

Memphis State: quite a commitment

By Zack McMillin

Sunday, March 30, 2003

Larry Finch could flat shoot the cover off a basketball. Dirty Red, as they called him over in Orange Mound, had hands strong as a bricklayer's, a barrel chest and arms built sturdy in the old-fashioned way, by play and by work and by nature. Nobody ever accused him of explosive leaping ability, but Finch could hover longer than one might imagine.

Because of his strength and his gift for judging trajectory, every time Larry Finch took a shot, it had a chance.

"He put more spin on the ball," says Larry Kenon, one of his famous teammates, "than anybody I ever played with."

So when Ronnie Robinson tipped the ball to him on the late fall evening of Dec. 1, 1970, Finch took four dribbles, eyed the basket 25 feet away, rose up, pointed his right elbow at the rim and loaded the basketball with backspin.

History does not tell us if the 7,123 at the Mid-South Coliseum that night made like a Melrose crowd and let out a collective "whoosh!" when Finch shot.

Newspaper accounts do tell us what happened next. The ball ripped into the cotton netting, and the Coliseum exploded with joy that had been bottled up too long.

Six seconds into his first varsity game for the Memphis State Tigers basketball team, Larry Finch had the first two points of a career that would produce 1,869 points in only three seasons. He finished with 24 that night against California-Davis, and, in the first game for charismatic new coach Gene Bartow, the Tigers scored more points -- 99 -- than they had in any game of the previous five seasons.

It was the opening scene in a three-year saga that forever changed Tiger basketball, and the unbridled cheers from that crowd began a kind of catharsis in Memphis, on and off the court. Because 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.

Maybe basketball lacked the power to solve the city's racial divisions, but it provided both a welcome distraction and a needed point of hope. When Finch, Robinson and company ended

their journey with a loss to UCLA in the 1973 national championship game, the Tigers had more than just captivated Memphis with their talent and enthusiasm for playing a simple game.

They had, in the process, helped people in the city learn to get along.

Tiger fans in St. Louis at that 1973 Final Four brandished signs that said, simply: "Believe in Memphis." It captured the mood of that unforgettable season.

"Memphis State and the rest of the city was racially divided," says Maxine Smith, former executive director of the NAACP. "Sport played such an overwhelming part in our community breaking down barriers."

At some level, it's a preposterous claim. Basketball breaking down racial barriers? Barriers that seem, at times, to be as intractable and forbidding today as ever?

But most anyone who lived through that moment in Memphis's history will attest that it's true. The 1972-73 Memphis State basketball team gave something to citizens from every corner of every neighborhood. It spread a collective joy that sports is uniquely equipped to generate, and the way people describe the city's response to that team has turned into a kind of local folklore.

On the 30th anniversary of that Final Four week in St. Louis, The Commercial Appeal will examine the impact that timeless Tiger team had on the city.

How much influence could a college basketball team have in a city polarized by race and class? To what extent did the city change, and did those changes last? Did that team really help white folks and black folks find common ground? Or is it all a happy myth?

And what were the players really like, anyway? While people tend to recall the team as a powerful social force, it was a collection of characters, too, individuals who didn't seek to change their corner of the world, but might have done so, just the same.

There was the coach so square they called him "Clean" Gene Bartow, who came from a Division 2 school to develop a basketball team powerful enough to put a scare in the best team in the history of college basketball.

There was transcendental Larry Kenon, who helped forever change the options available to talented young basketball players.

There was Billy Buford, one of the all-time great voices in the Tiger locker room, and L'il Bill Laurie, a gritty point guard who became a billionaire.

And at the center of it all were Finch and Ronnie Robinson, sons of mothers who earned their livings as what were then called "domestics," who emerged from Orange Mound to become the unlikeliest of heroes for a city in a slump.

When these two buddies took their spots on the varsity squad in December of 1970, the city was just 30 months removed from perhaps its lowest point, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the balcony at the Lorraine Motel.

Black Memphians detested Memphis's mayor at the time, Henry Loeb, who was described by Stax star and Tiger basketball fan Isaac Hayes as a "staunch racist."

In the following three years, the city's public school system would be riven by a federally mandated busing desegregation plan.

The day before Finch and Robinson began their Tiger careers, the city council met with legendary New York Times publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, whose company was in the process of purchasing a Memphis TV station. He asked them to name Memphis's biggest problem. The answer was obvious: race.

Things had improved, but the city was at a crossroads.

Councilman James L. Netters: "There is as much polarization at the grass roots level as ever, maybe more. One serious event, one big event could ignite it again."

Council chairman Mrs. Gwen Aswumb: "We're still very far behind."

Councilman Robert James: "The fever is raging."

On the December day of Finch and Robinson's debut, the wind along the river had cooperated just enough to allow workers to put down the first girder on what then was called the Interstate 40 bridge. Looking back, it's hard not to connect the two events.

Downtown, city fathers celebrated the construction of a new, modern bridge, one that would become a symbol of the city, one that would connect Memphis to the national interstate running clear to California.

In Midtown, in a civic building halfway between the Memphis Country Club and Melrose High, a mostly white crowd celebrated Larry Finch hitting a 25-foot jumper.

It is easy to recall the thicket of problems and frustrations facing the city and the nation in the early '70s, and easy to forget something else. There was idealism then, too. The palpable sense that anything was possible, even amid the chaos of a rapidly changing world.

Men were still landing on the moon twice a year, after all.

Believe in Memphis?

Why not?

A short walk, a long trip

Larry Finch and Ronnie Robinson grew up within easy walking distance of the Mid-South Coliseum in the area of Memphis known as Orange Mound, a place where pride has always run deep.

Finch lived over on Select Street, the oldest of Maple Finch's seven children.

His father, who drove a cab, died when Finch was 13, and his mother worked as a domestic, earning \$5.50 a day, the two quarters serving as her bus fare.

Finch learned the game on the outdoor courts in and around Orange Mound, and by pestering older players to include him in their games and practices.

"Larry would be out there, as short as he was, trying to look in and see what we were doing," says Charles Hudson, the golf pro at Pine Hill who played for Melrose in the early '60s. "I would see him out in the cold and I said, 'There's that little kid, Finch.' "

Ronnie Robinson lived in a three-room house over in Magnolia -- "kind of a suburb of Orange Mound," Robinson says -- with his mother and seven siblings.

"One of my goals, I said if I ever get up, I want the biggest bedroom I can find," says Robinson. "It was a pretty tough life growing up, but we didn't know it. To us, that was just the way this life works."

Robinson arrived at Memphis State skinny -- 6-8, 175 pounds -- in part because he would literally compete with his older brother, Neal, at dinnertime.

"The coaches at Melrose used to wonder why me and Neal got showered and dressed so fast after practice," Robinson says. "I told 'em I had to get home before Neal so I could get something to eat."

Finch and Robinson did not meet until junior high, but by the time they began playing together at Melrose, they were inseparable. As two of the city's most prominent athletes -- in any sport, on any level -- Finch and Robinson led Melrose to a famous city championship victory at a sold-out Mid-South Coliseum.

Memphis State and then-coach Moe Iba pursued Finch from the time he was a sophomore in high school, but convincing him to sign with the Tigers would be difficult.

Black Memphians did not trust Memphis State, and not without reason.

"They felt like it was a tokenism attitude toward blacks," says Leonard Draper, a black Memphian working in local community centers who Iba enlisted to help recruit.

In those days, black high schools played in what were known as the Negro Leagues, and Charlie Cavagnaro covered them for The Commercial Appeal. He can remember watching the best black

players in the city -- Charlie Paulk, Rick Roberson, Bobby Smith et al -- and thinking Memphis State could have won a national title by putting them together.

"There were these absolutely marvelous basketball players coming along in the city," says Cavagnaro, who later became Tiger athletic director. "Every college but those in the South were in here recruiting. Some great ones got away."

Until 1964, the athletic department did not permit coaches to recruit black athletes. Even when the athletic department declared itself open to black student-athletes, there were complications.

It is still not clear what went wrong with the recruitment of Bobby Smith, a fluid forward from Melrose who many still argue is the best basketball player Memphis ever produced.

When Penny Hardaway signed with the Tigers in 1990, many compared him to Smith in an effort to capture the magnitude of his talent. So when Smith signed with Memphis State and then-coach Dean Ehlers in the spring of 1965, the Tigers were poised to begin a new tradition.

It was a move former Tiger guard Mike Butler, as a student in the mid-60s, had urged the administration to make.

"It needed to happen," says Butler, who often ventured to black neighborhoods for pickup games. "Growing up, I had seen all these great black players going away to school. It really didn't make sense.

"Actually, segregation didn't make sense if you really want to get down to it."

Just before Smith was to enroll, however, the athletic department said he did not meet certain requirements on an entrance exam and denied him admission.

Though Smith would land at Tulsa and go on to enjoy a long and prosperous professional career, the episode created an even-larger divide between Memphis State and black Memphians, especially those in the neighborhood right next door, in Orange Mound.

"People in Orange Mound were really disturbed with Memphis State at the time," says Draper.

When Iba took over the program in 1966, at age 27, the Tigers were preparing to move into the Missouri Valley Conference, then considered one of the best basketball leagues in the country.

It was also considered a "black" league, a crude way of saying most teams in the league featured good black players.

To compete in the Valley, Iba knew he had to cultivate the fertile talent of the Memphis Negro Leagues. The only black player on Iba's first team, Herb Hilliard, was an unrecruited walk-on with modest skills.

There would be other reasons for the Tigers' woeful 3-45 league record those first three seasons in the Valley -- Iba's plodding offense, for one -- but it was impossible to ignore the head start other Valley schools had in recruiting black players.

"We had a mostly all-white team and it was quite an adjustment for the talent we had," says Iba, a part-time NBA scout now living in Fort Worth, Texas. "Memphis State had just never recruited black athletes. We had to break some ground."

This is what Iba was facing in his recruitment of Finch. Memphis State had never recruited, signed and played a black Memphian out of high school.

"He had to recruit some athletes to stay home," Cavagnaro says. "It's why Larry was so important."

Finch could think of many reasons to stay home and become a Tiger: His family, his growing friendship with Draper, the trust Iba had built with Melrose assistant coach Verties Sails and the commitment the Tigers made to also offer a scholarship to Robinson.

Even with all that, there was immense pressure on Finch within the community to sign elsewhere.

"Larry said, 'Coach, if you say not to go, I won't go,' " says Sails, the local junior-college coach who is now a Memphis coaching icon. "I said, 'Larry, if you want to go, I'd be crazy if I didn't tell you to do what you want to do.' "

Sails could handle the heat, he told Finch.

"The key was," remembers Sails, "could he handle the heat?"

When Iba assured Sails he was committed to the package deal of Finch-Robinson, Finch finally decided to follow his heart and sign with the Tigers.

William Collins, Larry and Ronnie's coach at Melrose, like many in Orange Mound, felt hurt by the decision. He refused to attend the signing ceremony.



Rough start: Tigers tumble early in season, despite their stars

By Zack McMillin

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Wayne Yates never much liked airplane travel, so as the turbulence buffeted the Continental flight, the dapper Memphis State assistant coach tried to calm himself.

Headed to Amarillo, Texas, to see a junior-college recruit named Larry Kenon, Yates stared straight ahead as the West Texas squall threatened to knock the plane from the sky.

"Folks," the pilot said, coming over the intercom, "this is what we call threading the needle."

