit golf tournament to help pay the mounting costs of Finch's medical care. Moody brought together the city to support "Coach" in a way that reminded many of how Finch brought the city together for nearly thirty years. Moody told the crowd gathered at Galloway Golf Course: "Look at this crowd and its whites and blacks, males and females, young and old, and he's brought the city together again. There's no way the Lord would rain on this parade. This is one of his angels." Pastor L. LaSimba Gray, who had blasted the university for its "blatant racism" when it fired Finch in 1997, joined the chorus of praise for Finch when he referred to Finch as more than a basketball player, and more than a coach; he was "a builder of humanity."⁴ The *Tri-State Defender* joined in the praise, but also echoed the sentiment in the black community that Finch had not been treated fairly by the university. Local black golf pro Charles Hudson, who helped to organize the event, reiterated that sentiment. When Finch coached, he worked for a salary lower than other coaches in the league. "It wasn't right and now that he's in this predicament, those people he worked for need to step up to the plate and do the right thing."⁵

The following year's golf benefit for Finch brought more concern from the community as his health waned. New Tiger coach John Calipari had just received a \$600,000 pay raise from the university to ensure that Calipari remained in the city, something that the university never had to address with Finch.⁶ Calipari was a hired gun,

⁴ Zack McMillan, "In Illness, Finch still a unifier," *Commercial Appeal*, April 30, 2005.

⁵ Wiley Henry, "Golf Tourney funds to benefit Finch," *Tri-State Defender*, April 23, 2005.

⁶ Geoff Calkins, "Finch, city's basketball soul, needs an assist," *Commercial Appeal*, April 16, 2006.

a man who came into the city to resurrect the basketball program. But, as a student of the game, he was a big fan of Finch and understood the importance of Finch to the city. Calipari returned the program to the NCAA championship game in 2009, where the Tigers lost to Kansas. Later that spring Calipari departed for the basketball job at the University of Kentucky, to the outrage of many Memphians. Winning basketball and competing at the highest level nationally, was thanks to Finch. But as Verties Sails told the *Commercial Appeal*, “a week or two after his (Finch’s) last game, people moved on to something else. Everybody forgot about Larry. But he didn’t forget. He couldn’t forget.”⁷

On April 2, 2011, Larry Finch succumbed to the health issues that plagued him for the previous ten years. The front page of the *Commercial Appeal* provided a picture of Finch smiling and shaking hands after a 1997 victory over the Houston Cougars at the Pyramid. Below that was a black and white picture of Finch, in tears, being comforted by Coach Gene Bartow following the 1973 NCAA Finals loss to UCLA. Six full pages of stories and pictures memorialized the man who brought Memphis together like no other man in the history of the city. Columnist Geoff Calkins reminded the city how Finch had chosen Memphis State over other suitors, even over the objection of portions of Orange Mound. Finch, along with Ronnie Robinson, “brought black and white together, carried Memphis State to the Final Four in 1973 and caused a city riven by racial hatred to see past its differences.”⁸ For Memphians, Finch was a native son who broke down the color barrier for the best black basketball players in the city. He became a symbol of hope for

⁷ Ron Higgins, “Larry’s Journey,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 4,2007.

⁸ Geoff Calkins, “He Loved His City; Memphis Reciprocated,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 3,2011.

the white political establishment following the 1968 Sanitation Workers Strike. He spurned playing in the NBA to remain home and play for the hometown's ABA Tams. The university turned to him to bring respectability back to Tiger basketball, and he did. Larry Finch embodied the best that the city and university had to offer.

In the spring of 2018 the University of Memphis looked back to Finch again when it hired Anfernee "Penny" Hardaway to resurrect its basketball program. Hardaway is the school's most storied player after Finch. The attention that he garnered reminded the city of its heyday under Finch. Memphians longed for a return to the glory days of Finch and Robinson; of Lee and Turner; and of Hardaway and Vaughn. In a city that remains divided racially over issues such as public schools, Hardaway created a diversion of unity behind Tigers basketball. Former Tiger players, city dignitaries and even Finch's widow were all on hand to announce Hardaway's hiring. Although much has changed in the Bluff City, much has stayed the same. Memphis Tiger basketball remains one of a few places where whites and blacks can come together as one, if only for a moment.

Selected Bibliography

Archival Sources

College Park, Maryland

National Archives at College Park

Jackson, Mississippi

Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame and Museum

Memphis, Tennessee

Lemoyne-Owen College, Hollis Price Library Special Collections

Memphis and Shelby County Room, Benjamin L. Hooks Public Library

ABA Pro Basketball in Memphis

Chandler Collection

Dana Kirk Folder

Larry Finch Folder

Maxine A. Smith NAACP Collection

Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned R. McWherther Library, Univ. of Memphis

University of Memphis Basketball Archive

Periodicals

Baltimore Sun

Chicago Tribune

Cleveland Plain-Dealer

Daily Helmsman (Memphis State)

Fredericksburg Free Lance Star

Harvard Crimson
Japan Times
Journal of Southern History
Labor History
Las Vegas Sun
Lawrence Daily Journal World
Memphis Commercial Appeal
Memphis Daily News
Memphis Flyer
Memphis Press-Scimitar
Memphis Tri-State Defender
New York Times
Oklahoman
Places Journal
Purple and Gold Christian Brothers Memphis
Reading Eagle
Sports Illustrated
Tuscaloosa News
Tuscaloosa Times
USA Today
Washington Post
West Tennessee Historical Society Papers

Books

Ash, Stephen. *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riots That Shook the Nation One Year after the Civil War*. Knoxville, UTK Press, 2015.

Axthelm, Pete. *The City Game*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970.

- Ayers, Edward. *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.
- Biondi, Martha. *The Black Revolution on Campus*. Berkeley: UC Press, 2012.
- Bond, Beverly and Janann Sherman. *Memphis in Black and White*. Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2003.
- Boyd, Todd. *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.
- Branston, John. *Rowdy Memphis: The South Unscripted*. Nashville: Cold Tree Press, 2004.
- Capers, Gerald. *The Biography of a River Town*. New Orleans: Tulane UP, 1966.
- Carey, Mike. *Bad News*. New York: Sports Publishing, 2016.
- Cohen, Stanley. *The Game They Played*. New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1977.
- Criblez, Adam. *Tall Tales and Short Shorts: Dr. J., Pistol Pete, and the Birth of the Modern NBA*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017.
- Davis, Seth. *Getting to Us: How Great Coaches Make Great Teams*. New York: Penguin Books Inc., 2018.
- _____. *When March Went Mad: The Game that Transformed Basketball*. New York: Holt, 2010.
- DeCosta-Willis, Miriam. *Notable Black Memphians*. Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008.
- Dowdy, Wayne. *Mayor Crump Don't Like It*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2006.
- Edwards, Harry. *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969.
- _____. *Sociology of Sport*. Homewood: Dorsey Press, 1973.
- Estes, Steve. *I am a Man: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2005.
- Fitzpatrick, Frank. *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: Kentucky, Texas Western and the Game that Changed American Sports*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999.

- Ford Jr., Harold. *More Davids Than Goliaths*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2010.
- George, Nelson. *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992.
- Gentry, Keith. *2015-2016 Shelby Metro High School Basketball*. Memphis: Gentry's Statistical Service, 2015.
- Gordon, Robert. *Respect Yourself: Stax records and the Soul Explosion*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Green, Laurie. *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007.
- Green, Nelson. *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1992).
- Green, Michael and Roger D. Launius. *Charlie Finley: The Outrageous Story of Baseball's Super Showman*. New York: Walker & Company, 2010.
- Goudsouzian, Aram. *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution*. Berkeley: UC Press, 2010.
- Guzzio, Tracie Church. "Race and Basketball in the Works of John Edgar Wideman," found in Amy Bass ed., *In the Game: Race, Identity and Sports in the Twentieth Century*. New York: MacMillan, 2005.
- Harkins, John. *Metropolis of the American Nile: Memphis and Shelby County*. Oxford: Guild Bindery Press, 1982.
- Honey, Michael. *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, MLK's Last Campaign*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007.
- Jacobs, Berry. *Across the Lines: Profiles in Courage: Tales of the First Black Players in the ACC and SEC*. New York: Lyons Press, 2007.
- Katz, Milton. *Breaking Through: John B. McLendon, Basketball Legend and Civil Rights Pioneer*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007.
- Kinchen, Shirletta. *Black Power in the Bluff City: African American Youth and Student Activism in Memphis, 1965-1975*. Knoxville: UTK Press, 2016.