As the lead recruiter for Tiger basketball coach Gene Bartow, Yates endured airplane travel as a part of his profession, and the trip to Amarillo had become a common destination.

Yates knew he needed to do more than just find replacements for senior big men Don Holcomb and Fred Horton. To compete for a national title -- and this was the goal for Memphis State in 1972-73 -- the Tigers needed impact players to help Larry Finch and Ronnie Robinson, best buddies from Orange Mound.

With the plane tossing one way and his stomach turning another, Yates just hoped he'd make it to Amarillo.

"It was a real white-knuckler," says Yates. "It was awful. I remember wondering, 'Is this really worth it?'"

If Yates required any reassurance, he needed only reflect on how far the basketball program had traveled in the two years under Bartow -- and remind himself how much the city was counting on the 1972-73 squad to do something special.

"From the end of Larry's and Ronnie's junior year, everyone . . . felt that if we could get just a little help, we'd get to the Final Four," Yates says. "That's all that was talked about. Everyone believed in it. It was like a religion."

Finch and Robinson had exceeded all expectations after joining the varsity squad as sophomores (freshmen were not then eligible to play) for the 1970-71 season.

Their decision to play for Memphis State -- so unpopular in and around their Orange Mound community -- had been more than vindicated.

As Finch and Robinson rejuvenated the program, the embrace of the Tiger faithful grew stronger, and as the affection for them grew, they seemed to respond with even better basketball. It was a cycle that constantly seemed to regenerate.

It was just as Verties Sails, their mentor at Melrose, had predicted when Finch frustrated many in his neighborhood by signing with the Tigers and then-coach Moe Iba.

"You go out there," Sails had told him, "and you do well and everybody that didn't want you to go, they gonna jump on the bandwagon like most fans."

When Bartow replaced Iba in 1970 after successive six-victory seasons, he installed an up-tempo offense and Finch and Robinson thrived, making the All-Valley squad as sophomores and juniors.

In 1970-71, the Tigers won 14 of their first 16 games and the Mid-South Coliseum began selling out regularly for the first time since it opened in 1965.

In 1971-72, with Finch earning league player of the year honors, the Tigers beat Louisville twice to tie the Cardinals for the regular-season championship of the Missouri Valley Conference. It took a wildly controversial Valley playoff game with Louisville, in Nashville, to keep the Tigers from the NCAA Tournament and a likely run to the Final Four.

But if the basketball was inspired, the reaction to the team was unprecedented.

Thousands of fans made that trip to Vanderbilt for the ill-fated playoff game, and those who remained home remember a Saturday night with streets empty of traffic.

Unlike the 1957 team that made the NIT finals, this team truly looked like all of Memphis -- some white players, some black -- and the two star players, Finch and Robinson, grew up one neighborhood removed from the university.

"This team has unified the city like it's never been unified before," Mayor Wyeth Chandler said after that season. "Black and white, rich and poor, young and old are caught up in its success."

It was against this backdrop that Yates pursued Kenon, and not even that rough plane ride could shake Yates's belief that Kenon was the missing piece to a championship puzzle.

"I went to see him play many, many times; I was never disappointed," says Yates. "I never lost my focus. He showed me every night he could play."

Billy Buford and Wes Westfall, two other junior-college recruits, possessed their own charms as basketball players, and Memphis State's main high school recruits -- Bill Cook and Clarence Jones chief among them -- were highly coveted, as well.

But anyone who saw Kenon knew his presence would transform the Tigers. Many describe his hands as the largest they have ever seen -- Kenon's palms made the basketball look like a grapefruit -- and, for someone so long and so lanky, Kenon possessed astonishing agility and balance to go with explosive leaping ability.

Even though he did not play organized basketball until his junior year at Birmingham's old Ullman High, Kenon was a natural. He averaged 27.6 points and 25.1 rebounds his sophomore year at Amarillo, and earned the honor of trying out for the 1972 Olympic team.

"It was pretty clear he was a pro," says Denny Crum, then the Louisville coach.

Add Kenon to the team's two homegrown superstars -- Finch and Robinson -- and the Tigers would have a starting lineup on an equal footing with every college team in America save UCLA.

Yates found recruiting much easier once he brought players to campus, where they found Finch earnestly entreating them to join him and black Memphians like Leonard Draper and Isaac Hayes helping woo them.

Not to mention a city all agog with Tiger basketball.

"Tigers to NCAA -- '73," it read on the Owen Lumber marquee over on Summer.

"The credit to that great recruiting year goes to the atmosphere that existed in Memphis at that time," says Yates. "Everyone, without exception, was behind the basketball program."

In other ways, Memphis faced enormous challenges.

Like so many other places in America, and especially in the South, Memphis was going through a kind of adolescence in 1972-73 -- enduring the pains of growth and coping with an ever-expanding set of new realities.

Busing had started in the city, with more than 7,000 white students leaving the school system.

In Vietnam, B-52 bombers hit Hanoi, trying to achieve what President Nixon called "an honorable peace."

Memphis considered putting a dome on Memorial Stadium to enhance its NFL chances, and Memphis State unveiled unfunded plans for a 16,000-seat on-campus arena.

The Supreme Court decided, in Roe vs. Wade, for a woman's right to choose.

The city grappled with how -- and whether -- to approve cable TV ventures.

Presidents Truman and Johnson died. Nixon defeated McGovern in a landslide, and, according to a Gallup Poll, was the man Americans most admired, far ahead of the No. 2, Billy Graham.

Memphis moved up to No. 16 in a list of the nation's largest cities, two spots behind San Francisco and two in front of Boston.

Apollo's 17th and final mission ended.

Bellevue Baptist Church welcomed a new pastor to Midtown, a Florida man with a "golden deep voice" and "magnetic appeal" named Adrian Rogers.

Chief Justice Lewis F. Powell, in a speech to the American Bar Association, condemned a "new ethic" in America, saying, "The overriding concern -- not merely of the youth but of large segments of our people -- often seems to be a highly individualized self-interest. One's chief allegiance is to his own conscience and his own desires."

In Memphis, at least, basketball had found a way to unite large numbers of people with uncommon interests.

When Kenon pledged to become the cornerstone of an eight-player recruiting class, the Tigers emerged as favorites to win the Valley and a darkhorse pick to make the Final Four in St. Louis.

The sports information director at Memphis, a sparkplug of ideas named Bill Grogan, captured the city's basketball fever with his own interpretation of the old song, Meet Me in St. Louis, Louie.

There in the preseason media guide, Grogan called out a challenge to mighty UCLA, winner of six straight national championships.

Meet me in St. Louis, Wooden,

Beat your Bruins there!

By August, there were no season tickets available -- the Mid-South Coliseum was sold out for the entire season. In November, just two weeks before the season opened, Bartow announced that UCLA had added Memphis to the schedule for the 1974-75 season.

Such was the mood when the Tigers opened the season Dec. 2 against Missouri-Western at the Coliseum, with Tiger fans giddy to greet the season.

"Everybody could not wait for the ballgames -- it was like the greatest show in town," says Bill Cook, who turned down offers from across the nation. "That old roundhouse over there, man, it got very vocal and very rocking.

"I just wanted to be a part of it."

And yet, just 18 minutes into the first half of the first game all the buildup seemed suddenly like a cruel taunt.

Robinson, the Tigers' senior big man, lay still on the hardwood, and his shouts of pain indicated the worst. His trick knee had given way, sending the man everyone called Big Cat collapsing to earth.

The next morning, The Commercial Appeal ran a picture of Robinson's long, lean body stretched across the floor, head cradled in his arms.

"I remember looking over there and seeing Bartow ready to swallow his tie," says Bob Jones, the beat writer for The Commercial Appeal. "It was a scary moment."

Scary, because Robinson had overcome doubts about his ability and become the Tigers' warrior. It was hard to conceive of winning a Missouri Valley Conference title -- and its lone NCAA Tournament bid -- without his inside power.

"Ronnie, being from Orange Mound, he'd go out on the court and he'd say, 'Come on and get some of this, you ain't gonna do nothing with this team,'" says Buford, the Tigers energetic sixth-man. "He's the one who would tell us, 'C'mon, fellas. Let's go. Let's get busy.'"

Robinson had a unique style. Stronger than he looked and blessed with athleticism, Robinson would time missed shots just so, bounce high off the ground, squeeze the basketball and then kick his legs out, wide as you please.

He more than retrieved missed shots. He snatched them forcefully and cleared out space with those arms and legs all akimbo.

On offense, who could forget that lefthanded turnaround jumper, as sweet as the coconut cakes and sweet potato pies Momma Robinson used to bake for the team?

Tiger radio man Jack Eaton tagged Robinson with his nickname because, as he put it, "when I saw this cat jump over the fence in my backyard, it was just like Ronnie Robinson going up for a rebound and so he was the Big Cat."

His knee problems dated back to high school, though Robinson did not have surgery to repair them until his freshman year at Memphis.

Sails, Robinson's assistant coach at Melrose, believes the procedure did more than simply repair old damage in the knee. Eight days of inactivity combined with regular hospital meals transformed Robinson.

"They brought him his clothes," remembers Sails, "and he couldn't fit into any of them. He'd gained 20 pounds."

With the knee flaring up again, nobody could know for certain how long Robinson would need to recuperate. A preseason Bartow described as ragged already had the coaching staff concerned about effectively blending talented newcomers with the established stars like Finch and Robinson.

Robinson's injury only added to their early season frustrations.

"We weren't what I would describe as a fine-tuned machine," says Bartow. "We weren't hitting on all cylinders."

In the season's second game, at Louisiana State, Robinson played only 17 minutes and the Tigers lost by 13 to a team that, with new coach Dale Brown, was picked to finish last in the SEC.

Like the city itself, the Tigers were struggling to find harmony.

"The chemistry hadn't arrived," Bartow said.

That LSU game began a troubling seven days for the Tigers. They would lose three of four games, hitting bottom after blowing a 10-point second-half lead to Texas at the Coliseum. It was only the third time in three years the Tigers had lost on their home floor.

Buford sat crying in the locker room after the one-point loss, a moment Kenon recalls as a turning point for the team.

"It had a profound effect," says Kenon. "For some reason, I felt like we'd be a good team after that."

It was hard to see then, but Kenon's premonition was a good one.

Bartow, the basketball coach with the mad scientist glasses, was about to work his basketball alchemy.



The ringmaster: Bartow had ability to get the best effort from his talented Tigers

By Zack McMillin

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Handed a technical foul by the Southeastern Conference officials, the Memphis State coach turned to his bench along the baseline at Vanderbilt's Memorial Gym and motioned to his players.

Jack Eaton, Memphis State's popular radio play-by-play broadcaster, told those listening on WMC radio that Bartow had beckoned the Tigers to head to the locker room. It was the beginning of the second half -- and he was ordering them to just up and leave?

The players, bewildered, walked toward Bartow and huddled.

It was Dec. 30, 1972, and the Tigers were squandering the best half of basketball they had played in this 1972-73 campaign.

For the 2,000 or so Memphis State fans who made the trip, the joy of seeing their Tigers finally fulfilling the massive preseason expectations quickly evaporated. Vanderbilt, ranked 10th in the country, had started to rally and the fans in the old opera house had started to roar.

"It was," says Jim Rothman, a 30-year Tiger season-ticket holder, "the loudest I have ever heard any gym anywhere at anytime in my entire life."

Thirty years later it is still hard to say whether Bartow's gesture was a momentary lapse in judgment, a shrewd motivational tool or simply a misunderstood reaction to the technical foul.

For those who knew Bartow, the man his players called "Clean Gene," it was an astonishing, electric moment.

"If he said, 'Dammit,' it caught your attention," says Wes Westfall, one of the team's junior-college transfers. "You never saw him lose his cool, unless maybe he threw a piece of chalk at the chalkboard."

Bartow had applied for the Memphis State job after six years at Valparaiso, then a Division 2 school in Indiana. At 42, Bartow had already climbed farther in the coaching profession than he

could have imagined when he took his first job, at Shelbina High in Missouri. When he won a state championship at St. Charles (Mo.) High in the St. Louis suburbs, Bartow started dreaming bigger dreams and when he took Valparaiso to the Division 2 NCAA Tournament, he thought maybe he could duplicate that success on a larger scale.

When Memphis State fired Moe Iba in 1970, after successive six-win seasons, Bartow got his chance.

Like Bob Vanatta in the '50s, Bartow took to selling the program to the city. As the story goes, Bartow would give his speaker-circuit speech to a crowd of three guys standing on the corner.

“Gene could apply the salve better than anybody I've known,” says Wayne Yates, one of Bartow's assistants and his eventual successor as coach. “He was a great PR man.

“He had Memphis totally sold.”

On this night, however, Bartow felt the referees were disrespecting him and his team. Hence, his outburst and this sudden dramatic moment.

As Bartow gathered the team, Eaton wondered aloud what might happen next.

If Bartow did have thoughts of forfeiting -- and he still adamantly denies any such intention -- he quickly changed his mind. The huddle dispersed, the roar began building to a crescendo and the Tigers poised themselves for a wild finish.

“We were in a fight for our lives -- several things had gone wrong -- and I had to get some attention,” Bartow would say after the game.

The final 13 minutes foreshadowed similar gut-wrenching finishes by this Tiger team.

With four players fouled out -- including starters Ronnie Robinson, Wes Westfall and Bill Laurie -- the decisive plays came not from reliable hometown hero Larry Finch nor from Larry Kenon, the Tigers' emerging superstar.

They came from the bench.

Kenny Andrews, called Buffalo because his face looked like a buffalo nickel, tipped in a miss.

Clarence Jones, a rangy freshman from Alabama, hit a key free throw.

Doug McKinney -- wild man McKinney -- dropped in a layup.

The result -- a 74-71 win that showed exactly why Bartow would go on to win 647 college basketball games, no matter that some did not consider him a strategic genius.

He knew how to reach people from all backgrounds and convince them to follow his plan for their success.

“We were all young and dumb and crazy, but he was a master genius at supervising everything,” says Billy Buford, the team's sixth-man. “He really knew how to narrow things down, and just had that ability to blend us all together.”

Calculated or not, Bartow's antics on the sidelines at Vanderbilt had a galvanizing effect, not just on that game, but on the ongoing process of forging so many disparate personalities into a team.

“I told him on his postgame show,” Eaton says, “it was the greatest coaching move I ever saw.”

Coming together

“Why, of all places,” Sen. Bill Bradley once asked, is the ideal of integration “closest to being achieved on the basketball court?”

Bradley would have fit well into Memphis State's basketball tradition. Like the first two great Tiger players, Forrest Arnold and Win Wilfong, Bradley grew up in a small Missouri town, not far from the Mississippi River. His destiny would lie in other places -- as a Rhodes scholar at Princeton, as an NBA champ with the New York Knicks, as a senator from New Jersey -- but in his book, *Values of the Game*, he wrote about basketball in a way that described the 1972-73 Tigers.

“I believe,” he wrote, answering his own question, “it's because the community of a team is so close that you have to talk with one another; the travel is so constant that you have to interact with one another; the competition is so intense that you have to challenge one another; the game is so fluid that you have to depend on one another; the high and low moments so frequent that you learn to share them; the season is so long that it brings you to mutual acceptance.”

Billy Ted Turnipseed is an ol' country boy from Lexington, Tenn., who has served as an administrator for elementary schools on overseas U.S. military bases for more than a decade. He has traveled the world, collected untold numbers of friends and collected a couple of storage sheds of memories.

Turnipseed was one of two student managers for the 1972-73 team. He washed the uniforms, made sure Ronnie Robinson's lucky socks did not get washed, made sure the locker room radio was dialed to WDIA.

He still remembers the camaraderie on that team, and he sometimes finds himself referencing it when he's making a point about teamwork to those working for him.

“I never had a sense of whiteness or blackness anytime in all my tenure there,” says Turnipseed, now living in Naples, Italy. “There was just a tremendous amount of respect. I think they loved each other, I really do.”

It started for this Tiger team in the pickup games before the season.

It extended to the early season practices, too.

Everyone remembers the day Kenon soared through the lane and threw down a vicious dunk -- dunks were illegal in 1972-73 -- to make a point about respect.

"I cannot remember, before or since, being with a tighter-knit group, on and off the court," says Jim Liss, a backup point guard who won the Arkansas game with a free throw. "I don't think people can ever understand the respect we had for one another."

There was no disputing the team's three stars -- Finch, Robinson and Kenon -- accounted for 67 percent of the scoring.

But throughout the season -- just like that memorable night at Vanderbilt's Memorial Gym -- the difference between winning and losing often fell to role players.

It might have been gritty point guard Laurie, applying his defense or diving for loose balls.

Or maybe McKinney, the spirited senior with the playboy looks and fearless attitude.

Though Kenon overshadowed them with his playing genius, the team's other junior-college transfers, Buford and Wes Westfall, would carry their own memories of individual glory out of 1973.

This does not happen for teams with fractures between personalities and friction between egos.

"There is no question a lot of the success of our team came because everybody stuck together and knew their role," says Laurie.

It even pertained to the coaching staff.

Yates, former Tiger star and Los Angeles Laker, got the best players.

Leroy Hunt -- "Draw 'Em Up Leroy," Buford called him -- provided the Xs and Os.

Bartow brought the vision together, built enormous confidence in each of the players and created the atmosphere conducive to harmony and, thus, to winning.

"They were a dynamite mix, like three perfect pieces to a puzzle," Turnipseed said. "I always watched 'em in awe."

Yates, for his part, believes that Finch was the key to it all.

He was a great player, yes. He was a great leader, too.

“The person who should get the most credit for the blending is Larry Finch,” says Yates. “He helped establish a great atmosphere, and kept everything positive.”

Headed into the first game of the Missouri Valley season, the Tigers weren't difficult to scout. Robinson and Finch were givens, and Kenon was emerging as the best big man in the country east of UCLA's Bill Walton.

But how does one stop camaraderie? How does one defend cohesion?

“The right path,” Bradley wrote, “is really very simple: Give respect to teammates of a different race, treat them fairly, disagree with them honestly, enjoy their friendship, explore your common humanity, share your thoughts about one another candidly, work together for a common goal, help one another achieve it.”

One way in

In 1972-73, the NCAA Tournament's calculus was unforgiving. If you played in a conference, there was one way to earn a bid -- by winning your conference outright.

To go to the NAAs, Memphis needed to win the regular-season championship of the Missouri Valley Conference.

That task began on the always perilous Valley road.

To be precise, it began on an icy Iowa highway three days into 1973, aboard a bus going 20 mph through the frozen Midwestern night.

Beating Drake at Drake could be tough enough in normal circumstances. Doing it after a harrowing night of travel made the task more daunting.

“I thought we were going to die,” says Bill Cook, a freshman guard who, like most Tigers, was not accustomed to severe winter weather. “There were these mounds of snow in the parking lot; they looked like big ol' igloos.”

The Commercial Appeal beat writer, Bob Jones, described the Tigers' Missouri Valley Conference opener with Drake as “a double-overtime thriller that had a Veterans Auditorium crowd of 11,100 constantly clutching at its heart.”

It also had the Drake fans searching their programs for the bundle of energy wearing No. 20 for Memphis State, one Billy Buford.

“Billy Bipp,” Larry Finch would tell Sports Illustrated later that season, “he's our fire man.”

In other words, B.B., as many called him, supplied the spark. He came off the bench to rescue the Tigers in times of crisis.

By February, Buford would come to relish his role, but, as the Tigers prepared for Drake, he still believed he should be treated as a star.

He'd been a star at Glasgow High and Paducah Junior College in Kentucky. He'd been an all-American in junior college and turned down a slew of big-time schools eager to add a smooth 6-7 forward to their roster.

“I struggled with that,” says Buford. “A lot of that had to do with my ego and my pride.”

The 51-year-old Billy Buford understands things the 21-year-old Billy Buford was only beginning to realize. A former heroin addict who now is a supervisor for an alternative drug sentencing program in Bowling Green, Ky., Buford takes great pride in, as he puts it, “being a Tiger.”

What's that mean? Try this: During the 2000 season, upon watching Louisville lay a first-half whipping on the Tigers, Buford bolted out of the luxury suite at The Pyramid and angrily confronted the Tigers before they returned to the floor.

Buford remains one of the greatest talkers in the history of Tiger basketball, and his brash confidence spilled onto the basketball court.

“Billy didn't walk, he be-bopped,” said Turnipseed. “He was like Will Smith before there was Will Smith.”

Unlike Will Smith, Buford was not handed a starring role in this production. For Buford, finding his place on a team with three undisputed stars -- Finch, Robinson and Kenon -- meant redirecting some of his enormous pride.

“For me, the breakthrough came with the removal of me trying to prove something,” Buford says. “I personally made the commitment that this ain't about me, this is about my team's success. I just needed to play the time I was getting.”

In the Tigers' 50-minute battle with Drake, Buford found his moment.

It came in the second overtime, after McKinney -- of all people -- hit a 15-foot jumper over two defenders to tie it at the buzzer.

It was one of only 15 shots McKinney would hit all season.

When Drake took a quick two-point lead in the second overtime, Buford went to work, scoring 10 of the Tigers' next 13 points.

The Tigers won their league opener, 97-92.

They'd trundle through the snow to make it 2-0 two nights later at Bradley.

That game was televised back to Memphis, so Tiger fans could see Finch break the school record for points scored in three seasons. Finch didn't get the 13 points he needed to break the record -- he scored just 8 -- but even that couldn't stop the Tigers.

As Bartow left the court, an angry Bradley fan delivered an elbow to his stomach.

Clean Gene did not make an issue of it. It's marvelous, how winning can improve a man's humor, and, besides, the Tigers had seven straight home games ahead of them.

The team that left Memphis not yet secure in its championship ambitions returned to the city ready to seize control of its destiny. With busing set to begin in the city schools in just a few weeks, with those B-52s still bombing away ahead of a Vietnam cease-fire, the city prepared to rally around the Tigers for a month-long homestand.

``We have the possibility of being a great team," Bartow said after the game. ``And we just might be getting there."



The favorite son: On-court heroics of Finch, others helped 'change hearts and minds'

By Zack McMillin

Wednesday, April 2, 2003

Cato Johnson can still remember the evening he came upon his car in the parking lot at Memphis State, its four tires slashed. "This guy walked out and said, 'Why are you here?'" says Johnson, Methodist Healthcare vice president. "I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'We do not want people like you out here.' I will never forget that."

This was in 1969, when Johnson was a part of the first generation of black students at Memphis State. It wasn't long after the civil unrest that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Tensions ran high.

"When I came back in the spring of '68," says Breen Bland, an MSU law graduate, "it was one week after Dr. King was killed and the hostility level had gone through the roof -- blacks didn't like whites and vice versa and everyone mad at everyone."