- Kirk, Dana. *Simply Amazing: The Dana Kirk Story*. United States of America, 1988.
- Kriegel, Mark. *Pistol: The Life of Pete Maravich*. New York: Free Press, 2008.
- Litwack, Leon. *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999.
- Mallozzi, Vincent. *Asphalt Gods: An Oral History of the Rucker Tournament*. New York: Doubleday Publishing, 2003.
- Maraniss, Andrew. *Strong Inside: Perry Wallace and the Collision of Race and Sports in the South*. Nashville: Vanderbilt Press, 2014.
- Martin, Charles. *Benching Jim Crow: The Rise and fall of the Color Line in Southern College Sports, 1890 - 1980*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010.
- Mazor, Sharon. *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*. Oxford: University Mississippi Press, 1998.
- Messner, Michael. *Power Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Montieth, Mark. *Reborn: The Pacers and the Return of Pro Basketball to Indianapolis*. Indianapolis: Halfcourt Press, 2017.
- Olsen, Jack. *The Black Athlete: A Shameful Story*. New York: Time Life Publishing, 1968.
- Pluto, Terry. *Loose Balls: The Short, Wild Life of the ABA*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990.
- Pohlman, Marcus. *Opportunity Lost: Race & Poverty in the Memphis City Schools*. Knoxville: UTK Press, 2008.
- Rappaport, Ken and Barry Wilner. *The Big Dance: The Story of the NCAA Basketball Tournament*. New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2012.
- Recht, Michael ed., *ABA Official Guide 1973-74*. St. Louis: The Sporting News, 1973.
- Rhodes, William. *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006.

- Roberts, Randy. *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*. New York: Free Press, 1983.
- Robinson, Zandria. *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2014.
- Rogers, Ibram. *The Black Campus Movement: Black Student and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972*. New York: MacMillan, 2012.
- Ruck, Rob. *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993.
- Sanford, Otis. *From Boss Crump to King Willie: How Race Changed Memphis Politics*. Knoxville: UTK Press, 2017.
- Shapiro, Leonard. *Big Man on Campus: John Thompson and the Georgetown Hoyas*. New York: Holt and Company, 1991.
- Simmons, Lakisha Michelle. *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015.
- Smith, John Matthew. *Sons of Westwood: John Wooden, UCLA, and the Dynasty That Changed College Basketball (Sport and Society)*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013.
- Telander, Rick. *Heaven is a Playground*. Lincoln: Bison Books, 1995.
- Tucker, David. *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Blacks and Civic Reformers*. Knoxville, UTK Press, 1980.
- Turner, Allegra. *Except by Grace: The Life of Jesse H. Turner*. Jonesboro: Four G Publishers, 2004.
- Tygiel, Jules. *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and his Legacy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983.
- Varady, Aharon N. Bond Hill: *Origin and Transformation of a 19th Century Cincinnati Railroad Suburb*, report, 9th ed. (Cincinnati, OH: Henry Watkins Press, 2005).
- Veazey, Kyle. *Champions for Change: How the Mississippi State Bulldogs and their Bold Coach Defied Segregation*. Charleston: The History Press, 2012.

- West, Gary. *Kentucky Colonels of the ABA: The Real Story of a Team Left Behind*. Morley: Acclaim Press, 2011.
- Wiggins, David. *Glory Bound Black Athletes in a White America*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1997.
- _____. *Separate Games: African American Sport behind the Walls of Segregation*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2016.
- Wiggins, David K. and Patrick B. Miller. *The Unlevel Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003.
- Williams, Charles. *African American Life and Culture in Orange Mound: Case Study of a Black Community in Memphis, Tennessee, 1890-1980*. New York: Lexington Books, 2013.