Says Ted Anderson, now the coach at Hamilton High: "It could not get any worse. Or we are not going to exist."

By 1973, much of this had started to change. Black enrollment had increased to 14 percent, with nearly 3,000 black students. Compared to 1959, the year when eight students integrated the campus, this was enormous progress.

But tensions still existed, even if the edge had come off them slightly.

Anderson, like many other students of the time, was a veteran. After serving in Vietnam, he was thrilled to be home, even if it meant 22-hour days going to school at Memphis State and pumping gas at the Union 76 at Poplar and Avalon.

Like many Memphians, Anderson reveled in the success of the Memphis State basketball team, traveling to many away games in his new Buick Riviera.

"At least I wasn't dodging from Vietnamese," says Anderson. "It was good to be home and to be back around basketball."

Even so, he still remembers feeling a kind of antagonism and a de facto separation between the races -- black students congregated in one corner of the cafeteria and sat in a block together at games.

"You can't say that is all because of race, totally," says Anderson. "Am I racist because I am comfortable with people like me? Are you racist because you are more comfortable with people like you?"

This is where the basketball Tigers entered the equation, serving as a both a rallying point and an ice-breaker for all Memphians.

No team sport is better suited to developing bonds of intimacy and familiarity between the participants and the observers.

The field of play is relatively tiny, a 4,700 square-foot rectangle that can be surrounded by thousands of people. Players wear shorts and tank tops without any protective gear.

So fans sitting even halfway up at the Mid-South Coliseum could see vividly the emotion and effort coming from Larry Finch, Bill Cook or the rest of the players.

Phil Cannon, now the tournament director of the Memphis's PGA Tour event, says he had never seen black players up close until his days as a student in the early '70s.

"White Station students weren't allowed to go to Melrose to watch Larry Finch at the high school," says Cannon. "There was a perception there."

Those games at the Coliseum helped alter perceptions. Seeing Larry Finch smile his smile and Ronnie Robinson play his old-school game and Billy Buford work his oncourt jive helped Cannon and those like him come to a new understanding.

"I was busy being proud of my city for the first time," says Cannon. "I stood in a lot of lines to get my student tickets."

This was not merely true for students. It extended to older folks as well.

Laverne Turnipseed, the mother of Ted, the Tiger student manager from Lexington, Tenn., recalls an encounter with Ronnie Robinson at the athletic dorm. Robinson had hurt his knee in that evening's game, but as Laverne waited for Ted, she remembers Robinson standing politely and keeping her company for half an hour.

"I knew how bad he was hurt, but he just stood there and talked," Laverne says. "You just don't find many young people like that."

This is how ideas were changed. This is how preconceptions were shattered.

"They changed hearts and minds," says Mike Butler, a Tiger great from the mid-60s, "and that's the battle."

For black students like Anderson, who regrets not having had the opportunity to play at Memphis State when he left Hamilton High in 1964, the achievements of Finch and Robinson and the Tigers brought something even more important than understanding.

It created respect.

"After so many people like myself did not get the chance, they welcomed the opportunity to play out there," Anderson says. "To see blacks go out there and have that kind of success, it was a feeling of pride."

Much of the credit for the Tigers' vast crossover appeal goes to Finch, who disarmed whites with his natural charisma and deflected any "Uncle Tom" accusations -- and there were some -- with his enormous pride and talent.

"When Larry got there," says Charles Harrison, third-generation director of the Orange Mound Funeral Home, "that was the birthing of his ambassadorship with that school and the city."

Finch had everything you'd want in an ambassador.

His power of positive thinking, no matter the adversity.

His style, which was downtown 1970s meets big-man-on-campus.

His heart, big and warm and generous.

And, much as anything, that famous movie-star grin, all 120 watts of it.

"He had a smile," remembers Verties Sails, his assistant coach at Melrose, "that would knock you out."

And then there was his basketball -- a mix of old-school moves, modern improvisation and airborne acrobatics at least a half-decade ahead of the times.

Melissa Lofton, a sophomore at the time, remembers sitting on the steps in the Coliseum's student section and feeling the energy transfer back and forth between Finch and the crowd.

"If he was in kind of a lull, they would play this little drum beat and he would get in a rhythm and he would dribble," she says. "I would say, 'C'mon, play his tune, play his tune.'"

If his ballhandling mesmerized fans, his shooting awed them.

"Larry was the first guy I ever saw who could change directions in the air, like you would see with Michael Jordan," says George Klein, then a local DJ and one of Memphis's biggest hoops junkies.

Midway in his senior season, however, Finch was frustrated.

Though the Tigers were 10-3 overall and 3-0 in the Missouri Valley Conference, league opponents had taken to gimmick defenses to limit Finch's effectiveness. With big men like Larry Kenon and Ronnie Robinson, it made some sense for coach Gene Bartow to use Finch as a decoy, but this ignored the essential truth about the 1972-73 Tigers: The Tigers fed off Finch's energy as much as Finch yearned to score.

The Tigers had won seven straight, sure, but the games stayed tense in part because Finch wasn't touching the ball very often.

So Sails met Bartow and his assistant coach, Leroy Hunt, over lunch one Tuesday near campus.

"If you let Larry alone and let him play, you won't have to sweat every night," Sails told them. "Some of these games will be runaways and blowouts."

The following Saturday, against Division 2 St. Joseph's College, Finch got loose.

By the time the first-half buzzer sounded, Finch had made 13-of-15 shots for 33 points. Eight minutes into the second half, he had 42 points, leaving him four shy of Forrest Arnold's single-game school scoring record.

Near the end, with the record in sight, Bartow yelled: "Get the ball and go, Larry!"

A 17-foot jumper from the right side of the free-throw circle broke Arnold's record, and the crowd cheered long and loud when Finch left the game with 48 points.

The record still stands.

"It's all in your confidence," Finch said after the game, "and now I've got my confidence back."

This was not good news for Memphis State's next opponent -- arch-rival Louisville, headed to town in five days for the Tigers' most anticipated home game of the year.

Finch was at his best against Louisville, another urban school that has been the Tigers' biggest rival for five decades. Nobody before or since Finch has given Tiger fans so many joyful moments against what is still the school's biggest rival.

"He's the only player I ever knew, who was not intimidated by Freedom Hall," says Lou Strasberg, a U of M administrator who has traveled with Tiger teams for more than 30 years, "Nobody liked beating Louisville more than Larry Finch."

In terms of tradition and history, Louisville has always been a kind of big brother to the Tigers of Memphis.

According to the current University of Memphis media guide, "Some say the true arrival of (Tiger) basketball came on Feb. 2, 1957, when the Tigers upset No. 3-ranked Louisville at the Ellis Auditorium, 81-78."

Sixteen years later, the rivalry had grown deeper and richer still.

Confrontations involving former Tiger big man Fred Horton and Louisville's Al Vilcheck had flared tensions.

Tiger fans found irritating the brash attitude of second-year Louisville coach Denny Crum, a former UCLA assistant.

And of course there was a controversial Missouri Valley playoff game in Nashville the previous March, when the league gave Louisville one last chance to beat the Tigers. Louisville won the game and the Valley's NCAA Tournament bid, then advance to what some considered the Tigers' rightful place in the Final Four.

So as the city awaited the Jan. 25 game at the Mid-South Coliseum, the rivalry had never run hotter.

"I've always been one who loved those situations," says Crum. "Absolutely, it was the No. 1 rivalry we had back then."

Although Louisville held Finch to "only" 20 points, he made all the difference. Against the Cardinals, he always did.

Before Finch's arrival, Memphis State had gone 2-13 against Louisville.

As a player, Finch played seven games against Louisville, going 4-3.

As head coach of the Tigers from 1986-1997, Finch went 12-8 against the Cardinals.

In its 88 years of basketball, Louisville has won 65 percent of its games. Against teams on which Larry Finch was the primary leader, the Cardinals lost 60 percent of the time.

This time, Finch took over with the Tigers down six points with 12 minutes remaining. When he capped a rally with a driving bank shot and two free throws, the winning streak hit 11.

The win moved the Tigers to 13-3 overall and 4-0 in the Valley. When they finished off the homestand with three more wins -- over Drake, Bradley and New Mexico State -- the winning streak hit 14 and the Tigers moved to No. 16 in the national polls.

Even as the city began the torturous process of integrating the public schools through busing, even as letters to the editor reflected a bitter racial backlash, the Tigers were generating positive energy.

Not everyone could agree on whether Interstate 40 should go through Overton Park, or how best to desegregate the schools or if the city should spend millions to renovate Memorial Stadium to lure an NFL franchise.

But there was no dissension when it came to Tiger basketball.

"It was kind of strange," says point guard Bill Laurie. "We were a bunch of guys who really enjoyed what we were doing and being around one another, and it just felt like our fans were connected to us in a way, needless to say, none of us had ever felt."



Valley Goal: The Tigers' talent, tenacity were essential to winning title

By Zack McMillin

Thursday, April 3, 2003

On Feb. 10, 1973, the Memphis State Tigers walked onto the court at Tulsa, and it's no exaggeration to say the enormous hopes of a season rested on the game's outcome.

Two nights earlier the Tigers saw their 14-game winning streak snapped at Louisville. Led by Memphian Willie Biles, Tulsa had surprised everyone by grabbing second place in the conference. Officials at Fairgrounds Pavilion released 1,000 standing-room-only tickets in anticipation of the largest home crowd in school history.

If they were to earn the Missouri Valley Conference's lone NCAA Tournament bid, the Tigers had to win this one.

The Tigers may not have had Biles, but they had the big guy from Birmingham, the missing piece who had come from junior college -- Larry Kenon.

First impressions

Looking back on it, Kenon landed in Memphis like an angel sent from the basketball gods. He was only with the team one year -- he was Dajuan Wagner before Wagner was born -- but he left an indelible impression on anyone who saw him play.

Kenon struck quite a figure when he walked into the gym. He was 6-9 with arms and legs longer than some 7-footers, and his Superfly afro only added to the presence.

Off the court, Kenon could appear downright stoic, but the moment Kenon got a basketball into his enormous hands, he commanded the attention of everyone in the building.

Seeing Kenon for the first time hit most folks like a basketball revelation.

Here is Wayne Yates, the Tiger assistant who recruited Kenon: "First time I saw him, I was awestruck."

Jim Rothman, a local basketball historian: "The first game, against Missouri Western, I'll never forget this. There was a skirmish on the floor, in the paint, and Kenon comes in, scoops the ball

up with one hand, raises up without putting his other hand on it, and drops it in from four feet. His hands, my God."

Bill Laurie, starting MSU point guard: "The very first day I saw Larry Kenon in our afternoon pickup game, he walked up to the floor, palmed a ball in one hand, palmed a ball in his other hand. He hadn't warmed up, hadn't done a thing and he walks up to the basket, jumps up and dunks both balls. I knew at that point he was a very, very special player."

The most remarkable thing about all this is that Kenon didn't even begin playing organized basketball until midway in his junior year at Birmingham's Ullman High. For Kenon, athletics had never taken priority where he grew up, near downtown Birmingham.

"Nobody in my family really played organized sports; we were just a working family," says Kenon, now a car salesman in San Antonio. "I do remember I grew to about 6-5 one summer, and all of a sudden I was so uncoordinated."

Once he joined the Ullman High team, Kenon worked to become great. He wore ankle weights all day, to build strength and explosion in those long legs. He jumped back and forth over benches.

Still, Kenon did not attract interest from big-time schools, and Alcorn State appeared to be his likely destination.

He had visited Amarillo Junior College, however, and liked the idea of developing his talent for two more seasons.

"My grandmother, she liked Alcorn and that's where she told me to go, but somehow or another I had visited Amarillo and decided that's where I wanted to go," Kenon says. "I left the house with my suitcase, running. A friend of mine took me to the airport."

By the time he finished his freshman season at Amarillo, word spread about the obscure kid from Birmingham doing ridiculous things on the court. By the end of his sophomore season, after he had committed to play for the Tigers but before he had played a minute of Division 1 ball, Kenon earned an invitation to try out for the U.S. Olympic team.

The talent was inescapable. And as Kenon developed into the most dominating player in the Missouri Valley Conference -- he was averaging 19.2 points and 17.1 rebounds after 21 games -- so was the speculation: Would he stay for his senior season or would he leave school early, which back then happened rarely?

"I haven't really given any thought to it," Kenon said midway in the season. "My main concern right now is Memphis State."

Someone asked him how he thought he would fare against Bill Walton, the transcendent UCLA center, should Memphis make it to the Final Four.

“I try to keep that out of my mind until we win conference,” Kenon said. “I caught about five minutes of him one night. He’s a bad dude, no doubt about it.”

But if badness was the measure, Kenon was badder than most.

Breathing room

No game described his impact so much as the thrilling battle for first place at Tulsa.

Kenon scored 27 points, pulled down 24 rebounds and hit an 18-foot jumper to force overtime.

The 91-87 overtime victory gave Memphis a two-game cushion in the Valley with five conference games remaining.

They would need it, but not until after a final two-game stand at the Mid-South Coliseum to say farewell to Larry Finch and Ronnie Robinson who had, in the course of three seasons, become the city’s most beloved athletes.

“Somehow or another, they made us feel a part of that community as well, even though a lot of us were from out of town,” says Laurie. “That was one of the big attributes. All of us on the team felt like, well, we’re all from Memphis.”

Since the day he signed with Memphis, in 1969, Finch carried a sense of responsibility. He not only accepted the enormous expectations, he asked for more.

Headed into the final two home games of their careers, Finch and Robinson had been a part of 56 wins, and they were 42-3 at the Mid-South Coliseum.

Their final two home games, blowout wins over Wichita State and West Texas State, came packaged in pomp and circumstance.

“One of the greatest eras in Memphis State’s sports history,” wrote CA beat writer Bob Jones, “will begin an emotional countdown.”

The final game, a 116-79 rout of West Texas State on a Saturday night, pushed the total attendance for Tiger games in nine seasons at the Coliseum past 1 million.

The 11,600 fans at the game were given commemorative certificates featuring pictures of Finch, Robinson and fellow seniors Doug McKinney and Jerry Tetzlaff.

Even the coach, Gene Bartow, received love on this night. In the student section, someone held a sign that read, “Bartow for Mayor.”

When it was all over, Finch and Robinson were given a pair of scissors so they could cut down the Coliseum nets.

On one end, Robinson hoisted Finch while he snipped, and, at the other, Finch helped hold Robinson up to the goal.

“It's just a big thrill playing for the people who come out and cheer for you like that,” Finch said. “It makes you proud to be a part of Memphis. I just love the fans.”

As the Memphis State band played Auld Lang Syne, Larry Finch and Ronnie Robinson walked off the court together, wearing the nets around their necks.

It was a sweet moment. It felt triumphant, even. All around Memphis, there was a sense that, with a two-game lead and three to play, the Valley championship was a foregone conclusion. But with one trip remaining on the Valley road, in three of the most hostile environments in the league, “mayor-to-be” Bartow still felt the pressure.

“Let's wait and see whether they want me next week,” he said. “It'll be a fight to the wire.”

A win away

When Finch scored 37 points to help win at North Texas State's famed “Snake Pit,” the Tigers, ranked 11th in the country, headed to New Mexico State knowing a victory would clinch the Valley championship and an NCAA Tournament berth.

But trouble brewed in Las Cruces.

Student protests at New Mexico State -- over the refusal of the school's regents to allow coed visitation rights -- led to confrontations with police, and, on the eve of the game, two buildings on the campus burned down.

Officials at the school made contingency plans should more trouble erupt, including the possibility of playing without spectators or forfeiting the game to the Tigers if “the excitement becomes too excessive.”

“I remember that environment,” says Laurie. “It was an unusual situation, no question.”

For Laurie, there was an additional measure of uncertainty because Aggie coach Lou Henson had listed the team's all-American candidate, John Williamson, as “possibly doubtful” to play at all.

Laurie was a strong 5-10 guard who had led the state of Missouri in scoring as a senior in tiny Versailles, Mo. His role on this team, however, involved less glamor. He got the ball to the three main scorers -- Finch, Robinson and Kenon -- and usually guarded the opposing team's best scoring guard.

“L'il Bill was 5-10 but he was strong as an ox,” says Kenny Andrews, a reserve forward who was the best man in Laurie's wedding. “He wasn't going to back down from anyone.”

Everyone called him, "Li'l Bill," but his bushel of blonde hair and his boy-scout smile belied an intense competitive spirit. Even now, at 51, Laurie plays in competitive basketball leagues.

``Bill was a gutty little player and just as hardnosed as anyone you've ever seen," says Wayne Yates, the assistant coach. ``If someone knocked him down, he'd jump right back in their face."

Says Wes Westfall, a starter at forward: ``He was tough with a capital T."

Nobody then knew what Laurie would one day become. They knew his girlfriend, of course, Nancy Walton, and often would see her at the Casual Corner, where she worked with Kenny Andrews's girl, June.

Back then, the name of Nancy's father, Bud Walton, didn't mean much. Wal-Mart stock had only recently hit the New York Stock Exchange.

``It was simpler times," says Lou Strasberg, longtime travel coordinator for the team. ``We just thought her daddy ran a little ol' five-and-dime over in Arkansas."

Nobody could guess that one day Li'l Bill Laurie and his wife, Nancy, would become billionaires. Nor could they foresee Laurie as the owner of the NHL's St. Louis Blues.

He was just another vital cog on the team, another player the city leaned on for its collective joy and inspiration. Laurie's play against New Mexico State would add to his reputation as one of the toughest guards to ever play for the Tigers.

With Finch in foul trouble -- he scored only eight points -- the game turned into the fiercest defensive battle of the season. Williamson played and finished with 18, but missed 14-of-23 shots.

``John was elbowing him and elbowing him, and I remember seeing the back of Bill's head and all that hair kept flailing back," Kenon says. ``I said, `Just let him go and I'll block his shot,' but he never let him go."

Still, the half-filled arena -- the campus had stayed trouble free -- sensed an upset, with the Aggies ahead by three.

Wes Westfall, one of the Tigers' poorest free-throw shooters, hit a pair of key free throws, Finch followed with a pair of his own and the Tigers took a one-point lead in the final minute.

As the clock slid toward 15 seconds, Williamson got the ball on the left side. He drove to the basket, looking to penetrate, but Laurie made him settle for a 17-foot jumper.

The ball glanced off the rim, Kenon stretched one arm high for the rebound and fired one of his famous baseball outlet passes to Laurie.

After dribbling out the final seconds, Laurie tossed the ball to the ceiling, crashed into press row and, as he ran from the court, was embraced by Bartow.

The league couldn't make them play a bogus tiebreaking playoff game with Louisville, not this year. The Tigers were outright champs of the Valley and headed for the NCAA Tournament's Midwest Regional.

"I just remember it was a great relief," Laurie says. "It was a very satisfying moment."

Forget the program's 0-3 mark in previous NCAA Tournament appearances -- these Tigers were proving they transcended everything that had ever come before them, on and off the court.

"There was," Laurie says, "a lot of jubilation."



All the way: Tigers didn't waltz into UCLA meeting

By Zack McMillin

Friday, April 4, 2003

They took two tapes to play on locker room stereos on the road, Billy Buford explained to the national media covering this Final Four team from Memphis State, and the Tigers felt good about the selections going into Saturday's game with Providence.

Larry Finch, the homegrown star for the 1972-73 Tigers, had donated his new Temptations tape.

"And, naturally, we've got to have that Shaft tape," Buford said, alluding to the music of Memphian and avowed Tiger fan Isaac Hayes.

That, Buford promised, was the right combination to finally break the jinx clouding Memphis State's history in St. Louis. The Tigers were oh-for-St. Louis, having lost all seven times they had made the five-hour trip north to this other river city, and they were four-point underdogs to Providence, ranked fourth in the country with a 27-2 record.

Memphis State coach Gene Bartow reminded the assembled media that he'd had some success himself in St. Louis, back when he coached suburban St. Charles High to a state championship.

"I don't think," said Bartow, his voice raspy from a barrage of interviews, "the players are even concerned with what's happened in the past."

As soon as the game began, however, it looked like the Tigers were going to run their record to 0-8.

The Friars looked inspired, the Tigers sluggish and those lyrics from one of the '70s signature songs -- Hayes's Shaft -- seemed to apply.

Who's the cat that won't cop out

When there's danger all about?

Providence guard Ernie DiGregorio was putting on a dazzling show, and the Friars were making these Tigers look meek, indeed.

Ernie D, as everyone called him, hit shots from every angle and fired passes that defied the imagination. Providence big man Marvin Barnes neutralized the Tigers' expected inside advantage.

As the Providence lead grew, nothing worked for Memphis.

Finch's shot was off.

Neither Larry Kenon nor Ronnie Robinson, the Tigers' talented big men, could establish a consistent inside presence.

Nothing Bartow called seemed to slow Providence.

In The Arena, a cavernous building hosting the Final Four, Tiger fans in the crowd of 19,000 -- Isaac Hayes included -- could not believe what they were seeing. This looked nothing like the squad that had waltzed through its first two NCAA Tournament games.

Where was the confidence? Where was the zest? Where was the team the entire city had begun believing could challenge seven-time defending champion UCLA and its 73-game winning streak?

This was not how anyone had imagined it.

The city had all but shut down for the game, and WMC estimated that 250,000 TV sets locked to NBC's signal and another 100,000 radio sets carried Jack Eaton's call on WMC-AM 790.

Rick Spell, then a student and now one of the program's largest financial benefactors, was at work pumping gas that day.

"All morning long, we were busy," Spell says. "Then the game started. In two hours, three cars came in."

When Barnes twisted his knee trying to block Robinson's shot, with more than 12 minutes left in the first half, it looked like the Tigers had caught a break.

No such luck.

Ernie D ran the Friars' fast break to perfection and as the Providence lead pushed to 13 points, there was an ominous feeling in The Arena and back home.

The outlook was certainly bleak for the Memphis State Tigers that day.

Signs of the times

Up until that moment, the NCAA Tournament had been a joyride. If anyone thought the city could get no more intoxicated with a group of basketball players, if they thought the hoops hysteria had finally hit a saturation point, they were mistaken.

And if anyone thought the team could do no more than it had already done to unite the city, they underestimated March Madness's grip on the city.

The signs were everywhere.

Literally.

"Go Tigers, Take Providence and then . . .," urged the marquee at the Admiral Benbow Inn on Union.

Next door, at Chuck Hutton Dodge: *"Go Tigers. World Champs."*

Over at Prescott Memorial Baptist: *"Have faith in the Tigers."*

Grocery store ads in the newspaper included rallying cries and pictures of Tigers. A local chain, Corned Beef House, put together a Good Luck card that stretched 150 feet and eventually included 20,000 signatures.

"Man, it was like, 'Shout Hallelujah!' " says Wyeth Chandler, the mayor in 1973. "The entire town could finally just sit back and enjoy something together."

The hindsight of 30 years brings the easy epiphany -- Memphis did not just become the basketball town it is today, one in which little old ladies and adolescent boys are equally rapt with enthusiasm for the game.

Those Tigers helped make it that way.

"When I was growing up, I did not know anything about basketball," MSU freshman Margo Bryant told The Commercial Appeal, "but now everyone I know -- black people, white people, purple people, green people, parents and little kids -- care about the Tigers."

Easy pickings

There was good reason for the optimism, even from those overzealous fans looking ahead to UCLA and past Providence.

In Houston, at another roundhouse of an arena called Hofheinz Pavilion, the Tigers had dismantled their opposition in the Midwest Regionals.

In a region that included four teams ranked in the top 13 in the nation, Memphis State won its two games by a combined 36 points. As the Missouri Valley Conference champion, the Tigers had received a bye into the Sweet 16 of the 25-team tournament.

"We had some dog in us," says Buford, the Tigers' jive-talking junior-college transfer from Paducah, Ky., and he meant that as a good thing. "When you said Memphis State, we wanted it to strike fear just like when you said UCLA.

"The fans had gotten cocky, too. It was just this feeling, 'We come to whoop ya.' "

The Tigers had actually entered the tournament on something of a down note, having lost at St. Louis in the regular-season finale. It was the most disappointing game of the season for Westfall, the junior-college transfer starting at forward, coming in his hometown in front of his friends.

Even more distressing for Westfall, Bartow informed him during practices leading to the NCAAs that Buford would move off the bench and take his starting spot.

For Buford, the chance to start was both a reward and a source of pressure. In South Carolina -- the Tigers' first opponent -- the Tigers had drawn an opponent with two future NBA players as freshmen -- Alex English and Mike Dunleavy -- a consensus All-American at guard in Kevin Joyce, another future NBA standout in Brian Winters and a 7-0, 240-pound center named Danny Traylor.

The Big Three of Larry Finch, Robinson and Kenon would need help to beat South Carolina and its Hall of Fame coach, Frank McGuire.

"Coach Bartow did more for me than he knows," Buford says. "I had always gotten everything I wanted, and this was a growing-up period for me and for me to see the end result was I get to start in the NCAA Tournament, that meant a lot."

Westfall made for an interesting character study. As pleasant and easygoing as any Tiger player, Westfall could be extra-sensitive to criticism, but he usually came around to seeing the bigger picture.

Maybe this had something to do with his childhood when, as a 6-year-old, Westfall suffered third-degree burns all over his body when a fire consumed his family's house.

At one point, doctors wanted to amputate one of his legs.

"My mother wouldn't let 'em do it," Westfall said.

Still, Westfall never forgot the lonely agony of spending 18 weeks in the hospital, unable to do anything to quench the irritation of his healing wounds.

"I just had to be really quiet and not move around too much," Westfall said.

Perhaps that is why Westfall found the discipline necessary to swallow his frustrations at such an important moment in the season.

"I almost got to where I didn't care," Westfall said. "Then I said, `No, we've come too far for a guy to be a sourpuss.' We've got a great bunch of guys. One bad apple can ruin it for everybody."

As it turned out, nothing could spoil the Tigers' fun in Houston.

Before the South Carolina game, Bartow asked if anyone had anything they wanted to add to his brief pregame speech.

It was the quietest Tiger, Larry Kenon, the Missouri Valley Conference Player of the Year, who volunteered.

"I don't know about you guys," said Kenon, "but I'm about to start playing."

Says Kenon today: "I don't know what came over me. I just had this feeling."

Kenon scored 30 points, grabbed 24 rebounds and South Carolina and its roster full of future pros never had a chance.

Two days later, Larry Finch dominated against ninth-ranked Kansas State and its star guard, Lon Kruger. Despite a night without sleep -- Finch and Robinson watched "the all-night movie . . . some spy movie" until 7 a.m. -- Finch scored 32 points and helped the Tigers shoot 60 percent in a 20-point victory.

"That's the hardest I've worked in a long time," said an exhausted Finch afterward. "All I want to do is go home tonight."

`Welcome home'

As the Tigers' plane from Houston descended toward Memphis airspace, the pilot came over the intercom.

"Congratulations to the Memphis State Tigers," he said, "and I understand there is quite a mob at the airport waiting to bring y'all back home."

The passengers could peek out of their window seats and see silhouetted figures pressed against the airport's giant windowed walls.

The scene topped anything anyone could remember in the city, at least when it came to a spontaneous, collective outpouring of joy.

By 12:20 a.m., when the team arrived, an estimated 5,000 fans had congregated inside the airport, just to greet the Tigers. Photographs of the scene show a diverse mix -- young and old, black and white, male and female.

It looked like some kind of strange airport music festival.

Some fans arrived four hours early to gain prime spots from which to see their heroes.

Those who arrived later stood atop garbage cans or climbed on the roof of the 1973 Ford Galaxy on display in front of the American Airlines counter. The Galaxy's white vinyl roof eventually collapsed, and a bass boat on display in another terminal was also damaged.

"We're No. 1!" the crowd chanted. One sign proclaimed: "UCLA -- The Memphis State of the West!"

It took the team nearly an hour to get from their gate to the airport exits.

"It was madness," remembers Bill Cook, then a freshman guard for the Tigers. "They just wanted to be a part of it. And everybody was."

Coming back

The honeymoon looked as if it were coming to a disappointing end.

No, really.

For Bennie and Janet Crosnoe, the improvised honeymoon to St. Louis to see the Tigers play in the Final Four seemed destined for a bummer of a conclusion.

It was halfway through Memphis State's first trip to the Final Four, and the Tigers trailed fourth-ranked Providence, 49-40. Sure, bad, bad Marvin Barnes had left the game with an injured knee midway in the first half, but Ernie DiGregorio had not yet shown signs of slowing down.

Ernie D was carving up the Tigers quite nicely all by himself. He scored or assisted on 24 of Providence's first 28 points, and his passing artistry -- behind-the-back lasers while looking the other way -- completely undid Tiger point guard Bill Laurie and his teammates.

"We weren't used to that hurly-burly stuff," Finch said.

If any of the Memphis State fans among the 19,000 at The Arena had a reason to think things might work out, the Crosnoes were those fans. Things had certainly worked out for them, after all.

One week earlier, on the Saturday morning before the Tigers played Kansas State -- the morning before their evening wedding at Leawood Baptist -- Bennie called Janet and made a suggestion. If the Tigers win and make the Final Four, what about they cancel the trip to Biloxi and make a week of it in St. Louis?

It was the second marriage for both Bennie and Janet, and both of them had two kids, so these kinds of adjustments didn't much faze them. So what if they didn't have tickets, they loved the Tigers. Why not?

Thirty years later, when it is suggested there are things a newly married couple might think of doing other than basketball, Bennie interrupts: "You don't know how big a fans we are."

Their devotion would win them tickets. Janet talked Bennie into staking out the Tigers' team hotel until the team arrived at 11 p.m. on Thursday night, and it was there they ran into a reporter from The Commercial Appeal.

The paper did a story on the hoops-mad honeymooners, and the sports editor of the time, Roy Edwards, hooked them up with a coach who gave them tickets.

"I had to pinch myself to believe we were actually here," Janet said at the game.

The Tigers would reward their perseverance.

Providence fans will forever argue that Barnes's absence decided the game, but the Memphis State players reject the notion. The lead was only six when Barnes left, and it was the inability to slow Ernie D that allowed Providence to build that 13-point first-half lead.

"We still would'a won that game, because we were a much better team," Robinson says. "Sooner or later, your rhythm breaks down and the momentum switches and it's off to the races. Maybe they looked like they was gonna beat us, but it's a 40-minute game."

Robinson and Kenon dominated the second half, in which the Tigers outscored Providence, 58-36. They combined for 52 points and Finch added 21 in what became a 98-85 victory.

Laurie dribbled out the clock, picked the ball up and spun it Globetrotters style on his finger while handing it to the referee.

The Tigers would play 48 hours later against the winner of the second game, between UCLA and Indiana, in the NCAA's first Monday night, prime-time final. If it was UCLA, then the challenge would be steeper than anything the Tigers ever imagined for themselves: The Bruins had not lost a basketball game in 26 months.

It did not much matter to a jubilant bunch of Tigers.

"At that juncture, there was just the pure enjoyment of getting to a level we never dreamed of," says Laurie.

As the Tigers left the court, they encountered the UCLA team in the tunnel, preparing to run onto the court.

Bill Walton, the Bruins center and national player of the year twice over, congratulated the Tigers before smiling and, 30 minutes before his tipoff with Indiana, adding one more thing.

"We'll see you guys," he said, "on Monday night."

Back in the Tiger locker room, Isaac Hayes, dressed in a full-length gray fox coat, hugged Finch and Robinson and yelled: "These are my men!"

When photographers turned to take photos, the three sons of inner-city Memphis grinned and held up one index finger.

"There's only one more left," Hayes said in his famous baritone.

"Just one more time."



The biggest game: Memphis-UCLA Final Four becomes stuff of legend

By Zack McMillin

Saturday, April 5, 2003

Ronnie Robinson and Larry Finch had long dreamed of the moment at hand, but they couldn't believe it had arrived. Two sons of Orange Mound would carry the hopes of a city into the NCAA Tournament's first Monday night national championship game.

The opponent at The Arena in St. Louis: Bill Walton and six-time defending national champion UCLA, the most dominant franchise in American sports in 1973.

"I didn't think it would happen like this," Robinson told Sports Illustrated. "We never thought we'd get this far."

Teammates for eight years -- four at Melrose High, four at Memphis State -- Finch and Robinson could barely sleep the Sunday night before the finals.

"The night before the final game you realize there are only two teams left and all these people are going to be watching," Robinson says. "That got you so fired up but you don't want to get so fired up you lose your game. Trying to keep your adrenaline down, that is a hard thing to do in a situation like that."

"You are about to jump out of your skin."

In their hotel room, the two old friends just talked.

"Can you believe we made it this far?" Finch told Robinson. "It makes you want to pinch yourself."

The thousands of fans who came from Memphis -- many without tickets -- only added to the magnitude of the moment.

"There are about 1,500 of us here," said Jim Watson, president of the team's booster club, "and at least 20,000 we left at home who wanted to come."

Memphis's state legislators in Nashville canceled meetings so they could watch the game. The Commercial Appeal's Society page ran a story on the many parties and converts spawned by "Basketball Fever."

"People who rarely have seen a basketball game were caught in the frenzy," the story noted. "For instance, on Saturday afternoon, when Memphis State was playing Providence, crowds of women shoppers in a Midtown specialty shop were amazed to hear a dulcet voice inform them periodically of the current score.

"The shoppers loved it."

Even half a world away, one Tiger fan hatched a plan to follow the game.

Don Holcomb, a star on the 1971-72 Tiger team, played pro ball on an Italian island called Sardinia and made arrangements with a friend in the Coast Guard to wait by a teletype machine in the middle of the night.

Rick Spell was a student then, but now, as one of the most influential donors at the school, he sits in on meetings meant to educate new administrators and coaches on the meaning of Tiger basketball to the city.

He says he has seen some of the most successful people in Memphis try to describe the 1972-73 team and the national championship game with UCLA.

It's close to impossible.

"You can see they are describing an emotion that the other person doesn't quite understand," Spell says. "And these are very large people, Allen Morgan and Pitt Hyde and those types people. That was a big moment for them."

The dynasty

UCLA came into the 1973 NCAA Tournament finals with the most overwhelming resume of any team in the history of college basketball.

The Bruins had won 73 consecutive games, dating to January of 1971.

They had won the past six national titles and eight of the past nine. They had won 35 consecutive games in the NCAA Tournament, a streak that covered seven years.

In those seven years, the Bruins had played 210 games. They had lost five, a winning percentage of .976.

To put this into perspective, Memphis State had not won an NCAA Tournament game before 1973, and Finch and Robinson, the Tigers two senior leaders, were sophomores at Melrose the

last time UCLA lost a game in the NCAA Tournament. The Tigers had lost five games in 1972-73, alone.

Earlier in 1973, UCLA had beaten Notre Dame for its 61st consecutive victory, breaking the mark held by Bill Russell's San Francisco teams.

Walton, a 6-11 1/2 center with the flaming red hair, had never lost a game in college and, dating back to his days at San Diego's Helix High, carried a personal winning streak of 123 games -- covering five years -- into the championship game.

Walton would go on to win the Sullivan Award in 1973 as America's best amateur athlete.

But Walton's mystique went beyond basketball.

``Bill is an unusual man," UCLA coach John Wooden said when Walton was awarded The Associated Press player of the year award.

``It's no put-on that at this moment he's less interested in material things than anybody in this room."

Just as Larry Finch and Ronnie Robinson were a perfect fit for that moment in Memphis history, Walton was a perfect fit for that moment in California culture.

He was a San Diego kid with counter-culture leanings playing for a man, in Wooden, who espoused the game's traditional values and went so far as to teach his players the proper way to put on their shoes and socks.

It said much about Walton that he could adapt his free spirit to Wooden's famous rules, and it said much about Wooden's rules that Walton could thrive within them.

``It's a game and I really like it," Walton said. ``But it's not like the most important thing in the world."

The previous spring, when Walton demonstrated in a rally opposing the United States bombing of North Vietnam and Cambodia, he was arrested and UCLA placed him on suspended probation.

Walton also made clear that, in the off-seasons, he had priorities other than basketball, such as hitchhiking across Canada after his sophomore year instead of playing for the U.S. Olympic team.

At UCLA, Walton studied history -- he graduated with honors -- and resisted the urge to become the highest paid player in professional basketball before getting his degree.

``One of the things I like about history is that you can learn a lot about different people and a variety of places," Walton said. ``I'm into that. I like trying to understand the different cultures."

The more unconventional his players, the more Wooden seemed to revel in them. It only added to his aura that free spirits like Walton and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (Wooden calls him Lewis, his given name) loved playing for him.

Wooden himself cultivated an image of a basketball professor of sorts, using basketball to teach about life as much as winning and losing. They called him the Wizard of Westwood, after the neighborhood in which the school is located.

Curry Kirkpatrick described Wooden this way: "He was Fred Astaire at a dance seminar; John Ford at a cinema exhibition; Maharishi Mahesh Yogi on the mount, accepting hosannahs, dispensing advice, suffering fools gently. The Wizard of Westwood, yeah."

When UCLA got the record-setting 61st-straight victory, Wooden did show the nation his fiery side, walking to the UCLA bench to scold Notre Dame coach Digger Phelps.

Ever-protective of Walton, Wooden warned Phelps about the physical play.

But after the game, Wooden made sure to present the image he preferred for his program -- that of one that wins so often it somehow appears above mere winning and losing.

"It was just another ball game, nothing to get excited about," Wooden said. "The Vietnam cease-fire certainly overshadowed this moment for me."

No tricks

On the pregame radio interview with Jack Eaton, Tiger coach Gene Bartow laid out the game plan.

Larry Kenon, Missouri Valley Conference player of the year for the Tigers, would guard Walton straight up. There would be no double teams, no gimmick defenses.

"Half of his game is passing off," Bartow said. "We'd like to make a shooter out of him tonight."

There was some logic in this. Walton was a gifted passer who found open teammates whenever opponents tried to double team. Kenon had the length and athleticism to guard Walton, and, Bartow hoped, the strength to push Walton out past his comfort zone.

It was the same strategy, said Bartow, that many NBA teams used against Wilt Chamberlain -- give the big guy his points and shut down everyone else.

"Who knows? Maybe he won't score 70 points," Bartow said. "Actually, I think the highest number of points Walton has scored at UCLA is 30, 32 points. He is usually at 18 or 20.

"We feel the more Walton shoots -- unless he is just shooting a fantastic percentage -- the better chance we have of winning."

Eaton, always known for his referee-bashing, brought up another factor.

When UCLA beat Indiana in the other semifinal game on Saturday, a questionable block-charge call midway in the second half went against Indiana's Steve Downing, preventing Walton from fouling out.

``Lot of the Memphis State fans, and I must admit I am in there too, are concerned about the officiating," Eaton said. ``They kind of think that in a marginal call, it'll go UCLA's way 90-percent of the time."

Bartow disagreed, but did say the Tigers would need some breaks.

``We feel many times Walton has been protected a little and we're gonna talk to the officials very nicely from the bench if we feel Walton is getting away with a lot of things," Bartow said.

Positive thinking

The Indiana comeback on Saturday -- coupled with Memphis State's dominating second-half against Providence -- had emboldened the Tigers.

``We thought they were in a league of their own until we watched them play Indiana," said Doug McKinney, one of MSU's four seniors. ``We know now that if we play great ball, we can beat them."

Added Bartow: ``Someday, somehow, somebody's going to beat UCLA. We not only think we can do it, we believe it."

As the Tigers took the court, there were nerves, but also the sense that they could topple mighty UCLA and finish off the Cinderella run that began when Bartow, Finch and Robinson revived the program three years earlier.

``For the first time I can ever remember, I had butterflies," Kenon says.

NBC estimated that 42 million people were watching the game, and the local affiliate, WMC, figured an audience of 1 million for its signal.

In complaining about the way the St. Louis newspapers previewed the game -- UCLA in a walk, they said -- Eaton captured the general feeling of most fans outside WMC's broadcast range.

The Bruins were not only favored to win, they were favored by 15 points.

``One guy in the paper today said, and I quote, `They're going to have to wake up John Wooden when the game is over to give him the championship trophy,' " Eaton said.

Good start, tough finish

“We're almost ready to go,” Eaton told the radio audience, as his microphone picked up crowd noise and music from the bands, “and I thought of a lot of things I could say but I am so nervous I forgot what all of them were.

“If our players are as nervous as I am, we've had it.”

If nerves affected the Tigers, they did not show it.

Kenon swapped early baskets with Walton.

Finch, the Tigers' big-game player, was scintillating in the biggest game of his life, hitting outside shots and drawing fouls and controlling the game out front.

But Walton was stealing the show, and it became apparent that the strategy that called for Kenon to single-team the nation's best player was backfiring.

Walton drew three fouls on Kenon, who also received a technical foul.

Walton did not miss a shot until 7:04 remained in the first half, and he promptly tipped back the miss to give the Bruins a 31-24 lead.

The lead did not last. Sparked by Finch, the Tigers outscored UCLA, 15-8, over the next five minutes to tie the score at 39-39, and Walton picked up his third foul.

Neither team scored in the final two minutes of the half, and Eaton's voice soared as he announced that the Tigers were tied with UCLA at the half.

Buddy McEwen, then the head golf pro at Ridgeway Country Club, had bought season tickets back in 1970, on the same day the news broke that former coach Moe Iba was being fired. A transplant from Nashville who played golf at the school, McEwen sat in the Tiger cheering section at The Arena and remembers the sense that something remarkable was taking place.

It was halftime of the national championship game, the Tigers were tied with UCLA and they had done it without playing their best basketball.

“I walked out into the hall and you know you sit out there and you say, ‘We are one half of a game away from a national championship,’ ” says McEwen, now the head pro at Davy Crockett. “And I started crying.”

When the second half started, the Tigers heightened the drama with two free throws by Finch.

“The Tigers have the lead on mighty UCLA,” Eaton said. “John Wooden's not asleep now.”

No, but Walton had only just begun. He hit every shot he took in the second half, with UCLA continuing to go back to him against a 1-2-2 zone defense run by the Tigers.

UCLA tied the game at 45-45, then Keith Wilkes hit a jumper to regain the lead for the Bruins.

Tiger fans complained afterward that Walton got away with elbows and shoves, that his layups should have been ruled goaltends (dunking was illegal in 1973), that Kenon and Memphis's other big men earned fouls doing things Walton got away with.

Whatever the case, the final box score showed Walton hitting 21-of-22 shots from the field and two more from the free-throw line to finish with 44 points, a record for the championship game that still stands.

In Italy, in the Coast Guard station in Sardinia, Don Holcomb gazed intently as the teletype machine sprang to life.

“It starts out, ‘Bill Walton hit 21-of-22 shots,’ and I just walked away,” says Holcomb, now a high school principal in West Tennessee. “Man, talk about sick.”

Though the Tigers stayed in striking distance, the UCLA lead finally hit double digits with six minutes to go and the final is still misleading: UCLA 87, Memphis State 66.

“People away from Memphis find out I was on that team and they say, ‘Oh, you were in that game where Bill Walton . . .’” says Kenny Andrews, a reserve Tigers forward. “People still remember it.”

In the final minutes, with the outcome no longer in doubt, Walton twisted his ankle and began limping off the floor.

It was at that moment that Larry Finch appeared, wrapped his arm around Walton and let the big redhead lean on him as they hobbled off the floor.

It was a fitting way for Finch to go out, really. He had carried an entire city on his shoulders for three seasons.

Now he would help carry Walton.

The gathering

As the city bus rolled through Orange Mound, a police escort in tow, people stood on the corners and waved.

“MSU basketball,” read the banner on the side, as the bus made its way to the Mid-South Coliseum.

It was the day after the 1973 NCAA Tournament championship game, and Memphis embraced the Tiger basketball team one final time. About 5,000 fans showed up for the weekday rally at the Coliseum.

“We all felt the heartbeat and pride of these Memphis State players,” Tennessee Gov. Winfield Dunn told the audience.

In the locker room after the game, the players had been devastated. Kenon dressed facing his locker and said only, “It’s all over.”

It was over for Kenon, who a few weeks later announced that he was going pro after his only year at Memphis State.

But the Tigers discovered on that day something that’s still true three decades later. The city holds a special place in its heart for that basketball team, and for good reason.

“They were so afraid they had let people down,” remembers Ted Turnipseed, a team manager for the Tigers. “When they saw the Coliseum like that, now it was the community giving the team what they needed. The players really, really loved that.”

In The Commercial Appeal the next day, an editorial hailed the team for the impact it made on the city.

“The underdog from a school that must have been fairly obscure to most of the national audience fought, at times brilliantly, right to the top,” it read. “And stirred the hearts of a whole city.”

Even more telling was an accompanying editorial cartoon. The cartoon depicted two boys -- one white, one black -- sitting on a sidewalk, looking slightly dejected. Behind them read a sign, “Larry we love you!!!”



Spirit of 1973 Memphis State Tigers basketball team lives on

By Zack McMillin

Sunday, April 6, 2003

In the middle of the posh Tiger Clubs room at The Pyramid, Ronnie Robinson proudly wore a sweater with the University of Memphis logo and listened politely as fans told him stories of the old days.

This was in February, when the U of M honored the members of the 1972-73 Memphis State Tigers basketball team, and Robinson, the old Big Cat himself, had entered the room tentatively, as if he were not sure what kind of welcome he would receive or whether he'd feel at home.

It had been 30 years since Robinson helped his close friend, Larry Finch, lead the Memphis State Tigers to that national championship game loss to UCLA, and little remained the same. The school had retired Robinson's No. 33 jersey, sure, and it hung in the rafters of The Pyramid alongside Finch's No. 21.

But Robinson had never quite gotten over the feeling that the university no longer embraced him. The way in which the school handled the firing of Finch as its coach still gnawed at him, too.

The night before, while his former teammates socialized in a hotel ballroom in East Memphis, Robinson had chosen instead to attend the Whitehaven basketball games to watch his daughter, Ashley, and son, Ronnie.

His wife showed up to retrieve the gifts the school prepared for the former players. Doug McKinney, one of the team leaders 30 years ago, urged her to relay a message to Robinson.

"You tell Cat that tomorrow is about us," McKinney said. "It's not the university. He better be there."

So Robinson showed up with son Ronnie. The reception in the Tiger Clubs room preceded the U of M's Conference USA game with UAB, the program started by Gene Bartow, who had been the Tigers' coach in 1972-73.

Most of his teammates had not yet arrived, so Robinson looked at the collage of pictures put together in the center of the room. Someone admired Robinson's hair in one of the pictures, and that drew a laugh.

"I'm just trying to hold on to what I got," Robinson said.

As Robinson talked to Tiger fans, activity in the front corner of the room drew a crowd.

Through the huddle of people, Vickie Finch was nudging Larry Finch along in his wheelchair. Four months had passed since Finch left the hospital following a devastating heart attack and stroke, and he had begun making public appearances again.

For those unused to seeing Finch in his debilitated condition, the first moments were the hardest. His face seemed blank, and his left arm lay motionless on a small tabletop attached to the wheelchair.

As Vickie moved Finch through the crowd, Robinson washed his gaze over the image of his old friend. He seemed shaken.

"I hate seeing him the way he is," Robinson had said a few weeks earlier. "It makes me sick to even think about it."

Robinson quickly composed himself, and stepped forward to greet his old friend. Not long after, Robinson was pushing Finch around the room. He rarely left him the rest of the night.

Changes

So much has changed in the three decades since Robinson and Finch and their Tiger teammates captivated the city with their run at a national championship.

Memphis never got that NFL team it so badly wanted, but Tiger basketball has become a local institution, and the NBA approved the Grizzlies move in part because of the city's well-earned reputation as a basketball town. The team ownership includes black businessmen who made their success in Memphis.

The Tigers play downtown now, at The Pyramid, a move the program made over the objections of its then-coach, Larry Finch, who wanted an on-campus arena. That move, however, contributed to downtown revitalization that includes the new downtown baseball stadium, AutoZone Park and, soon, the Grizzlies' new FedExForum.

In 1973, Tiger coach Gene Bartow made \$17,000 a year, with a \$1,000 bonus for his TV and radio duties. He paid \$32,000 for his new house out east.

Thirty years later, Tiger basketball coach John Calipari is guaranteed a yearly compensation package of \$1.1 million and has a clothing allowance of \$15,000. He paid \$1.5 million for his house near the university.

When Larry Finch and Ronnie Robinson joined the basketball team, the mayor at the time, Henry Loeb, was reviled and considered a racist by the black community.

Three decades later, Memphis has a black mayor, Willie Herenton, in his third term. Shelby County elected its first black mayor, A C Wharton, by a resounding margin in the 2002 election.

It's unrealistic to say that any or all of this happened as a direct or indirect result of the 1972-73 Memphis State basketball team, but the question arises, still: What kind of difference did that Tiger basketball team make in the grand scheme of things?

The Commercial Appeal hosted a forum for 10 people from every corner of this community to ask them that question. After 90 minutes of vigorous discussion, a consensus of sorts emerged.

If the 1972-73 Memphis State basketball team did nothing else, it filled a universal need. To move forward, Memphians needed to begin talking to one another in a civil way. They needed something to help transport them past the pain and bitterness that followed the civil rights movement in general and, more specifically, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Memphians needed something worth rallying around, something that could knit the city together.

That something was the 1972-73 Memphis State basketball team.

"There had never been another team or entity or effort or whatever that brought this city together like that team did," says Ted Anderson, the basketball coach at Hamilton and a Vietnam veteran who was then a student at MSU. "It transcended economic boundaries, transcended race. It was one universal theme."

Maybe the Tigers did not cure the town of racism, maybe they did not forge complete understanding between the races, maybe they did not fully heal all wounds.

What person or enterprise could have done all that, anyway?

At a time when the city was desperate for some unifying force, Tiger basketball found a way to touch people from every background, from every neighborhood.

"We were thirsty then," says Phil Cannon, the director of the FedEx St. Jude Classic.

Breen Bland, a CBHS graduate who grew up just north of Frayser, told a story about a club he frequented in the '60s called The Living Room, on Mississippi Boulevard.

"It was mostly a black establishment, but they welcomed white folks down there," Bland says. "There weren't many of us, but we liked the music and we went."

That is, until the King assassination. Bland, in the Navy then, said he did not go back after that.

"Never tried, and that makes me feel bad about myself in retrospect," he says. "But there was just so much hostility. . . . I felt like it was something I couldn't do."

Bland, an MSU law graduate, knows it may sound silly to suggest a basketball team could have changed that sort of dynamic. But, like many other Memphians, he lived it. He knows what the team did.

"People all of a sudden didn't really care too much about the conflicts because these were our heroes and it didn't matter whether it was Billy Laurie or Larry Finch or Ronnie Robinson," Bland says. "These were kids we were in love with. People have talked for years about how they brought this city together, but it was something I honestly experienced and people around me experienced, and it's something that has changed the whole city, changed me."

Nobody would begin to suggest the Tigers permanently erased prejudice or made people from different backgrounds completely trust one another. But at that moment, for that moment, the basketball team filled a need.

"About the time those games came along, there was a togetherness, a coming together of the races in this city we hadn't seen before," says Bennie Crosnoe, who took his wife to the Final Four in St. Louis for their honeymoon. "Sad to say, I wish we could have it now."

It's a telling plea, this last one. Memphis remains a city filled with its share of problems. Racial misunderstanding stands at the top of the list. But does that detract from what the 1972-73 Tigers did for Memphis, or does it make them more inspiring still?

At the hardest of times, when reconciliation seemed even more out of reach than it does today, they managed to make a difference in a city that desperately needed positive news.

They were a distraction and a rallying point. They were a reason to believe.

"Everything wasn't hunky dory," says Wyeth Chandler, the mayor in 1972-73, "and everybody hadn't gone off into the sunset, but it was the beginning of the reuniting of the community."

Back together

Almost all the old Tigers were there that reunion night in February, on hand to see one another and to watch the current Tigers play a Conference USA game against UAB.

There was the head coach, Gene Bartow, now a consultant for the Grizzlies. One year after the championship run, his coaching journey took him to Illinois, then to UCLA as John Wooden's successor and finally back to the South, at UAB. He was a coaching pioneer of sorts, doubling and tripling his salary with each step but always maintaining his finest moments came in Memphis.

There was the point guard, Bill Laurie, now the owner of the St. Louis Blues hockey team. Laurie married Nancy Walton, Bud's daughter, and the Wal-Mart inheritance has made them billionaires. They actually made a bid to purchase the Grizzlies before Michael Heisley, but the NBA did not approve the transaction, saying it wanted the team to remain in Vancouver and not move to St. Louis.

There was Doug McKinney, the inspirational senior leader, still irrepressible and still the life of the party.

There was Larry Kenon, the missing piece, who settled in San Antonio after an all-star career in the ABA and NBA.

Other key players were there, too, like Wes Westfall and Billy Buford, the other junior-college transfers, and Bill Cook and Clarence Jones, the two star freshmen.

Jim Liss, Kenny Andrews, Ed Deschepper, John Washington, Jerry Tetzlaff and even Shannon Kennedy showed up, too. Some of them barely played that season, but all of them still felt the bonds of team.

When the members of that team were introduced at halftime, the crowd gave a long and emotional standing ovation, with the spotlight shining down on Finch, with Robinson next to him.

They had grown apart in the intervening years, had Finch and Robinson; both gave a few years to the ABA before moving on.

Robinson played in Europe, Finch began his coaching career at Richland Junior High, and the usual thing happened. They fell out of touch. They developed different circles of friends, landed in different neighborhoods, pursued different ambitions.

Robinson eventually got his degree from the university and hopped from one high school coaching job to another, never quite realizing the kind of success he craved. He says it has taken him the better part of the past three decades to come to terms with his place in the world.

"Once you've been on a mountaintop and then you come down here among the masses, it's a tough thing," says Robinson, who now works in the Fayette County school system. "Sometimes you can't adjust after they put you on such a high pedestal. It's something you've got to deal with. If you ain't careful, it will suck the life right on up out of you."

Bartow got Finch started in college coaching by making him his assistant at UAB, and the rest is literally history.

Finch helped Dana Kirk assemble the Memphis State team that made the 1985 Final Four, and when he succeeded Kirk as coach in 1986 -- again serving as a healing presence for the city -- Finch went on to become the winningest coach in the history of the program.

His 11 years at Memphis produced 220 wins and 130 losses. He made five NCAA Tournaments before being forced to resign in 1997.

Finch was only 46 at the time, and had clearly been worn down by the pressure and expectations he himself helped build.

The man who led the Tigers to their first NCAA Tournament victory saw his grip on the job he loved begin slipping after a first-round upset in the 1996 NCAA Tournament.

The man who paved the way for other black Memphians to become stars at the university was undone finally when three local stars -- Tony Harris, Robert O'Kelley and Cory Bradford -- all rejected Finch and their hometown school.

"Larry's such a nice guy that he wouldn't use any of his leverage and wouldn't be pushy," says George Klein, the famous deejay at WHBQ in 1973 who befriended Finch in high school. "He would just be Larry and accept stuff."

When Finch was forced out as coach, many believe it broke his heart. "I know it did," says Klein.

When other schools declined to hire him -- notably Tennessee State University in Nashville -- the noticeable decline in Finch's health seemed to accelerate. A minor stroke in 2001 was followed by the debilitating stroke in 2002.

Finch has shown progress in therapy sessions, but doctors say his recovery will be difficult and gradual.

"I don't think Larry would be in the shape he is in today if he was still coaching somewhere," Leonard Draper says. "You know, some people just regroup faster than other people."

Draper says Finch is invigorated by the response he receives at public appearances, even if he does become emotional. That's what happened when Finch was introduced with the rest of the team at halftime of the reunion game.

He composed himself though, and as he sat in the wheelchair flanked by Robinson and Kenon, the spirit of '73 seemed palpable.

The Tigers were led by a local kid, an inner-city product named Antonio Burks. They were on a winning streak that would captivate the city once again.

When the lights came back on, the Tigers of 30 years ago hustled off the court to make way for the 2003 version.

Robinson pushed Finch toward the baseline, but when they reached the end of the wooden court, there was a sharp drop to the concrete floor.

Robinson reached down, lifted the chair off the ground, and gently lowered Finch until the wheels were level.

As Robinson pushed Finch toward the exit cutting beneath the stands, Finch moved his head back and forth.

He was looking into the stands, drinking in the moment.

It was still his team, still his city.

He was seeing what had become of it.

